

The cover art features four characters. On the left is a young woman with long, flowing blue hair and green eyes, wearing a white and blue outfit. In the center is a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a white shirt and a dark red cape, looking forward with a determined expression. Behind him is a large, dark, horned creature with glowing red eyes. On the right is a man with dark hair and a goatee, wearing a blue and white outfit, looking towards the center. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a bright light source behind the central figure.

Kiraku Kishima

Illustrator
peroshi

3

Back^{to the} Battlefield

The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray!

The book cover features a central illustration of a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a white shirt and a dark red cape, looking forward with a determined expression. Behind him is a large, dark, horned creature with glowing red eyes. To the left is a woman with long, flowing blue hair and green eyes, wearing a white and blue outfit. To the right is a man with dark hair and a goatee, wearing a blue and white outfit. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a bright light source behind the central figure.

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“Hello, mister.
You have a
really cool skill.
Hand it over.”

“Oh?
You look
like quite
the sweet
boy. May I
hear your
name?”

Atlantis
the Ultimate
Slime

Back to the Battlefield


The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray! **3**



**“You’re
missing
the point.”**

Kevin blocked
Atlantis’s final attack
with his open hand.

**“Your
skill!
Give it
to me!”**

A full-page illustration of the character Loki. He is depicted from the waist up, standing with his arms spread wide. He has long, wavy blonde hair and a mischievous, confident expression with a slight smirk and red eyes. He is wearing a light blue double-breasted suit jacket over a matching vest and a white dress shirt with a dark blue tie. The suit features gold-colored decorative elements on the lapels and buttons. The background is a dramatic, cloudy sky with a gradient from blue to orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the bottom left corner, there is a faint, stylized illustration of a dragon or mythical creature. The overall style is that of a comic book or graphic novel illustration.

“Ladies and gentlemen!
My name
is Loki the
Mythical
Creature!”

He had his arms
spread wide and
spoke in a voice loud
enough for everyone
around him to hear.

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Make it known, man who lost miserably more times than anyone else. Perfection comes not from possessing a flawless skill, but from the accumulation of life experience.

Prologue: The Champion and the Demon Lord

In front of the royal castle of the First Kingdom, Whitehyde, two men stared fixedly at one another. On one side stood Alan Granger, the Champion of Light, at 178 centimeters tall. Despite being in his forties and weaker than in his prime, his posture and sharp gaze were indicators of his fine health. On the other side stood Demon Lord Beelzebub. He appeared to be a man in his twenties, with almost unrealistically handsome features and build. Despite his looks, he was the most sinister demon in history and his warmongering had plunged humanity into turmoil for over one hundred years. He'd even brought them to the brink of extinction, before Alan had finally defeated him twenty-five years ago.

I never expected him to show up on his own right in front of the royal castle, Alan thought as he regarded his archenemy.

A large number of knights had been deployed in front of the castle for heightened security. Under normal circumstances, the commander of an enemy army would never deliberately enter such a dangerous place. However, the dense mana and palpable ambition emanating from Beelzebub had knocked out the majority of the knights the moment they'd laid eyes on him. Alan was already familiar with the demon lord's immense power, but it never ceased to amaze him. Calling Beelzebub an aberrant monstrosity would be an apt description.

This is bad. With the situation what it is, I'm the one who'll be fighting at a disadvantage. If the collapsed knights were caught up in their fight, they would surely lose their lives.

Beelzebub looked at the knights lying on the ground and said, "You're really such odd things. Weak and fragile, yet there's one among you who could best

Georgios, of all people, in brute strength.” He turned to look at the maid standing next to Alan—his attendant, Rosetta. “So there *are* humans like this girl who can remain conscious before me, despite lacking any combat strength. Though, I suppose she’s barely holding herself together.”

Rosetta was somehow still conscious with only a little physical support from Alan.

“It’s because I believe in Master Alan,” she said while looking directly at Beelzebub, though she struggled to speak.

“That is yet another unfamiliar concept to me,” Beelzebub said before turning to Alan. “Now, let us pick up where we left off twenty-five years ago without delay—or so I’d like to say, but we should change location first.”

“Are you sure?” Alan asked, surprised to hear Beelzebub say that.

“You won’t be able to fight seriously here. There’s no point in my revenge unless I crush you at your full strength.” Beelzebub turned his back to the royal castle and started walking away.

Alan readily accepted the suggestion and followed after Beelzebub, but he wasn’t alone.

“This will be dangerous, Rosetta. There’s no need for you to come along,” Alan said.

“No, I will accompany you,” Rosetta replied while shaking her head left and right. Her tone was forceful and she gazed at Alan without wavering.

She’s gone obstinate on me. Alan could recognize that tone of voice and behavior as the way Rosetta always was when she turned stubborn. When she got like this, she never listened to a word he said.

“I don’t mind the girl tagging along as long as she won’t get in the way of our fight. In fact, she’s more than welcome if my promise to kill her after I win will make you fight more fervently,” Beelzebub said.

“Hey! What nonsense is that, Beelzebub?” Alan said.

“I don’t mind,” Rosetta told Beelzebub without hesitation.

“You too, Rosetta?”

Rosetta looked back at Alan. “So please win no matter what, Master Alan,” she said with a broad smile.

“All right, all right, I get it. You’re all asking too much of a poor old man,” Alan said with a long sigh.

Chapter 1: Unrivaled Gadabout versus Ultimate Slime 1

The Fifth Kingdom, Green Farm, was known as the foremost agricultural kingdom among the seven great human kingdoms. It was a tranquil place where days usually passed without incident, yet, even in such a peaceful kingdom, the people were nervous. In the areas close to the royal castle where the demon army was expected to attack, the residents and livestock that could move had already evacuated. As a result, the streets were now devoid of people's voices or the cries of animals.

It had been about an hour since the space around a plain close to the castle quietly distorted and deposited a large group of demons. Thanks to the evacuation, no civilians had fallen victim to the demons, but that also meant the demons could move without interruption and begin their attack on their target: the royal castle.

The knights of the Fifth Kingdom found themselves at a disadvantage as soon as combat started.

"Ugh! Who would expect so many of them to be demons with underwater monster traits!" the commanding officer on-site said with a sour expression on his face.

The Fifth Kingdom's royal castle was a fortress floating on the ocean, so invaders either had to walk across the single path of land leading to it or swim through the ocean and scale the fortress's high walls. Since the latter method was arduous for most invaders, the kingdom's strategy had involved concentrating their troops at the front, blocking the land route.

Unfortunately, most of the demons that had attacked them had traits of aquatic or amphibious monsters, so they hadn't attacked from the highly fortified land route, but had used their ocean-adapted traits and inhuman physical strength to take the difficult route. The kingdom *had* stationed troops to handle invaders from the ocean, and they valiantly tried to shoot down all of

the climbing demons with magic or arrows, but the soldiers' numbers were significantly lower than those stationed at the front. Try as they might, they couldn't contend with every demon, and many of them broke through.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Humans really are so soft!"

While the demons had the traits of monsters that thrived in underwater environments, that didn't mean they were weak on land. The Fifth Kingdom's knights desperately fought back, but they were people who'd grown up in an era of peace and lacked any combat experience, so they couldn't keep up. There was a huge gap in combat experience between the individual soldiers of each side. Soon, it looked like the demon army would force its way through with little resistance.

Kaboom!

Abruptly, the sound of cannon fire washed over the fray as the demons who'd infiltrated the castle by climbing its walls were blown away.

"Yes! Now that's some firepower!"

"Guess not everything about the Humanity Defense Coalition was a waste."

The people who had fired the cannons were *not* knights of the Fifth Kingdom, but ordinary citizens who worked in the shipping or fishing industries. Though they were just civilians, their physiques weren't any less impressive than the knights', as they grappled with raging waves every day. They were expertly operating anti-demon artillery made by the Humanity Defense Coalition that had been placed on the balconies of tall buildings. Their accuracy was remarkable, and they shot down many of the demons who managed to get into the castle.

The artillery they were using was originally created to be fired at crowds of enemies; it couldn't easily hit fast-moving targets. However, the proud men of the Fifth Kingdom's sea, with its flourishing maritime industries, had learned a thing or two from all the times they had to fight off pirates. Compared to hitting the weak spots of a pirate ship with their cannons while standing on a shaking hull, this was child's play. They had accumulated plenty of experience fighting for their lives. In the current era, where wars between kingdoms were a thing of the past, it could even be said that they were the ones with the most life-and-

death combat experience.

“Tsk! Who cares about their weapons? Press on the attack!”

It would have been a blessing for the demons to retreat even a step or two, but they trusted their power to overcome and marched forward.

“All troops gathered at the front, redeploy at the designated locations! Now!”

The Fifth Kingdom also responded swiftly to the situation. Many of their commanders were survivors of the Titanomachy, and thanks to their precise instructions, their defensive formation began to regain its stability.

Slowly but surely, the battle atop the floating royal castle reached an equilibrium.

“Damn humans. Their pointless struggling exceeded my expectations,” grumbled the leader of the demons invading the Fifth Kingdom as he observed the battle’s progress. With gills on his head, scales covering his body, and flippers on his hands and feet, he looked like a typical fish monster demon.

Like most demons, he saw humans as vast inferiors, so he grew increasingly irritated as his soldiers’ attempts to rout the enemy failed. He couldn’t understand that the humans, driven by a terrible fear of demons, were holding on due to their thorough preparations. Assuming the worst, they had readied as many countermeasures as possible. This sense of precaution could be said to be another strength of the so-called weak human race.

“They’re flagging out there. I think I’ll head over myself,” said a young voice.

Commendable as the humans’ struggle was, the demon army had a monster on its side that laughed in the face of such weak creatures.

“Can I really ask that of you, Master Atlantis?” The leader of the demon troops had the build and air of an accomplished fighter with a long military record, as one would expect of a man entrusted with such a prestigious position. Despite that, he was down on one knee and bowing deeply while addressing the demon who’d spoken a moment before—a young boy with a childlike voice, blue hair, and innocent, round eyes.

“Well, just watching is no fun,” said the boy.

At first glance, he didn't seem strong, but anyone with some experience would know. The boy named Atlantis's aura overflowed with dense mana. There was only one type of creature that could subconsciously discharge so much mana: a shenmo, the highest class of being in the underworld.

“Hup!” Atlantis leapt forward, propelling his tiny body into the air. He gently soared through the air as if gravity didn't exist around him, right toward the Fifth Kingdom's castle.

The location he had chosen was actually the front gate, the place where the most human troops were gathered.

“Wh-What the heck? A boy is flying right at us!”

“That's no ordinary kid, that's a demon! Shoot him down!”

Following their commander's order, the knights guarding the front gate shot their bows in almost the same breath. A rain of arrows descended upon Atlantis, piercing through his small frame, yet he continued to advance toward the knights with his unaffected, innocent smile.



“What the hell is this guy?!”

“Pikemen, at the ready! Don’t let him get any closer!”

The pikemen formed up and stood in the way of the approaching Atlantis. They kept a close formation and lined up their pikes toward their enemy, like a phalanx, without leaving a single gap between the sharp tips of their weapons.

With a giddy laugh, Atlantis charged straight into them, beaming all the while. It didn’t take a prophet to foresee what happened to him next. The pikes ran through his body from top to bottom, turning him into a pincushion.

“What’s *wrong* with him? Did he hit his head during the battle and lose his marbles?” the humans’ commander said.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!” The smile never faded from Atlantis’s face. In an instant, his skewered body morphed into a green liquid and splashed everywhere, like a popped water balloon.

“What?!” the commander said.

Then, the green liquid rained down on the knights.

“Graaaaaaaaargghhh!!!” The knights’ screams of agony carried across the battlefield like a morbid chorus. The armor, clothes, and bodies of the knights covered in the green liquid began to erode like sand castles demolished by the relentless waves of the tide. Their end was excruciating.

Furthermore, the liquid that had been the source of their demises pooled together in front of the castle gate, then assumed a humanoid shape once more. When he finished reforming, Atlantis was unscathed.

“Now then.” Atlantis touched the gate before him with his index finger. “Skill: Impact Skin.”

A loud noise rang out as a large hole opened in the massive gate.

“This can’t be!” The commander in charge of the squad guarding the gate was dazed. This gate had been designed to withstand a dragon’s breath. It was a bulwark that boasted outstanding staunchness, even among the seven great human kingdoms. To be able to destroy it so effortlessly was preposterous.

“Come on, guys. The path is open!” Atlantis said in a lighthearted tone.

His subordinates took his cue and rushed into the castle. The knights guarding the center of the path had been thrown into complete disarray after Atlantis’s grisly attack, so they couldn’t stop the demons’ advance.

“Damn you! We must stop them here at any cost!” The Fifth Kingdom’s knights fought for dear life, but to no avail.

“Wah ha ha ha ha! They’re so weak!”

“Humans are as soft as little rabbits!”

The humans’ lack of combat experience and physical disparity with the demons proved to be fatal in direct confrontation. One by one, they lost their lives to the invaders.

“Boo, this is so boring,” Atlantis commented as he watched the fight with both hands behind his head. This was how he felt after involving himself in the fight, even to a small degree.

“Mister Beelzebub told us not to underestimate the humans, but they’re so pathetic. There’s not even any point to eating them,” he said. Since that was his primary motivation for participating in this war, nothing else could have been more disappointing.

While Atlantis was talking to himself, the other demons had breached the gate’s defenses, beaten the knights stationed beyond it, and were finally about to enter the castle. Their goal was to find the seal stone that was supposedly located within. It was said that if two out of the seven seal stones located in the castles of the seven great human kingdoms were destroyed, the demon army’s victory would be all but assured. The stone slumbering here would be the first target.

Unexpectedly, when the demons stepped foot inside the castle, they immediately stopped.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, guys?” Atlantis looked toward the drawbridge, where he saw a single man had appeared from further inside the structure. He now blocked the demon army’s way.

The man seemed to be around his forties and was quite tall, though his back was hunched as he staggered over to them. His every movement was languorous, as if he felt the weight of the air more than others. His opulent formal outfit was wasted on someone who wore it so sloppily, and it added an extra layer of shabbiness to his appearance.

Despite the impression he gave, he was Kevin Laphicet—one of the Seven Heroes, the Unrivaled Gadabout, and king of the Fifth Kingdom. He looked at the demons and heaved a long sigh.

“This is *such* a pain,” he said while scratching his head. “War and the like really are a pain in the rear. Could you guys just leave as you are?”

The demon army wasn’t about to comply with his request; quite the opposite, in fact. Kevin was both one of the Seven Heroes and the ruler of the kingdom, making him the unmistakable man in charge. The hot-blooded demons scrambled to be the first to get to Kevin.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! I’ll make a hell of a name for myself when I kill him!” one shouted.

“All right, I knew you guys weren’t the type to leave if I asked nicely.” Kevin sighed and drew the two hunting swords sheathed on either side of his waist with a motion as smooth as melted butter and a touch as light as air. “If you ever feel like giving up, I’m always open to your surrender. It’s much easier that way.”

“Well, well, so that’s one of the Seven Heroes, then?” Atlantis said as he observed the fight taking place at the castle’s entrance.

With a hunting sword in each hand, the middle-aged Kevin cut down the demons attacking him from every direction. His fluid, dance-like movements were as efficient as a well-made machine. Even Atlantis, someone without a shred of martial arts knowledge, could tell that they were far from ordinary. Though, something else caught his attention, even more than Kevin’s fighting style.

“Sorry, but I’ve already seen that move,” Kevin said as he reacted to the

demons' attacks as if he could predict the future. Ten demons, twenty, forty; with each passing second and every swing of Kevin's swords, more of them were defeated.

"I see, so that's his Save and Load." As Atlantis watched the fight, he remembered what Beelzebub had told him about the skill beforehand. Kevin's Unique Skill, Save and Load, allowed him to return to whatever point in time he wished and repeat events any number of times. Despite being a human skill, it was extremely powerful and could match the Ex-Skills used by Shenmo. From an enemy's perspective, Kevin could always predict their movements. And when it came to combat, there was probably no greater advantage than knowing your enemy's actions beforehand.

From the spark of joy in his eyes, Atlantis didn't care one bit that his allies were being slaughtered like cattle.



Atlantis walked in front of Kevin. "I like it."

"Oh? You look like quite the sweet boy. May I hear your name?" Kevin asked.

Atlantis ignored Kevin's question. "Hello, mister. You have a really cool skill. Hand it over."

"Hmm... It's not a very good thing to have, though," Kevin said while rubbing his head.

Looks like a troublesome one showed up. Kevin studied the boy with the innocent-looking smile standing before him. Nothing about him, visually, was out of the ordinary. For a demon to resemble a human so closely could mean only one thing.

He's probably a shenmo. That's a real pain. That would also make him one of the New Seven Black Stars, the seven top demons the demon lord had personally gathered.

One of the demons rushed up to Atlantis. "Will you be lending us a hand, Master Atlantis?"

"Sure thing. But you guys are kinda weak, so step away if you don't want to get caught up in this," Atlantis replied.

The demons listened to him and hurriedly scooted back.

"Now, let's get started, mister!" Atlantis leapt forward, leaving the ground as easily as a bird taking flight, and soared toward Kevin.

Kevin stared in shock. Atlantis's acceleration was simply unbelievable. His speed seemed to defy the laws of this world, where gravity and air resistance were absolute.

"Aha ha!" Atlantis stretched out his right hand, which had solidified into a pointed lance that extended all the way to his elbow. He thrust it toward Kevin as he flew directly at him. However, such a telegraphed attack was trivial for Kevin, who blocked it with the hunting sword in his own right hand.

Clang!

The sound of two metal objects colliding rang out.

My hunting swords are pretty sharp. For his lance arm to come out uninjured after a direct collision, his hardening skill must be potent.

“You’ve got skills, but you’re severely lacking in strength and technique,” Kevin said. He could tell from blocking Atlantis’s attack that his physical strength was about the same as a human child’s. Likewise, his technique was completely amateurish.

Atlantis only laughed at Kevin’s assessment. “I don’t need those things.”

“What?”

“Activate skill: Power Fist.” All of a sudden, the strength behind Atlantis’s lance multiplied.

Kevin was taken aback as his feet sank into the ground. The force he was dealing with now was nothing like before. Atlantis’s poor technique still failed to fully apply the strength of his attack to his enemy, but his raw physical strength had been amplified many times over.

“Hmph!” Sudden change or not, Kevin could react in time. He relaxed his grip on his sword and parried Atlantis’s thrust.

“Whoa!”

Thanks to the impeccable timing of Kevin’s parry, Atlantis was thrown off-balance. Not only did Kevin manage to parry an attack from an enemy whose physical strength suddenly increased by an order of magnitude, but he also had the prescience to disrupt Atlantis’s stance while he was at it. He pulled it off without a hitch; there was a reason he was said to have the best combat technique among the Seven Heroes.

Now that Atlantis was off-balance, Kevin aimed at his torso and swung his hunting blade without mercy.

A flash of light.

Atlantis’s body was split in half right across the waist.

“No, *don’t*, Your Majesty!” one of the Fifth Kingdom’s knights shouted. The next moment, the two halves of Atlantis’s body changed into green liquid—the

same that had dissolved several knights earlier—and surged toward Kevin.

“Wind Path Step!” Kevin moved almost twenty meters with a single step, evading the dissolving liquid.

“Huh, so even that sort of thing can’t get you,” said Atlantis after he reformed his original solid body from the liquid. Normal human reflexes couldn’t dodge an attack with that kind of timing. To exceed such limitations, Kevin created a rapid air current with magic under his feet and utilized the movement technique known as shukuchi to move without any preparation needed.

“How about this, young man?” Kevin held his right sword high above his head. “Sing, o whirlwind that gallops across the meadow.” Following his incantation, wind started gathering around the sword, spinning at a rapid speed like a miniature tempest.

“First Spring Breeze, Morning Swallow!” he cried.

As he swung his sword down, a tremendous storm was unleashed at Atlantis. It gouged the ground itself as it blasted forward and blew away everything in its path.

“Whoa!”

The storm violently slammed Atlantis’s small body against a wall. The pounding winds tore him to pieces as mercilessly as a tornado would. He should have been left as nothing more than a bloody stain on the wall.

“You’re wasting your time. That won’t work on me!” said a sneering voice. The scattered pieces of flesh liquefied once more, then gathered back into the shape of Atlantis. “Because I’m a slime.”

Kevin stared at Atlantis for a moment. “That’s strange.”

“Oh yeah? What’s so strange?”

“The ability to come back together after being cut apart is something the most powerful slimes can do. You’re a slime demon, so there’s nothing unusual about you possessing that ability too.” Kevin paused for a moment while thinking about their earlier exchange of blows. “But you also showed the ability to harden your body earlier. Soft slimes can reform their split bodies and hard

slimes can harden their bodies to use them like weapons. Since slimes are either one or the other, no slime should have *both* of those abilities.”

“You know a lot about slimes, don’t you?”

“Sure do, and that’s not the last of it. When you leapt at me in the beginning, you moved like the gravity and air resistance around you were almost zero.” However, after crossing blades with Atlantis, Kevin couldn’t sense any knowledge of martial arts or magic from his opponent. “You’re a shenmo, right? I imagine your Ex-Skill has something to do with it. Just what kind of ability is it?”

Atlantis stared at Kevin in silence for a moment, then spread his mouth in a wide smile.

“Heh heh heh, you’re a smart guy, mister. You got it. I started life as a soft slime demon. The only abilities I had back then were reforming my body and turning it into a caustic liquid,” Atlantis admitted. “Now, though...”

Atlantis’s right arm returned to its slime form. Kevin raised his eyebrows, wondering just what the boy was planning. His dripping arm then extended toward one of the subordinates Kevin had defeated earlier.

“M-Master Atlantis, what are you—” His words were cut off when Atlantis swallowed his body whole.

The fish monster demon struggled desperately inside the liquid, but to no avail. His body was trapped by the slime, and it wasn’t too long before he was gone, leaving no trace behind.

“Phew, what a nice meal.” Atlantis put an arm in front of his face. Its shape started changing as it grew flippers between its fingers and fish scales covered its skin. It looked exactly like the arm of the subordinate he’d just consumed.

Kevin’s eyes went wide in surprise. There was only one type of skill that came to mind after the phenomenon he’d just witnessed, not to mention their earlier battle.

“This is my Ex-Skill, Ocean Stomach. It allows me to absorb and use the abilities of any enemy I consume. I gained the ability to harden my body after eating another slime.”

“That’s *such* a pain,” Kevin said listlessly, followed by a long sigh. However, his expression was sharper than before. It was clear that the skills Atlantis had demonstrated earlier were not all he had in his arsenal. His most powerful skills would inevitably consume large amounts of mana, so he’d decided to save them for later, or so Kevin suspected. Undoubtedly, the shenmo before him would use any and all of the many skills he’d absorbed to try and kill him. The real fight was about to begin.

Man, I so don’t want any part in this. I’d rather skip all this annoying stuff and take a carefree nap, Kevin thought wholeheartedly.

Alan and Beelzebub—with Rosetta in tow—walked down a street leading from the castle to the suburbs in order to reach a place where they could fight at their full strength.

“At any rate, I’m impressed you managed to gather six other shenmo, Beelzebub,” Alan said as they walked side by side.

“The previous demon army was composed of demons who just congregated at my castle, after all. Back then, I thought a group like that would suffice against an enemy at the level of you humans,” Beelzebub replied.

“Quite the arrogant attitude.” Although it was a fact that humanity had almost been exterminated by Beelzebub’s ragtag forces.

“This time, I gathered my forces more seriously. I can confidently say that we, the New Seven Black Stars, are without a doubt the seven strongest demons in the underworld. Although that means some unruly characters had to be included.” Beelzebub shrugged his shoulders as he chuckled.

That’s an expression I didn’t see twenty-five years ago. As far as Alan knew, the old Beelzebub was like the absolute dignity of a king had come to life. However, Alan knew it would be foolish to think that Beelzebub’s new behavior meant his pride had diminished. Rather, Alan judged that Beelzebub’s personality had gained some depth.

Beelzebub paid little mind to Alan’s contemplation. “Especially Atlantis, the one who went to the Fifth Kingdom. He’s the most disobedient character of the

lot, though his strength is genuine.”

“If you say it, it must be true.” Beelzebub was unbiased toward the other demons, and not one to praise his own if they didn’t deserve it.

“His name is Atlantis. They call him the Ultimate Slime, due to his ability to absorb and utilize the skills of anyone he consumes.”

Alan almost gasped in shock. He could tell how dangerous that ability was by that explanation alone. “Then, will you tell me how many skills he’s absorbed so far?”

“One thousand,” Beelzebub said, as if such a number wouldn’t induce despair in anyone hearing it. “He may only be twelve or so years old, but he’s already absorbed more than a thousand skills.”

Atlantis the Ultimate Slime had no concept of toiling in order to become stronger. As with most demons, he’d only ever fought by instinct. Though he hadn’t been born powerful like Georgios or Beelzebub, thanks to his Ex-Skill, he had grown stronger whenever he desired.

Upon hearing Beelzebub’s account of humans who devoted themselves to studying and training day and night in order to grow stronger, Atlantis had only said one thing.

“Huh, sounds dumb.”

After all, he could just steal from others and save himself the trouble. Anyone who couldn’t do that should just give up, in his mind. No matter how much effort they put in, they could never win against him when he could absorb more skills and grow more powerful in an instant. Obviously, his way was more efficient. For that reason, Atlantis could only think of humans as stupid for working hard and pushing through hardship—it was a waste of time.

“Activate skill.” Atlantis thrust out his hand toward the foolish man who had challenged him. It bubbled as if boiling as it transformed into a dragon’s head.

“You’ve absorbed something as huge as that?!” Kevin immediately jumped away.

“Saint Dragon’s Breath.”

Fwooooooosh!

Intense mana, heat, and light blazed from the dragon’s mouth growing from Atlantis’s arm. The tremendous force of the attack broke through the castle wall behind Kevin and parted the ocean far into the horizon.

“There’s more where that came from,” Atlantis said with a laugh. This time, orange wings that crackled from the powerful electricity they were clad in sprouted from his back.

“One of the former Black Stars in Alan’s report has very similar wings, if I recall correctly,” Kevin said.

“Oh, Lightning Feather? Yeah, I ate a demon of the same species as that guy to get these wings. Anyway, you’re pretty good at dodging, mister, but an attack at lightning speed should hit you, right?” Atlantis spread his wings wide and scattered a large number of electrified feathers, which stabbed into the ground. He then discharged them all at once, sending a powerful attack Kevin’s way.

Kevin dodged out of the way before the attack was even fired.

“Phew, that was close,” he said. Despite his words, he looked fairly composed.

“Wow, you’re really amazing,” Atlantis said.

“Is this the right time to stand around impressed?” Kevin’s voice came from behind Atlantis. He’d circled around before the boy could even notice. “It’s a bad idea to only keep attacking while neglecting your defense, boy.”

Kevin swung one of his hunting swords down, but a water current sprouted at Atlantis’s feet with great momentum. The water rose like a wall to protect Atlantis and repelled Kevin’s slash.

“Oh?” Kevin said. “Now this one...”

“Oh yeah, another skill of a wannabe Black Star you know of. She crawled back alive, so I got to eat her right up,” Atlantis said with a wide grin.

“So you can use that at the same time as the lightning wings, huh?” Kevin

said, his face dark.

“Never said I could only use one at a time, did I?” Atlantis produced a fountain of water and rapidly fired bursts at Kevin while simultaneously shooting lightning-cloaked feathers from the wings on his back. Soon, the area in front of the castle looked like it had been hit by a localized natural disaster.

“You Black Stars are always such a pain to deal with,” Kevin said, despite his nonchalant movements as he dodged the carpet-bomb of natural disasters.

“Looks like you’re still hungry for more, mister.”

“No, no, no, don’t say such silly things, boy. I haven’t had any room to counterattack.”

“Either way, I’m using one more skill.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Skill: Curse Eye.” The center of Atlantis’s chest split open to reveal an ominous black eye. The moment the eye had Kevin in its sight, his movements dulled ever so slightly. Atlantis didn’t miss his chance and fired his water and lightning attacks, which cratered the ground Kevin was standing on. Atlantis hoped it had done the same to him.

“Phew,” Kevin breathed out. He had managed to dodge that onslaught as well—or perhaps not entirely?

“That one hit, didn’t it, mister?” Atlantis asked.

Kevin stayed silent, but his luxurious royal garments were singed in one spot, just as Atlantis had said. The hit wasn’t a direct one, but this meant that Kevin hadn’t completely avoided the lightning like he had up to that point.

“I learned about you humans. Your stamina drops after only a few decades of life, right? How long will you last at this rate, mister?”

“I’m really sick of this,” Kevin muttered. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead.

Chapter 2: Unrivaled Gadabout versus Ultimate Slime 2

Atlantis had the upper hand in every regard.

“Ha ha ha! Lightning Feather! Lava Stone!” He fired a barrage of lightning feathers and boiling lava at Kevin. They were both skills he’d absorbed from powerful demons, and they boasted large areas of effect and destructive power. On top of that, he still had that black eye on his chest.

Since Curse Eye debuffs the physical abilities of any enemy it looks at, he should be down almost a quarter of his usual strength. Yes, in addition to catastrophic, wide-area, natural disaster attacks, Atlantis also possessed a debuffing skill. Anyone on the receiving end of such a combined assault would have no choice but to switch to defense. Regardless, it would be a lie to say that Atlantis was in complete control of the situation, and his victory was not yet assured.

He’s a total headache, Atlantis thought.

In the short time since the fight had started, he was the one on the offensive most of the time. Despite bombarding Kevin with skills, he had yet to land a proper hit. This was largely due to Kevin’s expert combat technique, but more than anything else, it was his preternatural ability to always take the optimal course of action, as if he knew what his opponent was about to do.

When Kevin was showered with a downpour of lava, he dodged to a tiny gap in the attack that even Atlantis couldn’t predict. Against lightning, a type of attack Kevin couldn’t dodge at the sight of, he was already out of the line of fire by the time Atlantis started the attack. Atlantis could see clearly Kevin moved with prior knowledge of his opponent’s actions.

“This has to be the work of Save and Load,” Atlantis said. He could only speculate, but Kevin *must* have started reloading time at some point during their battle. Now, he fought while knowing everything Atlantis was about to do.

“That’s so cool! I want your skill even more now!” Atlantis giggled in delight.

Kevin stopped for a moment to take a breather. “Phew. I think it’s about time to try counterattacking,” he said. He pointed his sharp gaze like a surgeon’s scalpel at Atlantis.

Atlantis felt a cold shiver run down his back, but he continued firing sparking feathers, scorching lava, and heavy boulders at Kevin. Kevin was soon surrounded by a maelstrom and had nowhere to run, but he remained calm as he summoned wind to wrap around his right sword.

“Flax fields rustle in the white southern wind as the cicadas’ song echoes through the moonlit night.”

The wind around Kevin’s sword was different from the one he had used to attack Atlantis before; it was weaker in both strength and scale. If Atlantis could have gotten a closer look, he would’ve seen many air currents intricately intertwining like choreographed dancers.

“Summer Breeze Advent, Accentor!”

Kevin directed his sword at the incoming lightning, lava, and boulders before swinging it. In the same breath, the myriad attacks surrounding him were blown away.

“What?!” Atlantis shouted. Something was off. There was no way Kevin could have repelled so many powerful attacks with the strength of the wind around his blade alone.

“Accentor is a spell that shifts the trajectory of attacks with a small amount of wind around my sword.”

Atlantis started. Once again, Kevin’s voice had come from behind Atlantis before he could notice Kevin had moved.

“In a situation like the one I was just in, I can direct your attacks at each other to cancel them out,” Kevin said. As he spoke, he slashed his sword through Atlantis, vertically splitting the demon’s body right in half. “There’s more where that came from.” Kevin swung both his hunting swords left and right, cutting Atlantis into countless pieces. If the slime could reform after being sliced apart, Kevin just needed to chop him into such tiny pieces that regeneration became

impossible. At least, that was what Kevin hoped.

Despite having been chopped like an onion, the fragments of Atlantis's body turned back into liquid, then gathered into his humanoid shape. Once again, he was unharmed. "I told you, you're wasting your time! I'll say this in advance: I can revive even if you evaporate me with fire magic."

"Damn, as I expected. Really wish this attempt would've worked." Kevin shrugged his shoulders. "You're a real pain to deal with, you know that?"

"Ha ha! Pot calling the kettle black, mister?" Atlantis thought back to what Beelzebub had told him before their sortie.

"Kevin is the most troublesome one among the Seven Heroes."

Now that he'd fought the man in person, he could understand why. The ability to act in the optimal way, thanks to his foresight, gave him a huge combat advantage. Kevin's defensive wind magic had to adjust expertly in order to cause all incoming attacks—a deadly barrage of lightning, lava, and boulders assaulting him from every direction—to destroy each other with a minimum change in trajectory. Such a feat should have been impossible, but it was a doable task for Kevin. The current Atlantis couldn't prove it, but it was very likely that Kevin had seen everything play out once before reloading time.

"Hey, you don't retry just once, right? I heard you needed to go through a whole bunch of attempts to defeat the old Black Star you fought. Just repeat events until things go your way, huh?" Atlantis asked.

"You could say that," Kevin replied with a nod.

"Man, that's so sweet. That skill's practically cheating." The ability to restart until you won was unrivaled, definitely on the same level as a shenmo's Ex-Skill. "Still, you can't cut me down, so there's no hope."

"Is that so? Then maybe we're both pots."

"However..." Atlantis broke into a wide sneer. "Too bad for you."

Kevin's eyes widened as he felt a change in himself. A new demon's face had sprouted from Atlantis's right shoulder, and it was singing, which was having some sort of effect on Kevin. What concerned him the *most* was that the new

demon closely resembled a human.

“You’ve even absorbed another shenmo?” Kevin asked with a strained smile.

“Ex-Skill: Normalizing Hymn. It can seal any other skill except for Ex-Skills,” Atlantis said.

What Kevin had sensed was the sealing of his Save and Load skill.

“Eating this demon was a toughie, but Normalizing Hymn can only seal about eight hundred skills at the same time, so it wasn’t much use against me in the end,” Atlantis said, then he snickered. “You can’t cheat by redoing things anymore!”

“So that’s it then, Beelzebub.” Alan Granger nodded to his archenemy, who was walking next to him. Alan seemed to have taken Beelzebub’s earlier statement in stride. “A slime that possesses over one thousand skills and can grow stronger and stronger by absorbing others, is it? Yes, a very troublesome foe indeed.”

“Hmm. You’re awfully composed considering what you’ve just learned, Alan,” Beelzebub said in a curious voice.

“Oh, not at all. I do think that Atlantis fellow is a dangerous foe. I’d like to avoid fighting him if possible. However, you said he went to the Fifth Kingdom, right? Then everything will be fine. Kevin’s there, after all,” Alan said with absolute confidence. “He’s usually an unreliable guy. Lazy, careless, lies about the most trivial things...but he’s strong. I can easily say that he’s the most skilled among the Seven Heroes when it comes to a one-on-one fight.”

“Come on, mister. Die and become my strength.” Atlantis fired lightning from his wings, which Kevin dodged with his usual elegant technique. Atlantis just cackled. “How long can you keep running away now that you can’t use your skill?”

Atlantis continued to make the most of the situation by scattering lightning feathers, lava, and boulders everywhere. The lightning rushed at the speed of

light and scorched everything in its path; the lava oozed in a wide area and melted the outer walls of the castle; the smoldering boulders rained down with unbelievable speed and cratered the ground.

The onslaught of natural disasters had become even fiercer than before, and each attack aimed to end Kevin's life. His back was really against the wall now. Without Save and Load, he couldn't rewind time and take the best action for defense. He would have to face the music when he tripped up.

A few minutes after Atlantis had sealed Kevin's ability and begun his fierce offensive, he noticed something. "How... How can you move exactly as well as you did before?!"

Kevin was still evading with perfect efficiency, bobbing and weaving as if he knew Atlantis's next action beforehand. He sidestepped even the attacks that represented the wrath of nature itself.

"What's going on?! Your skill should be sealed away! You can't go back in time and figure out the best reaction anymore!"

"Uh, I think you're misunderstanding something here, boy," Kevin said as he turned to the trio of attacks headed his way.

"Flax fields rustle in the white southern wind as the cicadas' song echoes through the moonlit night." His sword became wrapped in complex air currents. "Summer Breeze Advent, Accentor!"

With a swing of his sword, every one of Atlantis's attacks disappeared.

"What?!" Atlantis stared, astonished. He'd been certain that Kevin's defensive spell was only possible thanks to his Save and Load skill.

Wait, don't tell me...

After witnessing Kevin's latest feat, Atlantis arrived at the truth.

"Are you telling me you weren't using your skill the entire time?!"

It had been Kevin's fated encounter with Reece when he'd been just sixteen that had led to him joining her unit and participating in the Titanomachy.

“It was love at first sight. I will protect you till death do us part. Marry me.”

After making such a grand declaration, Kevin had been eager to act as the knight in shining armor who would gallantly protect Reece.

Unfortunately, the war front hadn’t been a forgiving place where a man who’d been idling his time away on frivolity could excel overnight. Fight after grueling life-and-death fight, Kevin had been nothing but a burden for his allies. There’d been times when their operations failed because of his mistakes, and someone else became the victim as a result. His allies had branded him a nuisance and told him to leave the unit on more than one occasion.

“I’m saved just by having you here,” Reece had told Kevin in the midst of all that.

With her support, he’d somehow managed to keep fighting, but the war had still been cruel.

By the time of the decisive battle at the hideout of the demon army officer responsible for invading the Fifth Kingdom, Kevin and Reece had been the only survivors of their unit. Kevin had survived not by his own strength, but by dumb luck—the only thing he’d always had on his side. He’d never expected it to aid him as much as it did on the battlefield. But, in the end, he’d encountered a situation where no amount of luck would save him.

Nero the Bloodsucking Emperor had been the one who’d put him in that situation. Nero had been one of the Seven Black Stars, and the only shenmo in the demon army besides the demon lord himself.

Their face-off had been over in seconds. Worse, Nero had grabbed Reece to use her as a sacrifice in some sick ritual.

“Kevin!”

“Reece!”

Kevin had tried to race after Reece and rescue her, but he’d easily fallen to one of the underlings Nero had left behind. He’d been completely helpless. As his chest had been run through by the demon’s spear, thoughts had swirled around in his fading consciousness like water going down a drain.

I can't do anything, couldn't do anything.

Despite talking big with lines like, "I will protect you till death do us part," he'd been absolutely no use to the bitter end.

I'm so incompetent. Guess that's expected. Spent my life playing around without a single dream or aspiration. But, I still want to save Reece. That's all. I just don't want to see her with tears in her eyes.

The next moment, the world around Kevin had warped. When he'd come to his senses, he'd been back to the moment when Nero had snatched Reece.

What just happened?

He'd assumed his death had been a dream and fought Nero's underling once more, but he'd quickly been dispatched again.

Remarkably, the scenery had warped once more, and he'd found himself seconds before his fight with Nero's underling. He'd realized then, his own power: the ability to turn back time. He'd only awakened to it with his dying breath.

At that second, he'd sworn an oath to himself.

I'll save her, no matter how many times I have to repeat this. I might be a useless guy with no dreams or goals, but that is the one thing I swear from the bottom of my heart!

That had been how Kevin's long, long journey began.

His aptitude for combat had actually been higher than the average person's, but as he'd never received any kind of training, he'd only been slightly stronger than an ordinary human. It had taken him more than a hundred deaths to defeat Nero's underling.

Even after he'd gained the prowess needed to defeat that underling, there'd been countless hurdles he still had to overcome—Nero's powerful foot soldiers, his four elites, and then finally Nero himself. Through it all, he had a time limit hanging over him, because Reece had been doomed to be sacrificed in thirty days.

Kevin had died again, and again, and again, and again.

More than a trillion times.

Only by grasping for a miracle could a powerless, ordinary man like him have hoped to defeat a shenmo in only thirty days.

“Th-That’s impossible... *Me*, defeated at the hands of this trifling boy?”

At last, Kevin had pierced his sword through Nero’s heart. Then, with eager hands, he’d undone the restraints of the crucified Reece.

“I kept you waiting, didn’t I? I really did.”

“Thank you, Kevin. It feels like you’ve grown tougher in the short time we’ve been apart,” Reece had said, half relieved, half surprised. Her eyes had been locked on his.

“I could only do it thanks to you. You’re the reason I kept moving forward, even when I wanted to give up.”

“I’m not sure I follow, but you’re *so* dashing right now, Kevin.”

Kevin had never forgotten Reece’s smile on that day, and he never would.

“Shit! Hit him! Take a hit, dammit!” In a rage, Atlantis fired skill after skill. Storms howled; lightning crackled; flames blazed; plants transformed and attacked like living things; cold froze everything; dragon breath scorched the air itself. None of them could catch Kevin. He dodged, sidestepped, ducked, deflected, or canceled out every last one of them.

“Why can’t I hit you?! You can’t turn back time anymore, can you?! Your skill should be *sealed*!” Just like a little kid, Atlantis was throwing a tantrum because everything wasn’t going his way.

“Because I knew before this fight. How many times do you think I’ve lost in the past? How many times do you think I’ve died?” Kevin asked seriously, before shifting back to the easygoing tone he had at the start of their fight. “See, if you repeat things over a trillion times, you figure out most fight patterns. And I’ve figured out that even your ability has its limits.”

Atlantis was stunned into silence.

“Seems you can only use three different skills at the same time, max,” Kevin posited. “You’ve only used at most two attacks together so far, and you’ve stopped using the skill that weakens my physical abilities.”

Atlantis jolted. *He noticed?!*

“Why would you only use one debuff when you have over one thousand skills available? That would imply you can’t use several at once, right?” Kevin was spot-on: Atlantis could only use up to three skills simultaneously. Although, since skills were usually limited to one per person, having the freedom to choose three out of more than a thousand was still an incredible ability.

“Oh, hitting the nail on the head shook you up,” Kevin said as he charged. The flames and projectiles Atlantis had fired earlier were still between them, but Kevin paid them no mind. As swift as the wind, he slipped through the tiniest of gaps.

“What?!” Atlantis couldn’t hide his surprise. “You’re still wasting your time! You can’t damage my—”

Kevin’s sword slashed Atlantis’s body diagonally across the chest and blood poured from the wound.

“Argh! H-how...” Atlantis looked down at the injury and saw wind mana spiraling inside it. *He’s using wind mana to stop the wound from closing?!*

“I’ve fought all kinds of enemies in my time. Some of them were like you, where cutting them did nothing. You’re gonna have a bad time if you underestimate an old man who’s seen a thing or two, boy.” Despite his threatening words, Kevin scratched the back of his head lazily. “Say, how about we call it quits and you go home for real this time? I’m tired of fighting. Don’t worry, I won’t touch you while you’re running away.”

Atlantis stood there, mute.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, boy? You clammed up.”

“Damn...”

“What?”

“Damn you! Stop talking down to me!” Atlantis screamed. He had never

suffered an injury in battle. He found it painful, repulsive, and most of all, infuriating.

Atlantis unleashed a large quantity of mana hiding in his body, turning himself red from head to toe. Then, countless faces surfaced all across his body.

“I’ll tear you to pieces.”



“What kind of form is that?” Cold sweat ran down Kevin’s body as he sensed the danger radiating from his foe.

“Red Ocean Overdrive.” Every inch of Atlantis was bloodred and grotesque, warped faces now crowded tightly together on the surface of his body. “I’m strong. You’ll see—having more skills than anyone makes me the strongest!”

What kind of change would Atlantis’s dramatic transformation bring? Before Kevin even had the time to think about it, he understood.

Atlantis cackled manically. “Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, diiiiiieeee!”

Lightning, flames, wind, water, boulders, invisible shock waves, and even massive beams of light fired upon Kevin at the same time. This was a far cry from the two types of attacks at once Atlantis used before; there were scores of them now.

“Ugh!” Kevin narrowly dodged the destructive chorus of natural disasters. *And my skill is still sealed, huh?*

“Ha ha ha! Red Ocean Overdrive is the ultimate power! For ten minutes, I can use all of my skills at once, and all I have to exchange is a lot of mana!” It was clear from Atlantis’s onslaught that he was not exaggerating. Red Ocean Overdrive removed his three-skill limitation, giving him access to all one thousand plus of his skills.

“Well, well, what a blunt, troublesome ability,” Kevin said while evading the rain of attacks, although barely. In just a short amount of time, his body was grazed many times.

Previously, Atlantis had thrown around his powerful skills like an inexperienced child, which gave Kevin an advantage. What Atlantis was doing now was fundamentally the same, but the battle had dramatically changed nonetheless. While his attacks were even more crude and emotional since Kevin had injured him, because he could fire many kinds of destructive long-range attacks at the same time, tactics and strategy had become unnecessary.

At least there's a time limit. I need to somehow buy time. But as soon as Kevin had thought that, he felt his body grow almost as heavy as a stone. He couldn't muster his strength, just like when Atlantis had weakened him earlier, but the decrease in his physical abilities was far worse this time. *He's using several debuffs at once?!*

Kevin had speculated that Atlantis would use more than one debuff if he could, and now that that was reality, the power of it was staggering. These weren't ten debuffs or so; their numbers felt much higher, probably in the upper double digits. Kevin's physical ability, mana, and many other functions had been slashed to less than half. Even standing felt like a difficult task.

Atlantis didn't hold back. Accompanied by a cacophony of malicious laughter, he transformed his hand into a large, thorny hammer, then accelerated toward Kevin. His speed was so great it had sounded as if the ground had exploded when he took off.

Despite uttering a gasp of surprise, Kevin used his sword to intercept Atlantis's hammer. The incredibly heavy force rocked him back on his heels. *I haven't felt raw strength like that since sparring with Dora.*

"Hngh!" Atlantis forced more brute strength into his attack, sending Kevin flying back like he'd been shot out of a cannon. He crashed into the castle's outer wall with enormous momentum and sank into it.

"Gwah!" The impact shook through Kevin's body, hard enough that blood spilled from his mouth. He'd tried to evade the brunt of the attack, but the power behind Atlantis's attack and his own reduced physical abilities had made that impossible. *Well, he's not just debuffing me. He's also buffing himself, isn't he?*

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" There was no stop to Atlantis's fierce offensive. Ten arms grew out of his back next, each grasping weapons of various shapes.

"Seriously, using a weapon creation skill this time?" Kevin mumbled.

Atlantis sprang into action once more, swinging the axe he held in one of his twelve hands. Kevin's body, hindered by debuffs and damage, was slow to respond, but he used wind magic to boost his movement and managed to dodge by a hair's breadth. The axe struck the ground where Kevin had been

standing, then a loud explosion roared around it.

“An exploding axe, is it? Don’t tell me, the rest of the weapons have their own special abilities, don’t they?” Kevin said.

“Exactly! And I’ve got plenty more skills to show you!” Atlantis rushed Kevin with his twelve weapons, each possessing a special trait. He was still using his extensive array of debuffs even as his arms moved in a flurry around him, while his strength was comparable to Dora’s thanks to his buffs.

“So you think that numbers equal strength? That’s some nauseatingly blunt reasoning, boy.” Whatever he might say, Kevin was quickly running out of options. He was struggling to survive against Atlantis’s relentless onslaught. Though he devoted himself to defense and evasion, he couldn’t avoid every attack, and so was hit time after time—though none were quite direct hits.

Damn it, even walking up the stairs has wiped me out lately. This is a colossal pain in the rear. Gimme a break already, I’m tired. Kevin was a man in his forties, after all; his stamina was on the decline. *And come on, a thousand skills? That’s cheating. I really can’t do this anymore.*

Why had he succumbed to Alan’s coaxing and agreed to join the war again? Fighting wasn’t in his nature. To his mind, it only brought pain. He didn’t derive any pleasure from battling powerful foes like Dora or Alan did, nor did he enjoy tormenting his opponents and lording over them like Isabella or Derek. If anything, he was most like Yoshida, a mild-mannered and peaceful guy.

At his age, what was he even doing here?

Maybe I should just call it quits. I’ll be able to join Reece if I lose here, after all. Yeah, let’s do that, Kevin thought.

He had no lingering attachment to this life. The only reason he had gone on living since losing Reece was because he hadn’t died. His grip started to loosen on both his swords, but then, Reece’s words rang in his ears.

“Thank you, Kevin. I wanted us to live together in a peaceful world, but live on, won’t you?”

Back then, Kevin had died time and again. Again, and again, and again. But every time, he'd learned new combat techniques and ways to take down his foes. All in order to rescue Reece. His tenacity had eventually brought him before his final foe, Nero, the Black Star.

"Kevin!"

In front of the crucified Reece, Kevin had valiantly entered his final confrontation with the shenmo Nero. He couldn't win. The gap in strength between them had just been too overwhelming. Of course, all of his fights to reach Reece had been against stronger opponents, but the Black Star had been in a league of his own. After their first fight, Kevin hadn't been able to imagine a future where he could win within the span of thirty days.

It's fine. I have my Save and Load. I can do this as many times as it takes. Over and over again.

He'd kept on trying. Yet, despite all his efforts, he'd not been able to see a single way to win. He'd stopped making progress at some point, because it'd all become a habit for him.

I can just try again. It's okay. My skill will get me through this.

He'd died in front of Reece, loop after loop.

He'd run out of time, and Reece had been sacrificed in the ritual, time after time.

Many more times, he'd repeated the same thing without making an inch of progress, because he'd known he could try again.

He'd become so used to the routine, he'd been shocked when Reece had said something different than usual during one of his attempts.

"That's enough," she'd told him while he'd been losing to Nero's strength. "Thank you, Kevin. I wanted us to live together in a peaceful world, but live on, won't you?"

Then, she'd bitten off her own tongue, converted her own blood into poison with a spell, and swallowed it. He'd watched her end her life, just because she'd wanted to rescue him from the curse that was saving her. Her face had been

contorted in an agonized smile as she died.

Kevin had no idea why she'd acted so differently from his previous attempts. Perhaps some of his despair had crept onto his face. In that moment, realization had hit him like a brick.

I've had this wrong all along. The convenience of Save and Load had spoiled him. He'd needed to remember his purpose.

"I'm fighting because I don't want Reece to ever look as miserable as she just did. I'm going to change her lonely smile into a genuine one!"

He wouldn't accept loss. He wouldn't get accustomed to defeat. He'd fight with the intent to win every single time.

"People don't win because they've got a handy ability. They win because they struggle like hell for victory!"

From that point, Kevin had fought with renewed fire in his heart. He'd still lost. However, each time he'd lost from then on, he'd shed tears and bit his lips in frustration.

"Next time for sure, that's when I'll rescue her," he'd told himself—every time. And after countless attempts, Kevin had eventually kept his vow to defeat the Black Star.

"Yeah, that's right," Kevin said. He smiled softly at the memory.

Atlantis squinted at Kevin with suspicion. "What are you smiling about?! My thousand skills have your back against the wall!"

True enough, Kevin was still at the mercy of a blitz of powerful skills. If he was distracted for a moment or made a mistake, he'd die. Moreover, he might die even if he stayed focused and made no mistakes at all. That was the current state of things.

"Hah, piece of cake." Kevin seemed unconcerned as he tightened the grip on his swords. With a great battle cry, he repelled Atlantis's attacks. Unlike his usual parrying through precise use of technique, this was a display of strength.

Atlantis was baffled. "But how? How do you even have all that strength left?"

Kevin beckoned with his index finger. “What’s wrong? Your ten minutes are almost up, aren’t they? Come at me, you stupid brat.”

“Stop talking down to me, you senile old fool!” Atlantis didn’t yield for a single second. He pummeled Kevin with his debuffing, strengthening, long-range-striking, weapon-creating, and transforming skills in an all-out assault.

Kevin still dealt with everything that came his way. He was nothing like his earlier, aloof self. He roared, yet somehow remained graceful, as he fought with incredible zeal.

“H-How?! How are his predictions even more accurate than before?!” Anxiety crept over Atlantis; his Red Ocean Overdrive was about to run out. He was suddenly the one on the back foot. “How, just how?! I have one thousand skills! How can I still not beat you when I’ve got so many?!”

“Skills aren’t everything,” Kevin said with a chuckle. With a flourish, he swept away an approaching lightning bolt with his wind-clad sword. “My defeats and regrets are like scaffolds that prop up this old man. I won’t lose to some brat who only knows how to brag about how many skills he’s stolen.”

That was the core of his strength: the experience he’d gained as he tried to rescue Reece until he’d almost lost his mind. It’d been torturous, frustrating, and he’d wept with every defeat, but he’d been stubborn. To never give up and keep pushing forward—*that* was true experience. Determination was Kevin Laphicet’s actual most powerful, most unrivaled skill.

“I don’t understand, I don’t understand, *I don’t understand!!!*” Atlantis shouted as he turned his own arm into a spear with a metallizing skill. He only had a few seconds left in his Red Ocean Overdrive, so this was his last attack with it. “I don’t understand even one stupid thing you’re saying. But your skill! Give it to me! I can win if I have that!”

Clang!

The sword in Kevin’s left hand was knocked away, but he remained calm and took a deep breath. When Atlantis expressed envy for Kevin’s skill at the eleventh hour, he saw a reminder of his past self—who’d been spoiled by the power of Save and Load and had given up on winning—in Atlantis.

“You’re missing the point.” Kevin blocked Atlantis’s final attack with his open hand.

Naturally, stopping a sharp metallic spear with his flesh-and-blood arm had serious consequences for Kevin. The weapon pierced through his palm, but he ignored the sharp pain and focused his strength into his arm, contracting his muscles to slow the spear’s advance. The weapon was terribly sharp and powerful, so it carved through Kevin’s flesh and bone—until it stopped at his shoulder.

At that moment, Atlantis’s body returned to its normal color. Red Ocean Overdrive had run out of time.

“We’re quite similar when it comes to developing a dependency on the strength of our skills, so hear me out, kid. Even if you had my skill, it wouldn’t do you any good,” Kevin said.

“I don’t understand, I don’t understand...” Atlantis mumbled with hollow eyes. He couldn’t believe what had happened.

“Try coming back after you’ve died a thousand times or so. That’d help you understand, no matter how much you hate learning.” Kevin beheaded Atlantis with his sword, which was covered in the same wind that could stop regeneration he had used earlier. Blood sprayed from Atlantis’s neck like a geyser as his body collapsed and his head dropped to the ground. In the same breath, the demons who’d been attacking the castle also disappeared. The end.

“When a New Black Star is defeated, their subordinates can’t remain in the human world any longer. Exactly like in Dora’s report,” Kevin said while looking down at Atlantis’s corpse. “Haah, it cost me an arm, huh? Wish they’d stop pushing this old man so far.”

A few seconds of silence passed.

“Absorption complete,” said Atlantis’s head from the ground.

“What?!”

The next second, the scenery started moving in reverse. Kevin was very familiar with this phenomenon: it was what happened when he used his Save and Load.

Oh, he really did it! He absorbed the arm he pierced through earlier! When Kevin studied Atlantis's now-liquid body, he saw his own mostly digested arm inside it—just a glimpse. Then, their fight returned to the beginning, right to the start of their confrontation.

“This is amazing! This skill is really the best!” Atlantis said with a cackle of delight. He loved Save and Load, and understood the full strength of it now that it was part of his own body. “It takes a lot out of me, so I can't use it with Red Ocean Overdrive, but now I'm truly unrivaled! I can go forever until I win, after all!”

It's such a powerful skill. He must have won every fight ever thanks to it. What a cheater. It's a joke that he, of all people, was lecturing me with that big attitude earlier. Ha ha! Not even the demon lord can beat me now that I have this skill! Atlantis picked up the sword of one of his subordinates, buffed his strength, then swung it at Kevin.

Clang!

Kevin intercepted the attack with his singular hunting sword; he could only use his right arm at the moment. Even though time had rewound, his left arm hadn't made the journey back with them, because it'd been the way Atlantis obtained Save and Load in the first place.

“If I may ask, one of your two remaining slots is used by the skill that seals my skill, right?” Kevin said.

“You bet! You can't win anymore!” Atlantis laughed with a sense of superiority.

“Hmm, is that so?” Regardless, Kevin's expression wasn't that of a cornered person. Rather, it looked like he pitied Atlantis.

Seeing that, the demon grew incensed. “Why are you looking at me with such contempt?! Start crying!”

Since Kevin's left arm was linking cause and effect with the world before time was reversed, Atlantis knew Kevin should remember that he'd obtained Save and Load. It was downright bizarre to Atlantis that Kevin hadn't fallen into

despair.

“First off, you stink at combat without your skill menagerie, kid. Your armpit is wide open.” At that, Kevin cleaved Atlantis’s body in half with virtually no effort.

“Urgh!” A river of blood poured out of Atlantis’s body. “You’re wasting your time!”

Time started to rewind. The scenery moved in reverse and the sun moved from east to west. Save and Load interfered with and ruled the very world itself. Soon enough, things were once again at the beginning. Time had returned to the start of Kevin and Atlantis’s battle, meaning the latter was unscathed once more.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Your ability *really* is awesome! There’s no possible way I can lose now that I have it!” The real fight was about to begin.

“Hmm? Oh, I get it, you returned one more time, did you?” Kevin said. He had no recollection of the most recent time rewind, only of the first one. There was a sensible reason for that. Kevin had retained his memories of the first reload because it had a causal relationship with the loss of his left arm. No longer. There was no direct link between his left arm and time turning back now. Atlantis was the only one who could accumulate new experience in this battle, until he had enough to win. Rewind after rewind, he could amass experience until he defeated Kevin.

Kevin understood that fact perfectly well, yet he calmly readied his sword to face Atlantis.

“Eh, that’s all right, I guess. Bring it on!” Kevin said.

“I don’t need you to tell me!” Atlantis once again swung his blade at Kevin.

Kevin versus Atlantis. This was Atlantis’s third attempt after obtaining Save and Load, and he was more determined than ever.

“Agh!”

Unfortunately for him, Kevin parried his sword and sent Atlantis’s head flying.

Ouch! One more... Atlantis's fatal wound triggered another time rewind. He became lost in thought while watching the reversing scenery.

I already knew it, but this guy really is way better in terms of fighting technique. He hated to admit it, but the difference between them was like night and day. Not that it was any cause for concern! The more they fought, the more the gap between them would shrink. Besides, with his skills, he didn't need to surpass Kevin in combat technique head-on.

Time rewound again. The unharmed Atlantis faced off against Kevin with his missing left arm.

Save and Load and Normalizing Hymn are taking up two of my slots, but I can pick anything for the last one. Atlantis picked one skill from among his thousand.

Kevin's body tingled and twitched with an uncomfortable sensation. Atlantis had chosen a debuff skill to reduce his opponent's physical abilities. Earlier, he'd been using a skill to increase his physical strength, but now he thought it might be more effective to restrict Kevin's movements than improve his own. Atlantis charged at Kevin, who'd lost his balance after suddenly feeling the effects of the debuff.

"Hup!" However, Kevin slipped within reach of Atlantis and sliced his body in half, right across the chest, while the demon was still drawing his sword. "I've experienced countless fights where I've been held back by debuffs. This isn't even close to how brutal it was with plenty of them."

"Ugh!" Atlantis's fatal wound again turned back the hands of time. *This one didn't work either, huh? No matter.* The biggest strength of Save and Load was the ability to try as many times as it took to win, after all. He could go on forever. *I'll use a long-range attack skill next.*

With that thought in mind, Atlantis went through loop after loop. He used a different skill and strategy each time, again and again.

I can't win, Atlantis thought.

No matter how many times he tried, he couldn't defeat Kevin. Whenever time rewound, Kevin gained no new memories. Somehow, he still dodged Atlantis's

attacks as if he knew exactly what he would do in advance, then killed him in one hit.

This time was no different.

“Grah!” A moment of carelessness from Atlantis earned him another fatal sword wound through the chest. “Urgh... Why?!”

Even an amateur like Atlantis understood just how skilled his opponent was. Even so, he’d tried so many different things. Why wasn’t one of them good enough?

“Why can’t I win?! We’ve fought a hundred stupid times, yet I haven’t gotten a single step closer to defeating you!” Atlantis screamed like a toddler throwing a tantrum with blood flying out of his mouth.

“What do you mean? It’s *only* been a hundred times, right?” Kevin said it like it was the most obvious thing.

“Wait, ‘only’?”

“I died over a trillion times to acquire the combat techniques I have now. But your natural strength is higher than mine, so you might catch up after, what, one hundred million times?”

“O-One hundred million?” *I have to hurt like this that many times? No, no, I don’t wanna!*

Once those thoughts began to pass through Atlantis’s mind, he noticed something. “Huh? Time isn’t turning back. But, why?” he asked, bewildered. Here he was, on the verge of death, blood cascading down his chest, yet time hadn’t started reversing itself.

“Oh, given up, have you? See, Save and Load lets you return to a point in time you saved as long as your determination to fulfill your objective holds strong. This means you’ve lost all your drive to defeat me, boy.”

“N-No, that can’t—Urk!” Atlantis gushed blood from his throat like a broken faucet, then collapsed on the ground. He didn’t want to die, or lose, but even more than that, he hated the idea of going through that miserable experience again.

“It’s like I said, isn’t it? Even though you got my skill, it didn’t do you any good,” Kevin said as he looked down at Atlantis.

“Y-You also said...the two of us are alike, didn’t you? Then why, why didn’t you give up through all that hardship?”

“Aah, well...” Kevin paused for a moment, scratching his head. “It’s not really such a big deal,” he said with a faraway look. “There was a woman I wanted to make happy, no matter what. That was our only real difference,” he concluded in a self-deprecating tone.

“I don’t get it... I don’t...” To the bitter end, Atlantis didn’t understand a single thing Kevin said.

This time, when Atlantis turned to ash, he vanished for good. The clock didn’t rewind. Finally, the fight in the Fifth Kingdom reached its drawn-out conclusion.

Beelzebub abruptly stopped on the mountain trail they were crossing.

“Hmm? Is something wrong, Beelzebub?”

“It’s nothing much. Just seems like things turned out as you predicted, Alan.”

Alan furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Atlantis has died. That Gadabout of yours must have won,” Beelzebub said.

“Oh, so he did, then,” Alan answered in a quiet, neutral voice.

“You don’t seem surprised. You trust him a great deal.”

“You’re the surprising one. Don’t you look a little pleased for someone whose subordinate just died?”

“Hmph, that’s true. I *am* pleased, Alan.” As Alan had said, Beelzebub’s lips had quirked into a smile. “Pleased at the strength you humans possess. It makes exterminating you all the more satisfying.”

“You lot can be such a nuisance,” Alan said with a rueful smile.

Chapter 3: History's Strongest Sage versus Wicked Bone King 1

After the battle in the Fifth Kingdom had concluded, news of Kevin's victory quickly spread throughout every kingdom. When the rest of the Seven Heroes received the report, their reactions were similar to Alan's: devoid of surprise.

"Of course, he always pulls through when it counts," said Dora Alexandra, the Second Kingdom's Godfist Saint.

"Ha ha! Tenacious as ever, that guy," said Derek Henderson, the Third Kingdom's Exiled Dark Priest.

"Well, that goes without saying," said Isabella Stuart, the Fourth Kingdom's Final Form Villainess.

"Kevin's certainly an amazing person," said Yoshida, the Seventh Kingdom's Villager.

The only one who couldn't hear the report was the Sixth Kingdom's Norman Lockwood, who was called History's Strongest Sage. He didn't have the chance, because at the same time, his fight with the invading demon army was intensifying.

The Sixth Kingdom, Black Night—also known as the Kingdom of Night and Magic—had extremely long nights, much longer than any of the other great kingdoms. Its short days weren't caused by high latitude, but rather by a sunlight-refracting mana dome, which covered the entire world. The Sixth Kingdom and its environs just happened to be located in the area where the duration of daytime was limited.

Another effect of the mana dome was that the limited sunlight that shone on the kingdom was unusually strong. As a result, the climate was cold, but not to inhospitable extremes. Magic research flourished in this kingdom due to the abundant mana flowing through its ley lines, and moreover, because the

kingdom's people longed for sunlight. The various by-products of their solchemy research—the art of manufacturing sunlight through magic—were the foundation of the modern study of magic.

At the moment, the Sixth Kingdom was under attack by undead demons: zombies, skeletons, and other such ilk.

The royal castle sat at the heart of the capital, with both of the kingdom's main streets extending from it to the north and south, respectively. The streets around the main ones were organized in a square grid, with buildings with pointed roofs dotted between them. The roads in the grid all connected back to the two main streets.

The demon army had begun their attack with direct assaults up the north and south main streets. At a glance, this would seem like a foolhardy strategy, but it had been the worst possible development for the Sixth Kingdom. The buildings of the kingdom, private residences included, had been laid with magic traps to be used in emergencies. If the demon army had attacked by spreading its forces out across the city, it would have fallen victim to those traps and lost significant numbers. Unfortunately, they'd dodged the traps entirely.

On top of that, there was another problem.

"Dammit! They never let up!" one of the magic knights fighting on the south street front shouted.

The kingdom's magic knights had fallen into formation as soon as the invasion had started. They'd successively fired barrages of long-range magic at the incoming undead demons, but they'd soon realized they were getting nowhere.

"Vitality" might be a strange choice of word when referring to the undead, but the demons had displayed it nonetheless. No matter what they'd been hit with, they'd stood up like nothing was wrong, even after parts of their bodies had been blown off. They'd only needed a second to reattach those parts to themselves, then they'd pressed on.

The only way to halt the undead would be to grind their bodies to dust, but long-range magic lacked the firepower to accomplish that. Magic—not to mention most other types of attacks—lost strength at a distance.

To combat that, the magic knights had closed the distance and were currently fighting the approaching undead using intermediate-range magic. That greatly increased the percentage of enemies they were incapacitating, but at the same time, it also meant their enemies were near enough to strike.

“Geh heh heh!”

“Argh!”

With both sides within range of one another, many knights became the prey of the demons’ bows or bone javelins and were cut down.

“Ugh, this looks bad,” said the commander with full authority over this location. He ground his teeth as he realized they were being overpowered. Those who relied on magical attacks had an easier time the greater the distance between them and their foes. If possible, he wanted knights who could fatally injure their enemies from a safe distance.

The commander was lost in such thoughts when some new faces arrived on the scene.

“My apologies for the delay, commander.”

The commander turned. “Oh, the assistant instructors of the Sincere Magic Society! We’ve been waiting for you!”

A group wearing white uniforms with hakama had arrived. The Sincere Magic Society was a magic research society established by Norman Lockwood of the Seven Heroes, with the goal of cultivating upstanding individuals through the refinement of magic technique. It boasted more than forty thousand students throughout the kingdom from all walks of life, including knights, workers from magic industries, and even royalty. Among them, those particularly skilled at magic were assigned to the position of assistant instructor and taught the other pupils together with Norman, the head instructor. There was nothing more reassuring than having their assistance. The commander himself was also a former pupil of the society, so he was familiar with the instructors’ strength.

“Here we go, everybody!” the instructors’ leader said.

“Yes, sir!” the rest replied in unison. Acting as one, they held their hands up.

“Bonfire of the six fish, consume the mountain forest and transform into a firedrake!”

“Ray of lightning, a stroke of divine works, over a thousand years of humanity!”

A plethora of magic coursed from the instructors’ hands. Each spell was Chanted Magic, a type of magic far more powerful than the Template Magic that had become common in combat. Despite traveling a long distance, the spells destroyed one undead demon after another. Some took a few hits, while some needed just one.

“Wow, marvelous work, assistant instructors,” the commander said.

Unlike Template Magic, Chanted Magic required each individual to research and construct the incantation and mana manipulation method most suitable to them. It was considerably more difficult to learn and weaker than Template Magic if studied halfheartedly. Persistent effort and diligent study were necessary in order to master its use, but all the assistant instructors used it as naturally as they breathed.

“Oh no, you exaggerate. We are still in the middle of our studies,” one of the instructors said while shaking his head.

“Please, you’re being too modest.”

“Far from it, commander. We are always watching someone who has achieved far greater heights than us. We have no room for arrogance.”

The instructors were very familiar with the greatest magician, a man they couldn’t hope to compare themselves to. He could utilize almost every combat magic in existence and was continuing to develop new magic at a frightening pace every day. Somehow, he never let it go to his head. He was always gentle and modest, the picture-perfect example of a Sage.

“You have done well, everyone. Allow me to also lend my assistance,” said a bespectacled man in his forties with gray hair and a calm demeanor. His tall, lean body was covered by a black cassock with a white shawl over it, and he radiated the peaceful air of a priest or reverend, as if he overflowed with virtue. True to his word, he turned to the undead horde and pointed his index finger at

it, much like the assistant instructors had a few minutes before.

“Blaze Element, Tenth Magic.” The man used Template Magic, one of its easiest spells, geared toward beginners. All it was supposed to do was shoot a small fireball. However, when he cast it, a ball of flames as wide as a wagon roared into existence at his fingertip. The fireball blasted toward the demons and incinerated a myriad of them with a deafening impact.

“Oh, uh, *whoa...*” The commander was almost at a loss for words. Template Magic with such firepower behind it was a sight to behold.

This man was the one who’d built the foundation of modern-day magical combat. Template Magic had originally spread because the Chanted Magic he’d developed was far too sophisticated, but anyone could demonstrate a certain amount of power with Template Magic.

“So this is the power of Norman Lockwood, History’s Strongest Sage!” the commander said in awe.

“Tend to the injured, Sebastian,” Norman said. Sebastian was Norman’s butler, a man around the same age as his master.

“As you command, Master Norman.” Sebastian bowed courteously before beginning to use recovery magic on the wounded.

“Now then, everyone, this is no time for cockiness or carelessness. Let us fight while remaining calm in body and mind,” Norman said while straightening his glasses.



Nearby, on the north main street, the humans were slowly pushing back the demons thanks to the efforts of the assistant instructors from the Sincere Magic Society.

“Will the magicians run out of mana, or will the undead’s vitality meet its limit first? I believe that will be the deciding factor of this battle,” said the commander of the northern front. Without Norman by their side, the odds weren’t overwhelmingly in their favor, but they had grasped a small advantage.

Good. We can win if things continue this way.

However, as soon as that thought crossed the commander’s mind, a voice that echoed like it was bouncing off the walls of a cave could be heard.

“The time to awaken is nigh. I heed the call of Hades and seek now to manifest.”

In response, skeletons began pulling over a bevy of carts loaded with large objects.

“What’s going on? What’re they trying to start?” While the commander and instructors looked over in confusion, the skeletons nimbly put the materials from the carts together.

In the end, they had assembled a statue of a large devil, its mouth open wide, with a pedestal in the center.

Suddenly, it emitted a cloud of black smoke and from within it emerged a monster that stood taller than the other skeletons. His head was a bare, horned, animalistic skull, and his body was draped with ostentatious garb.

The moment the more powerful magicians—including the assistant instructors—laid eyes on the creature, they gulped.

“Wh-What absurdly high mana,” one of the instructors mumbled without meaning to.

A muffled voice echoed out once more.

“I am Grave the Wicked Bone King, of the New Seven Black Stars. I have come to deliver judgment upon you, pitiful children of man.” Grave stepped forward slowly, cloaked in a black aura. The skeletons around Grave busied to erect four

pillars with a motif of human bone, surrounding both him and the pedestal inside the devil's mouth. It was a suspicious and ominous sight, reminiscent of the altar a cult would use to perform its corrupt rituals.

“Dark Nascent Magic: Deadly World.” As Grave chanted those words, a frightening amount of mana rose from his body, and black mist gushed out of the pillars with fierce momentum, covering the entire battlefield in a faint fog.



“What?!” the instructors cried as one.

A strange phenomenon had affected all magicians present: they could no longer use their magic. Technically speaking, some could still use it, but its power had dropped so drastically that it could barely be called an attack—and everyone was affected, no exceptions.

The undead demons took advantage of the opening and pressed the assault.

“Gweh heh heh heh heeeeh!”

“Graaah!”

The northern front was filled with the magicians’ screams of agony.

“Sing the song of offering to the darkness.” Grave spread both his arms like a conductor and regarded the tragedy his undead soldiers were committing from atop the altar. The title of Wicked Bone King was an apt one for the current scene.

“Ugh, things have gotten worse. We have to do something about this black mist first!” the commander said. He tried to fight back with his own magic. He was fairly confident in his skills, but the lightning bolt he fired was pitifully weak. The fact that he could use any magic put him over others; more than half of the magic knights couldn’t cast anything at all.

“It appears we have no choice but to destroy the pillars spreading the mist, commander,” said one of the assistant instructors.

“That’s true, but...” The commander could tell as much. But with their magic inhibited to such a degree, even reaching the pillars would be a difficult task.

So this is what a New Black Star, a shenmo like the demon lord, can do!

The entire battlefield was blanketed by potent jamming magic. He’d neither seen nor heard of anything like it; it was a power that surpassed the comprehension of the average person. In the wake of such power, the Sixth Kingdom’s knights were being decimated.

“Shit! What are we supposed to do?!”

“We have no choice but to use every last drop of our mana to try and slow

down the enemy, even just a little!”

Just when they thought they were out of options, a sliver of hope arrived.

“Remain calm, everyone. Your mental state has a direct effect on the strength of your magic.” Norman, who should have been fighting on the opposite front, appeared along with his butler, Sebastian. “I greatly appreciate the assistance, Sebastian. Your rapid movement magic is as brilliant as always.”

“No, I have quite a long way to go before my magic can be compared to yours, Master Norman,” Sebastian said.

“Head Instructor Norman!” One of the assistant instructors rushed over to Norman. “Weren’t you supposed to be in charge of the south street?”

“Indeed, but most of the troubling enemies on that side have been disposed of. They will fare well without my presence.”

“I-I’d expect no less of you, Head Instructor.” This meant that the enemy’s main force had been devastated in a short amount of time.

“Now then, shall I take a turn on this side as well?” Norman said, though he didn’t wait for a response before flying toward the enemy.

“Please—please wait a moment, Master Norman!” the commander yelled in panic. “Jamming magic is spread across this entire battlefield!”

“Wind Group, Twenty-First Magic!” Norman ignored the commander’s warning and used wind magic. The twenty-first spell of the wind group was one that fired sharp, compressed air at a high speed. The blades of wind tore through a few demons and incapacitated them in one clean hit.

“Wh-Whuh...” The commander was in such shock that he could barely utter a groan. “To think you could use such destructive magic in the middle of this powerful jamming field. The mana of History’s Strongest Sage is truly incomparable!”

“I’m afraid that isn’t the case, commander,” said Norman’s butler, Sebastian.

“What do you mean?”

The one to answer was Norman, who’d just flown back and landed next to the commander. “Yes, it’s quite the opposite, in fact. My mana has decreased

considerably due to the effects of old age. These days, I would say I'm around the same level as the average high-rank magician. I've been diligently training every day to preserve it, but to no avail. It's honestly quite embarrassing."

"Then, how could you use such potent magic in the middle of this black mist?" the commander asked.

"Proper mana manipulation technique is the key. All that remains then is to choose the appropriate magic. You should harden your mana, then use honed magic with the highest attack efficiency possible, similar to the one I just used."

"I-I see... Messengers! Deliver Master Norman's words verbatim to every unit immediately." The messengers hurried to follow the commander's order.

"Thank you for your help. This should help us fight back a little. However, even if they know what they need to do, not many people will be able to perform what you just did, Master Norman."

"Well. That is, most likely, correct," Norman admitted.

"Which means we need to destroy these pillars spreading the black mist," one of the assistant instructors interjected. The four pillars surrounding Grave were still spewing the black mist that had covered the entire battlefield.

Norman, however, shook his head. "You are yet lacking in mental training, Assistant Instructor Granz."

"Huh?"

"Let us first collect ourselves. This is merely a cunning ploy on the enemy's side."

"Oh?" The depths of the eye sockets of Grave's skeleton lit up, perhaps because he'd heard their conversation from atop his altar.

"That extravagant pedestal and those four pillars hold no magical significance whatsoever," Norman said.

"Seriously?"

"I am also well-versed in the magic of the underworld. That black mist is a type of basic magic called Black Number Two that obstructs vision. It's just been thinly spread out, rather than focused in one place."

“In other words...?”

“It is all for show. Both that ominous altar and the black mist.”

The instructor and commander were both dumbstruck.

“Wh-Why would the enemy do this?” one of them eventually said.

“As I already stated, it is no more than a cunning trick. If you recall my earlier explanation, your mental state is directly linked to your mana. The enemy brought out such pointless yet sinister ritual implements in an attempt to throw our minds into disarray.” Norman turned to the enemy standing on top of that pointless altar and asked, “Would that not be the case, Grave the Wicked Bone King?”

“Hmm? What are you even talking about?” Grave asked in an ordinary voice, no echo this time. The commander and assistant instructors started when they realized he could speak normally.

However, Norman didn’t react. “I’m afraid there’s no point in feigning ignorance. What’s jamming everyone’s magic isn’t a spell but your Ex-Skill, correct? I can say this confidently, as I know that jamming magic of such magnitude shouldn’t be possible, even among the magic of the underworld.”

“Indeed. Deadly World is my Ex-Skill. It’s an unavoidable space-manipulation skill that weakens the magic of every surrounding enemy by two-thirds,” Grave replied evenly.

“That’s a considerable hurdle to overcome, even knowing the specifics,” Norman said. It was a skill worthy of the shenmo class.

“Yeah, but, I never intended to ‘throw your minds into disarray’ or whatever.” Grave’s dubious tone of voice seemed to ask, *Seriously, what are you talking about?*

“Excuse me? Then for what purpose did you bring over such meaningless, cumbersome implements and cast this unnecessary black mist magic?”

Norman’s question was reasonable. No such luck for Grave’s answer.

“Obviously, this way is much more stylish and gets my spirit up,” Grave replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Everyone involved in the conversation was stunned into silence by his reply.

“I beg your pardon?” Norman thought he might have misheard something, so he fished for clarification.

“Like I said, putting on this sort of performance gets me hyped!”

At that point, Norman could do nothing but stand, speechless.

“Hmm. This way of talking isn’t quite right. Aqua Magic, Number Two!” Blue mana wrapped around Grave’s body like a cape.

When he next spoke, Grave’s voice was muffled and echoing. *“One, two, testing, testing. Mhm, this way is definitely the most stylish,”* he said, sounding satisfied by the result.

The commander spoke without thinking. “What the heck is that guy saying?”

“Now then, I think it’s about time for me to join in.” Grave breezed away from the altar and toward the battle.

“Things are looking grim,” Norman said, his body drenched in cold sweat. “This might very well be the worst possible adversary that I could face.”

Thirty years ago, Norman had participated in the selection test for the Demon Lord Subjugation Unit sponsored by the king himself.

“Next up is number sixteen. Come forward!” Norman’s number had been called for the test that would measure his offensive ability by having him hit targets with magic.

“Phew, my right arm really is throbbing today,” he’d said.

At the time, Norman Lockwood had been fourteen years old, at the very height of his edgy phase. He’d been wearing a fingerless glove (on his left hand only), a black leather jacket, and a colored contact in his right eye, plus his hair had been bleached and styled into spikes.

Needless to say, none of these had any magical effect whatsoever; he'd just thought they made him look cool.

"It's fine if I break that, yeah?" Norman had asked, his voice cracking slightly. He'd pointed at the target as if it'd been a moment of great drama. He hadn't waited for an answer. "Arnos of the abyss, Leitos of the round, Damocles of the heavens, answer to my chant!"

The magic he'd used didn't require an incantation, but he'd chanted all the same because it'd sounded impressive to him. It was unlikely there were any gods or great men with the name Arnos, Leitos, or Damocles.

"Haah!" Unnecessary chanting or not, the flames he'd shot at the target had blown it and a chunk of the castle wall behind it away, leaving a large hole in their wake.

"Whoa..." The examiner had been flabbergasted by the tremendous display of power.

Norman had just exhaled and brushed his bleached hair up with one hand. "Huh? What, did I do something?" A rhetorical question. "What's wrong? You all look surprised. This much is to be expected, right?"

Back then, Norman had possessed quite the unpleasant personality.



Norman's superb innate talent for magic and his grandfather's influence had played a major part in his overdramatic youth. His talent for magic had indeed been outstanding, so his grandfather had constantly showered him with compliments.

"You're a genius, Norman! A very special existence," he'd said.

The young Norman had heard his grandfather's words and believed himself an almost supernatural prodigy. He'd liked to imagine backstories that explained just how special he was: that he'd been the reincarnation of the demon lord; that he'd been born with one magic eye; that his hair had gone white as a side effect of his naturally abundant mana. The list went on and on. The only thing that'd been irrefutable was his incredible talent for magic. Thus, a truly annoying person, a capable and powerful edgelord, had been born.

He'd fought the demon army for five years while acting the exact same way, and had even defeated one of the Seven Black Stars solo. However, eleven years after the war had ended, a realization at the age of thirty had hit him like a sharp slap on the cheek.

"Hold on a sec. Could I be, like, irredeemably cringe?"

Once he'd given it some thought, it'd occurred to him that no one had joined a party with him during his fight against the demon army, and he'd never kept a single friend, much less a girlfriend or a wife, despite supposedly being a hero.

If I continue like this, will I spend the rest of my life alone and unloved? Wait, that's terrifying!

From then on, his intense fear had led him down a different path. He'd chosen instead to imitate his well-loved grandfather, dropping the eccentric outfits, punk hairstyle, outlandish backstories, and frequent humblebragging.

In the wake of his changes, people who wanted to become his friend or magic disciple had started gathering around him; he'd also found himself a wife. What a natural form of happiness.

Yes, I really was embarrassing myself after all. That was a dark time. Being special isn't everything. In retrospect, coming up with fake stories about myself was a ridiculous idea. Humans don't need to be "cool" to be worthwhile. Living a

normal and modest life is ideal. I'll live my life like this from now on, Norman swore to himself.

"I should be allowed to forget the past that makes me twitch just remembering it!" Norman cried.

"Super Dark Flame Phoenix!" Grave said as he fired a spell at Norman. A mass of flames surged at Norman, who narrowly managed to dodge it. The building behind him was not so lucky and was blasted to bits in a deafening explosion of flame. It was a frightening display of force that demonstrated the title "shenmo" wasn't just for show.

Yet, there was a point other than the spell's destructiveness that Norman had to comment on.

"You liar! That was the basic demon magic Red Magic, Number Four!" Under no possible circumstances was its name "Super Phoenix" or whatever nonsense Grave had spouted.

"Are you even listening to yourself?! This name is way more stylish!" Grave's objection resurfaced a memory in Norman's mind that should have been sealed away forever.

"Phew! I'm really in the zone today! I'm going to name this technique Super Ancient Fire Eagle."

Those had been Norman's words at the age of sixteen, back when he'd devised a new type of flame group magic. For the record, it would go on to be called Fire Element, Third Magic.

This guy even has similar taste in names to the past me. Is this intentional harassment?!

"Your mind seems to be in turmoil, Master Norman," Sebastian said.

"I know!" As Norman had said, a person's mental state had a significant influence on their mana and spellcasting. With their mind in turmoil, both their accuracy and power would drop.

"Purple Lightning Flash Rumbling Extreme Blast! (Yellow Magic, Number

Three)!" Grave used another spell with an absurd name. One of Norman's long since sealed memories yet again rose to the surface.

"The secret magic bestowed to me by the spirits is now complete. I shall name it Dance of the Soaring Lightning, Sixth Model, Grand Phoenix."

This would later be called Lightning Group, Fifth Magic.

"Stoooooooooooooooooooooooooop!!!" Norman screamed. His tenacious force of will allowed him to continue the fight, but all he wanted to do right then was writhe in pain while clutching his head.

Grave ignored Norman's words and continued firing basic underworld spells while calling out the ridiculously long names he had given them. While what he spouted was silly nonsense, the power of his magic was tremendous, especially for nothing more than fundamental magic. And it wasn't just sheer power in which he excelled.

Across the board, his spell construction, manipulation speed, accuracy, and mana efficiency are top-notch, Norman thought. Despite talking like a bumbling fool, Grave's skill in magic was by far the highest of any enemy Norman had ever faced.

"Nevertheless... Water Group, Thirty-Fifth Magic!" Norman shaped a mass of water into the form of a shark and intercepted the fire magic Grave had used against him. Template Magic spells were numbered from one to fifty, and the ones numbered thirty-five and above were considered high grade. High grade or not, Norman's spell was nowhere near in scale to Grave's, and yet it still managed to drown it out.

"Well, well." Grave actually sounded a little impressed.

"You should know, magic elements have certain advantages and disadvantages against each other. Naturally, fire is weak against water."

"But that's not enough on its own, is it? Negating my attack while hindered by my Ex-Skill, not to mention your scarce amount of mana, was only possible thanks to your highly precise magic. I will admit you have the best magic technique among anyone I've witnessed so far."

"I am still learning," Norman said humbly.

Grave stayed quiet for a moment before continuing. *“Which makes this...dull.”*

“Excuse me?”

“Your measly mana makes this dull. I can already see how this performance will play out. You must know what I mean too, no?”

“Mrgh! You’re observant for someone who talks in such a peculiar manner.” Norman ground his teeth; Grave was right. Compared to his massive, shenmo-level mana and the strength of his output, Norman’s mana reserves were sorely lacking. With the hindrance of Deadly World also taken into account, the disparity between them wasn’t something that could be bridged with technique alone.

“What a shame. A terrible shame indeed.” Grave then resumed his magic assault. *“Griffon Reficis Fanfare!”*

Several lush plants sprouted from the ground and blossomed.

“That’s just Green Magic, Number Twenty-One!”

The emerged flowers fired a barrage of mana bullets at Norman, each over two meters in diameter.

“Ugh!” Norman boosted his speed with movement magic to avoid the attacks, blocking the ones he could not dodge using flame magic, the type that was favored against green magic.

Their numbers are too great. What laughably high mana reserves he has!

Mana bullets, each as powerful as Norman’s strongest spells, rained down on him like a cloudburst. Although not at the same level as Norman, the quality of the magic itself and its accuracy were quite high. There was no easy way to handle the situation. Norman kept dodging with his teeth clenched.

“Argh, if only I had the mana capacity of my youth!” Unlike the decline of stamina, the decline of mana capacity differed from person to person, but most humans lost their mana with age. In Norman’s case, the decline of his mana from age was particularly drastic. He had once possessed more mana than the rest of the Seven Heroes combined, yet his mana was now only impressive in

comparison to that of regular magicians.

“Dear me, old age is a dreadful thing,” Norman grumbled. Perhaps such complaints threw off his concentration, for he didn’t notice one mana bullet right in front of him until a second before it hit. “Shoot!”

The bullet struck him like a sharpshooter’s arrow, sending his slender body flying until he crashed into a nearby building. The wall crumpled inward from the impact. He coughed and hacked up blood as his insides were rattled like he’d been hit by an earthquake.

“Master Norman!” the commander yelled.

“Head Instructor!” the assistant instructor cried.

“Urgh... Gah...” Norman’s limbs were numb, as if he’d been frozen solid, and he could hardly move. Even the single hit of a wide-range attack from Grave was powerful enough to reduce him to such a sorry state. Grave’s magic had an offensive power at least an order of magnitude higher than any enemy Norman had fought in the past.

“Hmm. I was impressed that you could still use magic while under the effects of my skill, but I suppose the gap in our output was too wide,” Grave said. He was looking down on Norman while hovering above him.

Norman didn’t really have any defense to that comment. *I immediately deployed a mana barrier around my body, but it wasn’t enough, was it?* His barrier had hardly stopped any of the attack’s damage. If he’d had the mana he did in his prime, he wouldn’t have ended up so incapacitated.

“Old age is a truly dreadful thing,” Norman repeated bitterly.

“That would be incorrect, Master Norman,” said Sebastian, who’d been observing the entire fight.

Incorrect? How? Norman wondered. What could Sebastian have possibly meant?

“The fault doesn’t lie with your age. Your mana started declining around the age of thirty, at the same time you became the person you are today. Mana is strongly affected by your mental state. Please try to remember your true self.

Do that and you'll surely be able to defeat even the enemy before you."

Norman and Sebastian had known each other for a long time—ever since their teenage years, in fact—but the latter had always meekly accompanied his master. That was why his assertive statement struck a chord with Norman.

My true...self? What was that?

Unfortunately, Grave had no reason to give Norman the time to deliberate at his leisure.

"I will do you the honor of showing you the true form of magic in your final moments." Grave pointed his index finger toward the sky. *"Hell Ball."* A sphere of dark purple mana appeared in the air above him.

The assistant instructors started muttering among themselves at the sight. "Wh-What intense mana! If that sphere hits the ground, the damage will be catastrophic!"

This is bad. I have to take defensive measures now, Norman thought. However, he had no means to block such dense mana with his current abilities alone. *Urgh, I have to think of something!*

"Farewell, you feeble, miserable incompetent."

I'm...feeble and miserable? Those words resonated discordantly inside Norman. *Is he calling me an incompetent?*

His grandfather's words surfaced in his mind. *"You're a genius, Norman! A very special existence."*

He'd heard those words so often, from the moment he could walk, that they'd become something like his pride. Even after he'd left his edgiest days behind him and become humble, no one would ever treat Norman, undoubtedly the best magician in the seven great kingdoms, with such contempt.

"Farewell. Our fight was extremely boring." Grave released his magic to deliver the finishing blow. The sphere of dense mana swooped down on Norman like a stampeding bull.

"Who do you think you're calling incompetent, you fucking

braaaaaaaaaaat?!” Norman’s roar of rage shook the air like a thunderclap. Without a shred of technique, he fired a thick beam of mana from his right hand. The beam swallowed up Grave’s attack in a greedy gulp, then kept moving toward Grave with the same momentum.

“Whoa!” Grave was too occupied with dodging to apply an echo to his voice. He narrowly dodged by the skin of his teeth, but the fabric and ornaments on his shoulder were caught by the beam. It continued far into the horizon and illuminated the Sixth Kingdom’s night sky for but a brief moment.

“I was trying to behave, but this numbskull had to go and get carried away. Who the hell do you think I am?” Norman asked as he hauled himself to his feet. In a flash, he activated spatial storage magic and yanked out a fingerless glove for his right hand, a colored contact for his left eye, and a black leather jacket.

“Who! The hell! Do you think I am?!” For the finishing touch, he bleached his hair white and styled it into spikes with a jolt of magic, then turned to Grave and flipped him off. “You better remember! I’m the great Norman Lockwood, History’s Strongest Sage!”

Sebastian smiled broadly at the sight. “Now *that* is the true Master Norman.”



Chapter 4: History's Strongest Sage versus Wicked Bone King 2

"It's so good to see the true Master Norman," Sebastian said. Norman once again perfectly embodied the essence of an edgelord, much like he did the day they met.

"Bwa ha ha ha! Watch and be amazed at the power granted upon me by a fallen angel!"

Long ago, the young Sebastian had been sent off to war and had found himself in a precarious situation. It was then that Norman had appeared before him and eagerly obliterated every last enemy with his magic. He'd truly shone with joy at the time. When Sebastian saw that, he'd decided to follow him for the rest of his life.

"Please show us the groan-worthy sight of your actions dictated by your feelings, just like you did back then, Master Norman."

"You have the audacity to call *me* an incompetent? You think you can ridicule me like that? Repent for your sin after you're charcoal, bastard!" Norman started firing enormous pillars of flames and fireballs at Grave in rapid succession. "Come on, *come on*, come on!"

"Mngh!" It was Grave's turn to desperately evade a downpour of devastating attacks.

Norman was a fantastically talented magician with an aptitude for every element—the complete opposite of Alan. Unexpectedly, the element he was most naturally suited to was fire. Its primary property was its destructive power, so as long as the user had mana to spare, it was most powerful for direct attacks.

"Gwaaah!" Grave dodged the incoming fireballs with agility unsuited to his appearance, but one of them eventually found its mark. He was blown out of

the air and formed a crater when he crashed into a nearby building.

“Come on, come on, come on, come on, come on!” Norman’s barrage of fireballs mercilessly continued.

“H-Head Instructor...” The assistant instructors of the Sincere Magic Society were watching the scene in mute amazement. It was hard to imagine this was the same gentle man who routinely instructed them to stay calm and humble, and to resist giving in to their emotions. Not to mention, Norman’s current level of mana seemed an impossible feat. Confusion was painted over all of their faces.

“Why did his mana suddenly spike? Oh! That must be it!” One of the instructors pointed at the midair Norman. “That glove on his right hand must hold some secret for increasing one’s ma—”

“No, it does not.” Sebastian cut in. “That’s a souvenir he got from the First Kingdom during the war. He bought it because he liked its design.”

“Huh? Then why is he wearing it?”

“Naturally, because it looks cool,” Sebastian replied.

The assistant instructors were unfamiliar with the past Norman and thus couldn’t quite catch up. Another one of them decided to chime in. “Look closely! Master Norman’s left eye is glowing red. That’s likely some kind of magic eye with mana-amplifi—”

“That’s also incorrect. That’s simply a colored contact,” Sebastian explained yet again.

“Then why is he wearing it?!”

“Because it’s cool.”

There was no reply.

“Th-Then even his white, spiky hair?” another instructor asked.

“Yes, he’s using magic to color it and keep it affixed into place.”

“So those black clothes aren’t made of magic-resistant fabric?”

“Correct. They’re simply a fashion statement.”

Everyone present couldn't say another word for several seconds.

"Wh-Why would he do all those pointless things?" someone mumbled.

"To reiterate, because they're cool," Sebastian replied.

"They're not necessarily pointless," Grave said. He'd taken some damage, but it had been reduced through a mana barrier. He blew away the debris with his mana, stood up, and turned his gaze to Norman. *"Mana output rises and falls with one's mental state. How much it can rise varies by individual, but in your case, it's drastic."*

To put it plainly, Norman had been suppressing his own feelings in order to become a virtuous man like his grandfather. Setting himself free had been accompanied by a tremendous upsurge in his mana.

"However...the same is true for me!" The next moment, Grave's mana skyrocketed almost ten times higher. His mere presence made the air around him tremble.

"Unlike before, when you were merely going through the motions, I can feel your incredible passion. This is simply marvelous! I'm also feeling pumped up. Let's dance, shall we?!" Grave spoke like he was having the time of his life.

"First, I'm gonna make you apologize for calling *me* incompetent, you bag of bones!"

Thus, without a hint of strategy, a raucous exchange of offensive magic between Norman and Grave began.

"Rising Lucifer Apocalypse! (Lightning Group, Seventh Magic)!"

"Wicked Mixed Fire Killing Palm, Flame Lion God's Mane! (Red Magic, Number Four)!"

"Poseidon Ultimate Shooting Star!!! (Water Group, Second Magic)!!!"

"Earthquake Raison d'Être Iron Halo!!! (Umber Magic, Number Twelve)!!!"

They were both using fundamental spells, but the radical names they were shouting elevated their spirits and boosted their power several times over.

Every attack damaged where it struck, made the air rumble, and sent shock waves across the entire battlefield. The situation had turned into a hell worse than war for everyone but those two. The other people present had their hands full trying not to get incinerated by the blowback.

“Bwa ha ha ha!”

“Mwa ha ha ha!”

The two of them couldn't help but burst into laughter during their exchange of blows.

Eventually, they'd used practically every kind of magic at their disposal. They hovered in midair, regarding each other as they caught their breath.

“Wah ha ha! This is fun, so much fun, Sage. I can't get enough of it!” Grave said in an excited voice.

“Phew... I do agree. Though such excitement is unbecoming of my age. Not to mention my disciples are staring at me from below,” Norman said. He shot a look at his disciples on the ground, who were desperately trying to protect themselves from the fight's aftermath. He had no idea what kind of face to wear when he went to talk to them after this fight was over.

“Unbecoming for your age, you say? We demons have no concept of life spans or old age, so we can't really understand how you humans think.”

“What?”

“Well, what does age have to do with enjoying your life? Why not live life the way you like it until the day you die?”

Norman chuckled. “That's true. Thank you for reminding me of an important fact.”

“Please, I should be saying that. It's not often I get to enjoy a fight so much.”

“Heh heh heh!”

“Ha ha ha!”

The two of them broke into laughter yet again.

“Now, I imagine you already understand.”

“Yeah, with how much mana we each have left, the next attack will be our last.”

Two fellow first-rate magicians like them could sense that much without words.

“Very well. For you, I shall undo my Deadly World.” True to his word, Grave canceled his Ex-Skill. Norman’s mana made a sudden jump as it was no longer restricted to only one-third of its total power.

Norman was taken aback at his foe’s choice. “Are you sure about that?”

“I am. Since my skill weakens my enemies, fights usually feel like a major letdown. I want to surpass your strength in a direct confrontation for the finale. Indeed, that will be the epitome of style!” At the thought of that, Grave’s mana surged yet again. At this point, it was probably one hundred times higher than it had been at the start of the battle.

“Heh, you’re one funny guy,” Norman said with a mix of exasperation and respect.

“Let’s go!” they shouted at the same time.

Norman bent inward like a bow being pulled taut and brought his hands together near his waist. Intense mana started spilling from between his palms. “Control Art Restriction System, Thirteen Knights of the Round Table.” Thirteen circles appeared in the air around him forming a mandala as he started chanting. “First Control Art, Lancelot, Approved.” When the last word was spoken, one of the circles started glowing red. “Second Control Art, Gawain, Approved. Third Control Art, Percival, Approved. Fourth Control Art, Galahad, Approved.”

One after another, the circles turned red.

“Control Art Restriction? You mean to tell me Master Norman has kept his mana reserves hidden this entire time? But wait, who do those names belong to? I’ve never heard of Lancelot, Gawain, or any of them,” one of the assistant instructors said.

The one to answer that question was, of course, Sebastian. “Those are the names of the main characters from another world’s story he heard about from

his friend Master Alan. He took a great liking to them because they sounded cool.”

In other words, none of them existed.

“Wh-Which means...”

“He’s using the spell called Canvas Phantasm to draw a pattern in midair.”

“Then the reason he would go so far as to waste part of what little mana he has left for his final attack is...”

“It goes without saying.”

“Because it’s fuckin’ awesooooooooooooome!” Norman shouted with all his heart. “Thirteenth Control Art, Arthur, Approved!” The last of the thirteen circles floating in the air burned with red. On its own, it didn’t have a micrometer of magical meaning, but it helped lift Norman’s spirits to the utmost, and so a staggering amount of mana gathered between his hands.

Meanwhile, Grave flashily fluttered his robe open and unsheathed a sword hanging from his waist.

“Behold, the Myth-Severing Kusanagi Blade!” He raised the sword to the sky and the air around it rumbled.

“The New Black Star is gathering a huge amount of mana in his sword!” one of the assistant instructors cried out.

“No, look closely! The mana’s gathering in the hand holding the sword, not in the sword itself!”

“Wait a minute, that sword’s one of ours!”

“Bwa ha ha! It has a really nice design, so I decided to borrow it! I’ll take many of them back with me to the underworld when I win!” Grave’s actions didn’t serve any tangible benefit either, nor did it concern him if the people around him didn’t understand. He was only doing the things he found cool to elevate his spirits even further.

Eventually, both Norman and Grave had gathered their maximum energy capacity.

“Ultra Dimensional Heavenly Sky Roar Zeus Ultimate Super Big Bang
Unparalleled Ancient Lightning Übermensch Tiger Fiamma Swirling Wildfire
Delphine Crescendo! (Flame Group, First Magic)!”

*“Dragon God’s Destruction World Indiscriminate Sword Style Greatest
Strongest Final Ultimate Move, Illusion Eight Pleiades Grandes Evolute (Black
Magic, Number One)!”*

Norman’s super extra thick hot beam and Grave’s super extra thick wave of darkness slammed into each other. The immense firepower of their magic was enough to tear through space itself. The ground buckled and screamed in protest, oxygen burned in the air, and shock waves rumbled across the entire Sixth Kingdom.

“Oooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhh!!!”

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

They were equal in power, or so it seemed at first.

“Urk!” Norman was starting to fall back. Even though his mental state had returned to what it was in his heyday, he was still physically a forty-four-year-old man. His age *did* have a negative effect on both his mana and stamina.

“This is the end!” Grave increased the output of his attack to hammer the final nail into Norman’s coffin. Faster and faster, Norman’s beam of heat was swallowed up by the darkness.

“Ooooooooooooooh!” However, Norman Lockwood stood his ground, not taking a single step back. Veins rose on his skin and he bared his teeth as he exerted every ounce of strength in his body. “Not yet! I won’t let myself be defeated here! Because...I’ve yet to make you repent for calling me an incompetent, you piece of shit!”

“You were still holding a grudge about that?!” Grave forgot to add an echo to his voice when he made his retort.

“Of course! Just who the hell do you think I aaaaaaaaaaaaaam?!”

Norman’s mind flashed back over his entire life. He’d always been called a genius, amazing, praiseworthy. And the results he’d demonstrated *had* been

worthy of all the praise.

That was the true source of pride within him. He'd been born a genius, had the expectations of a genius placed upon him, and had lived up to them brilliantly.

I'll win because I'm a genius, he thought.

He was the best, and he'd proved it by being the strongest and winning—not just once, but every time. If he lost here, he'd have no choice but to relinquish his pride. But that would never happen! Not in a million years!

Because...

"I! Am! History's Strongest Sage! The genius, Norman Lockwoooooooooooooood!!!" As he roared, his beam pushed back against the black wave.

"*Gwah!*" The flames and heat surged until they swallowed Grave himself. "*Whew. Well, this outcome was expected,*" he said as his body was burning away. "*The name of his ultimate move was three words longer, after all.*" His final words were filled with satisfaction and acceptance.

"Oooooooooooooooooooooooooohhh!!!" Norman bellowed at the top of his lungs and the ensuing surge of power incinerated Grave until not even ash remained. History's Strongest Sage had brought the curtain down on the Sixth Kingdom's dramatic battle.

Though not without consequences.

"Th-The castle..." the commander said while staring at the building they were supposed to be protecting. Norman's spell hadn't stopped at wiping Grave from the face of the world; it had continued straight ahead—and blown the royal castle to smithereens. Fortunately, the seal stone was underground and the citizens inside had evacuated before the battle started, but the castle itself with its centuries of history and tradition was in a pitiful state.

"Haah... Haah... Hmm? Oh, this calls for *that* line." Norman combed his bleached hair upwards with his gloved right hand and said, "What, did I do something again?"

The smug look on his face was the same irritating yet bright one he had worn twenty-five years ago.

Chapter 5: The Lord of the Underworld

For Alan's attendant, Rosetta, the Demon Lord Beelzebub was a person she only knew through historical documents or the stories of Titanomachy survivors. Alan himself didn't speak much about the demon lord, and it was only natural for a seventeen-year-old girl to have no personal knowledge of the events of twenty-five years ago. She hadn't even been born back then.

During her conversations with people who'd experienced the war, the demon lord's name had been synonymous with fear and despair. He'd spread suffering across the entire human world for over one hundred years, had eradicated almost all humanoid races besides humans, and had reduced human territory to less than one-tenth its original size. "Fear and despair" really were the perfect words to describe the actions of the great demon lord.

However...

Rosetta watched the two men walking ahead of her. One of them was her master, the man who'd saved her life and stolen her heart—simply put, a very important person to her—Alan Granger. The one walking next to him was *the* Demon Lord Beelzebub, yet he talked to Alan like he was making small talk with an old friend as the two of them headed to a location where they could have their all-out fight.

He's nothing like the stories I've heard.

She'd wondered how atrocious, cunning, and wicked a demon Beelzebub would be, but he seemed levelheaded, impartial, and devoid of malice. He gave her the impression of a humane person, although she wasn't sure if this term could be applied to a demon. She had her doubts that this was truly the same demon lord she'd been told about. Yes, Alan had called him by his name and spoken to him, so there should have been no mistake about the demon lord's identity, but it was still difficult to accept.

This is undoubtedly the same person who caused the Titanomachy, but I really can't visualize it.

As Rosetta was lost in thought, ahead of her, Alan and Beelzebub stopped simultaneously.

“Hmm?”

“Oh?”

Even she could immediately tell what was wrong. A tremendous mass of mana had suddenly appeared straight in front of them. That’s when she noticed three silhouettes looking down at them from the top of a cliff.

“Ha ha ha! There he is!”

“Exactly as our information said.”

“Geh heh heh heh heh!”

The silhouettes belonged to three demons who were practically human in appearance, meaning they could only be shenmo.

Oh no! Rosetta cursed her own carelessness. “Don’t tell me you lured Master Alan here to ambush him with four shenmo at once?!”

“I doubt that, Rosetta,” Alan said.

“Huh?”

“Given his character, that’s something he’d *never* do.” His tone was one of complete certainty.

Beelzebub turned to the three shenmo on the cliff. “Fabula the Fairy King, Octoaranea the Six Sword Evil Insect, and Cypclos the Dimensional Eye. You turned me down when I tried to recruit you. What business do you have with me *now*?”

The three shenmo jumped down from the cliff and stood in Beelzebub’s way. They all had nasty grins on their faces.

“Heh heh heh! You’re always in your fortified castle surrounded by your underlings.”

“But now, you’re out here alone. Would we ever get a more convenient opportunity than this?”

“Geh heh heh, tasty, tasty!”

“You sure are popular, Beelzebub,” Alan said.

“The position of the demon lord is technically hereditary, but it can also be taken by defeating the current demon lord. Attacks like this are actually a common occurrence,” Beelzebub replied. “That’s why I wouldn’t mind if you called yourself the demon lord, Alan.”

“Give me a break,” Alan said with a shrug, eliciting a smile from Beelzebub.

“Beelzebub, your constant composure drives me crazy, but whatever. Hey, human!” The man known as Fabula the Fairy King was the one who called out to Alan. “This is the chance of a lifetime. How about you join us? We can take him without much trouble in a four-against-one fight.”

Rosetta went wide-eyed at their proposal. *He’s right. This might be our best chance.* From what she had heard, these shenmo didn’t sound particularly interested in invading the human world. Their objective was the demon lord’s position—in other words, authority and influence over the underworld. Their goal aligned with Alan’s.

Nevertheless, Alan shook his head. “I will unfortunately have to decline.”

This time, the woman known as Octoaranea the Six Sword Evil Insect was the one who spoke. “Oh, but why? Now matter how you slice it, it’s an appealing offer. What, do you perhaps want to settle this one-on-one, because you’re fated enemies?”

“Not really, no. If possible, I’d prefer never to fight him again, but...” Alan directed a sharp gaze at the three shenmo. “It’s a matter of principle. I never team up with twisted individuals, no matter how beneficial it may sound.”

The three shenmo stood silent for a moment in response to Alan’s words.

“Very well. You’re an interesting man, Champion of Light,” Fabula muttered, then he smirked. Octoaranea and Cypclos next to him also appeared delighted. Their smiles were truly twisted, just as Alan had said.

“Do as you wish. If none of you have any intention of assaulting the human world, I won’t bother you after the fight is over,” Alan said. He then moved back to Rosetta’s side.

“You have my thanks, Alan,” Beelzebub said as Alan passed by him.

“What for?”

“By promising not to attack them after the fight concludes, you’ve allowed them to use their full strength in their fight against me, no?”

“Only because I want you to tire yourself as much as possible.”

“There’s no need to hide it. I showed consideration by not involving your subordinates earlier. You’re repaying that debt, are you not? I believe that’s something you humans do.”

Alan sighed. “Please take at least a little damage.”

“That depends entirely on those three.” Beelzebub stepped imposingly toward the three shenmo.

I never expected to see the demon lord fight like this, Rosetta thought. “And his opponents are three demons of the same class. With a bit of luck...”

The current situation *could* be a boon. The sudden appearance of the enemies of humanity’s enemy was fortuitous on its own, but those enemies were also three powerful shenmo, which put them on the same level as Beelzebub or the other New Seven Black Stars. Surely even the demon lord would be challenged by facing three of them.

“All right. Ex-Skill, Fairy Sight.” Beelzebub stood before the other shenmo and barely opened a red eye in the middle of his forehead, which scrutinized his adversaries.

“*That’s* the demon lord’s Ex-Skill?” Rosetta asked under her breath.

“It is. His third eye can perceive any enemy’s abilities and skills. It can also gauge when people are lying,” Alan replied.

“That’s not as strong as I expected an Ex-Skill to be.”

Alan shook his head. “No, it’s rather strong. Think about it for a minute. He knows all of his enemies’ abilities and skills before the fight’s even started. I don’t need to explain what a major advantage that is, do I?”

“When you put it like that...” Rosetta knew a fight was a crucial battle for information before it was a clash of strength. How should the enemy be fought? Were they even an enemy that should be fought in the first place? That kind of information was crucial in combat. Advance knowledge made a world of difference.

“His scanning is also impossible to avoid. Even if you use magical barriers or escape to a different dimension, as long as Beelzebub is aware of an enemy, he can read them without fail.”

“Yes, that certainly sounds strong.” Rosetta was thoroughly convinced, but there was something else she still had her doubts about. Beelzebub’s Fairy Sight was no doubt a powerful skill, but...

Is it really enough to make him the dreaded demon lord who pushed humanity to the brink of extinction?

“Oh, is that the demon lord’s famous peeping eye?” Fabula asked in a mocking tone.

“So, what do you think of our strength? Did you find any way to win at all?” Octoaranea said with a chuckle.

“Geh heh heh, despair! Geh heh heh.”

They all spoke as if certain of their superior position, because no matter how the demon lord struggled, they had a definite numerical advantage.

“This is the first time I’ve taken a good look at you three with this eye, but you’re dull as trampled dirt. My victory is all but assured,” Beelzebub said. He drew a straight sword, much like Alan’s but with an ornate black pattern, sheathed at his waist. “Come. This is a rare opportunity, so I’ll fight each of you in your field of expertise.”

“Why, you... Don’t condescend to us!” Octoaranea shouted before slashing at him. Octoaranea the Six Sword Evil Insect was a shenmo with the traits of a monster known as a blood spider. Her strongest weapon was her durable web that could stop cannon fire at point-blank range with a single strand—or perhaps that was not the strongest?

Six of Octoaranea’s spider legs, all but the two she used to walk upright, had

developed into arms that could hold objects. The six-sword style of swordsmanship that leveraged those six hands was *actually* her strongest weapon.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!” The sword dance created by her six arms in tandem was as powerful as a mighty storm.

“Eek!” In spite of the distance, the shock waves and wind were strong enough to reach Rosetta.

“She doesn’t just have sheer strength; her swordsmanship is also top-notch. You can count the number of humans at her level on one hand,” Alan said.

“Take that, and that, and that, and that, and *that!*” Octoaranea upped the pressure when she saw that Beelzebub was holding up well against her onslaught. She was fierce and powerful, yet still delicate and efficient.

In but a few seconds, her attacks had torn the ground apart, destroyed nearby trees and buildings, and transformed the terrain itself. She wasn’t a shenmo in name only. Her monstrous strength was worthy of one belonging to the highest class of the underworld.

“Hmm. About as much as I expected,” Beelzebub said. He’d easily intercepted her six swords with his single sword, and one-handed to boot. During her ferocious assault, not a single slash had passed his defenses. There wasn’t a scratch on him. “You’re exactly how I saw you. You’re making this boring.”



“C-Cut the crap!” Octoaranea’s rage urged her to a more intense offensive. Thunderous roars echoed around them as the terrain was torn apart and remade once more. “Ugh! This can’t be!”

Still, Beelzebub defended himself one-handed without breaking a sweat.

Was this purely the result of a gap in physical ability and strength between two shenmo? No. There certainly was a wide gap, but there was another, simpler factor in play here. As a master of her art, Octoaranea could also understand. As hard as it was to believe, Beelzebub was the superior swordsman.

“Damn it all! I won’t accept this!”

How could she? Her swordsmanship was both her strongest weapon and the symbol of her pride. The residents of the underworld lacked the fundamental concept of training for improvement, but she’d polished her skills during many battles. For Beelzebub to so easily surpass her efforts was unthinkable.

“I simply refuse to believe it!” Octoaranea screamed.

She threw four of her six swords at Beelzebub. They flew at tremendous speeds thanks to her shenmo strength, but he sidestepped them with minimal movement. The swords flew past him, until they suddenly boomeranged back toward him. “Gotcha!”

Upon closer inspection, the swords had thin threads attached to them—Octoaranea’s silken threads that were strong enough to catch a cannonball.

“Web Sword Funeral!” At the same time, she dashed forward and attacked Beelzebub with her two remaining swords. This was her ultimate move, a simultaneous slashing attack that struck from every direction, the perfect technique to utilize her spider threads to their fullest.

“A petty trick,” Beelzebub said. The next moment, blood sprayed out of Octoaranea’s body, while the two swords in her hands had their blades severed in the same breath.

“What...was that?” Beelzebub had moved behind Octoaranea and cut her, along with her swords, as he was passing her by. “That’s not possible. How

could I fail to follow you with my eyes?”

“I believe this technique is called ‘shukuchi’ in the human tongue.” Much like Alan and Kevin, Beelzebub utilized the martial arts technique for rapid movement that could be used without preparation. However, it wasn’t usually possible to overcome a shenmo’s kinetic vision with that technique alone. That feat was thanks to Beelzebub’s formidable technical finesse. “This also falls under the category of petty tricks, but I thought I’d use it in response to yours.”

His technique was already beyond the level of the best masters, yet to him, it was no more than a “petty trick.”

“Getting distracted is pretty careless!” said Fabula the Fairy King. He’d sprouted four wings and had floated above Beelzebub at some point. Fabula’s traits were from a monster known as an evil fairy. Evil fairies excelled at magic, particularly black magic, which was the most orthodox and traditional among the underworld’s magic groups. “Eat this, Beelzebub. Black Magic, Number Forty-Five.”

“You’re going to use a spell higher than forty?!” Alan said. He had some knowledge about the underworld’s magic, although not to the same extent as Norman’s, so he knew how strong that spell was.

The underworld’s color magic had spells numbered from one to fifty for each color, just like Template Magic had for each element. Among them, the spells numbered forty and above were particularly difficult to use, but extraordinarily destructive as a result.

To paint a better picture of just how difficult those spells were, they weren’t something a person could normally use alone. It would usually take the combined effort of several demons with high mana and great skill at manipulating it, chanting and weaving their mana together over several days to cast one.

However, the shenmo Fabula was able to easily use such a spell on his own.

“Graviton Fall!” Fabula raised his hand above his head, where a huge, swirling mass of mana gathered like a coil of black snakes. It was a manifestation of crushing gravity, strong enough to make the ground creak from the energy it leaked. Fabula’s goal was slamming that ball of gravity directly into Beelzebub.

Even he couldn't brush off a direct hit.

Fabula brought his hand down and the mass dropped toward its target.

"As I saw, it doesn't reach Grave's level," Beelzebub said.

"What?"

Beelzebub raised his hand to the sky. "Black Magic, Number Forty-Nine."

"No...!"

"Evil Tree, Black Yggdrasil." An enormous jet-black tree sprouted from the ground.

"What the—" Fabula was dumbstruck. The tree was over thirty meters tall with innumerable thick, pointed branches spreading out from it like a flooded stream drawing mazes in the mud. One after another, the branches pierced Fabula's gravity mass and shattered it into tiny pieces.

"This can't be! How can your spell be so powerful?!" he shouted with his eyes as wide as a frightened animal. After destroying the gravity mass, the black tree's branches moved on to attack Fabula himself, piercing deep into his stomach.

"I'm not sure how to answer that. My magic has always been this strong. From the very beginning, I've been able to use all magic colors from one to fifty," Beelzebub said.

Fabula, too injured to respond, let out a hacking cough and expired.

"That's just Beelzebub's Ex-Skill," Alan said as he observed the fight.

"Huh? Isn't his Ex-Skill the eye that can read his opponents' abilities?" Rosetta asked.

Alan nodded. "Right. You see, he has two Ex-Skills."

No words could come out of Rosetta's mouth after this shocking revelation. Beelzebub was unmatched with one powerful Ex-Skill, but he actually had another one?

"His other Ex-Skill is called Ultimate Zenith. With the exception of Unique Skills like my mana of light or Derek's brainwashing, it allowed him to use most

magic and techniques at the highest level from the moment he was born.”

“Wh-What? That’s far too convenient.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Alan said with a strained laugh.

An eye that could instantly grasp opponents’ capabilities and an omnipotent skill that granted perfect mastery of most magical and physical techniques. Beelzebub could fight each foe in their strongest area and still overpower them. What if he employed the tactics they were the weakest against? He didn’t see the point in such a victory, because he was the strongest—absolutely unmatched.

“D-D-D-Damn youuuuuuuuu!” cursed the last shenmo left. Cypclos the Dimensional Eye, who had traits of a monster known as a magician cyclops, floated into the air and spread his arms wide. Summoning magic was his strong suit. “Summon! Devour him, Grodeus Party!”

A black dimensional tear ripped open behind Cypclos. Within seconds, a flood of insectoid monsters poured through it. The creatures were grotesque, ferocious, and numbered more than one thousand. They weren’t individually weak either; each one held enough mana to be a formidable enemy.

“Summon.” Beelzebub responded with his own summoning magic. “Burn them to a crisp, Evil Ghidorah.” A much larger tear in the fabric of dimensions than Cypclos’s slashed open. From inside, three massive dragon heads drew into sight. Their roar alone was enough to mow down the surrounding trees.

“O-Ooh...” Instantly, Cypclos understood the unbridgeable gap in their strengths. He couldn’t even put his fear into words.

“Remove them,” Beelzebub commanded. The three heads fired a blazing beam of destruction with power that was beyond comprehension.

“Geh gyeeeeeeeeeeh!” In a matter of seconds, the tremendous wave of energy enveloped Cypclos and his summoned monsters, and their ashes were soon scattered to the four winds.

“That’s insane!” Rosetta trembled in fear after witnessing the demon lord’s devastating power with her own eyes. *They were all shenmo, but the gap in strength was immense.*

She'd been naive. The Seven Heroes had won more victories than the New Seven Black Stars, and since Beelzebub was a shenmo just like the others who'd been defeated, she'd thought Alan could win as readily as his fellow heroes. She saw the truth now: the demon lord was in a league of his own.

"As tedious as I expected," Beelzebub said as he coolly observed the wasteland he'd created. "They only displayed the strength I perceived with my third eye. None surpassed my expectations." He paused for a moment and turned to Alan. "I knew it would have to be you. You and only you, Alan Granger. You and your fellow humans are the only ones who can surpass what my eye has seen."

"A difficult guy like you had to go and take a liking to me," Alan said with a long sigh.

Chapter 6: Mythical Creature versus Seventh Kingdom

The last of the seven great human kingdoms was Silver Factory, the Kingdom of Iron and Manufacture. It neighbored the First, Fourth, and Sixth Kingdoms by land. As its name implied, it had a flourishing manufacturing industry for iron items such as weapons and farming tools. Consequently, it contained a great number of domestic facilities and materials to construct weapons, which was fortunate in regard to the ongoing war. In fact, the Seventh Kingdom had more than enough to even export supplies to other kingdoms while they were still preparing.

However, when compared to the other kingdoms, the Seventh Kingdom also had its handicaps. For instance, the roads to its royal palace were entirely level, which made it difficult to defend as enemies could attack it from any direction. Its food production was also relatively low for the size of its territory and population. The biggest problem of all was that it had no one who could stand up to the incoming shenmo. The kingdom's hero, Yoshida, was the only member of the Seven Heroes who couldn't hold his own in a fight.

The Wiladorf sector was located in the Seventh Kingdom's suburbs. The area around the royal palace was characterized by its many flat roads which, while a great boon during times of peace, became a liability in times of emergency. Thus, the Wiladorf sector had been deemed the place most likely to be attacked; in other words, it was the front line of the Seventh Kingdom.

It was also the sector that currently held six particular young fighters.

"Will the demon army really come here, Stephan?"

"Who knows? I just heard this is the likeliest place for them to appear."

They were a good-looking bunch, and the way they carried themselves gave off the air of formidable warriors. They were the Great Six, the elite fighters of

the Humanity Defense Coalition.

“Come on, that’s so vague,” said Griffith, their de facto leader, a young man with a sharp gaze.

“I do think the chance is really high, though! ☆” chirped Leen Clarice, a perky pigtailed girl in a pink, frilly dress. Her looks and mannerisms were modeled after the main character of a play about a magical girl that had been popular in recent days.

Leen took a deep breath. “It’s true the demon army now appears able to create a dimensional gate to teleport them anywhere they want as long as the destination’s mana has a certain amount of density, but that doesn’t mean everywhere is the same to them, okay? That’s because demons can exhibit their strength the best in locations with high mana density. The mana density around the Wiladorf sector’s line of defense is especially high compared to other locations, which makes this, undoubtedly, the place most likely to be attacked, and obviously the one we must defend the hardest when the demons do appear. I believe this is the most solid and rational deployment despite being pretty conventional, tee hee, ☆” she explained as smoothly as if she had practiced this speech a hundred times. “Hmm? What’s wrong, Griffith? Why’re you staring at me?”

She makes some solid arguments despite the eccentric way she dresses and talks. The contrast weirds me out, Griffith thought. Leen had looked and acted like a clown ever since she’d enlisted, yet her grades had always been at the top of the class.

The six of them continued to the front line while chatting, until they were interrupted by a man who looked like the commander of the Wiladorf forces. He had rushed over as soon as he spotted their group.

“We’ve been awaiting your arrival, ladies and gentlemen of the Great Six. Your reputation as the Humanity Defense Coalition’s elite precedes you! It’s reassuring to have you on our side,” he said.

“Thank you, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Commander.” Griffith shook the commander’s hand readily, hiding his conflicted emotions. The commander’s words weren’t mere flattery, but a direct result of the recent public

acknowledgment of the Great Six. Previously, they'd been kept as a secret weapon of the Humanity Defense Coalition's, but their names were quite well-known now, and as reliable warriors no less. During the initial assault of the demon army, which also served as their debut, half of them got their behinds handed to them by the Seven Heroes, while the other half couldn't lay a finger on the former members of the Seven Black Stars. So how did their names inspire such confidence in people despite their disgraceful results?

The reason lay with none other than the Seven Heroes, specifically Alan Granger the Champion. After the fight, he'd said of the Great Six: "They possess both magnificent willpower and strength. They are capable of becoming the next generation's heroes. I expect great things from them."

When Chief Simon had heard that, he'd quickly taken advantage of the situation with an expensive public relations campaign across all kingdoms to spread the word that the next generation's heroes were acknowledged by the Seven Heroes themselves.

"Tsk! I'm not exactly happy about this," Griffith said under his breath. He recalled the striking image of Alan when he had appeared before them in their time of need and single-handedly crushed their enemies. Compared to him, they were nothing but unreliable. They lacked strength, achievements, and pretty much everything else they needed to deserve acknowledgment from the Champion of Light. "That reminds me. One of the Seven Heroes is here too, right?" he asked the commander.

"Hmm? Oh, you mean Mister Yoshida. Yes, he's right over there," the commander replied. He pointed toward the very front of their formation. It was the first line of defense, the people who'd be the first to clash with the demon army during an attack.

I'd expect no less from a hero like him, Griffith thought as he followed the commander's gaze.

"Oh man, things look bad. The war really has begun, huh?" Yoshida was crouching amidst a pile of weapons and food supplies, his body trembling in fear. The sight was so pitiable that Griffith didn't know what to say.

"Hey, Mister Yoshida! The Great Six have arrived!" the commander said.

“Oh!” When Yoshida heard the commander, he rose up and hurried over to them. “Hello, yes, we’ve been waiting for you. I’m expecting this to be a fierce fight, so we’re counting on you,” he said with his head bowed.



“Are you really one of the Seven Heroes, like the Champion of Light?” Griffith reflexively asked.

“Hurts a bit when you ask like that,” Yoshida said while scratching his head. “I admit, people say that I’m just a coward who was lucky to be surrounded by great people and get their leftovers, and it’s pretty much the truth. I can’t do anything special.”

“Not only does that man—one of the Seven Heroes, like you—have nothing special going for him, he became that strong *because* he had nothing, you know?” Griffith asked pointedly.

“I really wish you wouldn’t use Alan as an example. That guy isn’t right in the head. I’m just an average person who’s terrified of the front lines. At least I can handle logistical support, so I’ll help in that area.”

“Is that so?” Griffith ignored the hand Yoshida offered him and walked back to his group.

“You look irritated, Griffith,” said the large and muscular man, Strong Garfield.

“Yeah, it makes my blood boil that a guy like him gets treated the same way as the Champion of Light,” Griffith replied.

“You’ve become a total fan, huh,” said the gaudy woman, Stephan Goldeagle, in a teasing tone.

“I’m not his fan,” Griffith snapped. “He’s my objective. I want to become a warrior like him. Isn’t the same true for each of you?”

None of the other five replied to Griffith’s question, but no one denied it either. They had their own opinions when it came to the Seven Heroes.

“Either way, by stepping up to fight, at least we’re better than the coalition’s top brass,” Griffith concluded.

Yoshida pulled his hand back after Griffith ignored him.

So that was Griffith, huh? He shows promise, just like Alan said.

A youth prone to showing complete disrespect for his seniors, that was Yoshida's evaluation of Griffith. From Yoshida's perspective—no, from the perspective of anyone who'd survived that hellish war—it was actually better to have a little attitude.

At any rate, Yoshida didn't consider himself a man worthy of any respect at all. Griffith had said as much and Yoshida agreed. As his title indicated, he was a mere "Villager" with no special abilities to speak of who'd happened to survive the Titanomachy. Showing him respect for a superficial reason like him being one of the Seven Heroes or an elder would be wrong. Griffith was someone who understood the importance of perceiving the truth about the situations around him. That was a valuable quality for the battlefield, a place where putting on airs without the strength to back it up would lead to your death.

The strong will he displayed when he ignored my handshake and left is a brilliant trait in a fighter. I imagine he's the type to face his fears directly and boldly in the middle of the fray, always moving forward. I'm so jealous.

While Yoshida looked up to the other heroes for taking down foe after foe with their unparalleled abilities, he was also envious of them. However, he lacked both the skill and resolve to imitate them.

"That's why I still do odd jobs and logistical support at my age. I have to help in whatever way I can," Yoshida mumbled to himself. A second later, he felt a chill in the air around him, something beyond his five senses.

"Someone's approaching from straight ahead!" a female lookout shouted.

"So it's time." Yoshida turned toward the horizon and saw a man walking toward them.

He stood at the approximate height of an average human male and wore an elegant white shirt and dark necktie, with gloves covering both his hands. However, he was far from human, evident from the third of his body that was mechanical. Half of his face, his left arm, and his right leg were formed from a black metal. Like a machine in motion, he made a clanging noise whenever he moved.



“Just what kind of monster is he based on? A machine golem, perhaps?” Yoshida searched his memories but couldn’t come up with anything that fit the situation. The demon had many traits resembling the underworld’s mechanical life-forms known as machine golems, but something seemed off. There was still one thing Yoshida could be certain of. “An appearance similar to a human’s with just a few monster traits would make him a shenmo, wouldn’t it?”

Even someone with limited ability to detect mana like Yoshida could tell. As the demon walked in their direction, immense mana rose like a wall of darkness around him. The sheer amount and quality of his mana put the Seven Black Stars of the Titanomachy to shame.

Another clanging sound like a train coming to a stop signaled a pause in the shenmo’s approach.

“Ladies and gentlemen! My name is Loki the Mythical Creature!” He had his arms spread wide and spoke in a voice loud enough for everyone around him to hear. He raised his face to the sky and said, “Our world is both a tragedy and a comedy. I’d like to make the play we’ll perform together tonight a show to remember.”

Yoshida blinked in confusion at the enemy who’d started talking like they were in some kind of theater. “What is he talking about?”

“I would very much like all of you to struggle, fight, and move your audience to the full extent of your abilities!” With his arms still spread and his head tilted to the sky, Loki swept his eyes over the humans. “And now, let me introduce tonight’s actors!”

“Ugh, are you kidding me?” Yoshida muttered.

The earth rumbled behind Loki and a cloud of dust rose ominously into the air. One by one, massive machine golems, each over twenty meters tall, lined up and completely covered the horizon. Inexorably, they started lumbering toward the human forces. “It’s showtime!”

With those words, the curtains rose on the drama that would be the Seventh Kingdom’s struggle for survival.

The machine golem army advanced, stirring up a massive cloud of dust and causing the ground to tremble beneath them. They were like giants, towering creatures described in ancient legends, said to have been born solely to eradicate humanity. The Seventh Kingdom's knights shuddered in fear at the sight.

I get how you feel. Those things are terrifying. Yoshida couldn't blame any of them. Like the other human kingdoms, most of their troops were young and had no experience with deadly fights against demons. It was only natural they'd be too scared to move just as they had been taught. Yoshida shivered from head to toe himself.

Well, I also experienced war twentyfive years ago, so I should have gotten used to it by now, but it's easier said than done. He cursed his lack of growth and mediocrity. "But I have to get moving if I don't want to die."

Yoshida walked up to a nearby gunner, placed a hand on his shoulder, and cast a recovery spell. "Ether Magic, Light Cure."

"Huh? Uh, I haven't taken any damage yet," the gunner said.

"I know, but recovery magic can also calm emotions. The better you gunners perform, the fewer casualties we'll have. Try your best, okay?"

"I guess you're right." The gunner nodded, then instructed his platoon to get ready to fire.

"Wait for it... Fire!"

The Humanity Defense Coalition magicite artillery fired their shells in a deafening barrage, hitting their targets with ease. Although, with so many large targets lined up for them, that was hardly a great feat, and a single blow wasn't enough to destroy a machine golem. At most, they acquired some dents and slowed down a little.

Regardless, the first volley landing on target carried major significance. Thanks to their success, the other knights remembered their duties and continued the bombardment, one after the other. Unease and fear spread as easily as a contagious disease on the battlefield. It was during those times that someone calmly performing the correct action would lead the people around

them to follow and smooth over their fear.

“Yep, things are looking up. Now, I have a mountain of things to do myself, like delivering messages or supplies. Though it’s all stuff anyone else could do.” Yoshida pulled a cart behind him as he rushed across the battlefield’s back lines.

Thirty minutes after the start of the bombardment, the machine golems had yet to reach the Seventh Kingdom’s line of defense, to everyone’s surprise. Thanks to the cannon fire raining down on the behemoths, their advance had slowed to a crawl. This was possible thanks to the high performance of the Humanity Defense Coalition’s prohibitively expensive anti-demon artillery.

Actually, that wasn’t the only reason they’d been able to hold back their enemies so well. The artillery used by the Seventh Kingdom surpassed other kingdoms’ in both firepower and stability. And how exactly was that possible, one may ask?

“The difference lies in the batteries,” Yoshida said to himself. The artillery batteries had quickly been designed and manufactured for this war by the kingdom’s craftsmen. These metal, revolving batteries that supported the artillery were difficult to set up because of their massive weight, but after that step was handled, they allowed the artillery on them to smoothly rotate all 360 degrees. They also reduced the recoil when firing, allowing the full force of the magicite explosions to be transferred to the shells.

There was still one problem in the end.

“Dammit! Why are they so tough?!” one of the gunners said. While they’d managed to keep the machine golems at bay, they’d yet to destroy a single one. The golems only gained minor dents on their bulky armor from even direct hits. They then resumed their march soon after.

“The situation will worsen over time,” Yoshida murmured as he transported water to the gunners. There was still distance between the machine golems and the first line of defense, but the humans had no means to deal with such a large number of colossal foes at melee range. They had to defeat the golems before they drew close enough to strike, or at the very least reduce their numbers substantially before then.

If we can manage that in time, he thought.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting, Mister Yoshida.”

“Oh! Mister Adolphe!”

Several men wearing towels wrapped around their heads arrived, carrying many trays loaded with supplies. They were the Seventh Kingdom’s proud weapon craftsmen.

“In exchange for our tardiness, we made something worth the wait.”

“I’d never doubt the quality of your work,” Yoshida said. He hastily hoisted as many supplies as he could from the trays.

“Here, take this!” he said once he reached the gunners.

“Nice, they’re finally here.” The gunners accepted the supplies from Yoshida and swiftly loaded them into their artillery. After their preparations were finished, they once again adjusted their weapons’ sights. “Fire!”

The bombardment loudly echoed across the front line. This time, the shells fired tore through the air as sharp as knives, until they struck the golems and stabbed through their armor. The golems’ massive bodies wobbled and, their defenses breached for the first time, they collapsed.

“Hell yeah! Did you see that?! Now *those* are the drill shells we created by pouring all of our heart and soul into our work!” cheered one of the craftsmen.

The supplies the craftsmen had brought were enhanced artillery shells. They differed from regular shells in their elongated shape and pointed tips, as well as the helical pattern carved on their surfaces. At first glance, they looked like what the craftsmen had called them: drills. The improvements over regular ammunition didn’t stop with their appearance. They used the heat-resistant metal tungsten as coating over the metal they used for regular shells.

Just what kind of effect did that have on them? First off, the long shape and helical pattern gave the shells screwlike rotation as they flew straight ahead. Thanks to the heat-resistant tungsten coating, their shape didn’t warp from the heat of the magicite explosion, unlike conventional shells. The end results were shells that tore through the air like drills, their sharp tips rotating at a high

enough speed to pierce through their enemies with immense perforating power.

“Fire! Fire!” The gunners fired drill shell after drill shell. The machine golems went down, one after the other. Of course, that alone didn’t mean they could relax. The craftsmen had made each drill shell by hand in a short amount of time—hardening the metal for their special shape, layering on the tungsten coating, and even carving the helical pattern—which meant that they had a much more limited supply of them when compared to the conventional shells.

Thanks to the craftsmen banding together, they still made a considerable number. It was worth the trouble of going to artisans across the kingdom and pleading for their help. Yoshida had been the one to enlist the craftsmen’s cooperation, although he didn’t negotiate with trickery or threats. Instead, he stated the king and empress’s authority, then prostrated himself and earnestly begged for their help. Anyone could have done the same.

Nevertheless, it had been effective. At the rate things were going, the knights would annihilate the machine golems before they ran out of shells, as long as they didn’t waste too much ammo.

“Yes, we can do it,” Yoshida whispered.

As if he knew what Yoshida was thinking, Loki of the New Seven Black Stars snapped his fingers. “Form Change!”

“What the heck is that?” Yoshida muttered apprehensively.

Astonishingly, the golems crowded together in one spot and started disassembling their bodies. As efficient as worker bees, they took the resulting parts and combined them into a new form, until the golems had become one enormous golem.

The resulting golem was so massive that it had to surpass four hundred meters in height, taller than some of the great towers in the world Alan had come from. Such was its enormity that the top of it was hidden by the clouds.

“D-Don’t falter! Our target only became harder to miss!” a gunner called out above the noise. They once again launched their drill shells at the colossal machine golem, but to no avail.

“How can it be so sturdy?!”

Along with growing taller by twentyfold, the golem’s armor plating had grown thicker. It could repel the specialty shells that had been taking down golem after golem only moments ago. The golem slowly raised its leg, casting its imposing shadow over Yoshida and those around him.

“Oh no! Retreat!” Yoshida shouted before he dashed away with such speed his legs looked like they might drop off. The rest of the knights fighting soon grasped the situation and scrambled to get away.

The golem’s giant foot stomped on the defensive position they’d been occupying a moment before. From the golem’s perspective, it was just taking a step forward, but for regular humans, it felt as if a meteor had just crashed into them.

“*Whoa!*” Yoshida was knocked several meters away by the ensuing wind pressure. He rolled across the ground, gasping in pain.

Though his body protested, he somehow managed to pull himself to his feet after a few seconds. The scene that lay before him was bloodcurdling. Their outpost had been trampled flat, and in the same motion, over one hundred knights had become no more than stains on the ground. Even the lucky survivors were missing limbs and riddled with shrapnel. They groaned in agony. The sight would become another addition to the many tragic events from the Titanomachy that had been carved into Yoshida’s memory.

“Urp!” Yoshida covered his mouth with his hand to stem the nausea.

This was something he couldn’t get used to, no matter how many times it happened. He just couldn’t. It made him keenly aware of how unsuited he was for war. Alan, Dora, or Norman would probably head straight for the machine golem while brimming with determination, while Kevin, Isabella, or Derek would analyze the situation and quickly come up with a countermeasure. Compared to them, he could only cower in fear.

I really only became a hero to fill out the roster.

But he couldn’t let himself wallow in self-loathing. Just one step from the enemy’s humongous golem had crushed a fourth of their defensive position and

over a hundred knights who'd failed to escape in time.

"H-How can we even stop a monster like that?" Yoshida mumbled.

The Seventh Kingdom's knights were helpless against the tremendous demonstration that size equaled power. Anyone could predict the inevitable outcome if things continued in this manner. The enormous golem would move straight ahead, stomping the defensive lines in its path until it eventually reached and destroyed the royal castle too. With the castle in ruins, it could take its time searching for the seal stone located underground. If just two of those stones were destroyed, the sealed entity within, the one that would lead humanity to its ruin, would be unleashed.

Though, that also means we can afford to let one be destroyed. Even if they failed to protect their seal stone, as long as the rest of the Seven Heroes won, things would work out.

"But no, that's not good enough!" Yoshida shook his head. "We can't risk even a one in a million chance of that...*thing* being unleashed."

"All right, let's go, you guys!" A young man's voice rang out across the battlefield.

"Yeah!" Five other voices answered in unison. With Griffith at the vanguard, six young warriors made their appearance. The Great Six valiantly stepped forward to take on the enormous machine golem.

The Humanity Defense Coalition considered six abilities essential in combat: defense, strength, magical energy, magical control, special ability, and speed, with each of the Great Six excelling in one of these fields.

Master of Defense, Griffith Maxwell.

Master of Strength, Strong Garfield.

Master of Magical Energy, Leen Clarice.

Master of Magical Control, Lynel Foxfort.

Master of Special Ability, Chris Almard.

Master of Speed, Stephan Goldeagle.

These brave young warriors, averaging eighteen years of age, stood before the machine golem, which towered over them at four hundred meters tall or more.

“Now, what do we do about this hunk of junk?” asked Griffith, their leader.

“How ’bout I just throw the sucker?” said the tall and strapping Strong.

“I could easily go ‘boom’ and blow it away with my magic,” said Leen, the one dressed like a magical girl.

“You two have some grand ideas as usual,” said Lynel with a strained laugh. He was a slender, handsome young man with long silver hair.

“But that’s their strong point,” said Chris in a soft voice. She was a black-haired young woman with tanned skin, a glamorous figure, and a graceful face.

“So? In the end, what do we do?” Stephan asked in a perturbed tone. She was the gaudiest of the group, with her hair dyed in every color of the rainbow, plus suns and stars drawn under her eyes.

“Good question.” Griffith placed a hand on his jaw and pondered for a moment. “To add a few thoughts, our enemy is an absurdly tough but sluggish hunk of junk, which means...”

“Chris’s special ability will be effective,” said Leen, eliciting a nod from Chris.

“All right, we’ll go with the usual then.” The other five nodded in response. “Okay, let’s go!”

At Griffith’s command, the Great Six rushed toward the colossal machine golem. In response, the golem raised its leg to trample them all at once. It had no strategy or tricks up its sleeve, only its massive body and weight that could crush anything. It brought its foot down on them, but it never reached the ground.

With a grunt, Master of Strength, Strong Garfield, caught its foot with both arms.

“What, is that it?” He strained his muscles to put more strength into his arms. “Compared to that hag’s strength, this is as light as a feather! Get thrown,

idiot!” Strong screamed his lungs out and managed to actually push the golem back, throwing it off-balance. “Now!”

“Here I go, Chris!”

“I’ll be in your care, Stephan!”

Master of Speed, Stephan Goldeagle, grasped her comrade’s hand and took flight on magical wings that sprouted from her back. True to her title, her speed was remarkable even when burdened by carrying another person. She flew to the joint of the golem’s right leg and sharply thrust her rapier into it, but her weapon bounced back.

“I was expecting some weak points in its structure, but I guess this hunk of junk doesn’t have any,” she grumbled. “Well, nothing I can do about it. You’re up, Chris!”

“Okay!” Chris, still holding on to Stephan’s right hand, braced herself. A moment later, Stephan tossed her straight at the golem. “If you have no weaknesses, I simply need to create one!”

Chris retrieved a short knife from her bosom and pricked her fingertip. Drops of red blood came to the surface, which she then smeared on the golem’s right leg. “Weak Point, Lightning Group!” The bloodstain on the golem then took the shape of a lightning bolt.

Stephan arrived right on time to catch the falling Chris in midair, then asked, “How did it go?”

“Perfectly,” Chris replied with a wink. Master of Special Ability, Chris Almard, had a special ability—as you may have guessed—just like Derek’s brainwashing magic or Kevin’s Save and Load. Hers was called Weak Point. It allowed her to mark enemies using her own blood and bestow the affected area with an elemental weakness of her choice. Therefore, the golem’s right leg was now extremely vulnerable to lightning magic.

“My turn! ☆” Master of Magical Energy, Leen Clarice, pointed her magical staff at the enemy. However, even a hulking golem wasn’t enough of a slowpoke to take an attack lying down. It raised its structure-sized fist and threw a punch at Leen.

“In your dreams. Onion Shell.” Master of Defense, Griffith Maxwell, stood in front of Leen and raised his hands in the air to create a mana shield. The two-meter-diameter dome didn’t look up to the task of blocking the golem’s attack, but it knocked its fist away regardless. Onion Shell was a spell that created a shield using countless thin mana barriers stacked upon each other, like its onion namesake. Since each layer was both flexible and sturdy, the shield as a whole was much more durable than it looked.

“Now’s your chance, Leen!”

“Gotcha!” Leen started chanting her spell. “The winds and clouds in havoc, lightning rumbles through the skies, and the roar of thunder fills the air! Lightning Hurricane!”

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!

Like thunderbolts attracted to a body of water, numerous electric shocks peppered the golem’s right leg. A dull sound echoed as a crack formed there. Although it had been given a weakness thanks to Chris’s special ability, managing to crack such thick and sturdy armor was still an impressive feat. The girl with the highest raw magical energy in the Humanity Defense Coalition was a force to be reckoned with.

“As usual, Leen’s giving it her all,” said the silver-haired Lynel Foxfort with a wry smile. “I don’t have the same mana output you do, so pardon me if I work more efficiently.”

The youth with the title Master of Magical Control pointed his right index finger at the enemy. “Lightning Group, Twenty-Ninth Magic!”

A single line of electricity sparked from his finger. It lacked the fierce impact Leen’s spells had but made up for it by precisely hitting the crack she had created earlier. Spells that generated electric shocks were notoriously hard to manipulate delicately because of their speed, so firing one of them in a straight line was a sign of great skill.

With the crack widening even more, the golem’s right leg could no longer support its massive weight and snapped in half.

“Augh! It’s coming this way!” The golem’s colossal body was collapsing in

Yoshida's direction. A tragedy was inevitable if something wasn't done soon.

"Hmph!" Strong bashed the golem from the side, tilting it toward a direction with no people. An enormous cloud of dirt and debris scattered in the air when its four-hundred-meter-tall body slammed into the ground.

"Whoa!" Yoshida and the surrounding knights were almost blown away by the shock wave that followed. Meanwhile, the Great Six were unbothered.

"Hah! Take that, you hunk of junk!" one of them cried. Majestically, the group stood before the golem they'd just toppled.

"Those kids are amazing," Yoshida muttered. They'd improved since the last time he'd seen them. That must have been the result of a growth spurt. Above all else, they had the courage to stand before such a gargantuan foe without losing themselves.

"They really are great warriors...unlike me," he said with a mixture of hope and envy.

"That's one major combat achievement in the bag!" Strong said with a guffaw.

"We couldn't join the fighting last time, so it's all fair now! ☆" Leen added.

"I guess we've now graduated from being the champions of mock battles alone," said Stephan. The three of them had been unable to join the battlefield during the previous demon attack. This was their first official combat and demon extermination.

"This hunk of junk was pretty close in strength to those provisional Black Stars we fought last time. We've undoubtedly grown stronger," said Griffith.

"Looks like ramping up our training to an absurd degree after meeting the Seven Heroes bore fruit," Lynel said with a strained smile.

"I really thought it was going to kill me," Chris said, a similar expression on her face.

After the Seven Heroes showed them the pinnacle of strength they should aim for, the six of them had trained to an extent incomparable to before. Their

training was already so hard-core that none of the other members of the Humanity Defense Coalition could keep up, but their new routine made people see them as a little crazy. Fortunately, their youth increased both their growth rate and learning efficiency. This new generation of warriors had improved by leaps and bounds in a short amount of time.

“I’ll be catching up with you soon, Mister Alan,” Griffith said to himself.

The sound of clapping with some metallic clanging mixed in suddenly drew their attention. “Bravo! Excellent! Marvelous!” said Loki, the half-mechanical man and their supposed enemy, clapping all the while. He walked toward them at a leisurely pace. “You’ve all done an amazing job. What a stimulating and comical performance. Now, shall we dance together next?”

Griffith gulped as he watched the slowly approaching Loki. “It’s finally time, huh?”

Their foe was one of the New Seven Black Stars and a shenmo, a monstrosity far above the likes of Heavy Rain, someone they’d been crushed by not too long ago. Part of him was consumed by fear, just like his five companions. He could sense their tension and terror.

“Whatever we’re feeling...the Seven Heroes have already fought and defeated a few of them, haven’t they? Then there’s no way in hell we’re going to turn tail and run here.” The other five nodded in agreement. “We’re taking you down, Black Star, and then we’ll be on par with them!”

Around the same time, Alan and Beelzebub had arrived at a mountain district in the First Kingdom’s suburbs, a place that was mostly filled with vegetation.

“This location should be acceptable,” Beelzebub said.

“Yes, we should be fine so far away from any populated areas,” Alan agreed with a nod. “Step back, Rosetta.”

“I wish you luck,” she said with a bow.

“Thanks. But even if luck isn’t in my favor, I’ll figure something out.”

Rosetta nodded in response, then trotted away from the two of them.

“Oh, that reminds me. Another member of your group defeated one of the New Seven Black Stars. You Seven Heroes truly are a magnificent bunch,” Beelzebub said.

“Is that so? Thanks for the compliment.” However, Alan couldn’t see any concern in Beelzebub’s expression. *In fact, he looks delighted, doesn’t he?*

Beelzebub didn’t actually want to lose, but as the absolute strongest existence, he thought that the stronger the foe he set his sights on, the better.

“On the other hand...it is truly such a pity.”

“A pity, you say?” Alan raised his eyebrows.

“Indeed. You humans grow old and eventually perish. While you possess brilliant strength, it will decline given time. In the end, it vanishes altogether. That is something I find terribly unfortunate.”

So that’s what he meant, Alan thought. Since demons had unlimited life spans, it was natural that they would see things this way. “I disagree.”

“Oh?”

“The next generation will grow up and take our place,” Alan said. He remembered the confident smile of that cheeky young man who’d broken his record for the fastest medal award. “Even after we’re gone, new heroes will surely be born.”

Alan looked far into the distance toward the Seventh Kingdom. Griffith and the rest of the Great Six must have been fighting at that moment, with Yoshida’s support.

“And that’s exactly why...” Alan slowly drew his sword, the one he’d received from the empress herself, and pointed it straight at Beelzebub as the light reflected off its tip. “I can’t let you bring an end to humanity here.”

“Hmph, I see.” Beelzebub also drew his sword in response. “Very well. I don’t care what your reasons are, as long as you fight with everything you have.”

The Champion and the demon lord stood against each other with swords bared like fangs. They had walked until it was evening. The sun sank behind the horizon as the sunset dyed the scenery in the color of red flame.

“Here I go, Alan Granger.”

“Come at me, Beelzebub.”

Claaaaaaang!

A shock wave spread around as their blades collided. The duel between the Champion and the demon lord had started at last.

Humanity had three hard-won victories under its belt, but it would only take two losses for it to be wiped off the face of the world. The human race was still in the midst of an unprecedented crisis.

Afterword

And so, the third volume of *Veteran Heroes* has been released. This time we had battles, with a side of battles, and then some battles for dessert. I quite enjoy writing action scenes, so it was pretty fun.

Man, Norman really went wild, didn't he? I was actually laughing while writing his part. I can't wait to see Mr. Toda draw him in the manga version. What kind of result will spring forth from combining his dynamic art with the over-the-top interactions between Norman and Grave? I'm looking forward to it!

Since we're on the topic of the manga version, I have a small announcement to make. At the time I'm writing this afterword, the *Veteran Heroes* manga has over ten thousand favorites on Niconico Seiga. That's one of the criteria I use to judge a series's popularity, so I'm quite happy with it. I hope you will continue supporting it in the future. Incidentally, *Novice Middle-Aged Adventurer* has around 230,000 favorites at the moment. Wow, that's so coooool! (That's me talking like a grade schooler.) I'll work hard so that *Veteran Heroes* can catch up to it.

Now, this concerns the *Novice Middle-Aged Adventurer* series—I wrote a short collaboration story with it at the end of the first volume of *Veteran Heroes*—but I might have an interesting announcement to make about it soon. Please show a little more patience. Now, on to the final part: expressing my gratitude.

Thank you for always providing such amazing illustrations, peroshi. Every time I get a new illustration, I stare at it for minutes mumbling, "Mm-hmm, this turned out great!" as if *I* did anything. Half the charm of *Veteran Heroes* can be attributed to peroshi's illustrations, so words cannot express just how grateful I am. Thank you also to my editor and proofreader for fixing all the typos and missing text in my manuscript despite their busy schedule, and to everyone else involved in the publishing of this book.

Now then, the fight between the Seven Heroes and the New Seven Black Stars has finally entered its second half. Just what will happen next? I'd actually

already decided before serialization started, so we're entering the home stretch now. Thank you for your continued support.

Bonus Short Story

Griffith's Unexpected Sweetheart

The fifteenth of July was a special event for Continental Orthodoxy called the Day of Matrimony. It was the day when God descended upon the world and asked for the princess of the house of Whitehyde's hand in marriage. Henceforth, it became a day where the men of all seven great human kingdoms invited their special someone to dinner. Even the members of the Humanity Defense Coalition—a gathering of elites, important figures, and the rich from various kingdoms—honored this tradition. However, high-ranking nobles or wealthy individuals like them typically had no say in their choice of spouse. In the majority of cases, their partner was decided from an early age for the convenience of their own houses. Therefore, it was customary for them to instead go out and have a good time searching for mistress candidates on this day.

However, there *were* members of the coalition who treated this day earnestly: the ones who'd managed to join by passing the demanding general entry examination. The majority of them, once they had come of age, had arranged marriages with someone recommended either by their parents or their social environment. Quite a few of them had also found their own partners before that could happen. The Day of Matrimony was an important event for commoners like them.

"Ugh..." Griffith Maxwell, one of the highly praised up-and-coming powerful knights of the Humanity Defense Coalition, was a young man with his own worries on this day. His results in both written exams and mock battles were always impressive, so what could a guy like him be worrying about with such a sullen look on his face?

"C'mon, you should finally invite Clarice this year," said Strong Garfield, a tall and burly man who was a member of the Great Six like Griffith. The two of them had joined the coalition at the same time and were good friends, so Strong had

also seen Griffith groaning by himself at the barrack's cafeteria last year, and the year before that. "But I really am surprised, Griffith. Just what do you see in that phony witch girl? Sure, she's pretty attractive, but just listen to her."

"Shaddup, man," Griffith grumbled, while he recalled an important event from two years ago.

Two years ago, Griffith had been indignant. *These people are all rotten to the core!*

The Humanity Defense Coalition had been hailed as the foremost powerful organization for the protection of humanity. Every boy who'd dreamed of becoming a hero had knocked at least once at the coalition's door in order to pursue that goal. Griffith was no different.

However, once he'd passed the strict general entry exam and enlisted, all he'd found had been a den of self-interest and corruption. No one had taken training or lectures seriously. The staff had been paid over ten times more than people with similar positions in most kingdoms, yet they'd spent their days on idle amusement at the barracks. Not a single person had a sense of duty or a goal they were pursuing like Griffith.

Despite living in such a festering environment, Griffith had stayed true to his convictions.

Sure, maybe heroes are unnecessary in our peaceful world, but I'm sure the day will come when they will be needed once more.

Alone, he'd continued training hard. Despite that, no one had praised him, even when he'd scored the highest in both practical and written exams. The only ones who'd received praise were those who'd gone hunting with the organization's top brass. He hadn't actually wanted to be acknowledged by such wastes of space, but the state of affairs had still soured his mood.

Around that time, he'd participated in a monthlong joint training exercise with a different unit, although that had been a pretext for everyone to mess around at the nearby casinos. It'd been there that Griffith had experienced something novel, specifically when he'd gone to check the results of the written

examination during the first day of the joint exercise.

“I’m...second?”

That’d never happened before. Every unit had been full of people who’d only thought about taking things easy and lining their pockets. Griffith had always scored so high on the written exams no one else even came close to him. “So this ‘Leen Clarice’ got the highest score. I wonder what kind of girl she is.”

He’d asked some other members of her unit where to find her, then had gone to meet her. At the time, she’d been attending a lecture.

“Is she some kind of clown?” he couldn’t help but say when he’d first seen her. Leen had been dressed in a frilly pink dress and had her hair done in childish pigtails. He’d realized she was dressed like the protagonist—called something like a “magical girl”—of a play that’d been massively popular in recent years. She’d dressed like that in both training *and* lectures.

“And I lost to *her*?” Griffith had been quite confident in both his physical and academic abilities, so the realization made his face twitch.

That night, Griffith had headed to the training grounds alone after receiving permission from the instructor. Even if no one praised his efforts and no one needed him, he’d keep training by himself. He’d decided that in his heart long ago.

To his surprise, someone had beaten him to the punch that night.

“The winds and clouds in havoc, lightning rumbles through the skies, and the roar of thunder fills the air! Lightning Hurricane!” The sound of sparks had filled the grounds. Leen Clarice had been there, dressed in the same ridiculous outfit she’d worn during the day. She’d been practicing her magic, even as sweat had poured down her body and heavy gasps had escaped her mouth from the mana exhaustion.

Griffith had been momentarily rendered speechless at the sight. He could never have imagined, judging her by her looks alone.

“Hmm? Isn’t your name Griffith?” Leen had noticed his arrival and walked up to him. “Did you come for some personal practice?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Then we’re companions!” Leen had said with a smile.

“Companions...” Griffith had a feeling that was the first time he’d heard that since joining the Humanity Defense Coalition. Until meeting Leen, everyone had looked at him as if all the solitary effort he’d put in had been worthless.

“What’s wrong?” Leen had asked, peering into his face. Once he’d taken a closer look, he’d seen she was actually quite lovely and sweet.

“It’s nothing,” he’d replied, then gone on to start his own training. Time had felt like it passed by a little faster than usual during that night’s training.

Those events had taken place a little before Chief Simon gathered Griffith and his five companions to form the Great Six.



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Back to the Battlefield: The Veteran Heroes Return to the Fray! Volume 3

by Kiraku Kishima

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