

The background of the cover features a dynamic illustration of two characters. On the left, a character with blonde hair and a large, ornate golden helmet with a red visor is shown in profile, holding a sword. On the right, a character with brown hair and a white cape is shown in profile, holding a sword. They are facing each other in a confrontational pose. The background is a mix of purple and blue hues with some light effects.

Kiraku Kishima

Illustrator
peroshi

4

Back^{to the} Battlefield

The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray!

The background of the cover is a vibrant illustration. On the left, a character with blonde hair and a large, ornate golden helmet with a red visor is shown in profile, facing right. They are wearing dark armor with gold accents. On the right, a character with brown hair and a white cape is shown in profile, facing left. They are wearing a dark, form-fitting suit with blue and gold armor on their arms. The two characters are in a tense, confrontational pose. The background is a mix of purple, blue, and pink hues with some light effects.


Kiraku Kishima

Illustrator
peroshi

4

Back to the Battlefield

The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray!



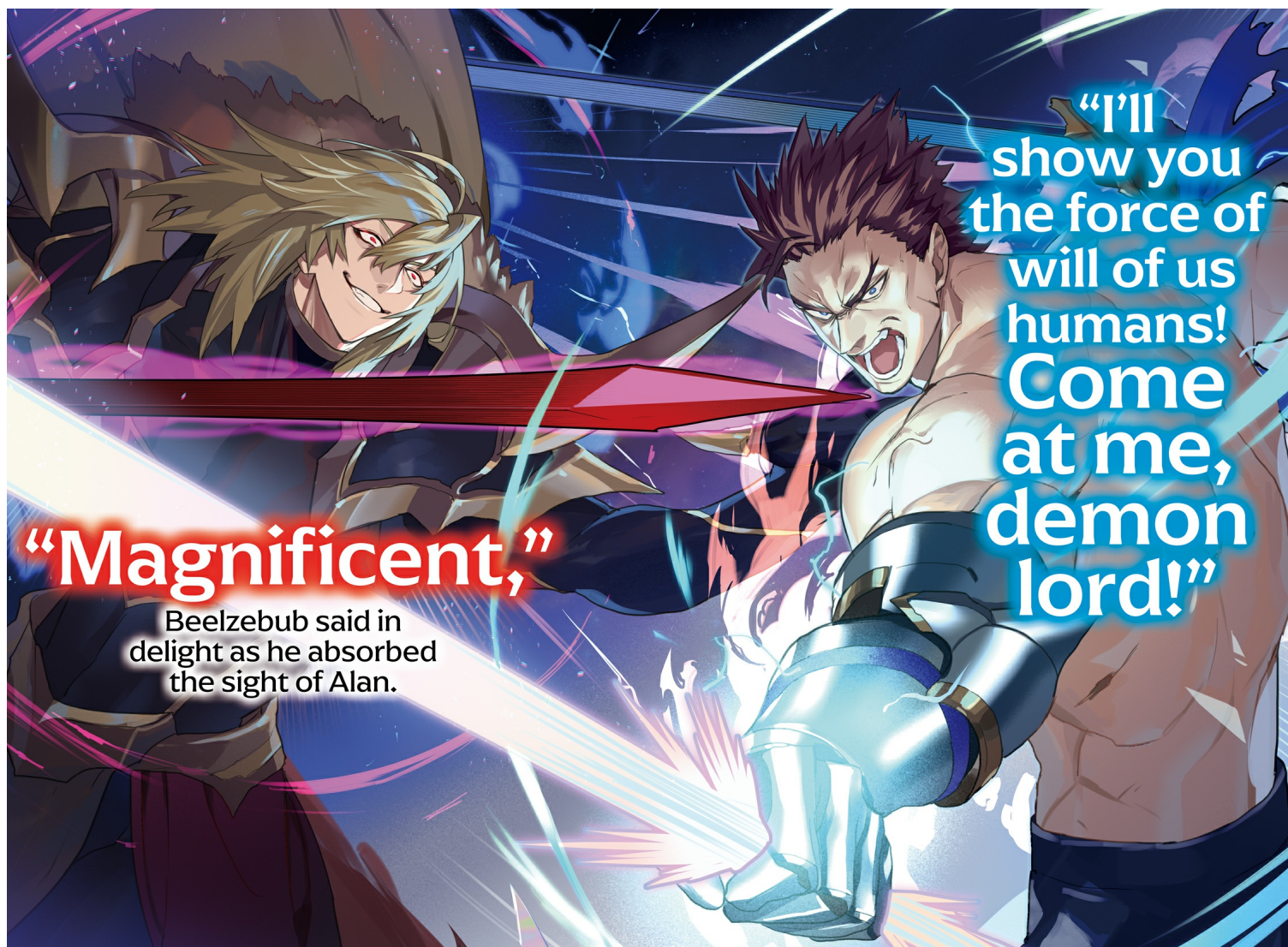
Abruptly,
the unavoidable
boulders split in
half.

Back to the Battlefield

The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray!

“There
you are,
shenmo,”

Derek said.



“Magnificent,”

Beelzebub said in
delight as he absorbed
the sight of Alan.

**“I’ll
show you
the force of
will of us
humans!
Come
at me,
demon
lord!”**

The last hero
had finally
appeared.
The first thing
that came into
Yoshida's view
when he
arrived at the
battlefield was
the altered
appearance of
his childhood
friend.

Aria now
stood before
them, framed
by sixteen
rainbow-
colored
wings.



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*The man blessed with nothing and the demon lord blessed with everything.
Their fated confrontation that began twenty-five years ago will be settled now!*

Prologue: The Young Warriors

The first strike between Alan Granger the Champion of Light and Demon Lord Beelzebub caused such immense shock waves that countless trees in the area fell. Despite that, there were few injuries among the animals and monsters inhabiting these mountains. The creatures had sensed that both combatants possessed unimaginable power, and they had mostly abandoned their dwellings and escaped as soon as Alan and Beelzebub had approached.

But how were the fighters themselves affected by this exchange of blows?

“Looks like old age is really wearing me down,” Alan said as a line of blood trickled down his brow. He’d also been pushed back a little from his original position.

Across from him, Beelzebub was unscathed and hadn’t yielded an inch. From an objective standpoint, he was clearly the victor of this skirmish. 999 out of 1,000 spectators would come to that conclusion, but things weren’t that simple.

“No. While you may be physically weaker, your attack still resonates with me. Well done, Champion.” Beelzebub had nothing but praise for Alan.

“I think you’re giving me too much credit, demon lord.”

“I’m just speaking my mind. I haven’t experienced such fierce resistance from anyone in the underworld. You humans are truly magnificent.” This time, Beelzebub’s praise was for humanity as a whole. “Your bodies are frail, your mana is low, and your lives are fragile and fleeting, yet you snap at our heels before we know it. It was the same during the previous invasion. When I first came to the human world and saw your people, I thought it would all be over within three years, but you held out for over a century. You’re truly creatures of mystery.”

Beelzebub turned his gaze to the distance, looking in the direction of his

forces fighting elsewhere. “Over and over, I tried to hammer that fact into the heads of the other New Seven Black Stars, but in the end, not a single one of them understood my words. If they are defeated, their conceit will likely be the reason.” He didn’t hesitate to point out the direct path to defeat for the demons who believed their strength was unimpeachable. Conversely, since Beelzebub lacked the contempt for humans so common in his kind, the path to victory was not so clear in his case.

He always spells trouble for me, Alan thought as he used his sleeve to wipe the blood from his face. If he fell here, the seal stone in the First Kingdom’s castle would be reduced to smithereens. Worse, Beelzebub would then be free to go assist the invasion of any other kingdom. If a second stone were destroyed after that, everything would be over. Humanity had no means to deal with that worst-case scenario. Alan had no choice but to fight.

“Well, time to stand my ground,” Alan said. He tightened his grip on his sword and charged right at Beelzebub.

Meanwhile, another battle was unfolding in Silver Factory, the last of the seven great human kingdoms. There, on the plains of the Wiladorf sector, the demon army was standing against the combined front of the Seventh Kingdom’s forces and the Humanity Defense Coalition. The humans had suffered great casualties, but they’d managed to repel the demons’ powerful and massive machine golems with the help of the Great Six, the coalition’s ace fighters.

These kids are amazing, thought Yoshida the Villager, one of the Seven Heroes, as he watched the young warriors boldly standing at the front line.

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 six had grown significantly in the short time after witnessing their foes' extraordinary power during the mock battles with the Seven Heroes and the fight against the fake Black Star, Heavy Rain. This rapid progress was only possible thanks to their youth. From Yoshida's perspective—someone who'd become one of the Seven Heroes by pure chance and was only capable of logistical support—they had truly become reliable allies.

But there's still a big problem, Yoshida thought.

This was no time for them to relax. While there was only one enemy left, he was a shenmo. The real battle was just beginning.

"It's showtime!" said Loki the Mythical Creature, one of the New Seven Black Stars, as he strolled forward.

At 180 centimeters, he wasn't much taller than an average man, but he stood out with his theatrical white suit, gloved hands, and dark necktie. Nearly a third of his body was mechanical. Half his face, his left arm, and his right leg were formed from a black metal. The clink-clank of the machines inside him rang out with each step he took. Despite his frame resembling that of a human, his machine golem traits clearly marked him as a shenmo. An even clearer indicator was the dense, powerful mana pouring out of his body.

"Urgh!" The nauseating sight reminded Yoshida of the terror he'd felt in the previous war. He felt like a pathetic excuse for a hero.

"We're taking you down, New Black Star. Then we'll finally be on par with them!" shouted Griffith Maxwell, the leader of the Great Six.

"Yeah!" the other five roared in response.

Their determination and fighting spirit were more than sufficient. The fight between these young heroes and the shenmo was on.

"All-consuming hellfire, cleanse the stain of sin from this world. Flame Tornado!" Leen Clarice was the one to kick things off with her Chanted Magic.

The Humanity Defense Coalition considered six abilities essential in combat: defense, strength, magical energy, magical control, special ability, and speed. Each of the Great Six excelled in one of these fields.

As Leen's title indicated, her magical energy was exceedingly high. Furthermore, she'd spent a great deal of time practicing her Chanted Magic—which had far higher output than Template Magic—amping up her attack even further. The flames were so intense an ordinary demon would burn to cinders from a direct hit.

"Bienvenido!" Loki let the incoming flames engulf him, his arms spread wide, as if welcoming them in.

"Huh?!" Leen gasped. As a specialist in magic, she could tell that Loki wasn't using any of the basic defensive measures, like covering himself in a layer of mana to reduce damage. Shenmo or not, his body had been burned and a small portion of his metal parts had melted.

"Ooh! Nice, very nice, little lady," Loki said with an ecstatic grin.

Griffith stared in confusion. "Is this guy seriously laughing while part of him's melting?"

"How bizarre. Should we try hitting him once more?" Lynel Foxfort asked. He didn't wait for a reply before leaping into action.

"Lightning Group, Twenty-Ninth Magic!" His area of expertise was precise magical control. While he didn't have the same high energy Leen did, he gathered mana at the tip of his finger, charged it with the lightning element, and fired the narrow beam at Loki. "I aimed my spell at his heart, the core of a shenmo's mana. What will he do now?"

"Okay!" Once again, Loki kept his arms spread like a heron's wings and took the attack head-on, no magical defenses in place. The lightning couldn't pierce through his tough body from end to end, but it still managed to cut to his heart and expose his core, scraping it just a little.

Did he just take a deliberate hit to his core? Yoshida wondered in shock.

The core was to demons as the heart was to humans. Since the heart was the source of mana, its destruction would lead to an inability to generate mana. That spelled certain death. There was absolutely no reason to drop one's defenses and take an attack there.

Abruptly, smoke erupted from Loki's core, and the damage on it seemed to

wipe away.

“What?!” Griffith shouted.

“Whoa, hold up! Didn’t we learn in class that no matter how potent a demon’s healing is, it takes them time to recover if their core is destroyed?!” said the muscular Strong Garfield.

“Heh heh heh, you’re seeing the result of my Ex-Skill, boy,” Loki said with a malicious jester’s grin. “Its name is Perfect Form, and it will restore my body to its original shape no matter how much damage it suffers. In other words, you could say I’m immortal. Let’s get on with the show now, shall we?”

“What the—” the Great Six cried in dumbfounded unison. The realization that the enemy they thought they’d nearly defeated was immortal hit them like a ton of bricks.

“So he didn’t defend himself since it’d be a waste of mana,” Griffith muttered.

“Now then, can you six kill me?” Loki said before appearing right in front of the Great Six.

“How did he move so fast?!” one of them yelped.

None of them could stop Loki from getting so close, but Strong immediately reacted. With a loud battle cry, he threw a punch with all his might behind it, as much as he’d used when he’d sent the monstrous machine golem flying earlier.

“Oh yes!” Loki said as he took yet another attack without offering a hint of resistance.

Thwaaack!

The metallic clang of two objects violently slamming into each other filled the air.

“Hmm, not bad,” Loki said with a smile, though it was misshapen by a dent on his face where Strong had slugged him. “You lot aren’t bad at all.” He then returned the favor by slamming his own fist into Strong’s large frame.

“Argh!” Strong’s back bent ninety degrees and he was blown into the distance.



“Strong!”

“But I’m just a little more powerful,” Loki said.

“Dammit!” Stephan Goldeagle had been standing next to Strong but dodged away quickly. It would be more than reckless to face an opponent who surpassed Strong in physical strength head-on. She tried to use her speed to put some distance between them.

“I also happen to be just a bit faster.” Loki’s voice came from the startled Stephan’s side. He’d caught up to her in the blink of an eye, and soon landed a vicious kick on her.

Stephan’s fate was the same as Strong’s. She went flying, folded in half like a piece of paper.

Loki spun his head 180 degrees to face the remaining four. “And here’s another thing.” Black mana began to gather at the tips of two of his right hand’s fingers.

“Here it comes!” Griffith shouted as he activated Onion Shell, his signature defensive spell.

“You’ll find my magic is better too. Black Magic, Number Forty.” This advanced underworld magic caused black miasma to spread from Loki’s fingers and ooze toward the four of them. The spell was superior to the one Leen had used, thanks to the high-quality mana of its shenmo user.

“Ungh!” However, Griffith’s magic still managed to stop the attack in its tracks. Onion Shell formed a resilient defensive wall by stacking thousands of thin, yet sturdy and flexible barriers upon each other. Griffith had improved the spell since the last fight by ensuring that each barrier had different flexibility or hardness. As a result, each barrier could compensate for the others’ weaknesses.

“Oh? Well, well, well, well!” Loki sounded genuinely amazed. “How interesting! You might actually be better than me in terms of defensive magic! Let me increase the intensity a bit!” As soon as he’d finished his sentence, the black miasma thickened twofold.

Even Griffith couldn't stop Loki then. The four of the Great Six remaining screamed in agony as the barrier was shattered, and they were tossed away as easily as pebbles.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Loki turned his face to the sky and clapped away. "Yes, you bunch aren't doing half bad! You might even be able to kill me. Come on, stand up! Let's up the tempo of this dance!" His laughter was so intense it was like he'd lost his mind.

"You damn monster!" Griffith cursed from the ground.

Still not enough, huh? Yoshida thought as he observed the fight between Loki and the Great Six.

The six of them were not weak. Save for the Seven Heroes, they were by far the strongest fighters in the Seven Kingdoms. Even so, they were lacking. They had yet to reach the level necessary to stand against a shenmo. While they were each comparable to Loki in their field of expertise, he exceeded them by just enough. Defensive magic seemed to be the only area Loki was lesser at, but that was because he had no need for defense thanks to his immortal body. In a sense, his defensive power was already infinite. When they were outdone in every aspect of combat, victory was impossible for them.

"Ha! So what?" Griffith was the first to stand up. "Who cares if you're better than us at everything? Even in a situation like this, the Champion would shout 'Not yet!' and get back on his feet."

"You're damn right!" Strong followed suit, and the other four quickly followed.

"I'm sure the Seven Heroes have faced countless hopeless battles like this one. This is just a trial. One for us to pass and prove we're heroes too," Griffith stated with confidence. The other five nodded in response, determination clear on their faces.

Ah, what reliable youngsters, Yoshida thought. He felt embarrassed at himself. He was a weak, gutless man who could do nothing but provide logistical support. Still, that was *why* he wanted to do the one thing he could. He ran up to Griffith.

“What do you want?” Griffith snapped. “You’re the only one among the Seven Heroes who can’t fight, aren’t you? It’s dangerous. You’d be safer if you took shelter at the rear.”

“I know that. But I can at least offer logistical support. Won’t you let me help you out?”

Chapter 1: Final Form Villainess versus God of Games

The Fourth Kingdom, Orange Gallery, had no shortage of buildings with historical and artistic value. Naturally, its royal castle held many magnificent works of art, both on display and safely stored away. For that reason, security was high in every part of the castle, even around the first gate that led to the plaza that was open to civilians. In most royal castles, security was there to protect the important people inside—the sovereign, first and foremost—but this castle was different because of the current ruler's fondness for rarities.

Somehow, despite everything mentioned so far, a certain demon had made his way inside as if he were taking a stroll in the park.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Isabella Stuart. I am one of the New Seven Black Stars, Adek the God of Games."

Silently, the man emerged from the shadow of a pillar. He was tall and slender, and handsome enough to turn heads. His polite speech, coupled with his tailcoat and excellent posture, gave him the air of a first-rate butler. His ability to conceal his mana must have been enormous, because not even Isabella, the best at sensing mana among the Seven Heroes, could perceive a speck of it from him.

Regardless, she could understand after assessing him directly. The quantity and quality of mana was overpowering; he was, without a doubt, a shenmo.

"I believe my security is rather tight, is it not?" Isabella said.

"Indeed it is. My game with them was rather tedious." Adek shrugged his shoulders in response to Isabella's question. "I'm expecting a more pleasant game with you, Queen."

Isabella spent a moment observing Adek in silence. "Adek the God of Games, you say. From that name, I can more or less infer what kind of abilities you possess," she said with a faint smile.

After a moment, she snapped her fingers. In response, several walls in the room flipped over and more than fifty fully armed guards appeared. “Did you think I would choose to play a game against someone calling himself a god?”

Isabella’s guards all rushed at Adek as one.

“Oh my, you’re a rather violent individual.” Adek shrugged and shook his head as if disappointed. While he stood idle, the guards kept charging at him with their spears. He didn’t lift a finger to defend himself, inevitably allowing the guards to turn his body into a pincushion.

However, the strangest thing happened next. One of the paintings hanging on the wall shattered into tiny pieces for no apparent reason.

“Oh no, you went and broke Her Majesty’s favorite work of art. You’ll need to be disciplined,” Adek said. Despite scores of spears stabbing into his body, he was unharmed.

Even Isabella was surprised at this state of affairs.

“I know you aren’t actually of royal blood. You share joint ownership of this castle and the kingdom’s works of art with the Minister of Culture, who *is* part of the royal lineage. Although, since you have full control over the ministry’s human resources, the minister can never really oppose you,” Adek said in a clear voice. “To better enjoy my game with you, I first played a game with the Minister of Culture over the ownership of this castle and the works of art. To be more precise, we forged a contract where any damage I suffer will be redirected to this castle or the kingdom’s works of art.”

“Cease your attack,” Isabella ordered her guards in a calm manner. She then addressed Adek. “Your ability isn’t as simple as killing an enemy you’ve defeated in a game, is it?”

“Correct. My Ex-Skill is called Destiny Bind. When I win a game, I can take ownership of any possession my opponent bet. That includes objects, lives, and anything else you can imagine. I’m free to use the things I take in any way I’d like. I can even have them take damage in my place,” Adek said with a smile. “Of course, if I lose, I have to hand over what I bet. Now, let me formally make my request: Won’t you have a game with me, Queen?”

Isabella spent a moment in thought. “Very well, I accept.”

“Are you certain, Mistress?” her trusted attendant Alicia asked. Isabella nodded in response.

A wicked grin formed on Adek’s elegant face. “I have received your consent.”

No sooner had Adek spoken than the scenery around them changed. While they had been in the queen’s room only moments ago, they now found themselves in a bizarre dimension as dark as the bottom of the ocean. Isabella, Alicia, and even Isabella’s guards had been forcefully swallowed up by this space.

“Let the game begin. Our delightful, oh-so-fun game.”

“Now then...” Adek took a seat at the square table in the middle of the room, the kind often seen in casinos. “Let me explain the rules of our game. We’ll need four players.” When he snapped his fingers, a black shadow appeared next to him and took the shape of a troll demon, which then sat down on his left.

“Please select a partner of your own, Queen.”

“Come, Alicia.” Isabella immediately called on her attendant.

“As you command.” Alicia gave a short bow and took her own seat.

Alicia and Isabella had been joined at the hip for decades. They’d even been classmates back when Isabella attended the academy for nobles and royals. She had Isabella’s deep trust even when it came to government affairs. It was only natural for her to be chosen in this situation.

Isabella was the last one to sit.

“We will be playing rummy today,” Adek said. He placed his hand on the table and revealed a deck of cards in it as smoothly as any stage magician.

“That deck is from the castle’s lounge, isn’t it?” Isabella asked.

“Indeed. You would suspect me of cheating if I prepared everything from my own possessions, no? A game is only interesting when it’s fair. Go ahead, you may inspect the deck.”

Isabella picked up the deck and inspected each card. “There don’t seem to be any tricks in place.”

“Yes. It’s an ordinary fifty-two-card deck with no joker. Now, are you familiar with the rules of rummy?” Adek asked.

Isabella nodded. “Yes, it’s a game of efficiency.”

In rummy, players start the game by drawing seven cards each. On each of their turns, a player draws an additional card and discards one card. Three or more cards of the same rank, as well as three or more consecutive cards of the same suit, form a meld. Players can place melds on the table to reduce their hand size. The player who empties their hand first—also called “going out”—is the winner for the round, while the rest of the players lose points depending on the ranks of the cards remaining in their hands. Everyone starts at 100 points. When someone’s points are reduced to 0, the one with the highest points is declared the winner of the game.

Each card’s value is as follows: Kings, queens, and jacks are worth 10 points each. Aces are worth 1 point each. And numeral cards are each worth the same as their number, from 2 to 10. When a player goes out, each other player loses as many points as the cards left in their hand are worth in total.

In short, just like Isabella said, the key to victory in this game is to quickly and efficiently empty one’s hand while the other players still have many cards in theirs. It’s similar to mahjong, in a sense. Much like mahjong has a powerful winning hand worth a lot of points called a “yakuman,” this game has something called a “rummy.” If a player goes out all at once without previously placing any melds on the table, they get a rummy, a finisher that rewards double the points.

“However, there isn’t much strategy involved in the game like this, so let’s add some rules to make it more tactical,” Adek said.

Under the normal rules, everyone discards their cards in the same pile, but under Adek’s revision, each player has their own discard pile in front of them. If a player needs one last card to go out and another player discards it, they can take it from them to go out on the spot. If a player goes out by taking their last card from an opponent, it becomes a “direct hit” and only the player who had

their card taken loses points that round. If a player has a card they need to go out in their own discard pile, they can't take a card from another player to win the round.

Under the normal rules, a player can choose to pick up the card the previous player discarded, but under Adek's revision, if a player can make a meld of three or more cards of the same rank with a discarded card, they can pick it up no matter which player discarded it. If two or more different players want the same discarded card to go out or to use it to make a meld, priority goes to the one whose turn is closest after the player who discarded the card. Additionally, if a player discards their last card and another player can use it to deliver a direct hit to them, the direct hit takes priority.

Finally, since this is a personal fight between Isabella and Adek, the one to reduce the other to 0 points first wins.

"So, what do you think?" Adek asked.

"I can agree to them," Isabella replied.

With these new rules, the game became much closer to mahjong, with an emphasis on strategy and reading one's opponents.

"So, what will we be betting?" Isabella asked.

Adek's Destiny Bind would give the winner of a game possession of what the loser had bet. What they would each be betting was equally as, if not more important, than the game they would be playing.

"Our lives, of course," Adek replied without hesitation. "The loser will have their life taken. It makes for a fair battle. Rest assured, my ability will take my life if I lose."

"I would think so. Otherwise, it would be too strong."

If Adek could start one-sided games with zero consequences if he lost, he'd have likely conquered the underworld long ago and would have no reason to follow Beelzebub.

"But your proposal is not enough," Isabella continued.

Adek raised an eyebrow. "Care to elaborate?"

“I doubt I can kill you by betting one life against another. I imagine an ill-natured man such as yourself has more than this castle or our works of art to act as your substitutes. Undoubtedly, you’ve also picked up a great number of lives from this kingdom’s people as scapegoats before coming here. In other words, even if I defeat you once, it will only lead to the death of one of my subjects.”

Alicia and the soldiers were at a loss for words; they hadn’t thought that far.

“Ah, I see. I was thinking you agreed to our game a little too readily, but you did understand the extent of it,” Adek said.

“The casualties for defeating you head-on would be far too great, so I decided to participate in your little game and kill you this way,” Isabella explained.

“However, we must make bets of roughly equivalent value. What will you bet in addition to your life?”

“Everything.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Everything in the Fourth Kingdom. My life, Alicia’s life, these soldiers’ lives, the people’s lives you don’t possess yet, the land itself, its resources, and even the thing you demons want the most: the seal stone hidden underground. I will bet everything. In exchange, you will bet your entire stock of lives. That’s my condition for accepting the game of rummy you suggested.”

“Heh heh heh, very well. That is truly a game worth playing,” Adek said, clearly pleased. “However, as meticulous preparation is in my nature, I have also acquired a stock of underworld lives equal to five times this kingdom’s population.”

“You coward,” Alicia said through gritted teeth.

Adek had made it evident he never intended for his defeat to be an option in this fight.

Isabella, however, didn’t voice a single complaint. “Then you may start the game with five times more points than me.”

Even Adek couldn’t conceal his genuine surprise at that statement. A gap of

five times the points was massive. Yes, in a game where player skill made all the difference, it was possible to win even with such a handicap. However, it was still a card game where luck was a significant factor, despite the additional rules to make it more tactical. The point gap suggested by Isabella would put her in a hopeless position.

“But, in exchange, allow me to suggest a rule of my own,” Isabella said with a finger raised, before raising an additional two. “Let’s make a ‘direct hit’ or a rummy worth three times the points.”

Adek blinked in surprise. This was somehow more absurd than her first proposal.

“Mistress Isabella, that seems far too reckless,” Alicia said.

“Do you understand what you’re saying? You only start with 100 points. Even a single direct hit would be fatal.” Adek also chimed in with a warning.

“I don’t mind. In fact, it has to be this way. A risk like this is necessary to bridge a fivefold gap in points,” Isabella said calmly.

“That confidence, the courage to disregard risks, and your collected behavior... You’re quite an intriguing person. Very well. When a direct hit occurs between the two of us, or when someone scores a rummy, the point loss will be tripled. Acceptable?” Adek asked. A slippery smile slithered across his face.

Isabella nodded. “Very. Let the game begin.”

Isabella’s long-trusted attendant Alicia was deep in thought as she drew her seven cards. *Several rules have been added, but the basics are still the same as standard rummy.*

In rummy, efficiency and speed are king. It’s in the game’s nature that, no matter how skilled the player, they have to use the cards they draw to form melds of three or more cards; otherwise they can’t “go out” and reduce their enemies’ points. Furthermore, when another player goes out, the more cards remaining in one’s hand, the more damage they will take. In short, the faster a player reduces the number of cards in their hand, the better.

A rummy is worth three times the points under our rules, but aiming for it is a huge risk. For now, I should stick with the orthodox strategy and try to go out as fast as possible, Alicia thought.

Adek started the round. "Let's see..." First, he drew a card. "Well, well! Luck seems to be on my side," he said, placing a meld of three aces and a meld of three sixes on the table.

Drat! He already got rid of six cards, Alicia thought.

Adek then discarded one card, leaving him with one. He was already one step away from victory. Fortunately, the special "direct hit" rule they were using was only in effect when someone went out by making a meld of three or more cards, so there was no need to worry about triple damage at the moment. But the rest of the players would still lose points depending on the ranks of the remaining cards in their hands when someone went out. For that reason, they wanted to empty their hands quickly, even if they couldn't go out.

Isabella only had 100 points. She couldn't afford to let herself take a big hit.

It was Alicia's turn next, so she drew her card. *These are my cards, Mistress Isabella.*

I hear you loud and clear.

Alicia was using popular telepathy magic with Isabella, which allowed the two of them to tell each other about their hands. Their enemies were likely doing the same. Alicia and the troll both had the goal of helping their own master win.

"Understood." After learning Isabella's cards, Alicia placed a meld of three jacks on the table. Then, she intentionally discarded one of her two sevens.

"I'll be taking that," Isabella said. As per rummy rules, she was allowed to pick up the card discarded by the previous player. She picked up the seven without delay and formed a meld out of the seven, eight, and nine of spades. She added another six to the meld of three sixes Adek had played to further decrease her cards. She finished her turn by discarding a king.

So far so good, Alicia thought.

Isabella now only had three cards left. Going out wasn't exactly out of her

reach, but her remaining cards had nothing in common. Unexpectedly, that wouldn't be much of a problem. On the troll demon's turn, it discarded a ten of spades. Instead of adding it to Isabella's meld like someone trying to win would, it discarded it.

"I think I'll take that card," Adek said with a grin. He picked up the ten of spades and added it to Isabella's meld of the seven, eight, and nine of spades, then discarded his final card. His face remained smug. "I'm going out."

Dammit! Alicia silently cursed these absurd odds. He went out in only two turns. There was nothing they could've done.

Isabella had a two, four, and a queen left in her hand, meaning she would lose their sum of 16 points. The score became as follows:

Adek: 500 Points

Isabella: 84 Points

Isabella was already on the back foot.

But at least she avoided taking a big hit. Alicia was a little relieved.

If Isabella hadn't gotten rid of as many cards as possible during her turn—for example, if she'd held her cards to aim for a rummy—she'd have lost an additional 30 points. Isabella already had a terrible gap between her points and Adek's. Losing almost half her points in the first round would have been the nail in her coffin.

"Oh dear! You already lost points, didn't you?" Adek said in a polite voice, laced with poison.

"Yes, I'm aware," Isabella replied.

"I see, I see. Then are you also aware of what's behind you?" As Adek closed his mouth, a grotesque transformation occurred behind Isabella. Her ordinary chair shifted into a snarling monster that was baring its large fangs at her.

"Mistress Isabella!"

The monster wrapped its limbs around Isabella. With a cacophonous growl, it sank its teeth into her shoulder.

“Ugh!” Isabella let out an uncharacteristic cry as her face distorted with pain.

“My, my, you’re showing impressive mental fortitude. That pain is so intense, some unlucky men die from the shock,” Adek said.

Bizarrely, while Isabella’s right shoulder had disappeared in the maw of the beast, from the elbow down, her remaining right arm still moved like normal.

“An ordinary game wouldn’t be entertaining enough. So, every time we lose points, a monster will devour part of our bodies and make them disappear. When someone loses all of their points,” Adek explained, a twisted grin warping his handsome face, “their body will be devoured until they fade into oblivion! Great, isn’t it?! Don’t you find it thrilling?! To experience an extravagant combination of dread and agony as your very existence disappears, piece by piece!”

“You have some sick tastes,” Isabella spat out.

“Ha, that may be so! But, please rest assured, my games are always fair. I have a monster too,” Adek said, gesturing behind himself. His own chair had transformed into a monster with a gaping mouth. However, his expression was fearless, as if the possibility of his defeat had never crossed his mind. “Let’s continue the game, shall we?”

After the first round was over, the cards were automatically collected and shuffled through magic. The four players then each drew a new set of cards.

I don’t have a particularly good hand this time, Alicia thought as she checked her cards. The ranks of her cards were all over the place, so not only were there no melds she could form, there were very few other cards she could use to form a meld of three. On the other hand, Isabella was faring much better.

Oh! This is a great chance! Alicia discarded the ten of hearts from her only pair.

“I’ll take that.” Isabella picked up Alicia’s card and formed a meld with two more tens from her hand. She also placed down the jack, queen, and king of hearts. After discarding a card, she was down to one, just like Adek had been in the previous round.

Luck is on our side this time, Alicia thought. They had to take advantage of this windfall. If they missed chances like this, they'd have no hopes of bridging the five-time point gap.

However, after the troll demon drew and discarded a card, it was Adek's turn again, and he had a surprise for them.

"Heh heh, I'll go with this," Adek said. He placed a meld of three aces and a meld of the ten, jack, and queen of diamonds on the table.

Alicia's eyes went wide. *He had two melds of three cards on his first turn, twice in a row?!*

"Oh my, how lucky I've been," Adek said.

Isabella observed the game state quietly. Both of them now had one card each. The game had become about who would draw a card that would allow them to go out first.

On their next turn, neither Isabella nor Alicia drew a card that would let her go out. Then came Adek's turn.

"So sorry, but I drew the card I needed." Adek placed the king of diamonds he just drew on the existing meld on the table, then discarded his last card to go out.

The last card in Isabella's hand was the three of clubs. Fortunately, she wouldn't take much damage.

Adek: 500 Points

Isabella: 81 Points

"It's punishment time," Adek said.

The monster acting as Isabella's chair took a bite out of her chest. She couldn't help but show a moment of anguish. Just like before, the bitten part soon vanished.

"I know I said this before, but the pain from getting bitten by this monster could kill some grown men on the spot. Enduring it with only a tiny peep is a sign of extraordinary will," Adek said.

Luck really wasn't with us there. We've only been taking hits, Alicia thought.

"I knew it," Isabella muttered.

"Knew what, exactly?" Alicia asked.

"Adek the God of Games. You have another Ex-Skill, don't you? One that makes you luckier or some such," Isabella said. Alicia started at the revelation.

"Oh?" Adek raised an eyebrow.

"Judging from the enormous quantity of scapegoats you prepared in the underworld, you're not the type who enjoys a challenge, but the type who enjoys victory. In other words, the type who fights after stacking the odds overwhelmingly in his favor. But you agreed to the rule I proposed about making a direct hit or a rummy lose three times the points, even though it might instantly defeat a player who makes a bad move."

Adek listened to Isabella's explanation without making a sound.

"That leads me to conclude you must know you won't lose under any circumstances. Am I wrong?"

Adek broke his silence with a burst of clapping and laughter. "You are quite intriguing, aren't you? It's exactly as you say. My second Ex-Skill is called Holy Chance. It puts good fortune on my side in games, regardless of the odds. To put it in short, it makes me extremely lucky."

"What?! That ability is simply unfair!" Alicia said.

Luck played a large part in most games, so reliably skewing that luck in his favor gave Adek a major advantage.

"Oh, I forgot to mention—since the time I was born, almost ten thousand years ago, in all the games with lives on the line I've played, I've never lost once. I've used my stockpile of lives as a betting chip every time, but I never needed it." Adek's handsome face was as warped as a crazy clown's. "Please show me, Queen, the face of the calm and composed Isabella as she writhes in terror for her final moments!"

There was now a visible bulge in his nether regions as he carried on raving. "Ah, I can't wait! How miserably will you cry? How sweet will you sound as you

beg for your life? I truly cannot wait to find out. This is my *raison d'être*. I wish it was already in front of me! But then again, I also want to drink it in as the dread and pain slowly spread across your face. My heart may as well be split in two. What to do, what to do?"

The monstrous shenmo had shown his true colors. He was nothing but a fiend who'd used his whole life to take pleasure in the suffering of others. Alicia and the soldiers shuddered in fear before his malice. However, he didn't have the same effect on his intended target.

"Calm down, Alicia," Isabella said, clearheaded to the end. "His luck isn't absolute. Otherwise, he'd have no need to gather such a large stockpile of lives."

"That's...certainly true." Alicia came to her senses at Isabella's observation.

"In the first place, if his luck really were invincible, he'd simply go out with a rummy on his first turn every time. His ability does nothing more than tilt luck in his favor. No matter how lucky he may be, there are countless ways for him to lose if he makes a wrong move."

Isabella was right. In the face of his consecutive victories, Adek's wicked aura had overwhelmed Alicia. She took a breath. "My sincerest apologies for losing my composure. I didn't mean to show you such a disgraceful side of myself."

"That's been a bad habit of yours since I first met you, Alicia."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Heh, a wrong move, you say? I suppose that *is* possible," Adek said with his usual smirk. "I may need to be careful about that."

The game resumed once more. During the next few rounds, Alicia learned from the way things progressed that what Isabella had said earlier was indeed true.

It's exactly as Mistress Isabella said. He doesn't immediately get rid of six cards and go out within three or four turns every time. Those first two rounds were probably lucky even by his standards. Most rounds, Adek only had at most

one meld in his starting hand. *Though that's plenty of nuisance.*

But this meant they had a fighting chance. There were even some rounds where no one managed to go out at all. Since rummy was a game where the players needed to get rid of a mere eight cards by forming them into melds, it was likely that *one* of them would go out right away, but there were cases where the deck ran out of cards without anyone managing to go out.

These stalemates often occur because the players end up holding the cards the others need in their hands. In the similar game of mahjong, each tile has four copies, so this situation isn't as common. Since rummy only uses one deck of cards, each card is unique, and players wind up without access to the right one. Therefore, players must memorize every discarded card, assess which their opponents are holding, and—if what they need is out of the picture—make the decision to intentionally discard from their existing pairs.

Because of the aforementioned factors, although rummy is meant to be a game about picking one's cards with the highest efficiency, actually pulling that off is challenging. In stories, characters usually play games as efficiently as possible like it's the norm, but that's practically impossible in reality.

Not even Alicia, someone who'd graduated second in her grade from the most prestigious academic institution of the Fourth Kingdom, managed countless government affairs as Queen Isabella's attendant, and was probably one of the five smartest people in the kingdom, had the intellect to perform at the aforementioned "highest efficiency."

Human brains are just not built like that.

However... Alicia glanced at Adek to her right.

"Oh, I have another meld," he said, leaving his hand with only one card. "I'm so sorry. Seems I'm the first to one card again."

This man is playing almost perfectly! Alicia had arrived at that conclusion over the course of this long battle. When she examined the three cards Adek had just placed on the table and his discarded ones, it was clear he'd made the most optimal moves. She also realized that he'd calculated early on that the card he'd been waiting for was likely in her hand and discarded the other two to instead build a different meld.

His ability to infer what cards are in his opponents' hands is too high. His Ex-Skill gives him excellent luck, but his skill is also amazing, Alicia thought.

The title “God of Games” wasn’t just for show. His ability at games was with no equal. Alicia had no choice but to accept this was how he’d remained undefeated for over ten thousand years.

Nevertheless, she’s also doing well. Alicia looked to her left side as she discarded her card.

“I’ll add the six and seven of diamonds to your meld. That leaves me with two cards,” Isabella said.

Isabella could also read her opponents’ cards as if it was second nature to her. Every time Adek reduced his hand size, she also cut herself a piece of the pie.

Mistress Isabella never changes, Alicia thought.

Isabella’s infamy as a monster of politics was on full display. She was terrifying even to her allies.

“You’re one step away from going out with those two cards, aren’t you? That was pretty quick. I need to take care not to discard the card you need,” Adek said with a chuckle.

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who always goes out first thanks to his cheating ability,” Isabella replied.

This round would come down to who drew the card they needed to go out first. Naturally, Adek’s luck-boosting skill gave him an advantage. However, Isabella did have her own advantage, since he only had one card left and couldn’t go out by forming a meld of three with the card he drew next. Even so, Alicia’s heart beat like a drum as she watched Adek draw his card.

He didn’t go out. He kept the new card and discarded the one he previously held. The new card likely gave him higher odds of going out, or he judged there was a chance it was the one Isabella was waiting for.

Thank goodness, Alicia thought.

Isabella held the jack and queen of hearts. Both of them were worth a lot of points, so she’d take a lot of damage if Adek went out while they were still in

her hand.

We have to go out first for sure this time! Alicia thought as she drew her card. She looked at it in surprise for a moment before asking Isabella through magic, *Should I discard it?*

Isabella nodded in response. Alicia nodded back and discarded her new card.

“I’ll make a direct hit with this card,” Isabella said. The card Alicia had discarded was the ten of hearts, so Isabella combined it with her other two cards into a meld.

“Phew!” Alicia let out a sigh of relief.

While Isabella had managed to go out, it was thanks to her ally’s discarded card and not Adek’s, so he wouldn’t be losing any points. At least they’d managed to prevent any point loss on their end.

Regardless... Alicia checked the current score.

Adek: 500 Points

Isabella: 56 Points

They’d managed to keep their losses to a minimum, but they’d been slowly bleeding points all the same. Meanwhile, Adek had yet to lose a single one. It felt inevitable. While both Isabella and Adek played optimally, he was the one with the odds in his favor. If Isabella stopped hedging her bets in favor of aiming for a high-scoring hand, Adek would simply go out before her.

I can’t see us making a breakthrough. Alicia ground her teeth in frustration. She looked over at Isabella, whose expression remained largely unchanging. She kept making perfect move after perfect move like some kind of machine. *How do you plan to break this deadlock, Mistress Isabella?*

Adek, clearly amused, just watched the two of them.

Heh! They’re caught in the swamp of my Ex-Skill, Adek thought, chuckling privately, as he drew his cards from the shuffled deck. *When faced with my Ex-Skill, all opponents, especially the ones with half a brain, fall into this delaying-the-inevitable trap.*

Adek's luck skill was by no means absolute. Fortune sometimes favored his opponents too, while other times his advantage was only minor. That was exactly why it could befuddle shrewd opponents. They got caught up in something along these lines: "If I play perfectly, I have a good chance of winning."

Unfortunately for those playing against him, Adek was talented; he had a photographic memory and could perform mental arithmetic in the blink of an eye. He'd never make a mistake when it came to probabilities, and he'd never be outdone in optimal play. Which meant that with each passing turn, the situation tilted more and more in his favor. There would be no turnaround—there had been *none* in all his ten thousand years. Suffice it to say, while his luck wasn't infallible, he was still a powerful foe.

She should have held on and aimed for a direct hit against me.

Isabella would have taken a heavy blow if Adek managed to go out first, but she had to take a successful gamble at some point. In fact, since her ally held a card she could use to go out, she could've waited another handful of turns before going out. Even if he didn't discard the card she needed, the troll might. This wasn't the only example. There had been several moments earlier in their battle where she'd decided to make the safest move as well.

She can stay calm by telling herself that she's safe because of her shrewd strategy, but she's really only buying herself a little more time.

She might be thinking, "I'm playing the best anyone could. I'm making the right moves, so I'm safe." But the moment she realized those assumptions were false, her true nature lying beneath that icy facade was sure to show itself. Adek couldn't wait to see it.

"I believe it's my turn first." Adek sized up his new hand and smirked. *And that's how we end up like this. I'm going to show you hell.*

For his first turn, Adek drew one card and discarded one. Alicia did the same. Next, Isabella drew her card, placed a meld of three kings on the table, then ended her turn by discarding a card. On the troll's turn, it discarded the three of hearts.

"I'll take that." Adek picked up the three of hearts and combined it into a

meld with another two cards from his hand. “I have something more.” He revealed his five remaining cards: the six, seven, eight, nine, and ten of clubs. “My starting hand was actually one card away from a rummy.”

The shock was evident on Alicia’s face. That Adek’s ally held the one card he needed to go out was certainly unlucky for them, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it now.

Heh heh heh! Since the odds are in my favor, something like this was bound to happen, Adek thought as he observed his foolishly cunning opponents. Since there was no point in scoring a rummy as a direct hit against his own ally, he’d intentionally placed his cards on the table one meld at a time. That way, he’d gone out normally. Each other player would lose points depending on the values of their remaining cards.

“Let’s see what kind of cards you have left, Queen.”

Isabella revealed her cards. While she’d gotten rid of three kings earlier, those weren’t her only cards worth 10 points; her point total was 36.

“It’s showtime!” Adek said.

Much like a four-jawed insect, the mouth of Isabella’s chair monster gaped open in four directions, then slammed down to take a massive bite out of her body.

“Graaah!” Isabella screamed in agony; the pain flared much higher than before. A hint of exhaustion clung to her face as she got her breathing back in order. A large chunk of her body had vanished. After all, she only had 20 points left. Adek still had all 500 of his. Her situation was truly precarious—there was a good chance she’d die in the next round.

“Heh heh heh! It’s already within sight, the moment of your death, when your beautiful body will be devoured by the monster down to its last scrap of flesh. Have no doubt, eternal darkness awaits you,” Adek said. He wanted her to squirm, thrash, cry, scream, and beg for her life. Once she’d been stripped bare of the skin of human reason, he would laugh at her hideous, pathetic appearance!

“Let us continue.” Isabella, however, remained the same. Indifferent and

calm, she drew her cards to start the next round.

Adek stood silent for a moment.

“What’s the matter? Draw your cards, shenmo.”

Adek the God of Games had secretly appeared on many battlefields during the Titanomachy. It would be reasonable to assume he’d been part of the demon army, but that hadn’t been the case. He’d taken his pick of prey from either side of the battlefield, then had his fun sending them to hell with his games.

There’d been no end to the soldiers betting their lives on the battlefield during the era of the great war, but they, too, had panicked, quivered, and writhed in agony when face-to-face with death in Adek’s games. Humans who’d thrown themselves into countless battles not knowing when they might die had wept like babies. Adek’s games had been different than fighting, because the rising fear of death was gradual but deliberate.

On the battlefield, the soldiers had experienced a constant state of excitement because of the chemicals surging through their bodies. Much like those around them, they’d had to desperately keep pace with the heat of battle, moving and reacting without much time to spare on thought. They’d fought together with other humans, laying their lives on the line as a unit. All that had inured them to one thing: the fear of death.

In Adek’s games, on the other hand, they’d had to sit around a desk and carefully think about what they’d gotten themselves into. That had forced them to take a good look at reality. The fear of slowly inching closer to their deaths, and the fear that a single mistake would end the game in the blink of an eye. The desk-turned-monster devouring their bodies piece by piece had served to emphasize their plights.

Back in the present, the woman before Adek was unshaken despite having only 20 points left. The monster had devoured most of her body, robbing her of her stamina and leaving her pale, but she didn’t show the slightest hint of fear.

This is so boring, Adek complained to himself. *I suppose there are rare cases*

like hers. Humans who believe in their own superiority to the bitter end.

Among the countless enemies he'd finished off in his ten thousand years, several of them had acted like Isabella. Adek found each instance truly regrettable. These victims followed the efficient strategy they'd established in their minds to the end, and blamed bad luck for their inevitable defeat. In a sense, they were delusional, failing to understand the world around them. People like them made this whole thing pointless. His reason for living was to watch living creatures scramble around in confusion when faced with their own mortality. Calling his games a means to that end would be an apt description. Now, even if he won, it would be a waste if Isabella never showed fear.

There's nothing I can do about it, though. I'll just smash her little strategy to bits and finish her off.

In other words, Adek would aim for a direct hit. He'd use the triple damage rule Isabella had suggested to assure her own victory, killing her through the decisive mistake of discarding the card her opponent needed. When he'd finally crushed delusional players in the past, they had at least shown him their fear of death at the bitter end.

"Let's continue, shall we? All I need to do is find how to quickly go out, so I'm having a pretty easy time," Adek said as he drew his cards. "Oh, I already have a meld. Lucky me!" he added before placing his meld on the table.

"Most of your opening hands have a meld in them, don't they? Or have you developed amnesia?" Isabella replied.

Adek couldn't sense a crumb of anxiety in her voice. *Bah, this is so boring. Just you wait, I'll manage to twist that expression of yours.*

In his fourth turn, Adek only had two cards left. *Oh, this is looking good.*

His cards were the jack and queen of diamonds, the ideal hand to wait for a direct hit, because the cards he needed were the ten and king of diamonds, both cards with high values that Isabella would never hold on to when she only had 20 points left.

As for Isabella's hand, she still had a full set of seven cards. Since Adek only

had two cards left, it was likely she would suspect he was waiting to go out and hastily try to empty her hand.

Come on, discard it for me. However, Adek's wish didn't come to be.

"I'm discarding the seven of spades, concluding the round," she said. Since the deck was empty, the round was over.

She didn't discard it in the end, huh? Adek shook it off, knowing that such things happen. *She might've noticed that I was one card short of going out in my fourth turn.*

Isabella had ended the game with all seven of her cards remaining. Since players had the option to swap a card every turn, the chances of someone being unable to drop even one card on the table were pretty low. Therefore, it was probable that as soon as Isabella had deduced that Adek had been waiting to go out, she'd given up on forming her own melds and avoided discarding the cards that Adek wanted.

This is similar to the strategy known as "betaori" in mahjong, where a player gives up on winning a round and only discards safe tiles to minimize the likelihood of dealing into other players' hands.

Hmm, I see now. She's formidable. Even though her skill led her into the delaying-the-inevitable trap, I never imagined she could entrust herself so fully to the probabilities and efficiency she believes in. Adek had met people like her in the past, but their moves in the game had become a little disheveled after they'd been driven into a corner and the endgame lay in front of them.

Hmm... A bit of contrivance will be necessary to get that direct hit.

In the following three rounds, every time Adek was one card short of going out, Isabella switched to defense and never discarded the card he needed.

She's pretty remarkable, Adek noted to himself.

Still, everything was within Adek's expectations. Isabella's insistence on the betaori strategy was further proof she'd completely fallen for his trap. The odds of staying safe seemed high at first glance, but she'd die if she only played

defense. Since she kept following that same strategy without thinking, when he finished her off with a direct hit, he'd be able to rock her world and throw her into complete despair.

He'd already begun preparations to make his plan a reality.

Heh heh, here it is.

Currently, it was his fifth turn and he held five cards in his hand. However, he'd intentionally kept one meld in his hand and was already one card away from going out. He was waiting for either the eight or queen of diamonds, so he used telepathy magic to relay that information to his teammate. The troll discarded the eight of diamonds, making this game over. Next, all Adek needed to do was pick it up, form a meld, and place down both melds, making him the winner. If he did that, Isabella—who hadn't discarded a single card—would be guaranteed to perish.

Yet, he chose not to do that.

I've set a near perfect stage for her to discard the card I need.

On his next turn, Adek drew and discarded a card. From Isabella and Alicia's perspective, it would look like he was either far from going out, or that the queen of diamonds was a safe discard. He expected Isabella would have guessed he was waiting for the eight or queen of diamonds, or thereabouts. Thanks to his plan, her reading of his hand should've been reset. In truth, if he was really waiting for those cards, he'd have already won.

With all of that in mind, what would Isabella do if she drew the queen of diamonds, a card with a high score that was hard for her to use because she'd already discarded its surrounding cards? The sensible move would be to discard it because it was a relatively safe card. A person like her, trying to hold on for dear life, would no doubt make that move.

Go ahead, draw the queen of diamonds, then dive right into the irrational trap you so rationally built for yourself.

On Isabella's turn, she drew a card, then discarded...the *king* of diamonds.

That was so close, just one rank above it. That was fine for Adek. By discarding the king of diamonds, the queen would be even more isolated in Isabella's

hand. This only increased the chances of her getting rid of the queen when she did draw it. *Come on, come on, come on! Hurry up, draw that card, then show me your face filled with despair! That's my favorite thing in the world!*

"Phew, is this the last card?" Adek said as he drew the last card from the deck. To his disappointment, Isabella never discarded the queen of diamonds, probably because she never drew it in the first place. That had always been a possibility. His good fortune was far from flawless.

Either way, I have plenty of chances. I haven't lost a single point yet, since Isabella is caught in the trap of defending herself. With her points as low as they were, if Adek succeeded at even one of his attempts, Isabella would meet her miserable demise. With that in mind, he discarded the king of spades he'd just drawn.

"I was waiting for that."

Adek almost recoiled at the dignified voice echoing through the darkness. It was none other than Isabella Stuart.

"I saw through you the moment we met, Adek. You're a sadist from the bottom of your heart, a worthless piece of garbage whose sole reason for living is watching the suffering of others. I knew that if I never showed any fear, no matter what, you'd aim for a direct hit. Even if you had to avoid going out, you'd wait so you could crush me. To you, it's not victory unless you surpass me, smash my pride, and watch me suffer. It's only natural you'd be controlled by your desires," Isabella explained. "As a result, I could take my time building the hand I needed to kill you."

Isabella then revealed her full hand of seven cards; she hadn't formed a single meld this round. Her cards were the queens of diamonds, hearts, and clubs, as well as the nine, ten, jack, and queen of spades. The two cards she'd been waiting for were the eight or king of spades.

"This is a rummy *and* a direct hit. Go on, show us your cards, Black Star," Isabella said with a stately, even expression.

Th-That was incredible. Mistress Isabella never fails to impress, Alicia thought,

her confidence in Isabella burning anew. She'd heard the strategy through telepathy magic, but Isabella really pulled it off spectacularly.

Adek stared at Isabella's cards in silence, a stark contrast from his earlier talkative self. "I...see. It was all deliberate," he said as he raised his eyes to look at Isabella.

"That's right. I played like a coward with a misunderstanding of probability, until my points were low enough that a direct hit would finish me off. I used your overconfidence to give myself enough time to form a lethal hand. After all, you went as far as to hold yourself back from going out when you could," Isabella said with a smirk. "Now, come on, show your hand."

"Oh, yes. I have to get to that," Adek said as he opened his cards on the table. He had the fives of all four suits, as well as the nine, ten, and jack of diamonds, for a total of 49 points. Since this was both a direct hit and a rummy, the points were increased ninefold to a final result of 441.

Adek: 59 Points

Isabella: 20 Points

While Isabella hadn't killed Adek in one hit, she'd dropped his points low enough for his death to become a distinct possibility.

And that's not all, Alicia thought.

What was even more impressive was the fact that Isabella had used the queen of diamonds—one of the cards Adek had needed to go out—for her victory. In other words, she'd also realized which cards Adek had been waiting for.

My mistress is a truly outrageous individual. Alicia couldn't help but shudder.

"It's your turn to get a taste of pain." As Isabella said that, the monster acting as Adek's chair began to move. The game really was impartial.

"Graarrgh!" Adek screamed in agony as the monster consumed more than half his body in one fell swoop. He'd lost more than 400 points in a single round. The pain was on a level far above what words could describe. Even the face of a shenmo like him warped from the excruciating torment.

“Haah... Well, well, well... I must say, you *got* me, Queen,” Adek said, both of his hands on the table as he tried to catch his breath. “You’re *certainly* talented at reading people. And your mental resolve! To completely trust in a reading that will result in your death if you’re even slightly off, that takes nerves of steel—no, orichalcum.”

“In the royal court’s power struggle, I’ve experienced many situations where an incorrect judgment call would end with my death sentence,” Isabella replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “The sour, the sweet, and the bitter betrayals—I’m here now because I drank deeply of all of them. I’m far past being afraid to stake my life on my own insight.”

The Villainess. That was what Isabella had been called at the academy where the noble children of the Fourth Kingdom gathered. She’d been born into the House of Lightwise, an influential noble family which had opposed the Stuart royal family for generations in a bid to grasp greater political power. That explained why her entire family were seen as villains from the royal family’s perspective. Furthermore, even back then, Isabella had been beautiful enough to turn heads. She’d been one of the fairest in the entire academy, in fact. It was only natural that she’d been shunned and suffered harassment.

Isabella, however, hadn’t retaliated against the harassment. “Let’s forget about it and get along. I’d like to be friends with all of you,” she’d say. She’d understood that everyone who attacked her had their own complicated reasons. After all, none of them had gotten to know her one-on-one. She’d believed, if she approached them with an open heart, they’d come to understand each other.

“You’re Alicia from the House of Haschwalth, right? Let’s be friends!”

In that way, Isabella had reached out to other isolated children even during her own hardships. She’d been a lighthearted, good-natured, and hardworking girl. She’d treasured the bonds between people, trusted them, and tried to approach everyone without bias. Her bright and warm disposition had eventually made her popular with those around her.

“I believe in people. Everyone has a kind heart in them,” Isabella had declared

without hesitation. She'd climbed her way to the top of her class while wearing her heart on her sleeve. Before long, she'd amassed an entourage of great friends who supported her, and she'd started enjoying her academy life to its fullest.

One day, her reputation had reached someone two years above her at the academy—the first prince and direct successor to the throne. He'd taken a fancy to her good looks at first glance, so he'd called for her to stop in a hallway. Then, without warning, he'd grabbed her hand and kissed her.

"There's a soirée at the royal castle tonight, and I've decided to invite you. Go on, thank me," the first prince had whispered in a sugary voice. Despite being a man, he'd had quite the beautiful face, with almond-shaped eyes that had stared into Isabella's.

"Such insolence! How dare you treat me like that?!" Isabella had said, scolding him in a loud voice. Her nearby friends had been petrified with fear. She didn't seem to realize she'd scolded *the future king*.

"Hey, I like this chick," he'd said, a surprisingly favorable reaction. Since he'd been next in line for the throne and said to be the most handsome man in the kingdom, no woman had ever treated him like that before.

After that incident, the first prince had made passionate advances on Isabella. Despite his pompous behavior, he'd revealed himself to be an honest and virtuous person, which had charmed her. The two of them had ended up falling in love, vowing to spend their futures together. Regrettably, the royal family hadn't welcomed their marriage due to Isabella's origins.

The king had personally commanded Isabella to participate in the subjugation of the demon army. Despite the hard times the Titanomachy had caused, conscripting the daughter of such a prominent noble family had been a ridiculous act. The House of Lightwise's social status had been high enough to rival that of the royal family. It had been obvious that the true aim of the royal family had been to tear the first prince and Isabella apart, and then have her die in battle.

"I'm sorry, Isabella. I'm powerless until I succeed the throne," the first prince had said in frustration.

“No, this isn’t your fault. But what can I *do*?” Isabella had been at a complete loss.

“This could be your chance, Isabella,” Joseph, the third prince, as well as Isabella’s classmate and one of her many friends, had said. “You can prove yourself in combat and rack up military achievements to increase your prestige. You can become a woman so worthy of the next king that no one will be able to voice their opposition to your marriage. Of course, you’ll have to return from the war alive for that.”

At that, Joseph had pointed to their academy friends behind him. “We’ll help you out. We’ll form a party and fight with you on the front lines.” The others had nodded along.

“Everyone...”

Isabella’s gratitude for her academy friends had been deep, and together, they’d left for the battlefield.

Many in Isabella’s group had already shown excellent results in the use of magic at the academy, and the same had remained true in battle. They’d performed remarkably. Isabella, in particular, had improved her lightning magic by leaps and bounds. Although she’d had support, she’d been the one who accomplished the magnificent feat of crushing one of the Seven Black Stars at the end of a grueling battle. After that, Alan had taken down Beelzebub, closing the gate connecting the human world and the underworld, sending the demon army back where they came from.

Isabella and her comrades had made their long-awaited triumphant return to the royal capital. Since she’d defeated a member of the Seven Black Stars, one of the greatest military achievements possible, her engagement to the first prince would be acknowledged, and they’d live happily ever after. The girl who’d been called “Villainess” would go on to obtain the greatest happiness thanks to her integrity, kindness, and earnestness.

Alas, it did not come to be. Something quite different had awaited Isabella upon her return.

“What? The king was assassinated?!” Isabella had been shocked to her core.

For generations, the kings of the Fourth Kingdom had placed strict emphasis on security, meaning they'd lived under guard, around the clock. As a result, no king had lost their life to an assassin in the kingdom's long history—until then. It had been especially shocking because the late king hadn't been particularly social outside of his royal duties. He'd really only associated with those close to him.

Worse news had awaited Isabella and her friends. The military police of the Humanity Defense Coalition—which had held significant authority at the time—had appeared before the first prince.

“Your Highness, classified defense documents concerning every human nation have been discovered in a hideout previously used by the demon army. We have reason to believe you were the one who sent those documents. You are hereby under arrest. Your defense will be heard in the coalition's court.”

“Wh-What is this?! I have no idea what you're talking about!”

Thus, the first prince had been court-martialed. He'd been charged under coalition regulations, the highest order of humanity's rules that exceeded even the kingdoms' constitutions, and found guilty of the gravest crime of all: treason against humanity. Soon enough, he'd been sentenced to death.

The Humanity Defense Coalition had concluded that the first prince had planned his father's assassination because the late king had doubts about passing on the throne to the prince. On top of that, they had evidence he'd formed a secret agreement with the demon army. In exchange for providing the demon army with classified information on humanity, the Fourth Kingdom's royalty would reign while the rest of humanity was enslaved after the demon army's victory. Capital punishment had been deemed the only acceptable verdict for such betrayal against humanity as a whole.

This is absurd! Isabella had thought.

She'd known the first prince better than anyone. They'd whispered sweet nothings to each other every night, and she'd listened to him sleep-talk as she gazed at his defenseless sleeping face. Despite his somewhat arrogant behavior, she'd been certain the first prince had cared about his people more than anyone else, and he'd respected his father deeply. Under no circumstances had

he been the type of person to plot an assassination against his family or sell out his own kind.

However, although Isabella had been a hero, she'd still just been the daughter of a noble family; her protests had fallen on deaf ears. The first prince's execution had been carried out, and the Fourth Kingdom had soon begun calling him "History's Vilest Prince."

Isabella had been thrown into a daze. Why had things turned out this way? She'd overcome countless difficulties with her allies to achieve victory. She was supposed to have arrived at her happy ending.

"I can't... Why, why did this happen?" Isabella had wept, inconsolable.

"Isabella..." said the third prince Joseph.

"Miss Isabella..." Alicia echoed.

Not even the people who'd fought with her could cheer her up.

In the end, Joseph had succeeded the throne thanks to the accolades he'd earned fighting alongside Isabella. She had remained shut in her room, shedding tears, even during the coronation ceremony held among the joy brought about by the end of the war.

Nevertheless, Isabella had eventually dried her tears, left her room, and started an investigation.

There's something bizarre about this. The events that led to his execution are beyond unnatural.

Isabella had enlisted the help of Alicia, the one who'd been by her side the longest, and started looking into the specific circumstances that had led to the first prince's execution, as well as everything surrounding them.

"Miss Isabella, this settles it."

"No, this *can't* be true!"

The two of them had uncovered a clue which led them to the terrible truth. The Humanity Defense Coalition judge who'd conducted the first prince's trial had been Joseph's old friend. He'd also received a large donation from Joseph's messenger during the subjugation of the demon army.

The two had disguised themselves, and they used their charms to enter the exclusive club the judge in question had been drinking at. Once with him, they'd "encouraged" him to imbibe alcohol laced with truth serum and had heard the facts directly from him. The information had been firsthand, so there'd been no room for doubt.

With that clue in hand, they'd gone on to uncover several pieces of proof. First, the classified documents on humanity found at the demon army's hideout had been forged. Second, the late king himself had told those close to him that the first prince would inherit the throne, so the prince had no reason to plan an assassination.

In conclusion, the one who'd been pulling the strings had been none other than Joseph, Isabella's academy friend and comrade in arms. After all, he'd been the one to benefit the most from this state of affairs. He'd left the second and fourth princes in his dust and become king himself.

Isabella had been at a loss for words when faced with her close friend's betrayal. Even so, she'd wanted to trust him. He'd been her friend ever since their days at the academy, they'd fought side by side, and although he'd sometimes turned a little violent when he lost his temper, he'd always been helpful to others. She'd thought that he couldn't have resorted to such extreme measures. However, the definitive evidence she'd gathered herself had broken her trust.

"I...believe in people. Everyone...has a kind heart," she'd tried to reassure herself.

Joseph's behavior had done a complete one-eighty after he'd taken the throne. He'd expelled various individuals who'd supported the kingdom for years, filling his surroundings with sycophants. He'd also increased taxes under the guise of postwar reconstruction and had used the money to live an indulgent and luxurious lifestyle.

As if that all hadn't been enough, he'd designated Isabella as his wife. By then, his word alone had been equivalent to a royal decree. Thus, Isabella had been forced into an engagement with Joseph.

On their wedding night, when they'd withdrawn to his bedroom and had

prepared to consummate their marriage, she'd gathered up the nerve to ask him something.

"Wait. Joseph, what did you...really think about your brother?"

She'd wanted to trust him right up to the very end.

"Don't bring *him* up when I've finally made you mine." Joseph's reply had oozed with loathing and irritation.

The moment Isabella had heard Joseph's words, she'd finally been convinced: this had been his plan since the very beginning. He'd fought the demon army alongside her to increase his prestige. He'd had the king assassinated and framed the first prince to eliminate him. As a result, his war accomplishments had placed him above the other two princes and made him a shoo-in for the throne.

Isabella had reflected on the moments they'd shared up to that point. She'd occasionally gotten the feeling that Joseph had been looking at her with wicked eyes. She'd chalked it up to her imagination, but he'd just admitted as much. She had to accept it. Joseph had desired everything the first prince had, and he'd stooped to immoral and cowardly methods to achieve his goal.

"Come, Isabella. Turn your butt this way."

"I...believe...in people."

"Dammit. You have no idea how to act in the bedroom."

She'd gripped the sheets in frustration and regret, tight enough that her nails had cut into her skin and stained the fabric with blood. As Jacob violated her from behind, she'd felt nothing but disgust. She'd had absolutely no desire to sleep with Joseph, but he'd been the king. Unlike Alan, Kevin, or Norman, she hadn't been strong enough to manage on her own after making an enemy of her own country. Complying had been her only option.

What a fool I've been, Isabella had thought as she endured the pain; Joseph's reckless thrusting had shown zero regard for his partner. *Believing in people? Everyone having a kind heart? Idealistic delusions. There's no end to the malice in this world. That's what's really at the heart of it.*

Isabella had sought more information after that. She'd learned that Joseph might have been the ringleader, but apparently, many members of the royal family or high-ranking nobles had either backed his plan or looked the other way. The first prince had been a sincere, pure, and moral individual, enough so that Isabella had once admired him. If such a man had become king, there was a good chance he'd have one day judged their corrupt actions.

With that knowledge in mind, Isabella had no longer felt any indignation.

"I see, so that's how it is," she'd flatly replied to Alicia's report, her eyes narrow and icy. "Alicia."

"Yes?"

"From here on out, I'm going to show those pieces of garbage hell. Come with me."

"As you wish, Miss Isabella."

After that, Isabella had started operating behind the scenes in political circles. Her work had quickly turned the political power structure in her faction's favor. Her influence as the king's consort had played a role, but it had been her new ability that'd become her greatest asset. Once she'd accepted that humans were creatures bent and gnarled by desire, she'd turned her intelligence into a surgeon's scalpel, perfect for dissecting the thoughts of others.

For the next three years, she'd pretended to obey Joseph—the king, her husband, and the person she hated the most—while slowly plotting against him.

"Your Majesty, you are under suspicion of multiple acts of accounting fraud and bribery, but most importantly, of the assassination of the late king," declared one of the members of the military police as they'd rushed into Joseph's room.

"Th-That's preposterous!"

Joseph hadn't been shocked that his assassination plot or other wrongdoings had been uncovered; given enough time, he'd assumed that someone would dig around and discover the truth. However, he'd thought that even if the truth were to come to light, his prosecution would've been impossible. In the Fourth

Kingdom, prosecution of the king's crimes required the unanimous consent of all four archdukes, and Joseph had forcibly placed his sycophants into those positions. That system had been little more than a formality, one that had never been put to use since its inception.

“Let me go! Who— Who do you think I am?! *Damn* those bastards! How dare they betray me! Me, after I gave them a free ticket to the easy life?!”

Isabella had stared down at her husband with cold eyes as he'd been pinned down to the floor for resisting arrest by the military police.



“I-Isabella...”

“What a simpleton. You lured them to your side with profit, so wouldn’t they betray you if the profits for doing so outweighed the losses?”

“No, don’t tell me...? You were the one who—”

“You can rest easy. I’ll have your friends join you soon enough.”

“Isabellaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

Thus, by Isabella’s influence had King Joseph been executed. He’d committed enough crimes to be sentenced to death many times over, so the verdict had been expected. Isabella had then succeeded her husband as queen of the Fourth Kingdom. A year later, she’d had all of Joseph’s collaborators, the four archdukes included, sentenced to death in a proper manner that everyone could agree to. An additional year after that, she’d placated or eliminated those who’d opposed her for claiming the throne despite having no royal blood.

There hadn’t been a single person who could outwit Isabella.

Within five years of Isabella involving herself in politics, there had been no one left in the kingdom who could stand against her. In the end, the Villainess had become queen and made the entire kingdom her own.

Adek: 59 Points

Isabella: 20 Points

There was still a gap in their points, but it was within a reasonable range for a game of rummy; a comeback for Isabella was now possible.

He’s lost the unbeatable lead he had until earlier, Alicia thought as she looked at Adek.

If Adek had started with 100 points like in a regular game of rummy, he’d have already lost. And thanks to the rule about direct hits being worth triple the points, he might lose in the very next round.

It would be ideal if this makes him shrink back and play it safe.

With a deep release of breath, Adek recovered from the pain he’d

experienced when the monster had chomped down on a huge chunk of his body, then straightened himself.

“Very well. It seems you’re not just a toy for me to play with and break. I’ve officially recognized you as an enemy.” His carefree air reversed as decisively as a flipped card, revealing his true nature. There was a sharp, murderous glint in his eyes. “I swear, I *will* kill you.”

A shiver ran down Alicia’s spine and every hair on her body stood on end. *Such intimidation and malice!*

“Let’s continue the game,” Isabella said, prompting the four of them to draw their cards and start the next round.

Oh! This is a great chance! Alicia’s eyes widened as she silently exchanged information with Isabella about their cards. If Alicia let Isabella have the card she needed from Alicia’s hand, her mistress would immediately be one card away from going out. *Even better, since we’ve reduced the point gap this much, we don’t necessarily need a rummy. A simple direct hit—no, with a little luck, even going out normally might deliver the finishing blow, if he has many cards left.*

Adek’s troll ally went first and discarded a card, followed by Adek doing the same. Alicia was next. She waited for instructions from Isabella before taking her turn, drawing a card, and discarding an unnecessary one. Isabella didn’t pick that card up; it wasn’t one she needed in the first place.

If I let Mistress Isabella have that other card, she’ll be one step from going out.

However, that was no reason for them to rush. While having many cards in one’s hand carried a risk, it also widened their options for cards they could use to go out. Though Adek had his luck-boosting skill, it was fine to pass a few turns and observe the situation. True enough, two more turns passed without Adek making any significant moves.

Is it time, Mistress Isabella? Alicia made eye contact to gain confirmation, and Isabella nodded in approval. Alicia then discarded the six of hearts.

“I’m taking that.” Isabella then placed down the four, five, seven, and eight of hearts from her hand. With Alicia providing the missing six in the middle, the

meld was complete. After discarding a card, Isabella was left with only two cards: the nine and ten of diamonds.

Great, now she only needs one more card. She could go out on her own, or Adek might discard the eight or jack of diamonds. He does still have a full hand, Alicia thought.

Since a direct hit tripled the point loss, Adek would almost certainly die if he received one while he still had seven cards. Isabella had played this game with a knife at her throat since the very beginning, but this was the first time the same applied to Adek. Alicia couldn't help but wonder, how would he act in a situation like this?

"Oh, I'll have that card," Adek said before picking up the card his teammate had discarded.

"I take that." Next, the troll picked up Adek's discarded card. As a result, it was left with four cards in hand.

"I'll also be taking that card." Adek picked up the troll's discarded card yet again and combined it with another two of his to place a meld on the table. He now only had two cards left and discarded the ten of spades from that, leaving one in his hand.

"With that card go out." The troll revealed its hand, the eight, nine, jack, and queen of spades. The card it needed was right in the middle, similar to what Isabella and Alicia had done with the six of hearts.

"Oh dear, looks like I just took a direct hit," Adek said before revealing his final card: a three. This was only a flesh wound for him.

Alicia shuddered as she looked at Adek's last card and the ones he'd placed on the table. *He gave up on going out himself halfway through the round and had his teammate go out instead!*

Adek must have sensed that Isabella had quite a good hand this round. Moreover, since his hand was mediocre—which could happen, even with his great luck—he decided to have his teammate deliver a direct hit for a minor point loss and end this round. Since direct hits were worth triple the points only between Isabella and Adek, he could keep his losses to a minimum by

intentionally getting hit by his ally. Also, the three he had left at the end was clearly a card he didn't need. By keeping a card that would decrease his chances of going out in his hand, he'd signaled that this round was about cutting his losses.

That decision sounds much easier to make on paper than in practice, Alicia thought.

Even though it was only 3 points, Adek was already down to 59—now 56—in a game with his life on the line. Any loss further increased the possibility of his defeat. It took a strong will to make such a terrifying decision. Furthermore, he needed great insight to discern who had the upper hand between himself and his opponent.

“Ouch!” The monster took a small bite out of Adek. He quickly shook it off. “Phew. All right, on to the next round.”

The game continued at a fast pace. Next round, Adek went first. Isabella built a hand aiming for a direct hit, but Adek kept discarding safe card after safe card, so the round ended without anyone going out. In the round after that, Isabella was the first to assemble a winning hand and go out. However, Adek had already discarded all the cards worth many points, going as far as to give up his chances of going out, so he only lost 12 points.

Adek: 44 Points

Isabella: 20 Points

Adek's defense had been thorough. Even though luck had been on Isabella's side these past few rounds, she'd failed to finish him off. And in the end, Adek's skill meant he would be the luckiest on average.

“Oh, how fortunate!” In the next round, Adek immediately dropped two melds of three cards each on the table and was left with only one card.

“Tsk!” Alicia tried to pass useful cards on to Isabella and help her reduce her hand size, but three turns later, Adek flashed a wide grin as he drew his new card.

“I'm going out,” he said.

Come to think of it, even though he's always fought with an overwhelming advantage, he's been winning all his games for the past ten thousand years, Alicia thought. She'd arrived at that conclusion given Adek's luck, optimal play, accurate reading of the board, and his sense of knowing when to push and when to pull. *He's proved once again that he's an excellent player, plain and simple.*

"Let's see your cards, Queen. Oh, another stroke of luck for me. A seven, three, and a two, for a total of 12 points."

The monster bit away one of the remaining pieces of Isabella's mostly faded body, accompanied by another surge of intense pain. Even though the point loss wasn't particularly high, Isabella's composure couldn't completely stop her from groaning in pain.

"Your remaining points are now in the single digits. Just a tiny push more."

Adek: 44 Points

Isabella: 8 Points

Isabella was finally down to her last few points. She was at the stage where Adek going out, no matter his hand, had a good chance to kill her. Anything like a direct hit was guaranteed death.

She's in a truly precarious situation, Adek thought as he drew his seven new cards for the round. *However, I can't afford to let my guard down. A direct hit has a decent chance to send me straight to the grave too.*

Meanwhile, Isabella finished drawing her own cards. The new round started.

For me, games aren't something I play, but something I win, Adek thought. Therefore, he'd make sure to deliver the coup de grâce. Luck may favor him, but at the end of the day, it was only chance. He wanted something definite: a total victory.

Heh heh, preparations are complete. Adek had a wide smirk on his face.

The round had been proceeding at a leisurely pace. Neither Isabella nor Adek had been especially lucky and both had yet to place a single meld on the table.

The first to break the equilibrium was Isabella. She added the card she drew and one from her hand to an existing meld on the table, then dropped a three-card meld she'd apparently had all along, leaving her with two cards.

"I'm going to give you a heads-up: I'm only missing one card. Do be careful, okay?" Isabella told Adek.

"Oh, is that so? Then I'll make sure to be *extra* careful," he replied. He wasn't some dimwit who'd blindly trust what Isabella had to say, but in this situation, the possibility of a direct hit was the thing he had to be wariest of. After all, his points were low enough for a single direct hit to finish him off. With seven cards in hand, like he had at the moment, that chance was more like a guarantee. He'd have to pass his turns by discarding safe cards, even if it delayed his own chances of going out.

Everything's fine. She's not that close yet, Adek thought with conviction before checking the top card of the deck. Incidentally, the card he was looking for at the moment was the four of hearts.

Hmm, at this rate, Isabella's going to draw it on her next turn, so let's do something about it. He sent instructions to his teammate.

"I take that," the troll said. It picked up Alicia's discarded card.

As a result, Adek ended up drawing the card originally meant for Isabella. Such a move *would* be pointless under normal circumstances; no one should be able to tell the identity of face-down cards.

"Heh heh, I finally have a meld, so I'll play it safe and drop it on the table," Adek said before dropping a three-card meld that included the four of hearts he'd just drawn.

Isabella didn't show any particular reaction and continued with the game.

Yet, how did Adek know the four of hearts was the next card? How had he been so convinced earlier that Isabella wasn't one card from going out yet? One might guess that he was somehow cheating, though within the space where the game took place, cheating through magic was impossible. If the chair monsters detected any magic other than telepathy magic, they would instantly devour its user whole.

Too bad for Isabella that cheating that doesn't rely on magic is fine, as long as you don't get caught, Adek thought.

Adek had cheated by marking the cards. It was a method where one would apply some kind of marking to the back of each card, to then be able to tell what a card was even face down. When executed well, it was a type of cheating that worked wonders.

Against Isabella, simply marking the back of each card like a naive fool would get him caught in an instant. Besides, since the cards were stacked in a deck, he'd only be able to identify the top one. Therefore, Adek had marked the cards on the side with tiny scratches so imperceptible that even shenmo, with their acute sense of sight, could barely notice them. The position he'd scratched each card was also subtly different. That allowed him to tell the cards apart even when stacked as a deck, as well as know which card his opponents drew each time. Of course, he hadn't marked every card, only eleven of them up to that round. Even so, that was more than enough. Combined with his superb luck and high skill at the game, his victory was almost assured.

Isabella has the jack of spades in hand and the queen of spades in her discarded cards. I have the ten of spades in my hand and the troll has the other three jacks, Adek thought.

In other words, Isabella's jack of spades was completely isolated. She couldn't go out with a direct hit as long as she still had it.

On the other hand, things are great on my side. Adek inspected the deck. The small scratches on the side revealed the exact position and ranks of the marked cards.

Heh, I can go out with my next draw. His only concern was Isabella sensing that something was wrong and having Alicia pick up the troll's discarded card to change the turn order. He wouldn't put something like that past her.

Let's see, what will you do now? Adek watched as the troll drew and discarded a card...which no one picked up. The card that would lead to his victory lay at the top of the deck.

I won. He was almost moved to tears. Defeating an enemy on a different level from the scrubs he usually killed filled Adek with deep elation.

“All right, it’s my turn next.” Adek drew a card: the winning one. “I’m sorry, but it looks like I’m going out,” he said before combining the three of clubs he’d just drawn—the card he already knew was his next draw—with two more threes in his hand to form a meld.

Alicia was stunned by the development.

“This was a great game, a truly magnificent one. Goodbye,” Adek said and discarded his last card, the ten of spades.

“Direct hit,” Isabella said at that very moment.

“Excuse me?”

Absurd, inconceivable. Isabella should have had a jack of spades in hand with nothing to go into a meld with it!

When she revealed her two cards, she actually had the jack and queen of spades. Either the ten *or* king of spades would have granted her victory. Adek twitched in shock. How was this possible? The queen of spades had been among Isabella’s discarded cards, but when he looked again, it was no longer on the table.

“You swapped it while I was drawing my card, didn’t you?”

“Whatever could you mean? I could tell you were staring at the deck very intently, so even if we suppose someone did do *something*, I doubt you would have noticed,” Isabella replied with a small, captivating smile. “Nevertheless, you discarded that card very carelessly. Did you have some solid reason to believe it was safe?” she added, turning the jack of spades horizontally and briefly showing off its side.



She knew?! Isabella's gesture made it impossible for Adek to object to her obvious cheating. If he did, she'd immediately retaliate by pointing out the markings on the side of the cards. *But how did she figure it out?*

Isabella's accurate maneuver would only be possible if she knew which cards she and her opponent were holding, at least to a certain extent. Did that mean she used Adek's markings? He considered that possibility, but those scratches were impossible for a human to perceive. Then, he noticed something on the marked cards. There were tiny red blots on the opposite side of his own markings. This deck was something he'd originally taken from one of the castle's rooms. There'd been many small stains on the cards in the first place, but now that he thought back on it more carefully, he didn't remember this red kind.

Isabella chuckled as she rubbed her thumb and index finger together.

Now I get it: that's her nail polish!

Those red blots were Isabella's refined red nail polish. By rubbing two of her nails together, she could shave small pieces of it off and stick them in slightly different parts on each card.

Isabella had started cheating even before Adek.

"I never once believed you would face me in an honest fight," Isabella said with a chuckle.

"I can see that now. You acted the same when you suspected I have a stockpile of lives or that I have a second skill. You're a deeply distrustful person, aren't you? Not just when it comes to this game, but in your everyday life as well. It must be hard to live a life where you're suspicious of everything and everyone."

"I don't mind it. The me who couldn't face reality died twenty-five years ago," declared the queen of politics, unconditional monarch of a world rife with trickery, as if such a life was only natural. "Moving on, you'll be losing three times the value of that ten of spades. Have at him."

"Dammit!" Adek screamed in pain as the monster took a substantial chomp out of his body. The experience left him panting for a long while.

“Now you also have one foot in the grave. Tell me, how does it feel?”

Adek looked at his body while trying to adjust his breathing back to normal. The hand holding his card had mostly disappeared save for its fingers. If he took a look in the mirror, he’d see that more than eighty percent of his body had gone up in smoke. “This...is the first time, the very first that I’ve been pushed this far.”

Through the combination of Adek’s unrivaled skill, his thorough preparations, and excellent luck, he’d never been cornered, even in honest games. This fiend, who’d made countless others teeter on the verge of death, now found himself in their shoes. He was left with a measly 14 points. It wouldn’t take a direct hit to guarantee his death anymore; losing a normal round could also seal the deal.

“Hah... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha...!” Thrown in a situation like that, Adek laughed. He wasn’t trembling in fear or overcome with rage. No, this was his most sinister bout of laughter so far. “Nice, how nice. This is the ultimate showdown. I can’t get enough of it! Now, before we begin the next round, let’s return the cards to normal. I wouldn’t want to throw a wet blanket on the finale of this wonderful battle. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not. Go ahead,” Isabella replied with a nod. This wasn’t a proposal she could turn down, as she was also guilty of marking the cards.

“You and I will both cast repairing magic on the cards at the same time. That way, no one can pull any tricks in the confusion of the moment,” Adek suggested, earning another nod of approval from Isabella.

Adek and Isabella poured mana into the cards in tandem, restoring them to their original form. They didn’t remove just the nail polish blots and scratches, but also the stains that had been on the cards before the start of the game. The deck was now as good as new.

“Let us begin our final confrontation, as both of us stand on the edge of death’s abyss,” Adek said.

Adek: 14 Points

Isabella: 8 Points

The final round began. After coming this far, it was only natural for both players to think about their defense. If they saw their opponent doing well, they'd undoubtedly have their teammate get them with a direct hit to end the round, and they'd never discard a card if it looked like their opponent needed it. A single misstep would lead to certain death. The two of them would have to play their turns under all that pressure.

"Heh heh heh! Nice, I like this tension. I haven't tasted anything like this in my ten thousand years. It's simply delicious!" Adek said with a grin. "Just you and me, in the end. Who will prove to be the better player? Let's settle this." He directed a malicious and intense gaze toward Isabella.

Sharp as a knife, Isabella glared back. There was no hint of fear in her eyes. She was composed and focused on the game before her.

Good. I want no less from the best opponent I've faced in over ten thousand years, Adek thought with conviction. No other player had ever come close to measuring up to him. *But that's why I have to stack the deck against her with no room for error.*

He chuckled to himself as he became lost in thought. For a brief moment, he glanced over at Alicia. Not at Isabella or even his teammate, but Alicia.

Somehow, she managed to turn that hopeless situation into an almost equal one, Alicia thought as she looked at Isabella. *She's incredible, simply unparalleled.*

It had always been like that.

"You're Alicia from the House of Haschwalth, right? Let's be friends."

Those were the words Isabella directed at Alicia as she reached out to her during their first meeting. Despite facing much harsher circumstances than Alicia, Isabella was bright, kind, and stunning. Unlike the present, Isabella had her vulnerabilities and careless moments, but she still shone with a radiance that attracted people to her. Someone like Alicia, who was timid and targeted by bullies despite her high social standing, could never be like Isabella. That was

why Alicia thought she had to support Isabella, who had her flaws back then, as her close friend.

Alicia's name happened to be a front-runner among the prospective marriage partners of the first prince that Isabella was in a loving relationship with. Alicia herself also had feelings for the handsome first prince. If she'd been chosen, she would have been on cloud nine. However, the prince chose Isabella. Though disappointed, Alicia thought it was only natural, completely unavoidable, in fact. She buried her feelings and decided to stand and fight alongside Isabella, even during the war with the demons.

Later on, after Isabella experienced betrayal and awakened as a monster of politics, she lost her earlier vulnerability and acquired everything in the kingdom with her fearsome intellect. Alicia struggled to keep up with Isabella after her sudden change. Nevertheless, she found that new side of her friend incredible. Alicia became certain that someone like her could never beat Isabella in anything, no matter what she tried.

It was around that time that something interesting occurred.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Adek."

One night, after Alicia finished her duties and returned to her room, she found a demon waiting for her.

"H-How? With the demon lord's gate gone, no demon should be able to exist here," Alicia stuttered.

"True enough, miss. The demon lord's gate didn't just connect our two worlds. It also kept transported individuals on the other side—*this* side," Adek said. With the gate's closing, that power had disappeared and the demons could no longer remain in the human world. "Oh, but, my Ex-Skill has allowed me to turn many of this world's inhabitants into my standins, you see. It's terribly draining keeping a shenmo like me here, so they burn up quite quickly, but they *should* last me another month or so."

Alicia shuddered at that. Treating the lives of others like candles to burn through was a deplorable thought.

"So, what? Are you thinking of using me to replenish your stock?" Alicia

placed her hand on an emergency alarm device. If she poured mana into that magicite, a loud ringing noise would echo throughout the entire castle. The demon before her was a shenmo. He wasn't the kind of enemy she could hope to fight and defeat alone.

"No, I came here tonight to sign a contract with you," Adek said. He smiled gently, to Alicia's surprise.

"Wait, a contract?"

"Precisely. Wouldn't you like to rise above your mistress, Isabella Stuart?"

"What?!"

"She's been shaping up into the most delectable prey these past few years. I'd like to have her when she's at her ripest."

Adek made his proposal to Alicia. In about two decades, the demon army would invade the human world again. Adek planned to participate in the war and attack the Fourth Kingdom with Isabella as his target. He would play a game with her. During the final stages of that game, Alicia's job would be to betray Isabella and help him finish her off.

"In exchange, you will be granted sovereignty of the Fourth Kingdom after it falls under the demon army's control. I don't have any particular desire for authority, you see. In other words, you'll become queen."

"I...could replace Mistress Isabella as queen?"

"As long as there's consent from both parties, my skill can forge an unbreakable contract, even without the need for a game." Adek's handsome face wore a truly fiendish smile. "Let us sign the contract now, shall we?"

That day, I made a deal with this man. Alicia drew a card from the deck and felt Adek glancing her way as she discarded her card. *Let me pass along the information, Adek. My cards are...* She then used telepathy magic to relay the message to Adek.

The game continued with both Isabella and Adek proceeding favorably. They both placed a meld on the table early on. On her fourth turn, Isabella added

one of her cards to an existing meld and went down to three cards in hand, followed by Adek doing the same. Victory would be decided based on who could pick up a card to form a meld and then discard their last card.

I need the three of spades to go out, Isabella told Alicia via telepathy.

My apologies, but I don't have that in hand yet.

Very well.

Alicia reviewed her cards during their conversation. The three of spades was most certainly among them, but she didn't discard it.

Adek, whose turn was right before Alicia's, drew a card, placed it in his hand, and discarded a different one. *I have two jacks now. It's time to fulfill your contract, miss, or rather, Queen*, he told Alicia through magic.

Adek had held on to the jack of hearts, a high-point card that could result in his immediate demise, even though it should have been his first card to discard with that in mind. The reason was simple: Alicia had told him she had the nine and king of hearts, as well as the jack of spades. If he drew the ten or queen of hearts, and either of the two remaining jacks, he'd have her discard the appropriate card and pick it up for victory.

Alicia went stiff as she looked over her cards.

"Is something wrong?" Isabella asked, finding her behavior suspicious.

Adek let out a small chuckle. The contract he'd signed with Alicia specified that if she betrayed Isabella during the game and it led to her death, Alicia would be granted sovereignty of the Fourth Kingdom after it was taken over by the demon army. Which meant that, at the moment, Alicia also had the option of not betraying Isabella. She could instead discard the three of spades Isabella needed and help her go out.

Alicia once again turned her eyes to Isabella, her friend and mistress. Unlike Alicia, who showed clear signs of her age, Isabella was still as beautiful as ever. She was intelligent, a capable fighter, determined, and had taken hold of absolute authority and fortune. Alicia was inferior to her in every single way, so she'd decided that her role was to support Isabella for the rest of her life. However, deep down, the truth was that she found Isabella unpleasant. She

loathed losing each and every time. Even if it was just once, she wanted to stand above Isabella.

“Mistress Isabella.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Did you know that I was the leading candidate to be the first prince’s fiancée?”

Isabella stayed silent.

“I’m sorry, Isabella.” Alicia offered her apology while referring to Isabella just like she had back in their student days. She then discarded the jack of spades, the card Adek needed.

Alicia had sold her soul to the devil, all in order to discard the inferiority complex she’d carried inside her once and for all.

Adek’s face twisted with the widest grin he’d shown yet.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!! I’ll be taking that! That card is mine!” His loud, delighted laughter ricocheted around the pitch-black space. “A wise decision, Miss Alicia. Congratulations! From now on, you’re the queen!”

“Yes...” Alicia was in a complex mental state of guilt mixed with schadenfreude.

At any rate, this was game, set, and match. Humanity had suffered its first defeat. The Villainess fell to the God of Games. His frightening craftiness deserved a special mention. Beginning over two decades ago, he’d selected Isabella as his target and instigated her attendant Alicia’s inferiority complex with careful preparations. He’d done all that just for a chance to watch his opponent suffer. It was truly the work of a devil, a horrible man who lived by feasting on the suffering of others.

“Heh heh heh! It’s time for you to be buried in darkness, Queen,” Adek said as he reached for Alicia’s discarded card.

Isabella interrupted him. “I’m sorry, but you seem to be mistaken about this game’s result.”

“What?” Adek and Alicia said in unison as they turned toward Isabella.

“I will be picking up that card. The one whose turn is the closest after the one who discarded it gets priority, no?” Isabella said. She revealed two of her cards: the nine and ten of spades.

“Th-That’s impossible!” Adek jumped up from his chair when he saw Isabella’s cards.

“But...that can’t be. You were supposed to be waiting for the three of spades.” The disbelief was plainly written on Alicia’s face too.

Isabella ignored the bewildered duo and picked up Alicia’s card. She combined the jack with her nine and ten to place a meld on the table, then discarded her last card.

“How did you know that I’d betrayed you, Mistress Isabella?” Alicia asked Isabella, her voice quavering.

“I said it earlier, didn’t I? I don’t trust anyone.”

Alicia couldn’t believe her ears.

“Trusting people means you stop thinking and put your mind at ease. Of course, if you want to live peacefully, that’s a necessity. Lovers, friends, family, retainers...if you keep suspecting each and every one of them, you won’t be able to live sanely.”

“I see now. So I couldn’t be any of those roles for you.” Perhaps it was strange for a traitor to think like that, but Alicia considered herself Isabella’s close friend and confidant.

“You’re mistaken.” Isabella shook her head. “I simply have no intention of leading a sane life. That day, I swore never to trust anyone ever again.”

A terrifying decision. Isabella was declaring that she had no need for peace of mind or serenity and would spend the rest of her life in a long night of suspicion and subterfuge. For ordinary people, her worldview would be an unbearable hell.

“Still, I’d never doubt someone more than necessary. I simply observe the nature of those before me—nothing more, nothing less. My read on you was, ‘If

Alicia betrays me, she'll keep acting as my loyal subject up until the final, decisive moment.' I'm glad it turned out to be correct."

Alicia had no reply.

Isabella then discarded her final card and went out. "Since you tried to pick up this jack earlier, you must have a pair of jacks in hand, correct? That means a minimum loss of 20 points. You lose," Isabella told Adek.

"This is absurd!" In response, Adek slammed the table. "This is completely and utterly absurd! It can't be happening!"

Adek's expression had transformed into the opposite of the delighted and casual one he'd had since making his appearance in the castle. His face was warped by an ugly grimace as he scratched at his head in frustration.

"This is all backward! Unthinkable! I had the one-sided advantage! I was in a situation where defeat was virtually impossible! How did things end up like this?! This is all wrong, there must be some kind of mistake!"

"Everything you just said is true, shenmo," Isabella told Adek. "This battle wasn't one I could hope to win by fighting you head-on. Not only is luck on your side, you're also peerless in gaming ability. As the cherry on top, you had a massive advantage in points. Therefore, I had to make this into a contest where your skill wasn't the deciding factor."

Suppose there was an enemy before you that you couldn't defeat with force. How would you achieve victory? Lead the fight in a direction where the enemy couldn't use their true strength.

"My win condition for this game was making you want to win through some kind of scheme. Delivering a massive direct hit early on was imperative to my success. As a result, you put the contingencies you'd prepared into motion. Even though you would've had a significantly high chance of winning by relying on your luck and gameplay, you decided to aim for a guaranteed victory. I predicted you'd do that and used it against you. That was how I managed to overcome the odds. Quite literally, I tore your godsent luck apart. Knowing you'd use Alicia to betray me was easy enough to guess, given your personalities."

Isabella stood up and turned her back on Adek. “The sour, the sweet, and the bitter betrayals—I’m here now because I drank deeply of all of them. Even though you’re the better player, I’m better acquainted with the foolishness of people.”

“Isabellaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!” As Adek roared in rage, the monster behind him started moving. “Eep!” He tried to make a run for it, but it quickly grabbed him and began tearing into the remainder of his body.

“N-No, please, help...” In the past ten thousand years, Adek had savored the terror of all kinds of people as they disappeared from this world. Now it was time to taste his own.

Isabella walked away from the table without sparing a moment to look back. “I have no interest in watching individuals suffer in agony as they meet their end. Goodbye, shenmo.”

“Graaaaaaaaaaargh!!!” Bite by bite, the monster eventually devoured Adek’s head. His screams were silenced forever as he vanished into the void.

Once he was gone for good, Isabella, Alicia, and the soldiers were released from the world he’d trapped them in for his game. Instantly, they reappeared inside Isabella’s luxuriously decorated room.

“I’m sweaty. Fetch me a towel,” Isabella ordered one of the soldiers, who hurried over to a shelf in the room. He brought her a refined towel to wipe her brow. “In any case, I really managed that by the skin of my teeth. You were the most troublesome opponent I’ve faced by far,” she said to the now-departed Adek.

“Mistress Isabella...” Alicia was captured by the guards while the past few minutes played over and over in her mind.

This was unavoidable, Alicia thought as the soldiers pressed her down into the carpet. It was the obvious outcome for a traitor who’d backstabbed Isabella, the Fourth Kingdom, and humanity as a whole.

Isabella drew a guard’s sword and walked up to Alicia. The gesture made it clear that there would be no trial for Alicia; she’d be executed on the spot.

Isabella grabbed Alicia's long hair and pulled her head up.

As Alicia looked up at Isabella's face, she once again noticed how beautiful her mistress had remained despite the passage of time.

I really, really wanted to win against her, she thought.

Isabella swung the sword down without mercy. Alicia's head hit the floor.

"Huh?"

While still attached to her body.

"This is your punishment: from now on, you're forbidden from growing out the long hair you were so proud of past shoulder-length," Isabella said. Then, she returned the sword to its owner and turned away.

"But why? I betrayed you."

"Yes, you certainly betrayed and tried to kill me—*once*. But that means you were loyal to me every other opportunity," Isabella said while looking back at Alicia. "That's still somewhat preferable to what everyone else has done. Keep working for me in the future. Relax. Even if you decide to betray me again, I will find a way to use it for my own benefit."

Alicia could only stare at Isabella's queenlike visage as she spoke. *I really am no match for her,* she thought.

There was something Alicia had felt ever since meeting Isabella: their ranks as humans were somehow different. Despite Alicia's social awkwardness leading to her being bullied, she was still good-looking, from a prestigious family, and talented. It had felt so unfair to be surpassed by Isabella at every turn.

It wasn't until Isabella let her live that Alicia felt like she could understand the true gap in ability between the two of them.

"As you command. I will continue working at your behest, my mistress." Alicia lowered her head and once again pledged her undying loyalty to Isabella.

Chapter 2: Exiled Dark Priest versus Aloof Holy Beast of the Sword

The Third Kingdom, Blue Intersection—also called the Mercantile Nation of Mist—was an island nation completely disconnected from any other kingdom by land. Cargo ship routes didn't need to pass through its specific geographic location, which should have made it a challenge for it to center its development around trade and commerce. In spite of that, the majority of trade vessels *did* pass through the Third Kingdom for one reason: many locations around the kingdom, both on land and in the ocean, had an extremely low concentration of mana.

Monsters only inhabited areas with a certain amount of mana. The distinction from place to place was clear: the higher the mana in a location, the more fearsome the monsters. As long as travelers avoided areas with abundant mana, there was little reason to worry about monster attacks—the main obstacle in the distribution of goods. Removing those attacks from the equation was the best boon a merchant transporting valuable cargo could ask for.

In the current war, the Third Kingdom was once again benefiting from the blessing of its geography. A vast part of its territory, the royal palace included, had mana concentration that was too low for the demons' teleportation gate to manifest. Since the areas high in mana were limited, the humans could easily predict where the demons would appear.

Above all else, the Third Kingdom had its hero, Derek Henderson. He'd prepared quite the nasty welcome for the therianthropes—half-beast, half-demon—who'd come to attack the Third Kingdom. The therianthropes were brutal, powerful warriors who took great pride in fighting without any form of magic, using only their brawny bestial bodies.

Derek had taken direct command of the forces intercepting the demons. The strategy he had prepared for them could only be described as “complete lockdown.”

“Onwaaaaards!”

A gate formed in a forest rich in mana around forty kilometers away from the royal palace of the Third Kingdom. From it, an army of demons appeared and rushed forward with a loud battle cry. The mixed group that included therianthropes with traits of monsters such as silverbacks, killer cats, evil Dobermans, and crimson bears ran across the field with animalistic speed. They easily crossed the sloped mountain trail, slaughtering any humans that appeared in the way with little effort, then continued on toward the palace.

Humans are so feeble, thought the silverback demon leading the charge. The demons had run into the Third Kingdom’s forces as soon as they’d emerged from the gate, but the result had been a crushing victory for the demons. The armed humans had been no match for the therianthropes’ sturdy bodies and high physical ability.

“Dammit all! Retreat, retreat!” shouted the humans’ commander. The human forces could only fall back and fire spells or arrows at the demons.

“Hah! What’s wrong, humans? You won’t hurt us by blindly attacking while you run!” The therianthropes took heart at their victory and advanced with even more ferocity. They evaded the humans’ sloppy attacks and gave chase, felling human after human with their claws and fangs.

The morbid game of tag continued for some time, until the Third Kingdom’s soldiers arrived at a straight path sandwiched between two valleys. They retreated through it as they had before, but as soon as the therianthropes stepped foot on the path, the bedrock supporting it exploded and collapsed under their very feet.

The therianthropes were surprised, but this posed no real obstacle for them. The demon race was already blessed with sturdy and powerful bodies, but therianthropes were in a league of their own. They nimbly jumped from one piece of rubble falling through the air to another and most of them landed without taking much damage.

“Damn you humans and your underhanded tricks,” the silverback demon grumbled.

“Heh heh heh! Meatheads like you are the easiest opponents.”

The silverback looked up to see a thin man with a twisted face looking down at them from the top of a nearby cliff. There was no doubt that he was the leader of the humans they’d been warned about in advance.

“Drop dead without accomplishing anything,” Derek said as he raised his right hand.

The silverback was stunned at the sight before him. “What’s all *that*?”

Derek wasn’t alone at the top of the cliff. Accompanying him was a considerable number of Third Kingdom troops that were armed to the teeth, turrets at the ready. He’d predicted the demons’ path and had prepared accordingly.

“Torture them to death,” Derek commanded.

At his signal, the soldiers fired the turrets in unison. Of course, these were the expensive anti-demon turrets made by the Humanity Defense Coalition. The strategy was straightforward: they would fire from the high ground so that gravity would accelerate their turret shells instead of hinder them. Moreover, the shells were constructed in a crafty way; the moment they crashed into the ground, they burst apart and scattered pieces of shrapnel around them.

The therianthropes’ screams filled the air. Even their agility wasn’t high enough to allow them to dodge everything—not while they were hemmed in by cliffs on all sides and assaulted by an unending barrage of shells.

“Dammit! Don’t get cocky, you filthy humans!” The demons weren’t just sitting ducks. Many of them slipped through the shrapnel and tried to climb the cliff.

“Oh, look at you go! Do it,” Derek said while smirking from ear to ear.

His order was directed at conscripted civilians who were not regular soldiers. One after another, they worked together to roll massive boulders down toward the demons. The demons couldn’t fight back against the falling boulders while still climbing. Their screams reached the top of the cliff as they fell back to the bottom, where they were greeted by the rain of turret shells.

“Ha ha ha! Too bad! Back to square one for you! Come on, don’t give up! Try again!” Derek’s laughter was almost as loud as the sound of the bombardment.

This is a tough one, but we won’t give up! “Don’t falter! It’s not easy to gather many boulders of that size. They’ll run out of them eventually!” the silverback called out to the rest of the demons.

Fortunately for the demons, they were durable enough that close to eighty percent of them had survived even in the face of such insurmountable odds. If they kept trying, they’d eventually reach the top of the cliff. Once even a few of them did, it would be their turn to use their superior strength and show the humans hell.

Suddenly, the silverback’s knees started wobbling. “What?! Is this...paralyzing poison?!”

“It took a lot of effort to enhance it enough to adhere it to the shrapnel. I might be an expert in poisons, but turret shells are outside my field!” Derek said with a malicious laugh.

“All right, it’s nothing but a matter of time now,” Derek said while stuffing his mouth with a scone he’d had his nearby wife, Elise, bring along. Under his watchful eyes, the therianthropes fell one by one to exploding shells and long-distance offensive magic.

“You *bastards! Cowards!* Come down here and fight us fair and square!” the therianthropes shouted. To Derek, it sounded like nothing but background noise.

“There’s no shred of honor in this battle,” mumbled someone—not the enemy, but a soldier from the Third Kingdom’s forces.

“It’s all good, as long as we win. The more cowardly our tactics, the easier victory becomes,” Derek said.

“But, still, this is...too much.” The soldiers couldn’t so easily come around to Derek’s reasoning.

“Tsk, bunch of Goody Two-shoes,” Derek grumbled to himself.

The soldiers of the Third Kingdom's army were either from Whitehyde or Asch Sanctuary, so they were passionate advocates of chivalry in battle. They'd also voiced great opposition to Derek's plan when he'd first given the order for it. To shut them up, he'd brainwashed their friends and family right before their eyes.

None of that matters right now. The real problem lies elsewhere. Derek assumed things wouldn't just end like this. After all, the New Black Star had yet to show up.

Derek noticed many therianthropes that had slipped through the bombardment scaling the cliff again. "Oh, looks like some of them haven't given up. Let's drop them back down," he said, giving the order for the civilian conscripts to roll down some more boulders.

"Argh! Again?!" a climbing therianthrope complained.

The therianthropes couldn't easily dodge while climbing, so their only remaining options were to either hold on and get squashed by the boulders or to let go and willingly drop away from the incoming threat. No matter what, all the effort they'd poured into climbing would amount to nothing.

Abruptly, the unavoidable boulders split in half.

The therianthropes shouted in joy. "Commander Master Unicorn!"

A mysterious, beautiful girl wielding a longsword appeared on the battlefield. She was dressed from head to toe in pure white furs, and a single horn sprouted from her forehead. Her elegant and feminine features coincided with an attractive physique. All in all, her breathtaking beauty was a perfect manifestation of the graceful monsters known as unicorns.

"There you are, shenmo," Derek said.

"I'll handle this." The moment Master Unicorn uttered those words, every last therianthrope stopped trying to join the fight.

"What, you guys so scared of fighting that you're gonna leave the rest to your boss and enjoy the view?" Derek said.

"You're wrong, you filthy coward! Your cheap tricks won't break our spirits. As proud warriors ourselves, we will not interfere with the commander's

honorable battle,” the silverback objected.

“Both you guys and my men won’t shut up about honor this, honesty that. Let’s kill her off first,” Derek said, ordering his men to focus the bombardment and rolling boulders away from the therianthropes and toward Master Unicorn alone.

In response to the incoming barrage, Master Unicorn accelerated soundlessly. This was no exaggeration; her movement really was completely silent. She could perceive both the shells themselves and the shrapnel caused by their explosions as she ran like a rushing river across the bottom of the valley. The downpour of attacks didn’t so much as graze her. Even more surprisingly, once she reached the cliff, she started running up it like it was level ground.

“What the hell?!” The Third Kingdom’s soldiers were stunned.

Master Unicorn closed the gap before anyone had the time to drop more boulders. She effortlessly slashed a metal turret in half with a single swing of her longsword. The cut was so clean that the soldiers’ shocked faces were reflected on the cross section like it was a mirror. She then went on to bisect the nearby bewildered soldiers. She continued, cutting down turrets and humans without straining a muscle, her movements flowing gently as she danced from one place to another.

“What’s going on here?!” the soldiers screamed in terror. They couldn’t believe their dominant position had been easily overturned by a single person. “What kind of magic or skill is she using?!”

No, that’s not it. After watching Master Unicorn fight, Derek had arrived at an unbelievable conclusion.

“Heh, magic? A skill? You’re completely off the mark, sneaky humans,” the silverback said. “Commander Master Unicorn uses no magic. She fights by the sword alone.”

All demons are born in one of two different ways: reproduction or abiogenesis, the latter of which involves them spawning in a random location. As a result, some demons happen to be born next to ferocious monsters and

are devoured as soon as they appear in their world.

Master Unicorn—still nameless at the time—had had the misfortune of being born in the depths of the dungeon known as the most dangerous one in the underworld, a terrible place even by demon standards.

One might expect her fate would be the same as those other children eaten soon after their birth. Perhaps worse, as she appeared in the dungeon's deepest boss room, home to the basilisk, the underworld's most powerful giant serpent.

While the little girl's mana quantity was rather low, its quality was remarkably high. The basilisk tried to devour this felicitous treat in one gulp. However, the newborn baby girl, who couldn't even speak or stand on her own two legs yet, had picked up a broken sword dropped by a previous dungeon challenger.

A ferocious battle ensued. At the end, this frail baby girl stood—or rather, crawled—victorious after delivering a total of 230 slashes to the basilisk.

The girl then wandered the dungeon, cutting down every monster that attacked her. By the time she was grown and could *walk* out of the most difficult dungeon in the underworld, she'd exterminated every last one of its monsters. The Aloof Holy Beast of the Sword was only five years old at the time.

“Commander Master Unicorn's Ex-Skill is called Infinite Core,” the silverback explained. “It allows her to absorb natural electrical energy through her horn and convert it into her own. Neither her mana nor her stamina will run out no matter how much she exerts herself. It's a powerful skill, if a little modest.”

Compared to a skill that made its user's body the hardest in the world or one that allowed its user to take any kind of skill from devouring other creatures, it seemed humble.

“However, when combined with her swordsmanship, the best in the underworld, she becomes a killing machine that can slaughter her enemies without rest. *That* is our commander, one of the New Seven Black Stars, Master Unicorn the Aloof Holy Beast of the Sword!” the silverback announced with pride. He had the utmost respect for their leader and total faith in her strength.

Now that she was in a close-quarter fight, Master Unicorn was flanked on all sides by the Third Kingdom's forces. Nonetheless, her peerless swordsmanship proved that the therianthrope's faith hadn't been misplaced. Despite their intense daily training and numerical advantage, she cut the soldiers down with a flash of her sword and not a drop of sweat.

Derek, who'd encountered all kinds of monsters and other powerful foes during the Titanomachy, noticed something else. Something more frightening.

As a shenmo, her mana quality is high, but her physical strength is around the same as a human teenage girl's! Somehow, she displayed such fearsome power with swordsmanship alone.

The situation made Derek remember a conversation he'd once had with Kevin when visiting the Sixth Kingdom for diplomatic reasons.

"Sound is the result of energy loss. Moving in perfect silence is moving at your peak."

"And not even you can do that, Kevin?"

"Nope, no way. When I run, there's the sound of my feet kicking the ground, and when I swing my sword, there's the sound of me cutting the air. Perfect silence means removing those sounds entirely. I'm closer to achieving that feat than the average person, but complete silence is such a faraway goal it might as well be infinite."

The girl darting across the battlefield before Derek's eyes moved without making any sound at all, putting Kevin's theory into practice. She'd reached the pinnacle of movement that the most skilled human couldn't dream of after a trillion time loops.

This is hopeless. We can't take her down with numbers alone, Derek quickly realized. The New Seven Black Stars spelled nothing but trouble. He nearly spat on the ground with disgust at the words he was forced to utter next.

"Fine, I'll fight with that 'honor' you guys seem to love so much," he said. He had Elise voluntarily float him down to the valley with her magic. He landed softly on the ground and faced Master Unicorn. "We'll fight one-on-one. You won't run away, will you?"

“I don’t mind. It’s fine with me either way,” Master Unicorn replied, her expression unchanging.

Derek and Master Unicorn—hero and shenmo—stood facing one another. Their visages were like a refined painting of two enemy generals proudly facing each other in single combat.

“We might have misunderstood you, Your Majesty!” the Third Kingdom’s soldiers shouted with appreciation.

I’m only doing this because it’s the way to win, you useless tools, Derek cursed internally as he drew the sword on his back. Many thorns sprouted viciously from the bizarre longsword, which was called Emanuel’s Blade. There weren’t many who could use this weapon, but it was a perfect match for Derek’s wicked aura.

“Are you sure you want to do this alone?” Master Unicorn maintained a natural posture even after Derek readied his weapon. “You look like someone whose abilities are suited for logistical support or strategy meetings, not direct combat. I don’t think you’ll put up much of a fight against me.”

“Heh heh, I don’t know about that,” Derek said before dashing forward. He accelerated with tremendous force, much like a close-quarter combat specialist would.

Master Unicorn raised her eyebrow with a glimmer of surprise.

“Take that!” Derek shouted.

She blocked the incoming downward swing, but the unexpected weight behind the attack knocked her back.

“Wait, was His Majesty also good at physical enhancement magic meant for this sort of fight?” asked the commander of the soldiers as he looked down at the fight from atop the cliff.

“No, take a closer look,” one of his men replied. He pointed behind Derek.

“Physical Enchantment, Pacific Blessing.” Derek’s wife Elise, who’d descended to the bottom of the valley with him, stood some distance behind him using her

magic to bolster him.

“You said this would be a one-on-one fight, you craven!” The therianthropes voiced some justified criticism.

Derek, however, showed no sign of guilt. “What are you guys talking about? Elise is just a tool I’m using after brainwashing her. She’s essentially the same as a sword or a shield. Isn’t that right, Elise?”

“Yes. Everything is as His Majesty says. I’m but his humble tool,” Elise replied. The eyes on her charming face appeared hollow as a result of his control.

“See? She said so herself,” Derek said.

“Our king seems to lack a human heart! How deplorable.” Derek’s men exchanged various words of contempt for him.

Derek clicked his tongue as he glanced over at his soldiers. *Bunch of fussy morons clinging to their foolish honor and chivalry ideals again.*

“You think we’ll accept your cheap sophism?!” the silverback shouted in rage. He obviously shared the soldiers’ sentiment.

“I don’t mind,” said Master Unicorn.

“Good, good. Looks like you get me, unlike those bumbling idiots.” Derek unleashed a maniacal cackle.

“I’ll still win regardless of what you do,” she said with an even expression. She found Derek as threatening as the pebbles that rolled at her feet. Words like “arrogance” or “haughtiness” weren’t even close to describing her behavior.

“Hmm, I see now. This entire battlefield is full of nothing but noisy insects. Let’s see how long you can keep up the tough act!” Derek said as he readied his sword again, then snapped his fingers.

“Wind and fire, bring forth a dazzling paradise of embers. Firestorm!” Elise fired a powerful blaze group spell from her hands. Her Chanted Magic charged forward with tremendous force and heat that charred the ground beneath it. Master Unicorn managed to just barely dodge it.

“You shameless cretin. You’re even having her use offensive magic now?!” The silverback ground his teeth in frustration.

Elise peppered Master Unicorn with a barrage of powerful Chanted Magic. Each spell reduced the surrounding trees to charcoal and gouged the earth it struck. Master Unicorn slipped through them with smooth movements, but she was as physically frail as an ordinary human girl. If even one of those spells found its mark, the wound would be fatal.

“Elise is a mage of the highest caliber, you know. They had high expectations of her back during the demon lord’s first subjugation. She’s high specification, right?” Derek said.

“That’s something you’d say about an object, not your own wife! You’re scum even from a demon’s perspective,” the silverback said.

“What’s wrong with praising a tool’s specs? She’s also pretty efficient when we have fun in the bedroom. She’s even popped out four kids!” Derek replied before giving a sinister laugh.

Master Unicorn dodged one of Elise’s spells, bringing her close to Derek.

“Hey, you have to pay attention to me too!” He’d caught her while she was midair. With no foothold, she was unable to move. It was an orthodox and nasty attack that took advantage of the opponent’s most vulnerable moment. However, Master Unicorn twisted her body in the air with feline flexibility and applied instantaneous force to dodge Derek’s swing.

“What?!” Derek shouted in surprise. This woman’s combat technique was beyond the pale. Since he’d never expected her to dodge that, he’d left himself full of openings. Master Unicorn swung her sword at him mercilessly, but his body stopped her blade with a loud clang.

“Physical enhancement magic, is it?” she murmured.

The one who’d used the magic was, of course, Queen Elise. The ones most surprised by it, though, were the Third Kingdom’s soldiers. Master Unicorn had sliced through metal turrets like butter only minutes ago. They understood that magically enhancing a human body to be tougher than metal was an almost impossible task. They knew that their queen, along with their king, had earned significant military accolades during the Titanomachy, but they never imagined she was *this* skilled.

“You could even say Elise is better than Norman at this! She’s truly the best of tools.” Derek mentally thanked his brilliant past self for acquiring such an excellent object as he held his sword aloft. Just as Master Unicorn was about to block his attack, he said, “Curse Droplet.”

Momentary shock overtook her, but she immediately stabbed her sword into the ground and used it as an axis to rotate her body around, followed by a large leap. A black liquid flew out of the thorns on Derek’s sword and splashed onto the spot she’d been standing. As soon as the liquid hit the ground, it made a sizzling sound, and black smoke rose from the dissolving rocks.

“Poison.”

“Ha ha ha, figured it out, did you?” Derek said with some sarcasm.

This was the Dark Priest’s surefire strategy: have physical enhancement magic cast on him to supplement his low combat abilities and use powerful black poison magic to one-hit KO the enemy while they were distracted by his allies. His thorn-riddled longsword, Emanuel’s Blade, offered an easy way to tear through an enemy’s skin and deliver the poison into their body.

“This is how I buried your predecessor in the Seven Black Stars. His last screams had quite a ring to them,” Derek gloated. It had been a fine victory. The past Black Star had been massive and confidently displayed amazing feats of strength, but as soon as Derek’s paralyzing poison had hit, that strength had dropped by two-thirds. After that, Derek had easily tormented the Black Star until his death.

Thoroughly crafty and merciless. That was the essence of Derek’s fighting style.

“Hmm, I see,” Master Unicorn said to herself. “Even so, I’m simply going to win in the end.”

Derek blew a fuse; she was still underestimating him. “Say that again?!”

A second later, she vanished from sight.

“What?!” he cried in shock.

“Your Majesty, behind you!”

Derek tried to react to Elise's warning, but he was too late. Before he could turn around, Master Unicorn brought her sword down faster than the eye could see, slicing his right arm off and sending it dancing in the air.

"Ugh!" he grunted.

After a moment to take in the situation, despite the shooting pain, Derek grabbed his arm and rushed over to Elise.

"Your Majesty!"

"Hurry and stick it back before the cross section is damaged!"

Just as she was told, Elise put his arm in place and used recovery magic. Reattaching a severed arm normally took about a day, but recovery magic was another thing she excelled at. Moreover, it was Derek's aptitude with the water element that assisted his recovery the most. He could control every liquid flowing through his body, his blood included; he hadn't lost a drop. With all those advantages, his arm connected back to his body in the blink of an eye.

"So, you can teleport, huh? You're plenty cunning yourself, keeping an ace like that up your sleeve," Derek said. The silverback under Master Unicorn's command had prattled on about her fighting with swordsmanship alone, so Derek had been caught off guard.

"No, I didn't do anything special." Master Unicorn shook her head. "I ran quickly and circled behind you."

"Don't give me that crap. Are you trying to play dumb?" Derek scowled. "Your physical abilities are about the same as this woman's. Even if you're the embodiment of silent movement or whatever, you could never move fast enough to practically teleport without magic."

On top of that, Master Unicorn had cut through Derek's magically enhanced body when she'd failed to do the same moments before. Straightforward swordsmanship could have never accomplished that—there had to be a trick to it.

"Why can't the rest of you do it?" Master Unicorn asked.

"Do *what*?" Derek asked.

“I’ve never been able to understand. If you want to move fast, just move fast. If you want to cut something hard, just cut it so it cuts.” She acted like a monkey that couldn’t understand why it was the only one who could speak among its troop. “Why can’t everyone else do what I can?”

Solitude had been the only thing awaiting the girl after she’d left the dungeon. Even in the outside world, no one could stand against her swordsmanship.

The underworld was always a world of slaughter where survival of the fittest reigned supreme. The girl had no trouble dealing with the countless foes she found there, though. Constant challengers came to her, but she destroyed anyone who tangled with her, fight after fight.

Whenever she heard about a powerful enemy, she challenged them herself, but still cut them down. She piled up corpse after corpse like some kind of macabre assembly-line system. In this demon-eat-demon world, she found herself the only one with no equal in power, far too different from everyone around her. That was true solitude. Was there no one who could quell this emotion, someone stronger than her?

“Well, well, you’re a pretty amusing lass,” Master Minotaur said.

He was the demon hailed as the strongest fencer in the underworld, holder of the “Master” title awarded to the most powerful therianthrope swordsman. In their fight, the girl’s swordsmanship was bested for the first time.

“Bwa ha ha ha! I knew you were good for a laugh. How ’bout becoming my student? Who knows, you might even surpass me in five years or so,” he said.

Thus, the girl studied the blade under Master Minotaur, though at first she only observed his fights. That was still plenty for her. With just one viewing, she could recreate anything she saw and immediately put it into practice. Unicorn felt the most fulfilled in her life during that time. After all, she had an enemy she couldn’t take down with her sword; for her, that was bliss.

However, that changed only one year later.

“That was brilliant...my student.” Her teacher fell to his knees, a deep wound

across his chest.

The therianthropes' title of "Master" was passed down through a succession battle to the death. In a single year, the girl had reached a high enough level to challenge her teacher. It was a decisive victory that demonstrated the gap in their ability. She hadn't sustained a single injury.

"You're perfect...a flawless swordsman. You might even exceed the demon lord himself...in sheer combat ability. I doubt anyone will appear...who'll surpass you in the way of the sword," her teacher had said. Copious amounts of blood ran from his mouth and wound. No matter how durable demons could be, he wasn't long for this world.

"Then...will I always be alone from now on?" She had outdone the first person who managed to defeat her in but a year. Wandering through a wasteland of endless solitude with no one to stand as her equal was the future that lay before her once more. Except that, this time, she felt that it would go on for eternity.

"Well... If...if someone who can defeat you does exist, it won't be because of pure strength, but because they possess...*something*."

"What do you mean by 'something'?"

"Hah...even I don't know the answer to that. I'm yet another person who lived in search of strength— Guh!" Master Minotaur finally collapsed. "I'm...sorry. I couldn't...erase your solitude."

With those last words, he expired.

"Looks like I'm alone again," the girl mumbled as she looked away from her teacher's remains and toward the gloomy, boundless sky of the underworld.

That was the birth of Master Unicorn the Aloof Holy Beast of the Sword.

"Do you have that 'something'?" Master Unicorn readied her sword.

As Derek watched her, he felt a chill from head to toe. *This pressure is nothing like before.*

"Something other than strength. If you don't, you'll never beat me," she said.

It's been said that those who meet someone who's perfected their craft will feel overwhelmed and break into a cold sweat simply from facing that person. At that moment, what Derek had experienced was that exact phenomenon. He'd felt the same when he'd watched Alan or Kevin wield their swords in earnest, but this was on a completely different scale from those two.

"Shit! I don't know what your little 'something' is, but thanks for taking your sweet time. My arm's back in place now." Derek slashed at Master Unicorn using the arm Elise had just healed. Surprisingly, he'd chosen to go for a head-on attack without feints or tricks. For the current situation, he'd decided it was the best course of action.

I have the upper hand in terms of strength thanks to Elise's physical enhancement magic. I can push her back in a direct clash and beat her that way, Derek thought.

However, a loud clang rang around them as Master Unicorn effortlessly blocked his strike. "What?!"

"I've gotten used to your weight."

You don't just block a frontal attack by "getting used to it," dammit! Derek cursed to himself. "How about this?! Curse Droplet!" Poison liquid potent enough to melt rock oozed out of the thorns on Emanuel's Blade and rained down on Master Unicorn.

"That won't hit me if I dodge." In an instant, Master Unicorn once again moved behind Derek.

"Go to hell!" Derek swung his poison-coated blade behind him.

"That poison is meaningless," Master Unicorn said as she blocked Derek's sword, resulting in a phenomenon he couldn't comprehend.

How is the poison not splashing in her direction?! Normally, blocking a sword coated in poison should cause the liquid to move in your direction because of inertia. How the hell did she block my attack without any inertia?!

Next, while their swords were still in contact, Master Unicorn gripped and shifted hers in a way that sent an impact directly to Derek's internal organs.

What...happened this time?! Derek thought through coughing fits.

“See, you can achieve the same effect as poison without using a drop of it if you just send a shock directly into your enemy’s body through their sword as you’re blocking it,” Master Unicorn said in a low voice. The techniques she’d used were practically indistinguishable from high-level magic, but this freak of nature considered them normal.

“Curse you and your talent!” Derek said while biting down on his bloodstained lips. Her condescending attitude was driving him mad. He wanted to teach her a lesson and make her quiver in fear. “You were blabbing about ‘something other than strength’ earlier, right? Then just watch, I’ll show you that *something!*”

Derek directed Elise to throw spells at Master Unicorn to force her to dodge, then used the opening to put some distance between them.

“Brainwash!” he shouted. No sooner had he finished that word than the therianthropes who’d been observing the fight all charged at Master Unicorn with a loud roar.

“Wait, what’s going on?! I know that His Majesty’s magic is incredibly potent once it’s taken effect, but it can’t go farther than twenty meters, and it shouldn’t work on people with high mana or strong willpower unless they’re weakened first, right?!” one of the Third Kingdom’s soldiers asked in surprise. Not only had Derek brainwashed enemies outside his magic’s range, he’d also affected the robust therianthropes who had plenty of fight left in them; that shouldn’t have been possible.

“Ha ha ha! Those conditions don’t apply to those with my blood inside them! For them, the range is infinite, and they can only block the effect with exceptionally high mana or willpower!” Derek said, followed by a burst of laughter. “That’s how I keep Elise under my thumb even though she’s a first-class mage. Those turret shells were smeared with my special brainwashing liquid: a mix of poison and my own blood!”

With all the shrapnel scattered around, every therianthrope should have at least been grazed.

“That’s far too vile, Your Majesty!” said the soldiers who valued chivalry at all times.

“Shut your damn mouths, simpletons! Want me to force you to fight too?!” Derek shouted. These fussy morons couldn’t get it into their thick skulls that pride wouldn’t defeat the monster in front of him.

“I see.” Master Unicorn smoothly sidestepped her attacking subordinates. With magnificent footwork, she dodged their attacks, even as she readily dealt with Derek and Elise when they dived for her openings.

“You damn freak!” Derek shouted in irritation.

“How beautiful. So that’s the culmination of swordsmanship.”

“Not to mention she keeps knocking her men out without killing a single one.”

The Third Kingdom’s soldiers had nothing but words of praise for Master Unicorn’s kinetic movements, despite them being on different sides.

“They’re still my subordinates, more or less. I can’t let them die,” Master Unicorn said humbly.

“On the other hand, our king is—”

“Shut up, you idiot. He might hear you!”

I already have, you useless fools, Derek thought as he listened to the all-too-familiar criticisms coming his way. *To begin with, this is only happening because you guys are so incompetent you couldn’t hold a candle to her even as a group.*

“Yeah, it’s exactly as they say. Unlike me, you can do this with honesty and honor, horn girl,” Derek spat.

Master Unicorn tilted her head in confusion while nimbly dodging her brainwashed subordinates’ attacks.

“You’ve fought and defeated every enemy that’s come your way fair and square with those beautiful swordsmanship skills you were born with, while everyone around you has praised and respected you for just how *incredible* you are. You see, I...” Derek’s expression twisted with more rage with every word he uttered. “I absolutely *loathe* people like you! Each and every one of you who walk the straight and narrow path are the worst!”

“Right. I’m sorry, but I don’t understand that kind of sentiment.”

“I’ll warp your composed expression with pain, you bitch!”

Derek Coleman—presently known as Derek Henderson—had been born to a couple running a small store in Blue Intersection.

He was raised in a perfectly ordinary household, but he was shunned by everyone around him, including his parents. Once he awakened to his unique brainwashing magic at the young age of six, he was suspected as the culprit for everything that went wrong. He was always accused of using his magic to force others into breaking the rules.

“My power is terrifying, but I’m sure I’ll get to use it to make someone happy one day!”

Back then, Derek was a kindhearted boy with pure thoughts like those. Even when a thief lied about being manipulated into stealing and Derek was thrown in jail, or when his mother blamed her cheating on him controlling her, he never abandoned his goal of using his powers to help people. While it was true that he could have easily committed all the misdeeds he was accused of if he felt like it, he wasn’t that kind of person.

People hate me now because of my power, but if I use it to help them without doing anything wrong, they’ll come to like me eventually. I just know it, he thought.

Then, at the age of fifteen, Derek was visited by an important girl.

“You’re Derek, right? I heard that you possess a magnificent power.” To his surprise, his visitor was Elise Henderson, the second princess of his kingdom. “I’m thinking of participating in the demon lord’s subjugation, and I’d like you to join me. Won’t you lend me your power for the sake of this kingdom and the rest of humanity?” she said.

Elise’s lovely looks and gentle smile stole Derek’s heart. At the same time, he was thrilled to be given the opportunity to use his powers for someone else’s sake.

So, Derek joined Elise's party. His brainwashing magic could make enemies fight each other or force them to leak confidential information. He could even ensnare monsters to fight alongside the party. Everyone in the party, Elise included, praised Derek endlessly for his efforts.

"You're incredible!"

"You might even be humanity's messiah!"

Back home, Derek had only garnered resentment no matter what he'd done, so he drank in their every word.

"Your power isn't a wicked one. It's a wonderful gift meant for bringing happiness to people. Let's work together until we can take down the demon lord. After that, everyone can spend the rest of their lives smiling," Elise told him. Nothing would have made him happier.

Eventually, their party destroyed the demon army's base that had caused the most destruction in Blue Intersection. It was an achievement worthy of having them hailed as heroes upon their return to the kingdom.

"At this rate, we might really take down the demon lord, Lady Elise!" Derek said with an innocent heart.

"No, this is more than enough. You've served your purpose," Elise said before running a sword through that same heart.

"Huh?!" The heart was the source of mana. With it so damaged, Derek was completely helpless. Blood dripped from his mouth as he looked at her. "Wh-Why, Lady Elise? Didn't you say you want to defeat the demon lord and make the world a better place?"

"No, I only wanted to win in the succession struggle for the throne. Destroying this base will give me plenty of prestige. Why else would royalty like me participate in such a dangerous war? I'd have to be either a complete deviant or an idiot otherwise," Elise said. The expression on her face was a wicked grin of ambition, completely unlike the gentle and compassionate smile she'd shown Derek so far. "It would reflect poorly on me if it got out that I had someone with a repulsive power like yours helping me, so I'll make it look like you were never here. I even have a body double ready to replace you."

“Wh-What? But you said...my power is a wonderful gift...that will bring happiness to everyone.”

“Haven’t you heard of lying? How could I compliment something so repulsive?” Elise’s face twisted into a grimace as if he was literal garbage. She then kicked Derek down the cliff they were standing on.

Derek felt his body floating for a brief moment before sinking into some kind of viscous liquid. The next second, a sharp pain assaulted his senses. He’d fallen into the territory of a belial snake, a type of vicious, venomous snake monster that turned its nest into a poisonous swamp.

“Curse you, Eliiiiiiiiise!!!” Derek shouted at the top of his lungs, ignoring the stinging pain caused by the poison. He’d trusted her, even loved her.

“You’re a real dimwit, aren’t you? No one could ever trust you when you have *that* kind of power, not in a million years. You make me sick to my stomach. Who would ever love a guy like you?” With those parting words, Elise and the rest of her party had departed.

“Shit, shit, dammit! *Damn you all!!!*” Derek screamed as he slowly sank into the swamp.

Screw this! I never asked for this power! Everyone, even my parents, hate me and treat me like a villain because of it. I always thought that if I never used it for wicked purposes, a day would come when I could use it to help someone. I thought that I’d finally met like-minded allies.

Now—I don’t care anymore. I’m fine with being your villain. I’ll stop trying to use my power for the sake of others and think of myself. I can live my life and use it to fulfill my own desires, just watch! I’ll get out of here alive and get my revenge on all of you!

Derek swore his revenge even as he writhed in pain from the poison permeating his body.

Elise and her party had made one grave miscalculation: Derek’s brainwashing magic fell under poison magic, a subcategory of the water element, meaning that his body had a natural affinity for poison. Although the poison in the swamp he’d fallen into caused him excruciating pain, it had helped him recover.

Enough to survive.

Furthermore, as luck would have it, it was the belial snake's egg-laying season at the time. Even though food had literally fallen from the sky, it had no choice but to ignore Derek for the seventy-two-hour period of its egg-laying. He slogged through the swamp at a slug's pace for three days and nights straight and somehow got out with his life, then spent some time healing from his terrible injuries.

During their triumphant return, Elise and her party stopped at an inn, where they held a celebratory banquet. In the middle of the boisterous festivities, they suddenly collapsed.

"Come on, you have to at least check your food for poison! These are your just deserts for getting complacent after having me around to do it for you," Derek said as he stepped on one of his former allies' heads. He'd slipped ten times the lethal poison dose into everyone but Elise's drinks, killing them instantly.

"Help...me..." Elise said through the agonizing pain. Her dose had been carefully adjusted to be just below the lethal level, so she was on the brink of death.

"Very well, I will! After all, I owe you for opening my eyes, Elise. This power isn't meant to bring people smiles but to satisfy my every desire!" Derek had said. A smile more vicious than the one she'd shown him twisted his face. "I think I'll give becoming king a spin first. You'll give birth to my kids, Elise!" His expression was a far cry from the pure one he'd worn only days ago. He oozed malice from every pore like the worst sort of monster.

Elise squeaked with fear. "No...!"

"Relax, I'll fix you up so you truly enjoy serving me! Ha ha ha ha, *aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!*"

"Oh yeah! That was the most fun I've ever had in my life! That's when I truly knew that this is who I am!" Derek said as he burst into a fiendish, bestial, and devilish bout of laughter. His smile see-sawed between one of pleasure, rage,

scorn, and delight. “That’s why I can do anything, no matter how despicable, without a shred of remorse!”

Even though the Third Kingdom’s soldiers weren’t currently fighting, they shuddered as cold fear washed over them.

“Hey, horn girl. You said you wouldn’t let your subordinates die, didn’t you?” Derek asked.

“Yes, I did. Why?”

“Then I’d like to see you try. Therianthropes! Take turns killing yourselves,” he commanded. The therianthropes obeyed, many of them aiming their swords directly at their own hearts.

As could be expected, the soldiers raised their voices in loud opposition to their king’s actions. “Don’t do this, Your Majesty! You’re taking it too far!”

“You guys wanna join them?” Derek threatened.

“Eep!” The soldiers’ commander fell on his backside in fear.

“Now come on, what will you do, o upright and impeccable Holy Beast of the Sword? You’re not going to let anyone die, right?” Derek asked.

“That’s my intention.” At a tremendous speed, Master Unicorn ran through the gaps between the therianthropes about to kill themselves and knocked their weapons away. Even though the therianthropes were spread across the battlefield, she moved as abnormally fast and fluidly as always. As soon as that was done, another wave of therianthropes attempted to take their own lives, but she somehow reached them faster than they could turn their own swords and disarmed them.

“Next,” she nonchalantly said, repeating the process over and over. Despite her perfect soundless movement, dashing high and low should’ve exhausted her, but that was where her Ex-Skill came into play, supplying her with endless stamina.

“You really are something else, you know? But you’ve given yourself a huge opening!” Derek shouted. Since he was the one who decided who would attempt suicide next, he could predict where Master Unicorn would go. No one

was better than him at doing what his enemies hated most. He ordered the furthest therianthrope from her to commit suicide with the worst possible timing for her. While she was still able to deal with it quickly enough, even she revealed a chink in her armor.

“There!” Derek slashed at Master Unicorn with impeccable timing. Like the true monster she was, she managed to dodge by a hair’s breadth. “Well, well, I only managed to graze your clothes, but this is the first time I’ve gotten a hit in.”

She’d dodged the sword itself just fine, but a tiny poison droplet had found its mark and dissolved a small part of her clothes. This was the first time in their fight that she hadn’t managed to fully evade one of his attacks. Since she hadn’t taken any damage, she moved to counterattack, but his next words stopped her in her tracks.

“Oh? Are you sure you have time to deal with me? More of your men are about to die over there.”

Far from where the two of them stood, several therianthropes were holding their sharp claws up to their own throats. Master Unicorn stopped her counterattack and raced to knock the therianthropes’ hands away from their necks.

“Here’s another one!” Just like before, Derek attacked at the worst moment for Master Unicorn to react to him, though she dodged by the narrowest of margins again—just the sword. This time, several droplets landed on her clothes and burned a portion away. “The poison got you again! How many more of these can you dodge?”

Despite the side they were on, Derek’s allies heckled him while watching with disgust, fear, and contempt.

“What a dishonorable fight.”

“What is there to be proud of if you win like this?”

“Bwa ha ha! Like I said, it’s all good as long as I win!” Derek sneered at their grievances. He didn’t mind being labeled as evil; he was the Exiled Dark Priest, after all. At this point in his life, their scornful gazes filled him with nothing but

delight.

Meanwhile, Master Unicorn stared at him while preventing another one of her men from taking his life.

“What is it? Do you have a complaint too?” Derek asked.

Master Unicorn simply shook her head from side to side. “I just thought...you seem to have a lot on your plate,” she said with an expressionless yet somehow sympathetic voice.

“Is that sarcasm? Stop talking down to me and die already!”

“I didn’t mean it to come across that way. I haven’t enjoyed a fight this much before, but I’ve figured out how to defeat you,” she said before cutting through one of her men as he was about to kill himself.

Has she finally given up on saving her subordinates? Derek thought.

“Huh? What was I doing?” The therianthrope Master Unicorn had seemed to kill was alive and back to his senses.

“That’s impossible! How did you undo the brainwashing?! Your sword should have gone right through his body. How is he not in two pieces?!” Derek shouted.

“The only thing I cut was the brainwashing link,” Master Unicorn replied.

“What kind of nonsensical pinpoint technique let you do that?!”

Derek’s brainwashing was an innate skill, and differed from learned ones that were based on existing magical mechanisms. Therefore, it was impossible to undo it using the magic currently available. His skill itself would need to be thoroughly studied for a cancellation method to be developed, but he would never collaborate with such research. That’s why his skill had always been so strong once he took hold of someone—until today.

“One I just came up with,” Master Unicorn said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You goddamn prodigy!”

Master Unicorn undid the brainwashing on the therianthropes still trying to kill themselves, one after the other.

“No, no, no, dammit!” Derek cursed as he lost his precious tools one slash at a time. *Things are getting ugly for me! I have to do something before they’re all freed from the brainwashing*, he thought and brought his sword down on her to try and take her down.

“Are you sure you want to get that far from her?” Master Unicorn abruptly changed course.

“Shit!”

Master Unicorn was headed toward Elise, the one who’d been supporting Derek with physical enhancement magic and the occasional offensive spell. During the entire battle, he’d positioned himself to always be ready to intercept any enemy headed her way. His impatience had driven him to leave that position for but a brief moment, and Master Unicorn wasn’t a foe to let such an opening slide. She raised her sword and sliced right through Elise’s body.

“Huh?” Elise was left in a daze as twenty-five years of brainwashing came undone. “No way, this entire time, I...”

“Elise...” Derek muttered.

Master Unicorn took the opportunity to release the last therianthrope from Derek’s brainwashing. “Now you’re out of people to help you fight.”

Elise had been released from her brainwashing, the only thing that had made her spend decades as Derek’s devoted tool. His brainwashed therianthrope tools were gone too. He was left without a single ally.

Now that Elise’s enhancement magic was no longer supporting Derek, Master Unicorn mercilessly gave chase. Her swings were faster than the eye could see, but he managed to block her with his sword amid grunts of exertion.

“You have surprisingly good intuition,” Master Unicorn said.

“Stop underestimating me. I have plenty of actual combat experience,” Derek snapped.

Derek primarily fought away from the first line of combat, but as someone who’d both fought in and survived the Titanomachy, he was still one tough nut

to crack. His combat ability was leagues above the average soldier of this peaceful era. Unfortunately for him, his opponent was a beast in a dimension all her own.

“Your specs are lacking.” Master Unicorn sent Derek flying despite his best efforts at defense.

Ugh! Her attack is as heavy as Dora’s was the time we sparred. How can she do this with such frail arms?! Derek thought.

Now that she’d knocked Derek off-balance, Master Unicorn pressed forward even more intensely. She assaulted him with a relentless barrage of slashes that would deliver a shock to his organs through his own sword when he blocked, just like the one she’d compared to poison earlier in the fight.

I’ll be in deep shit if I block all these, but what else can I do?!

Derek knew how her attacks worked, but he wasn’t at a level where he could dodge like her; blocking with his sword was his only option. As his body was rattled by the destructive “poison” impacts again and again, he coughed up what felt like a river of blood, so much that the loss started to make him dizzy.

Crap! I can’t...move anymore, Derek thought. His opponent was vastly superior. Now that they were *actually* fighting one-on-one, it was plain for every witness. The fight would be decided in the blink of an eye.

Right, I’m all alone, he thought as intense pain ran through him. He’d lived his entire life alone, always feared for his brainwashing ability. He had no one to reach out to, and had crushed anyone who opposed him, in both body and mind, to make them obey. That’s why he was alone, now and always. Even when he ruled over people through brainwashing and fear, at the end of the day, no one was his true ally.

To hell with this shit. To hell with them. Everyone and everything can just go straight to hell!

“You fight in a rather unusual way, so I was hoping you’d have that something,” Master Unicorn said with a touch of disappointment. “This is the end.”

She aimed her sword at Derek’s heart, who was too exhausted to even try to

dodge. The first defeat of the Seven Heroes, who'd miraculously won every fight so far, was set in stone.

“Your Majesty!”

In an unexpected turn of events, Elise—who should no longer have been brainwashed—jumped in from the side and pushed Derek behind her. She took his place as Master Unicorn's sword pierced straight through her heart.



Even Master Unicorn was so surprised she froze in place.

“E-Elise? But...why?” Derek asked.

“Now, Your Majesty!” Elise shouted as blood dripped from her mouth. Derek was able to react in time and ran his own sword through her body, directly striking the defenseless Master Unicorn.

Fresh blood splattered across the air. Some of it belonged to Master Unicorn, who’d just been hit by Derek’s sword. She staggered back and tumbled to the ground, pulling her sword free from Elise’s chest. Yet more blood sprayed out like a fountain from the queen’s gaping wound.

“Elise!” Derek immediately held the collapsed Elise in his arms.

“I’m...so glad...to see you safe,” she whispered.

Her wound is too deep. She’s beyond saving! Derek had acquired medical knowledge through his research on his field of expertise surrounding brainwashing and poisons. His experience told him that the chance of Elise surviving this was zero. Master Unicorn’s attack hadn’t been an ordinary thrust, but the same kind that assaulted the organs directly; Elise’s vital organs had been torn to shreds. Her dress was quickly stained red as blood poured out of her chest.

“Why?! You’re no longer brainwashed! Why did you save me?!” Derek shouted. He’d been treating her as his puppet for twenty-five whole years. Before that, she had betrayed and tried to kill him. It was unthinkable for her to possess any kind of affection toward him.

“Why...?” Elise said. “Shouldn’t that...be obvious? Because you loved me.”

Elise Henderson had been a tool from the moment she’d been born.

Her mother was only a low-ranking noble, but she *was* exceptionally beautiful, so she used her looks to curry favor with the king in search of power and riches; that was how Elise had been born. Her mother was only interested in her as a ticket to the authority and lavish lifestyle that came with joining the royal family. When Elise suffered from sickness during an epidemic, her mother

wasn't worried about Elise's health but only of being forced out of the royal palace and losing her luxurious life if her daughter passed away.

Since Elise grew up watching a twisted mother like her, treating others like tools was second nature to her. She squeezed every drop out of the people useful to her and discarded the useless ones. All until the day when Derek, a tool she'd disposed of after it'd served its purpose, returned.

Suddenly, she found herself on the receiving end of her own behavior. She would be treated as nothing but an object and thrown into the trash when she no longer had anything to offer. That was the fate she believed Derek had in store for her, but he proved her wrong.

"You have some guts damaging my tool, you bastard!"

When she was injured during combat, he raged on her behalf.

"Tools need maintenance. Stay still."

When she felt unwell, he nursed her back to health and stayed by her side until she healed.

"Ha ha ha, good job! You're the best tool in the world!"

When she gave birth, he showed her a pure smile like the one he'd had during their first meeting.

He never once treated her as an actual tool.

"I could tell because...we were always together. You became a villain when everyone treated you that way...but you're a kind person deep down," Elise told Derek as she held his hand.

"No! You're wrong! I'm just a fiend who treated you like his possession!"

Elise shook her head. "No matter what you say, you still loved me. Thank you...for treating me with such care," she said with a smile. It wasn't the artificial smile she'd tricked him with during their first meeting, nor a forced one from brainwashing. It was a genuine smile with all her heart behind it.

"I also...love you." With those final words, Elise closed her eyes. She stopped

breathing and her body started to grow cold in his arms.

“Elise!” Tears streamed endlessly from Derek’s—from the *Exiled Dark Priest’s*—eyes. Elise’s words always had struck a chord with him.

“You make me sick to my stomach. Who would ever love a guy like you?”

He’d finally found someone who could. He now realized that the thing he’d gone his whole life without had been right under his nose, only to lose it.

“Why? Why are you only telling me now? Why couldn’t you tell me twenty-five years ago? If you had, I, I...!”

Master Unicorn grunted in pain as she staggered to her feet with her hand on the wound Derek’s strike had carved across her chest. Just like Elise, she’d been fatally injured. The wound itself wasn’t deep, but Derek’s poison was already circulating in her blood. Despite her endless stamina, her body was only as durable as a human teenage girl’s. It didn’t take much thought to realize what would happen to an ordinary girl if she was exposed to such potent poison.

As her consciousness faded, she looked at the people who’d defeated her. The woman who’d given her life to protect her husband even after she’d come to her senses, and the man who sobbed as he embraced her lifeless body. From her perspective, they were both too weak to pose any threat. There was such a gap in their strengths that she could confidently declare she’d win ten thousand fights out of ten thousand. Regardless, it was a fact that they’d taken her down.

Oh, I get it now. I think humans call that “love.”

Her teacher’s words surfaced in her mind.

“If someone who can defeat you does exist, it won’t be because of pure strength, but because they possess...something.”

So, that was the “something” that defeated me. It was something that demons, creatures with infinite lives who valued strength above all else, didn’t—couldn’t—possess. It’s just as you said, Beelzebub. Humans are really fascinating creatures.

As Master Unicorn finally understood that, she vanished with a small smile of

joy across her face.

Chapter 3: Champion of Light versus Demon Lord

The fight between Alan the Champion of Light and Demon Lord Beelzebub had finally begun.

Alan braced his sword and ran straight at Beelzebub. His footwork was polished to such an extreme level that it almost looked like gravity had no effect on him as he sped up. Carried forward by his momentum, he struck at Beelzebub, only for the demon lord to easily parry the sword with his own.

“Ha ha! Another great strike that I could feel to my heart, Champion! But that strike wouldn’t have hurt me even if I failed to defend myself,” Beelzebub said.

“I guess that’s true,” Alan replied.

Instead of fighting against the force of being knocked away, he used it to put some distance between them and did one full rotation in the air to straighten his stance. When he observed Beelzebub, he saw vast amounts of dense mana overflowing from the demon lord’s body. The magical protection offered by the mana he subconsciously emanated made him almost impervious to ordinary physical attacks. Physical strength an order of magnitude higher than Dora’s would be necessary to break through.

“Then how about this?!”

Alan activated the mana circuits he’d developed inside his own body. Those circuits could only be activated when he felt the mana of a demon standing before him. The last time he’d used them—in his fight against the three former Black Stars—it had taken him some time to get the rusty pathways working after decades of unuse. But this time, they’d immediately reacted to the impressive mass of the demon lord’s mana. Soon enough, a dazzling light shone from every part of Alan’s body.

“Yes, that’s it. Bring out your mana of light! That’s what I’ve wanted to fight all this time!” Beelzebub cried with delight.

Alan’s mana of light was an element specialized against demons. Its power

was many times more effective against them than other targets, and it erased their mana on contact. Yet, Beelzebub rejoiced to face this destructive light that could so easily turn his kind to ash.

Alan swung his sword just as he had before, but this time, it was clad in brilliant, blinding mana. Beelzebub responded by covering his sword in his own dense pitch-black mana and intercepted the blow. Light and darkness clashed. Beelzebub's mana was powerful enough to stand against the mana of light head-on, despite its inherent disadvantage. The two kinds of mana scattered into the surroundings, causing untold destruction incomparable to the wreckage before.

Beelzebub burst into laughter. "Oh, how glad I am that we changed location. I have to defeat *you*, the man who once killed me, when you're at full strength!"

He expelled a tremendous amount of mana from his entire body, making his already-incredible mana from earlier feel like he'd just been messing around. His presence alone warped and twisted the world around him. Alan responded in kind by drawing out more of his mana of light. Now, it was clear that they were both serious.

"Let us begin, Champion! I challenge *you* this time! Time for the second round of our battle in the Titanomachy!"

"Master Alan..."

Rosetta was watching Alan's fight from a faraway location. The shock waves were so intense that she could barely stay on her feet even at this distance. She knew that standing there and hoping for Alan's victory wouldn't change a thing, but praying was the only thing she could do. That, and treating his wounds with magic after his victory.

"I believe in you, Master Alan," she murmured.

Alan and Beelzebub had already exchanged over fifty blows.

Even with his anti-demon mana of light in action, Alan's fighting style was

rooted in the basics. Although it was orthodox and by the book, he'd perfected it to a frightening degree. He made full use of his beginner, nonelemental spells—Basic Warp, Mirage, and Barrier—with impeccable timing to supplement his flawless swordsmanship and fend off his enemy in this high-stakes battle. While his stamina and mana had decreased from his heyday, his combat ability was as good as ever. He moved in the ideal way described in every combat manual.

However, his enemy was the demon lord. Ordinary strategies like that weren't enough to grant him victory against such a demanding foe. His attempts at feints and defense with beginner magic were all seen through, and even his swordsmanship that stood at the realm of legends was nothing Beelzebub couldn't easily keep up with.

This must be the work of his Ultimate Zenith. An Exploitative Skill through and through, Alan thought.

Beelzebub possessed two Ex-Skills. The first one was called Fairy Sight. The third eye on his forehead laid all of his opponents' information bare to him, but since he already knew Alan's tricks from their first fight, it wasn't of much use here. The problem was the second one, the aforementioned Ultimate Zenith. With the exception of Unique Skills like Alan's mana of light or Derek's brainwashing, it allowed him to use almost all magic and forms of combat techniques at the highest possible level from birth.

It was exactly like this during our first fight. Beelzebub faced the techniques I'd risked my life to perfect with the ones he'd just been born with.

This time was no different. Beelzebub deflected a number of Alan's best attacks magnificently, just like their first battle—until Alan realized something was off.

Something is different from last time!

Beelzebub roared as he deflected one of Alan's attacks and countered with his own. The hero grunted in pain as the sword grazed his cheek and drew blood. Beelzebub didn't let up there. Without a moment's delay, he pointed a finger at Alan and gathered his mana.

"Red Magic, Number Forty!" With terrible power, Beelzebub formed a massive beast out of flames and sicced it on Alan.

“Hngh!” Alan focused his mana of light and faced the spell directly. Not only did the light element increase in power more than tenfold against demons, it was also elemental magic, making it significantly stronger than the nonelemental magic he used. Under the usual circumstances, his mana would have no trouble negating Beelzebub’s in a direct confrontation.

Such dense mana! I can’t negate it! Alan thought.

To be more precise, he *could* negate it, but he was consuming considerable amounts of his own mana to do so. Just because he was using the mana of light didn’t mean he had an endless pool of mana like Norman.

To conserve mana, he turned his light-clad sword horizontally and slid Beelzebub’s spell across it to change its trajectory, causing the beast of flames to pass by his right side. It landed on a spot several kilometers away where it exploded with a violent roar, creating a pillar of fire that towered over one hundred meters tall.

“That was some ridiculous destructive power, and that was *after* I dampened it with my mana.” Cold sweat ran down Alan’s brow. His earlier hunch had been confirmed.

Beelzebub was powerful the last time too. He’s incomparable to any other demon I’ve fought in my life, he thought. However, he hadn’t been *this* strong.

In their previous conflict, Alan had been slightly superior in swordsmanship and martial arts, and when their magic had collided, his mana of light had warded off the majority of Beelzebub’s attacks thanks to its favorable affinity. This time, Beelzebub had improved both his physical and magical abilities by one degree. The demon lord had prevailed in every fight he’d entered thanks to his omnipotent Ultimate Zenith. What would happen if he were to improve even further?

“Heh, have you noticed?” Beelzebub used conventional footwork just that much more refined than Alan’s to close the gap between them in an instant. He yelled as he struck at Alan with a series of grounded, rational attacks, better in technique than the hero’s.

Unintentionally, Alan found himself captivated by the level of Beelzebub’s swordsmanship. It took everything in Alan, amid grunts of pain, to deal with the

barrage of blows.

“Our previous fight was when I first tasted defeat. I asked how someone as talentless as you became so strong. You told me, and I still remember those words clearly,” Beelzebub said.

In those days, everything had been dull.

If Demon Lord Beelzebub's life as a demon were to be summed up in one adjective, there would've been no better choice. He'd been born under the most powerful Noble lineage in the entire underworld, the one stationed in the demon lord's castle, and possessed the all-powerful Ultimate Zenith skill. He'd instantly eliminated all competition for the throne without expending any effort at all. From the day he'd been born, he'd been able to do anything. Everything had been gifted to him on a silver platter.

I invaded the human world because I thought it might be a little fun, but no human has reached my castle's throne in the past century. Beelzebub had transported his castle to the human world with his magic and had since spent his time sitting upon his throne, bored out of his mind.

One day, he heard news that his army was struggling thanks to the efforts of seven particular humans. His subordinates were in complete panic, but Beelzebub had grown weary of the invasion. Everything would be over right away if he applied himself—or so he'd thought, when a lone human arrived in his throne room.

“I finally made it, demon lord.”

The demon lord's first human visitor was a young man. He must have defeated several deployed guards on the way there.

“Hmm.” Beelzebub used his Fairy Sight to examine the man's abilities. *What is this weakling doing here?*

The man was too pitiful to even consider an enemy, much less a threat. He possessed the lowest potential among most humans, a species that was feeble as it was. Beelzebub held some expectations at first, but even looking at the man was, frankly, a waste of his time.

However, despite his injured hands, the challenger hoisted his sword at the ready and took a step forward.

“I’ve devoted my entire life to come here and defeat you. Bring it on, demon lord!”

“I hate to rain on your parade when you’re so passionate about this, but you’ll lose in a matter of seconds.”

The fight began soon afterward, only to end with Beelzebub’s defeat. He suffered a deep wound from the challenger’s sword, clad in mana of light. Acute pain stabbed through him as his body was extinguished from the inside.

“Rrgh... How did I...lose to a talentless person like you?” Beelzebub asked through the pain.

His Fairy Sight’s ability to discern an enemy’s potential was absolute. The challenger’s aptitude was practically nonexistent. He was a failure, a nobody who couldn’t be compared to the demon lord on the same scale.

“Because I put in the effort! Humans can grow stronger,” the man replied. His imposing, heroic expression was filled with determination and conviction.

“Humans...” Beelzebub muttered back.

What bizarre creatures humans were. Their lives came to an end quickly, their bodies were brittle, their mana was meager, yet they still somehow exhibited impressive strength and tenacity.

I thought I had everything from the moment I was born, but this man has what I don’t. If effort is the source of his strength, then, if I’m given another chance...

“So I tried the same thing you did! All for the sake of our rematch!” Beelzebub pointed his right hand at Alan and started preparing a spell. “I put in the effort! Black Magic, Number Thirty-Eight!”

Alan, powered by his mana of light, and Beelzebub floated in midair as they fought. Beelzebub’s spell caused a mass of black mana to burst through the ground and spout toward Alan like a geyser.

Dammit! Trying to cancel this out head-on would take too much out of me!

Alan used his light just to protect his own body and dodged out of the way of the incoming black geyser. *Beelzebub already had ample energy and control for his magic the last time, but now, he's beyond even that!*

Beelzebub had refined his magic down to the last detail; not a single iota of mana was going to waste. The same could be said for his swordsmanship. He was a far cry from his past self who'd simply relied on his natural strength and abilities. His expertly executed slashes assaulted Alan one after the other, better than he ever could with his innate abilities alone.

These past twenty-five years, he'd truly gone above and beyond to improve himself. All in order to defeat the Champion who'd once killed him, much like Alan had worked hard to defeat the demon lord the first time. As a result, he'd taken his natural physical and magical skills from the strongest in the underworld to the strongest in *any* world. He was now truly unparalleled in every aspect of battle. Conversely, Alan no longer surpassed him in anything. With such a gulf between them, even the advantage granted by the mana of light was like a drop in the ocean.

"Black Magic, Number Forty-Nine." Beelzebub summoned an even vaster amount of mana than before. However, he wasn't brute forcing his way utilizing a large quantity of mana, but delicately composing his spell like an artist putting the finishing touches on their masterpiece.

"Evil Tree, Black Yggdrasil!"

He activated a large-scale spell, parting the ground to sprout a massive black tree over thirty meters tall. Its sharp branches extended like rivulets diverging from a larger muddy stream. Thousands of them rushed at Alan like a phalanx of black spears.

There are too many to avoid! Alan was left with no other choice. With a loud battle cry, he emitted a large quantity of mana of light to intercept the jet-black spears. His plan was to defend by completely erasing the spell attacking him, but his plan wasn't foolproof.

A cry of pain escaped Alan's mouth as his defenses were broken through. The demon lord's boundless mana and expert magic handling had been enhanced

by his diligent training, making his spell impossible to fully block. The black branches enveloped Alan and sent him crashing into the ground, causing a shock wave to erupt around him.

This was but an inevitability, Beelzebub thought.

A massive mushroom-shaped cloud of fumes rose in the air, almost like a massive explosion had occurred.

“After adding hard work on top of my overwhelming talent, I’ve reached the absolute peak of both magic and physical ability.” His words weren’t conceit but the hard, objective truth. “Now that old age has taken its toll on you, our strength is worlds apart.” Another objective fact.

Alan had nothing left to stand against Beelzebub. Even his mana of light was powerless against Beelzebub’s magic. Not only did the demon lord possess highly dense and practically endless mana, he’d also polished his skills at magic to the utmost level.

“Yet, how? *How* do you still stand?” Beelzebub asked.

The smoke cleared to reveal Alan standing there, panting heavily. He’d been fighting Beelzebub—who’d transcended to a different realm of strength—for quite a while. Injuries peppered his body and he could hardly breathe properly, but he was still standing.

It would’ve made perfect sense for our fight to be decided in only a few moves. In fact, that should’ve been the natural outcome, Beelzebub thought. Nonetheless, his opponent stood on his feet. He’d been beaten ragged and grown frailer with age, yet he remained in Beelzebub’s way.

“Hey, Beelzebub. Have you ever swung your sword until you vomited blood?” Alan asked between bouts of heavy breathing. His body had undoubtedly grown much weaker than his youth, but it hadn’t given out yet. “Have you ever run until you passed out? How many times have you challenged an enemy you thought you could never defeat? Have you knocked at death’s door?”

Beelzebub could say nothing in response. Silently, he stood and stared at Alan, as if to burn the image into his memory.

“I pity you. You were born a prodigy, so you can’t push yourself beyond a certain point.”

Alan shaped his empty left hand into a tight grip as a shining sword of light appeared in it. At the same time, he covered his entire body in bright mana. He had the ornate sword he’d received from Empress Margaret in his right hand, and the sword of light he’d made from his mana in his left. He adjusted his posture until his head was held high and stood imposingly before Beelzebub.

That was the Champion of Light.

“I’m going to show you something you can’t understand. The thing that lies at the end of true effort you can only achieve by pushing yourself to the utmost limits. I’ll show you the force of will of us humans! Come at me, demon lord!” the Champion proudly declared.

Oh. Beelzebub was amazed.

A brilliant light shone in Alan’s eyes. It didn’t matter if he was older and covered in wounds; he still had the same indomitable light he’d possessed twenty-five years ago. Despite the overwhelming disadvantage he was in or how hopelessly stronger his opponent was, he didn’t care. His courage and determination burned hotter than the sun itself and fueled his certainty of his victory.

“Magnificent,” Beelzebub said in delight as he absorbed the sight of Alan. He couldn’t help but feel great joy at this development. “This is why I find value in challenging you, Champion! Here I go!”

He roared as he propelled himself through the air toward Alan.

Beelzebub had felt numb as long as he could remember.

As someone born with everything, he felt nothing about this world where everything always went his way. Nevertheless, he eventually tasted his first defeat at the hands of a feeble human, even though the two of them were like night and day in terms of aptitude.

At that moment, Beelzebub felt passion for the first time in his life. He wanted

to defeat that person. To challenge that weak yet strong contradiction of a man to a rematch, and to emerge victorious this time!

As luck would have it, he was miraculously granted that opportunity. His reborn blood seethed with excitement as he thought about challenging that man again! This time, he wouldn't be the king waiting imperiously upon his throne, but an ordinary challenger! Nothing could be more thrilling!

With a howl of exertion, Beelzebub flung his whole body and soul into his offensive against the exhausted Alan. He unleashed a series of slashes, his innate strength polished more than ever thanks to his intense training. On top of that, he cast a barrage of spells, each elevated to the pinnacle of magic. Everything at his disposal, he threw it at Alan, as if he were trying to guarantee the death of his wounded prey. The air screeched and the earth was torn asunder by his ferocity. The local maps would need a thorough revision after this fight.

However, Alan faced the assault head-on with a hearty bellow. With his back against the wall, he evaded, parried, and sometimes stoutly blocked the deadly attacks. The insurmountable gap in strength between the two of them should have kept him on the defensive, but he paid that no mind as he ferociously stood up to his enemy. Defense wasn't enough for him; he even started counterattacking, his screams as strident as ever.

Beelzebub flinched in surprise. He couldn't help but be amazed as they exchanged blows. *How? Even if I take the advantage his mana of light gives him into account, I should be surpassing him at everything. Magic, physical abilities, you name it! So, how?*

"Haaaaaaaaaahhh!!!" Alan shouted as he brought his weapon down on Beelzebub.

The demon lord yelled in pain as the sword found its mark. Alan's mana of light plunged into the open wound, and a sharp pain assaulted Beelzebub's senses.

Little by little, he's pushing me back. He hurls himself into the jaws of death with every exchange, but he somehow makes it out alive. Each time he uses his

magic, his strength builds further. There's an incomprehensible something driving me into a corner, Beelzebub thought.

Alan's body pulsed with willpower. Even his roars pushed back against Beelzebub like they were a tangible force. The demon lord once again came to a certain realization as he watched his mortal enemy.

I get it! That's the force of will he mentioned earlier!

It was a power that he didn't possess. It could only be obtained by continuously putting oneself in the most extreme situations, like this fight. Bravery, motivation, grit, resolution, hysterical—it was a suprarational power known by many names. Beelzebub might have endeavored to improve himself after his one defeat, but such heights were fundamentally out of his reach. After all, he'd held unimaginable strength from the beginning; there were only a handful of people the world over he could fight to the limit with. It was precisely because humans were weak that it was possible for them. Just like twenty-five years ago, that power was putting him in dire straits.

“Wonderful job, human. Let's see how much further you can ignite my passion!” Beelzebub said with delight.

Alan simply roared as he pressed on.

His fierce rush met Beelzebub's sword again and again, and in return, Beelzebub slashed at him time after time. He left his mark, carving deep wounds into Alan's body with each swing. Yet Alan wouldn't go down. His many injuries were devastating enough to knock an ordinary person out on the spot, but he never wavered. Quite the opposite, in fact. With every new wound, his force of will redoubled along with the momentum of his attacks.

As a result, Beelzebub suffered his own wounds. While his individual strikes were deadlier, Alan's swords were empowered by his mana of light. Once they injured an enemy, the mana would invade the body and destroy the demon from the inside like a deadly toxin. Beelzebub's boundless stamina and mana were depleting at an alarming rate to stop the mana of light's rampage. It was as if—rather, there was no “if” about it—every mana particle emitted by Alan carried the undying desire to take Beelzebub down.

The mana of light's special properties only activated against demons. As Alan

had originally possessed no elemental aptitude, he'd had to develop it from scratch. Therefore, if he killed Beelzebub and demons disappeared from the human world again, it would go back to being a useless ability, but that didn't matter. Alan, a man with no talent, had obtained such power after giving his everything toward the goal of defeating the demon lord. As long as he could achieve that one thing, he didn't need anything else.

"Heh heh heh, aha ha, ga ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!" Joyous laughter spilled out of Beelzebub's mouth in the middle of their bloody fight. Alan Granger never betrayed his expectations. "Rejoice, Champion! I've just been informed that other than Loki, the rest of the New Black Stars have been defeated."

Not that Beelzebub paused his assault for a moment.

"But you're still alive," Alan cried. "I will bring you down, right here and now!"

"Yes! Those are the eyes brimming with determination I wanted to see!"

Alan wasn't the only one doing the impossible. Based on sheer strength alone, the demon army should've won an overwhelming victory, yet humanity had brushed them aside like flies. The history of twenty-five years ago was repeating itself. Alan intended to mimic his greatest deed as well.

"You humans have surpassed my expectations countless times. Let's see you do it again!" Beelzebub said.

He gathered most of his remaining mana into his right fist and used it to fire off the most devastating underworld magic: the highest number of black magic. The accumulated mass of mana formed a gigantic black tear in the fabric of space itself. The ground, air, and even the light around him had been devoured before he finished casting the spell.

"Final Black Magic, Number Fifty: Dark Legion, Chaos Ragnarok!"

This was the demon lord's—no, the entire *underworld's*—most powerful attack. Seventy-two sinister, towering devils emerged from the black distortion in space. Each one possessed mana that rivaled a shenmo's. They all charged at Alan together. Naturally, he prepared to intercept them with his most powerful light elemental attack. The sword of light in his left hand emitted a blinding light that reached up to the heavens. This was the essence of the Champion's light,

an attack that had felled innumerable demons.

“Bravelight Excalibur!”

The ultimate attacks of light and darkness collided against each other, their owners screaming at the top of their lungs alongside them. The powers on display were on such a frightening level that without Alan’s mana of light negating the darkness on impact, the damage to the surrounding area would have been incalculable.

Despite his determination, Alan was losing ground.

“Ha ha ha! Seems like I’m better in such direct confrontations, Alan Granger!”

The army of darkness had the clear advantage. The seventy-two jet-black devils pushed back the light in the blink of an eye. This outcome was inevitable. Though the mana of light had a favorable affinity against demon magic, it wasn’t enough to overcome the gap in strength between the two sides. Beelzebub had known that since the beginning, but he didn’t think this was enough to seal his victory.

Go on, I know you’re not done yet! He hoped that this wouldn’t be enough to defeat Alan; that was the only thought in his mind. “Come on! Show me what you’ve got, Champion!”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

Alan’s vigorous cry shook the air itself, causing the unbelievable to happen. Mana poured out of his body with tremendous force as the intensity of his attack spiked. This output far surpassed his limit that Beelzebub had seen with his Fairy Sight. While mana could be influenced by one’s emotional strength, there should still be some sort of boundary. The information gleaned by Fairy Sight was unquestionable. It was impossible for it to have misread anything about Alan.

If that was true, then how was this human displaying strength he shouldn’t possess? The answer was simple: because he was the Champion.

Courage and determination. He broke through the limits of his mana using nothing but willpower, Beelzebub thought. There was no trick or clever answer. He poured more mana into his spell as he burst into delighted laughter. *How*

wonderful!

The light and darkness grew in intensity, and their clash soon caused an immense explosion that swallowed up the entire region around them.

It had been twenty years since Beelzebub's miraculous revival following his defeat at Alan's hands. He'd spent the day swinging his sword in a wide room at the demon lord's castle he had long ago claimed for himself, panting from the exertion.

The sweat streaming like a waterfall down his body and the demolished surroundings from the shock waves caused by his sword swings made it clear that his training was no mere routine.

"The place would be a complete mess if the castle wasn't capable of repairing itself," Greha—a one-eyed old woman who served Beelzebub—said from behind him.

"Phew! I think you're exaggerating. Besides, it would be disrespectful of me to challenge him to a rematch after undergoing some half-hearted training," he replied.

"It's certainly surprising. As soon as you returned from the human world, you started swinging your sword or studying magic. All your subjects find it shocking that Demon Lord Beelzebub himself is spending his days training nonstop."

"It's no easy task, that's for sure."

That he needed to train had been a simple thing to say, but putting it into practice had been no walk in the park. He'd put effort into improving himself a little every day. Once he'd tried training for himself, he'd realized just how much work was necessary, leading his admiration for Alan to grow. After all, Alan had spent his whole life going through much more challenging situations.

"But you seem to be enjoying yourself, Lord Beelzebub," Greha said.

"I suppose I am. The training itself is the furthest thing from pleasant, but looking forward to demonstrating the fruits of my labor fills me with nothing but joy." Whenever he thought about his rematch with the Champion who'd

defeated him, he was filled with energy. He chuckled while thinking about his past enemy. “This is a feeling I’d like to teach my past self if possible. ‘Don’t worry, you’re not perfect. There’s a man in the human world who can defeat you and make you passionate about your life,’ I’d tell him.”

“I understand. Then, I should move the preparations along on my end as well. I’ve made contact with the Noble of the Isle of the Dead, Grave the Wicked Bone King.”

“Very good. I shall request his participation in my army posthaste.”

Together with Greha, Beelzebub had started preparations to leave the underworld again. There was no end to the work he had to take care of. Rebuilding the demon army, scouting shenmo for every member of the New Seven Black Stars, and above all else, training for his rematch with Alan. But there was no doubt that his current life was more fulfilling than back when he’d ruled over his territory with his naturally unmatched strength and looked down on everything and everyone. He might as well have been dead back then. He now understood that life without passion was indistinguishable from death.

“You have my thanks, Champion. I will be the one to challenge you this time. Our fated rematch is nearly at hand!”

Demon Lord Beelzebub’s life had begun on the day he’d been defeated by Alan. That was what he believed.

The thundering noise of two objects colliding into a hard surface filled the air. Beelzebub and Alan had been blown into opposite directions after the explosion caused by the clash of their ultimate attacks, and each had crashed into the bedrock with enough force to form craters.

Blood spilled from Beelzebub’s body, he struggled to move, and he’d used up most of his mana. Yet, despite the sorry state he was in, he laughed.

I was actually a little worried, he thought. He’d wondered if he’d overtrained. With effort on top of his exploitative talent, perhaps even the Champion would’ve been unable to stand up to him. It was not so. Alan had fought back magnificently and even pushed Beelzebub to his limits. Of course, it was clear

that Alan was the one struggling the most. When their ultimate attacks collided, and in their earlier exchange, he'd received significantly more damage.

"Not yet!" the Champion yelled as he rose to his feet once more. Though his body was battered and bloodied and his mana of light, his last ray of hope, was running on empty, Alan pressed on as if any such concerns were beneath him. He picked up his sword and leapt directly at Beelzebub.

"Yes, not yet! Let us continue!" Beelzebub wouldn't relent. The fight he'd so impatiently waited for was finally before him! He stood up, gripped his sword, and moved to intercept Alan.

The two fighters met in a dramatic midair fight once more. Groans of pain escaped their mouths as both their blades drew blood. They'd spent most of their mana earlier. Hanging in the air and charging their swords and bodies was about all they could do. There was no more room for cheap tricks. They each fought while relying only on their trained bodies, polished swordsmanship, and determination to take down their opponent.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Whoaaaaaaaaa!"

They swung their swords with all their strength, until finally, they both broke. The ensuing shock wave knocked them both back, and with no more mana left to keep them in the air, they raised two massive columns of water as they fell into a river.

"Haah, haah..."

"Whew, whew... Ha ha..."

They got up, water now mixing with the blood that ran down their bodies. The fight wasn't over yet. With no more mana to use and their swords broken, a fistfight was the only way left to settle this. They each cried out as they punched, kicked, elbowed, and kneed each other. The sound of flesh meeting flesh echoed across the mountain.

"I'm stronger in here too!" Beelzebub shouted as he threw a pair of punches.

"Grah!" Alan bent backward as he took direct hits in both his face and

abdomen.

“Ha! Your age is finally catching up with you, Champion!” Beelzebub’s merciless unarmed attacks sent Alan’s old body flying back and into the river.

Thanks to covering himself with the little mana of light he had left in his body, Alan could still injure Beelzebub, but the difference in vigor was plain as day. Now that they were fighting with nothing but their bare bodies—the rawest combat possible—the discrepancy between an ageless demon and a human who’d grown weaker after a twenty-five-year gap was prominent.

“Not. Yet!” Alan mustered all of his fighting spirit to get himself back up and made a beeline for Beelzebub. He roared as he unleashed a ferocious rush of attacks.

“Gwah!” Beelzebub was shaken. *Although he’s clad in a thin layer of mana of light, his attacks should still be only as strong as his dilapidated body can deliver.*

Nevertheless, some incomprehensible force dwelled in each of Alan’s attacks that jolted Beelzebub to his core, causing the damage to reverberate throughout his body.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Good, this is it! That’s the spirit!”

Beelzebub countered Alan’s attack in kind. He quickly forced Alan back and threw punch after punch at the Champion. The body he’d thoroughly trained for twenty-five years in order to defeat his old enemy still moved with force even under such adverse conditions. He was cornering Alan thanks to all his hard work. The feeling of those grueling days of training bearing fruit exhilarated Beelzebub. A sense of joy and fulfillment he couldn’t have tasted after a billion years of dull days as the undisputed strongest coursed through him.

“My blood boils for more! This is what it means to be alive!” Beelzebub shouted.

Alan grunted in pain as Beelzebub’s kick struck him, leaving him wide open, and Beelzebub wasn’t one to let such a perfect opportunity go.

“Haaaaaaaah!!!”

This was Beelzebub's time to deliver the finishing blow. He put his whole body and mind behind a right cross, then a left elbow strike, a right high kick, and a left flying knee. He could clearly feel Alan's bones, flesh, and organs creak and snap with the hits. He finished off his attack with a right roundhouse kick.

Alan was blown away like a shell fired from a cannon. He flew across the air with tremendous momentum and crashed into the bedrock tens of meters away, forming a gigantic crater. The hole he'd formed after his crash-landing during their exchange of ultimate moves was nothing in comparison. The subsequent impact made the bedrock crumble and endless sand and boulders rained down on him. Before long, the rubble had buried him.

Despite being the attacker, Beelzebub was out of breath and almost collapsed. *I put my entire being behind those five consecutive attacks. Is it over now?*

"Not! Yet!"

Alan was still able to jump out of the rubble and charge at Beelzebub. It didn't matter that practically every bone and muscle in his body had been shattered or torn by Beelzebub's previous attack. He was coming apart at the seams; it was a complete mystery how he was alive. Somehow, resolutely, he advanced toward his enemy.

Magnificent. Beelzebub watched with sheer delight. "You are truly one of a kind, Alan Granger!"

He also broke into a sprint and met Alan head-on. They both probably had only one strike left in them. Alan gathered the remainder of his mana of light into his fist and threw a punch. Beelzebub summoned the last of his stamina and threw a punch of his own. Their fists passed by each other and headed directly for their opponent. In the end...

"Gagh!" Alan coughed blood. He'd missed.

"This was a battle for the ages, Champion."

Beelzebub's fist had pierced through Alan's heart. As the heart was the source of both mana and life itself, its destruction meant the end of this fight and Alan's life. Blood poured out of his body in a torrent as if a dam had just been

broken. The fight was decided. His eyes gradually lost color.

“Huh? Sup, Commander? Throwing in the towel already?”

Alan felt like he’d heard a cocky voice call out to him. He raised his head and saw the unforgettable face of a young man standing in the darkness.

“William.”

“Bingo! It’s yours truly, the genius super rookie, William Rayfield!” he said with a smug smirk.



“I’m sorry. My error in judgment took away your future.” The words naturally fell out of Alan’s mouth.

When he saw that young man, brimming with confidence and anticipation of what was to come, he was filled with regret. The feeling hadn’t left him since the day William died. After fulfilling *his* dream, Alan had decided to protect and raise the youngsters chasing after their own dreams, but he’d failed William.

“Ha! Well, it is what it is! Guess your brain went senile along with your body, old man,” said the impertinent youth inside Alan’s mind.

“I guess you’re right. I’ve started forgetting things recently,” Alan said with a chuckle.

“So, whatcha gonna do?” William asked as he looked straight at Alan. “Gonna retire like a frail geezer? Nothing wrong with laying off now. You’ve done enough already. Maybe the next gen will deal with the rest, yeah?”

“True, they might,” Alan replied. In fact, he couldn’t be happier if they did. “But, you know, I think I’ll hang in there for a little longer. I don’t want to have regrets like I did in my past life. That’s the one thing I wanted to avoid in this one. I’ll keep on until the end and do my best to somehow achieve the uncertain.”

When William heard those words, he quietly vanished with a small smile on his face.

“Thank you, William. You’ve given this old man the motivation to move forward.” Alan was full of gratitude toward the passionate youngster.

“No, I said not yet!” Light flooded back into Alan’s eyes.

Beelzebub’s face was the very definition of surprise as Alan grabbed the back of Beelzebub’s head with his right arm and fiercely headbutted him. A dull sound echoed as their skulls collided, and blood started dripping down their foreheads. Alan hadn’t hesitated to put all his strength behind the headbutt.

“Wha—” Beelzebub gasped as he leaned backward.

“Wargh!” Alan cried out and tightened his fist. This would be the final blow,

no turning back, with every ounce of strength remaining in his body squeezed into it.

Beelzebub observed the situation calmly. *I don't need to worry. His punch won't have enough strength to defeat me.* Alan only had a tiny bit of stamina left, so he couldn't put that much into his attack. More importantly, his heart had been severely injured; he couldn't use mana in that state. Beelzebub was in poor condition himself, but there was no way a human's bare, powerless fist could mortally wound him.

With a fierce roar, Alan's fist lit up.

Impossible! Beelzebub's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. *Mana of light?! How?! His heart has a hole in it! He physically can't produce any mana!* he thought as his eyes fell upon Alan's face. It spoke volumes: of his powerful volition, his tenacity to grasp victory, and the total determination that was carved into every inch of him.

"So, that's how it is." The truth washed over Beelzebub. The destruction of Alan's source of mana had been truly irrelevant. *Even the laws of physics are but a trivial afterthought before his willpower.*

Alan's fist, burning with his mana of light, pierced through Beelzebub's heart.



“Gah!” Beelzebub collapsed on the ground with a gaping hole in his heart. His core, the equivalent to the heart for humans, had been completely destroyed. This was a mortal wound.

“Hah, ha ha ha...” As he lay on the ground, his eyes lifted up to Alan. *You weren’t defeated...even when your heart was run through, were you?*

Alan stood imposingly, even as blood flooded from his body, and looked down at Beelzebub. The demon lord couldn’t help but think that his old enemy was an incredible man, just like that “force of will” of his.

“Then I won’t give up either, not yet,” Beelzebub said. He tried to get up, but he didn’t have the strength to stand. “I guess...that’s it. I can’t move. It would seem someone who was born all-powerful can’t possess the force of will you speak of. You’ve done magnificently, Champion. Victory is yours once again.”

With the last ounce of his remaining mana, Beelzebub cast a recovery spell on Alan’s heart. The bleeding from his heart slowed, if only temporarily. It was only a stopgap solution; if Alan didn’t get emergency treatment soon, he wouldn’t make it out alive.

“Why would you do that?” Alan asked.

“Because I want to...fight you again, of course,” Beelzebub replied. He didn’t want this to be the last time. He might have lost, but this was the best he’d felt in his life. The satisfaction was like nothing else. Next time—next time for sure. “I don’t know how long it’ll take, but...if I revive again, I’ll need you alive for another rematch.”

“I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but I’ll probably be dead by then. Humans don’t live forever,” Alan replied.

“With your willpower, I believe you can overcome even death itself,” Beelzebub said with unshakable confidence. If he were to invade the human world again, Alan would surely brush aside minor details such as old age and lifespans and come stand in the way of his army. Beelzebub was convinced.

“You’re wrong, demon lord. It’s because we humans know that our lives will

eventually come to an end that we can have so much willpower. Trust me, I came to realize that better than most. That's all there is to it," Alan said with a faraway look in his eyes, as if he were remembering some distant other life.

"I see..." Beelzebub nodded. "Your will burns bright because you are finite," he mumbled. Such a power would be forever unattainable for an immortal creature like him.

I've had everything from the moment I was born. Until he found humans, those who had the one thing he lacked. In the end, he realized that no matter how much he struggled, he would never obtain it. But that was precisely why he found it the most dazzling and beautiful thing in this world.

"Humans are...truly wonderful!" Beelzebub said with a contented expression as he crumbled to ash.

"Master Alan!" Rosetta ran toward Alan immediately after Beelzebub disappeared. "Please lie down! I will treat your wounds at once!"

"Thanks, Rosetta." Alan did as she instructed.

Then, Alan turned his face in the direction of the Seventh Kingdom, where he knew the young warriors were still fighting. The image of his old enemy was still fresh in his mind. "If you do revive again, Beelzebub, feel free to attack once more. Even if I'm no longer there, some new, bright lights will surely take you down. That's another thing humans have because our lives are finite: the ability to pass on our hopes and knowledge to the next generation."

"Your injuries get worse when you talk, Master Alan! Please be quiet!" Rosetta said.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Scolded by Rosetta, Alan went silent, relaxed, and surrendered himself to her treatment.

Chapter 4: The Young Warriors 2

“What do you want? You’re the only one among the Seven Heroes who can’t fight, aren’t you? It’s dangerous. You’d be safer if you took shelter at the rear,” Griffith, the leader of the Great Six, snapped at Yoshida, who’d intentionally left the back lines to talk to him.

Those fighting on the front lines of the Seventh Kingdom currently stood against a powerful shenmo with the power of immortality. Griffith wondered what business Yoshida—someone who was useless in a fight despite being part of the Seven Heroes—could have with him in a situation like that. He was filled with contempt, or at least half of him was. The other half felt genuine concern for Yoshida’s safety. Griffith had fully realized the extent of the New Black Star Loki’s overwhelming strength in their previous exchange of blows. If someone with a civilian’s fighting ability like Yoshida wasn’t careful, he could die just getting caught up in the combat’s aftermath.

“I know that. But I can at least offer logistical support. Won’t you let me help you out?” Yoshida said.

“You want to help?”

“My aptitude lies with the ether element. I might be weak, but support magic is my specialty.” Yoshida spread his arms and a sphere of white mana floated in front of him. Just as he’d said, it was ether elemental mana. “I’ll help you all recover your wounds. Healing Snow.”

As he spoke, white mana particles started raining down on the injured Great Six.

“Oh? My wounds...?” Strong, the one who’d been the most heavily injured, said in surprise. “Yeah, they’ve healed up just a tiiny bit!”

Other members of the Great Six also chimed in with their comments.

“I feel ever so slightly better now!”

“If you asked me whether it made any difference or not, I’d honestly be hard-

pressed for an answer.”

Griffith was also bathed in the white mana that treated his injuries only a small amount. “Mister Yoshida, you aren’t very good at magic, are you? It’s somewhat impressive that you can use magic besides Template Magic, but if you’re at this level, maybe you’d be better off sticking to ether Template Magic.”

“I’m not sure why, but I can’t get the hang of Norman’s Template Magic. That’s why I adjusted the Chanted Magic I used in the past to work without an incantation,” Yoshida replied while looking sheepish. “So, while I can use ether magic, I’m sorry to admit I’m rather mediocre at it.”

“Look, just stay back where it’s safe. I’m telling you for your own good here.” By this point, Griffith was completely fed up.

Despite that, Yoshida wouldn’t back out of trying to offer a helping hand. “Oh no, you don’t need to be so considerate of me!”

Why is this geezer so stubborn? Griffith was thankful for Yoshida’s intentions, but he’d joined the Humanity Defense Coalition in order to become a hero who protects humanity. He couldn’t stand by while an innocent man got himself killed on his watch.

“Come on, why turn him down? Every bit helps,” said the pigtailed Leen. “Thanks for the recovery magic, mister. Though I think you could practice your mana control more.”

“Uh, well, this is the result of giving it my best effort,” Yoshida replied.

“I agree with Leen. An ether user is a useful asset on the front lines, though he’ll be in ridiculous danger himself,” said Stephan, the beautiful, tall, and eccentrically dressed girl.

“Yes, I...understand the danger. Still scared out of my mind, trust me!” Yoshida said while his legs trembled like he was at the epicenter of an earthquake.

Come to think of it, even the fact that he stepped forward despite his fear makes him ten billion times better than the corrupt top brass at the Humanity Defense Coalition, Griffith thought as he studied Yoshida. “Very well. We’ll leave

the support to you, Mister Yoshida.”

“L-L-L-Leave it to me!” Yoshida nodded fervently despite the shaking in his legs increasing.

“Are you getting cold feet *now*?!” Griffith asked.

“Have you finished discussing everything, boys and girls?” Loki said before he started walking toward them.

The Great Six moved into combat formation with Yoshida positioned a few steps behind them.

“How should we handle this, Griffith?” asked the tanned and lovely Chris Almard.

“Our enemy surpasses us at practically everything, even our respective areas of expertise. To top it all off, he has that annoying immortality Ex-Skill. We first need to figure out what to do about that,” Griffith said.

“For the record, I can also use sealing magic, but it’s nowhere near powerful enough to work against a shenmo,” said Lynel, the best one at magic control among them.

“I have a plan,” Griffith said.

Although Griffith was around the same level as everyone else in terms of ability, he led the group because of his motivation and determination, as well as his excellent judgment in situations like this one.

“Unfortunately, part of it hinges on Mister Yoshida, someone we haven’t worked with before, but here’s the idea.” Griffith relayed his plan to the others using telepathy magic to make sure Loki couldn’t hear them.

“Mhm, I see, I see! Sounds like a tricky strategy to coordinate,” Leen said with a spark of excitement in her voice.

“But I know we can pull it off,” Strong said as he tightened his large fists.

“Can you do it, Mister Yoshida?” Griffith asked. He was confident that his close comrades in the Great Six would follow the plan to the letter, but could Yoshida do the same?

“Yes. Even I can handle such a small thing,” Yoshida replied without hesitation.

Griffith stood in silence for a moment.

“What’s wrong?” Yoshida asked.

“It’s nothing, don’t sweat it. All right, let’s go!” At Griffith’s command, the Great Six dispersed.

The Great Six spread out in every direction.

“I’m curious to see what kind of attack you’ll use this time,” Loki said as he gleefully stared down Griffith.

“We’ll show you what we’re made of, shenmo!” Strong was the one to make the first move. With a fierce roar, he brandished his morning star and swung the massive iron sphere attached to it by chain at Loki. The hefty mass of metal made a terrifying sound as it displaced the wind around it and approached at incredible speed.

“Come now, did you forget how you failed at the same thing earlier? I told you, I’m more powerful than you,” Loki said, sounding disappointed before he raised one arm to block the iron sphere. However, when it made contact, he was shocked to find himself pushed back a few centimeters. “Well well, what’s this? You seem a little *stronger* than before.”

The reason for Strong’s sudden strength bump stood a small distance away from them.

“Strength Boost!” Yoshida was using ether magic to enhance Strong’s physical strength.

“The old man’s magic is only helping me a bit, but the difference between you and me is small. It’s nothing like that time against that hag, Dora!” Strong raised his iron sphere again. “Even a hint of extra strength is enough!” A loud *clang* echoed as he struck Loki once more.

Loki had to block with both arms this time. He grunted in annoyance, then laughed. This time, their strength was comparable. “Impressive! Very good,

young man—but I’m still more powerful!”

When Loki focused more strength into his arms, he started pushing back the iron sphere step by step.

Strong followed suit, but even his best efforts weren’t enough to hold his ground. “Urgh, dammit, it’s as you said! Even with help from magic, my strength is no match for a shenmo like you.” However, he was smiling as he spoke. “But, you see, I’m not alone here.”

“O savage earth, tear the winds apart. Swallow the sun with sandy clouds.” Behind Strong, Leen chanted a spell.

At his current position, Strong would get caught up in Leen’s spell too, but he abruptly vanished from sight without making the slightest sound.

“You could bear to lose some weight, Strong.”

“This is all muscle!”

Stephan, the fastest in the entire coalition, had carried Strong away.

With her ally out of the way, Leen fired her powerful earth elemental spell. “Sandblast!”

“Magical Energy Boost!” Naturally, Yoshida was assisting this time as well, if only a fraction.

“Black Magic, Number Thirty-Five!” Loki fired a whirlpool of black mana at the impending sandstorm. The two spells collided, and once again, their strength was comparable, but Loki outdid her by a thin margin.

“I’m quite adept at magic myself! Water Element, Twenty-First Magic!” Chris added her own spell on top of Leen’s. While her role in the Great Six was to utilize her special ability, Weak Point—which allowed her to bestow weaknesses on enemies by touching them—she’d grown quite skilled at magic in the process of learning how to control her ability.

Leen’s sandstorm grew heavier with the addition of water and overpowered Loki’s spell.

“Marvelous!” Loki rejoiced as the sandstorm swallowed him up. “Hmm, yes, not bad at all.”

He'd left himself completely defenseless, so he'd taken some damage, but his injuries rapidly healed before their very eyes.

Even if we disregard his immortality, he's sturdy, Griffith thought.

He'd taken a direct hit from Leen and Chris's combined spell without using any kind of magical defenses, yet the damage had still been fairly low. If an ordinary demon had done the same, their body would've crumpled like a piece of paper. Not only was Loki immortal, his body was also incredibly robust. How exactly were they supposed to defeat such an enemy?

"Next, it's my turn in the spotlight!" Loki said. He ran up to Leen and Chris with tremendous speed. "You seem to be gifted at magic, young ladies, but what about physical strength?" With that, he raised his fist and threw a punch at the two girls.

"Whoa there, not so fast!" Strong appeared in Loki's way—Stephan had dropped him from the sky—and violently countered the demon.

"Oh?" Loki fell backward from the blow and soared a short distance.

"Now's your chance, you two!" Strong shouted.

Leen and Chris fired their magic at Loki again. His prone position left him no room to react, so he took the attack head-on.

"Bwa ha ha! Good, good!" He applauded their efforts even as his body crumbled and rebuilt itself in rapid succession.

"Looks like it went through," Stephan told Griffith after getting next to him.

"Yeah, although it wasn't enough to break through his immortality," he replied.

Either way... Griffith glanced over at Yoshida. *His timing for using his support magic is impeccable. The effects aren't very potent, but he casts his spells at the exact moment needed during battle, even with everyone moving helter-skelter.*

Of course, if Yoshida was exceptional at ether magic, he'd have used his best support magic on them at the beginning; his performance was no doubt below average. However, the skills he'd acquired surviving the Titanomachy were plenty of help to them.

I'll have to apologize later for telling him to stay out of this, Griffith thought. It might've been impossible for him to recognize Yoshida as a hero on the same standing as Alan, but the Villager was also a pioneer who'd survived the Titanomachy. That made him worthy of respect.

"Oh, I get it now," Loki said as his gaze fell on Yoshida. "I'm not sure exactly what you're planning, but he's the leading actor of this funny play, right? I wonder what you'll do if I aim for him," he said. Without warning, he broke into a sprint toward Yoshida.

"Oh no you don't!" Leen shouted before firing a spell at him.

Loki cackled as the spell hit him directly and didn't slow his charge at all. Part of his body had melted, but he didn't care—it would be restored in a matter of seconds. He soon reached the defenseless Yoshida, the one supporting the rest of the members, and unleashed his attack.

"You fell for it," Griffith said.

Loki collided with something he couldn't see and bounced back. "What's this? An invisible barrier?"

"When you set up protective magic in a fixed location, it's easier to make it more complex and powerful," Griffith said.

Of course, the barrier wasn't sturdy enough that Loki could never break it, but it would take him some time to crack through the unexpected obstacle.

"You've left yourself wide open," Stephan said. Before Loki could notice, she'd moved behind him with Chris in tow.

"Weak Point, Blaze Element," Chris said as she touched Loki's back. The blood she smeared on that spot changed into the shape of a flame.

"Hmph!" Loki turned around and threw a backhand chop at Chris, but Stephan immediately whisked her out of there with her speed.

"Preparations are complete," Lynel said.

Griffith nodded and placed his hands on the ground to activate his spell. "Onion Shell!" He formed a barrier out of countless thin mana layers stacked upon each other—not around them, but around Loki. The shenmo was now

surrounded by a spherical wall.

Lynel touched the barrier, which started shining. “I gave it a reflective property. Any magic that comes into contact with the barrier will be sent back the way it came.”

“What, are you trying to keep me safe? How sweet,” Loki said with a chuckle.

“You wish, moron. You’re about to experience hell,” Strong said. “I’m not very good at all this support magic stuff, but I can use the fundamental ones. Basic Gate!”

The spell Strong used created a small, one-way wormhole that linked two locations no farther than one meter apart. It didn’t have any practical combat applications under normal circumstances, but things were different with Loki surrounded by a barrier on all sides. Using the wormhole, they could send spells directly into the barrier.

“No, you couldn’t be...” Loki had finally realized their goal.

“All-consuming hellfire, cleanse the stain of sin from this world.” Leen pointed the tip of her staff at the wormhole. “Flame Tornado!” The raging flames passed through the wormhole and into the barrier.

“Graaaaaaaaagh!” Loki screamed.

The inside of the barrier soon became an inferno. Its walls reflected both the fire and heat, infinitely multiplying the temperature. Moreover, Chris had made Loki vulnerable against fire. No matter how abnormally sturdy a shenmo like him was, he couldn’t take such damage without batting an eyelid. The barrier obviously melted too, but every time the innermost layer of Onion Shell broke, Griffith created a new one on the outside, rinse and repeat.

“You said your skill makes you immortal, but there’s no such thing as true immortality! Every skill consumes mana when used. If we keep killing you until you run out of mana, you’ll die for good,” Griffith said. “Oh, and for the record, Leen and I have thoroughly trained to increase our mana capacity these past months, and we’ve prepared a mountain of mana-replenishment potions. Let’s see who runs out of mana first, shall we?”

Loki screamed as he became trapped in an endless cycle. The heat melted his

body, which automatically reformed itself, then the process repeated, again and again.

“Hot, hot, hot, I’m burning up!” he called out. However, even when he was literally being roasted alive, he laughed. “Yes, that’s great, keep going just like that! Just kill meeeeeeee!”

Loki the machine golem shenmo had been born in an underworld machine golem production factory, just like the rest of the golems.

He was an irregularity among the mass-produced combat golems in three ways: One, despite being created in a factory that produced only guaimo-class machine golems, he was a shenmo. Two, his body immediately reverted to its original shape no matter how many times he was destroyed. As for the third point...

I wanna die already.

For some reason, that thought had filled his head from the moment he’d been born, and the prospect of his death never ceased to captivate him. However, his innate Ex-Skill and his desire were at complete odds with each other.

Nevertheless, he tried various methods to achieve his goal. He lay down inside a dragon’s nest and let himself be consumed. He jumped from frighteningly high places. He threw himself in front of magic that was boasted to be the most destructive in all the underworld. He held his breath indefinitely. No matter what he tried, he couldn’t die. His unwelcome “blessing” of an Ex-Skill had granted him absolute immortality; his body returned to normal no matter what it went through.

Three hundred thousand years later, he’d tried every conceivable way to end his own life, but nothing had worked.

Turns out it’s impossible, huh? It has to be.

He’d given up hope until a particular day in the human world had changed his outlook. Just like Adek, Loki had secretly visited the human world during the Titanomachy, only *his* goal had been to find a way to die. It was then that he’d

come across something special.

Not bad. You've done a truly good job, boys and girls, Loki thought with surprising calm while his body melted and reformed itself in an endless hell.

The Great Six's combined attack had been the product of magnificent coordination. Their plan to keep killing Loki at an incredible speed until he had no more mana left to recover was well-thought-out. There was no doubt that even a shenmo would turn to dust when faced with it.

But I've already tried this.

Loki had leapt into an inferno's nest—the ultimate lava monster—which was filled to the brim with the creature's lava. The situation had been similar to this one, with his body constantly melting and recovering.

Unfortunately, I couldn't die even after submerging myself for twenty years. My Perfect Form consumes only a minuscule amount of mana. Its consumption rate is far lower than the high mana recovery rate I have as a shenmo.

Any powerful ability was accompanied by a high cost, but Loki's perfect regeneration came at almost no expense. It was a skill as exploitative as they came, though its owner couldn't be any less grateful for it.

"I suppose *that* is my only option," Loki muttered. His eyes were not locked on the people attacking him. Rather, he looked toward the location where the demon lord's castle had appeared during the Titanomachy.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Demon Lord Beelzebub had appeared along with his castle, which had become the base of operations for his army.

The ruins of that castle were now under heavy surveillance for two reasons. First, it was the location with the highest density of mana in the human world, and it used to be thought that if the demons were to invade again, they could only enter from this spot. However, this time around, the demon army had developed a new type of gate called a Character Gate that allowed a teleportation gate to manifest using an individual with powerful mana as the

center. There shouldn't have been any reason to keep this specific location under strict watch anymore.

Nevertheless, there *was* a second reason that necessitated heavy security, and it happened to be significant.

"So, this is where that *thing* is sealed. I appreciate the information," said Simon Rolek, the current chief of the Humanity Defense Coalition. He was a man in his seventies, with long, swept-back hair and a similarly long beard, both completely white. Due to his luxurious lifestyle, his body was quite rotund.

Simon was being followed by a cluster of about ten coalition soldiers he'd brought with him. He was currently at the ruins of the demon lord's castle for some undisclosed reason. Stranger still was the presence of the person next to the chief.

"You don't need to worry about the accuracy of my information, my esteemed chief. I personally witnessed the moment the seal was formed in the previous war."

Strangely enough, it was Loki the Mythical Creature of the New Seven Black Stars. He should have been fighting on the front lines of the Seventh Kingdom at the moment, so how was he also at the castle ruins?

"Still, this is most curious. You mentioned that your real body is somewhere else, but you look nothing but the genuine article," Simon told Loki.

"Ha ha ha, that's because I *am* genuine. This is simply an application of my Ex-Skill. You can consider this 'me' as a fragment of 'me,'" Loki replied. That explained why his mana density was particularly low despite his shenmo status.

Simon's group kept moving forward as the two men chatted, until they reached the guards keeping the castle under watch.

"Halt!" one of the guards called. "Are you...Chief Simon of the Humanity Defense Coalition?"

"Precisely. Your hard work is appreciated. You may stand down."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we cannot do that. We're here under direct orders of Her Imperial Majesty herself."

The guards posted at the castle ruins were under the jurisdiction of the First and Seventh Kingdoms, not the Humanity Defense Coalition. Therefore, they had no reason to withdraw even if Simon were to give the order.

“That simply won’t do,” Simon said before raising his arm. In response, the coalition soldiers behind him aimed their guns at the guards and fired.

“Argh! Wh-Why?” the guard cried.

“It’s unacceptable for the war to end. If humanity wins again, even more people will call our reason for existing into question,” Simon said as he passed by the guards bleeding to death on the ground. “The war against the demon invaders simply must continue.”

Once they arrived at a room farther inside the castle, they found what they were looking for.

“My goodness, this is...” Simon said in sheer surprise.

“It’s what you imagine. It once took all Seven Heroes to seal away this disaster personified. This is Aria, commonly called ‘Town Girl A,’” Loki explained.

Before them, a lone girl lay asleep, sealed inside an enormous, seven-colored crystal.

“She looks like a perfectly ordinary girl. Still, I can sense tremendous mana from this sealing magic, though it feels...dark. It’s the same kind of mana you possess, Sir Loki,” Simon said as he studied Aria.

“That’s correct. She is a colossal mass of demon mana.” Loki, too, was watching her. “If that mana is released, mana much like the underworld’s will spread across the entirety of the human world. As a result, demons beyond the demon lord will be able to open gates to travel between our worlds.”

“Indeed. Even if the Seven Heroes *had* defeated her, this biological weapon would have spread demon mana across the entire world, so they were forced to seal her away.”

According to Loki, the teleportation method the demon army currently used—the Character Gate—required the demon lord for the preparatory procedure.

If the demon lord was defeated in this war and disappeared for good this time, there would be no more demon invasions, at least not until a shenmo of Beelzebub's caliber appeared again. Even the underworld didn't often give rise to an outlandish, unmatched genius like him.

Therein lay the problem. Chief Simon *wanted* it to be trivial for demons to come to the human world, because without an enemy, the Humanity Defense Coalition would become obsolete. A large-scale invasion like the current demon invasion was a real problem for him, but more restrained attacks with only some harm brought to humanity would be ideal.

Simon chuckled at the thought. "With this, our status will remain secure."

"And I'll be able to easily sell goods from the underworld across the entire human world," Loki said.

"We shall cooperate with you, Sir Loki. You're a very practical individual."

While the two of them counted their chickens before they hatched, the blue piece of the crystal broke.

"It appears the detached unit is doing its job properly," Simon said with a grin.

The Third Kingdom was shorthanded because of its fight against the demon army, so Simon had sent a unit of coalition soldiers to its castle. The crack on the crystal was a sign that they'd just destroyed the underground seal stone.

"Not even the Seven Heroes know this, but the Seventh Kingdom's seal stone isn't underneath its royal castle. The Seventh Kingdom's king placed a fake one there. 'To fool your enemies you must first fool your friends,' and all that. The real one is right here," Loki said. He poured mana into one of the walls of the room Aria was sealed in, and the wall slid to the side to reveal a secret storage space. A silver-colored stone was inside—the Seventh Kingdom's seal stone.

"I see! So, this is a complete blind spot," Simon said. "The seal stones need to regularly send mana through the ley lines to maintain the seal, but nothing prevents you from placing a stone next to the seal itself."

"I'm going to break the stone now. Get ready," Loki said.

Simon gave a signal to his men, who aimed their anti-demon guns at the girl.

“Will these weapons really be sufficient?” Simon asked.

“Yes. I might have called her a mass of mana, but her body remains that of a regular human girl’s. She’s similar to our Master Unicorn in that regard. If you execute her while she’s still unconscious, right after the seal has lifted, she won’t have the time to struggle,” Loki replied.

“And the only thing left will be the underworld mana flowing from her corpse. Then I see no cause for alarm.”

“Exactly. All right, here I go. Take that!” Loki raised his right fist and smashed the silver-colored seal stone to bits.

A moment later, the silver part of the crystal around Aria broke. Large cracks soon forked like lightning across the rest of the crystal, until the whole thing shattered with an earsplitting noise.

A girl who looked around thirteen years old emerged from the now-broken seal. Outside of the crystal, it was easier to examine her. She had long black hair, and though she was yet plain and immature, it was easy to imagine her growing up into a beauty. However, she was so thin—or more accurately, emaciated—that her limbs seemed like they could break as easily as twigs.

Even Simon had his apprehensions about watching such a young girl be disposed of, but he did everything for the everlasting prosperity of the Humanity Defense Coalition.

“Fire!” he commanded.

Several gunshots echoed in unison and the bullets rained down on the unconscious girl, but right as they were about to hit her, they were obstructed by some invisible force.

“Wh-What the hell is that?!” Simon shouted in shock.

It was challenging to describe the true nature of the thing stopping the bullets. If Simon were to try and express it in a single word, it would be “noise.” It was a mysterious energy, as if the world itself was some kind of picture muddled by black paint. It was impossible to identify what kind of mana it was. It didn’t fit under any of the six human elements that Simon was familiar with, nor any of the six colors of demon magic. If he had to choose, it might be most

comparable to Alan's mana of light, a unique element, but it was too ominous, too dissimilar.

Either way, Simon couldn't afford to remain surprised forever. They had to kill her before she woke up.

"Fire again!" His men obeyed, but no matter how many times they tried, the bullets were blocked by the noise and vanished before they could reach her. "Wh-What's going on here?! Sir Loki! Didn't you say it would be simple to kill her while she's unconscious?!"

Loki simply chuckled. He'd laughed uproariously several times on their way there, but this time was different. It was like his deepest desire had finally been satisfied.

"That is her Miasma of Rejection, an ability that surpasses all others! It's a flawless wall that protects her body by indiscriminately eliminating anything that comes into contact with it," Loki said.

The girl finally cracked her eyes open. They were like a bottomless swamp that reflected something other than this world.



“No...”

No sooner had she muttered that word than her Miasma of Rejection spread around her and enveloped everyone present.

“Come on!” Griffith said in frustration. “How much longer can this bastard keep regenerating?!”

An entire hour had passed since they’d trapped Loki inside a barrier filled with never-ending flames. He’d been laughing the entire time, even as his body repeatedly burned to ashes.

“We can keep going for a while longer thanks to our potions, but...do you think we might be in trouble?” Leen, the one supplying the flames inside the barrier, said as sweat poured down her body. She was right; if they couldn’t kill Loki before she or Griffith ran out of mana, things would turn ugly.

Loki brimmed with expectation. *Heh heh heh. Almost. Just a little longer.*

He’d received word from the fragment he’d sent to the castle ruins, and it had completely vanished instead of returning to him to regenerate. His wish would at last be granted after three hundred thousand years.

“Come on, hurry up, don’t keep me waiting,” he murmured.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Yoshida said. His years of combat experience warned him that something horrible was about to happen—and they were right on the money.

“Hey, who’s that girl over there?” said one of the Seventh Kingdom’s soldiers near the back of the regiment.

Walking toward them was a lone girl dressed in nothing but rags.

“There she is.” The moment Loki laid eyes upon her, his face broke into a wide smile.

“No...way...” Yoshida was almost struck dumb.

“The heck, what’s a little girl doing in a place like this?” Strong asked.

“Forget about why she’s here, what even *is* she? Is that thing really human?”

Stephan said as she broke into a cold sweat.

Everyone could tell from the moment they saw her: something about her was off. Her presence writhed with an uncanny and dreadful aura, even more so than the shenmo before them.

“Everyone, get out of here, now! This is no time to stand and fight!” screamed Yoshida, the one who knew the girl’s true identity.

By all rights, the Great Six shouldn’t have listened to Yoshida’s warning, not when they’d managed to corner a shenmo and had the opportunity to kill him. However, they’d all felt *something* unfamiliar in the air, and they’d grown to trust him in the earlier battle, so they gave up on their attack and retreated. They left Loki—his body still melting and regenerating—as the girl approached his position.

“Ooh, at long last. Will you be my death?” Loki said. He raised his reformed right hand and fired a pitch-black beam of mana at the girl. He didn’t hold back an iota of his immense shenmo strength. Nevertheless, right before hitting her, the beam was swallowed up by noise and erased in an instant.

The girl turned toward Loki as if she’d only just noticed his existence. A grotesque cracking sound rang out. From her back, around her right shoulder blade, sprouted rainbow-colored wings as dainty as a butterfly’s. They were beautiful, but glowed with an ominous and otherworldly light that evoked an instinctive fear in anyone watching.

Loki spread both arms in a welcoming gesture and grinned from ear to ear as he looked at the girl. “Yes! Come on! Come on! *Do it!*”

The girl pointed her tiny hand toward Loki. Around her, an enormous amount of noise rose with a deafening sound. Her Miasma of Rejection rushed forward like a dark, raging river and swallowed him up along with everything around him.

“Whoa!” The shock wave was enough to blow away Yoshida and the Great Six. Not even a shenmo like Loki could resist when he was caught right in the center.

Ahh, I’m disappearing and not regenerating, Loki thought. He closed his eyes

and lost himself in the feeling of the noise gnawing away at his body, erasing his very existence. As the last traces of his form wore away, his five senses started to follow suit. *So this...is death? Nice. It's peaceful. Not too bad.*

His wish granted, the last of the New Seven Black Stars vanished from this world with a satisfied smile on his face.

Final Battle: Villager, Who Somehow Survived, versus Town Girl A

Two childhood friends bound by a tragic fate. Ordinary man, bring salvation to the soul of the girl who's transformed into wayward destruction itself.

That grassland on the Seventh Kingdom's front line spread out as far as the eye could see.

In mere seconds, it was turned into a barren wasteland, along with everything present—Loki the shenmo, the military fortifications, and nature itself. All were swallowed up by the noise and expunged.

"Aria..." Yoshida, who'd miraculously escaped the noise, stared in horror at the girl who stood alone in the heart of destruction that extended for several kilometers. He didn't think he'd ever see her again. Not in this life. Their meeting during the Titanomachy should have been their last, because there was no more *need* for them to come face-to-face with one another.

"I have to do it," he said. He stood up and drew a knife, a perfectly ordinary one with a worn handle, from his breast pocket. "I'm probably the only one who can kill Aria. None of the others could do it, not against her."

Her eyes were the same as *that* day, filled with nihilism as deep as the ocean and a hint of loneliness.

The moment Yoshida looked into her eyes, he took off screaming, the sound trailing after him as he ran.

I can't do it. I haven't changed at all. I'm still exactly like I was back then.

The extremely average boy who'd been born in the Seventh Kingdom's countryside and the girl had met by sheer coincidence.

Yoshida was always weak. His reflexes were poor and he wasn't particularly smart either. Above all else, he was awfully meek, which made him the

preferred target of the neighborhood bullies.

That day, he was crying because the other kids had focused on him as a target in their game of dodgeball, like they usually did. If he didn't want to play, he could've said no; if they angered him, he could've started a fistfight. However, Yoshida wasn't brave enough to do either. One could call him a gentle soul, but the truth was less kind—he was afraid of people hurting him if he did anything to push back.

What a weak and pathetic boy he knew himself to be. The frustration he directed toward himself far exceeded any he harbored toward his bullies. If his father saw him like this, he would scold him by saying something like, "Stop crying over every little thing. Act like a man!"

For that reason, Yoshida hid himself away in an abandoned church at the outskirts of the village and cried until his tears had run dry. However, on that day, someone else was already there.

"Oh?" she said.

A girl close to his age that he'd somehow never seen around the village was there. Her long black hair was carefully groomed and glossy, and while she looked both cute and sweet, something about her overall appearance gave her a refined air.

Yoshida stared dumbfounded at the girl for a moment, until she noticed him and spoke.

"Are you crying?"

"No, I, erm..." He stumbled over his words, then tried to wipe his tears a little too late. He didn't want a girl to see him crying like a baby.

However, the girl seemed unbothered by it. "What a waste," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Look how pretty the stars in the night sky are." She pointed up as she said it.

The stars were certainly visible that night, but it was the same night sky Yoshida had seen since the day he'd been born. He couldn't recognize anything special in them, but the girl viewed that commonplace sight with sparkling eyes.

“It’s not just the night sky. The sea, rivers, forests, the land, as well as the people and animals who live here...the world is filled with beauty. Your eyes will blur if you cry, and you won’t be able to see them as they are,” she’d said with a smile.

Yoshida was captivated by her glittering eyes that believed in the beauty of the world.

“My name is Aria. What about you?”

“I’m Yoshida.”

“Uh-huh. Say, wanna watch the stars together? It’s a waste not to share such a pretty scene with someone.”

That was their first encounter. A memory of the first love between Yoshida, who had yet to become one of the Seven Heroes, and Aria, who had yet to become a disaster.

“Inconceivable! The seal on Town Girl A has been broken?!” Empress Margaret Whitehyde of the First Kingdom shouted as she listened to an urgent report. Thanks to certain members of the Seven Heroes, the right of command in this war had been recovered from the Humanity Defense Coalition and given to her, so she was serving as supreme general.

Margaret stood a little taller than the average woman at 170 centimeters, with long limbs and a pleasing figure. Most noticeable of all was her bosom, tightly pushed up in her purple royal garments. No man in the world could keep his eyes away from them. Despite the temptation, her gallant gaze, framed by her imploring eyebrows and long eyelashes, exuded such dignity that most viewers instinctively prostrated themselves before her.

Despite her stately beauty and looks much more youthful than her actual age of thirty-eight, anyone could tell that she was in an utter panic. She’d received a report of their sixth consecutive victory not too long ago, so she’d been talking to everyone in a celebratory tone since she’d thought the fight in the Seventh Kingdom was the only one left. The festive mood had vanished in an instant.

“You must be joking, yes? I’d like to consider myself a forgiving leader, but

even I can lose my temper,” Margaret said with imploring eyes to the knight who’d delivered the report.

“N-No, I’m afraid it’s the truth. There *is* a silver lining, as the last of the New Seven Black Stars was eliminated by Town Girl A’s attack,” the knight said.

“Well, that’s good news, yes.”

With the last Black Star gone, every gate to the human world should be closed, and the demons would vanish back to the underworld as a result. Victory against the demon army was theirs.

“But, with the disaster revived, the war is far from over,” interrupted Alan, who’d just arrived in the throne room.

“Y-You shouldn’t move around yet, Master Alan!” Rosetta protested.

Alan was peppered with bandages from head to toe. He’d rushed over in the middle of his treatment as soon as he’d heard the report. The fact that he could stand now, after being carried back to the castle with his heart almost destroyed, was a testament to his unwavering willpower. However, that also indicated that the current situation was grave enough to necessitate him displaying his willpower in the first place.

“Fill me in on the details,” Alan told the knight.

“Uh, yes, sir!” The knight activated the magical device that projected images on the wall.

A scene straight out of a nightmare appeared on the wall. The lifeless wasteland depicted had likely been a town full of people only a short while ago. It must have been a peaceful, comfortable place with man-made structures that coexisted with nature. Now, the buildings had been reduced to rubble, all living beings had vanished without a trace, and the abundant greenery had shriveled into nothing.

In the center of everything, a lone girl radiated noise in terrible waves with each step.

“Town Girl A is advancing from the Seventh toward the First Kingdom. She’s already destroyed over twenty towns and villages, and the casualties are

estimated to be close to two million. Our nearby forces have moved to intercept her, but...”

The display on the wall shifted to show a unit composed of soldiers from every kingdom with the Humanity Defense Coalition’s forces playing the central part. They fired at the skinny girl using the coalition’s latest model of anti-demon turret. Nonetheless, the shells that could fell even robust demons were blocked by the noise protecting her. Her Miasma of Rejection counterattacked by washing over them like a torrent full of choking mud, swallowing the entire unit and the town itself instantaneously.

Nothing was left after the dust settled.

“Wh-What on earth was that? An entire town vanished in a second!” The ministers serving as strategy advisors by Margaret’s side were stunned.

“Dammit all, I knew they would end up like that. Stop the attack. I doubt you can stop that girl for even a millisecond.” Alan ground his teeth in frustration as he watched the lives of countless young soldiers being snuffed out right in front of him.

“I’ve heard about her from Alan, but I never imagined the extent of the devastation she could cause,” Margaret said.

“This is why Beelzebub and his army were aiming for the seal stones. They wanted to revive this disaster and let her single-handedly destroy humanity. Since she’s human herself, she’d pass away from old age one day, and then they could do as they pleased with our empty world. That was the gist of their plan, although Beelzebub himself had no interest in our land,” Alan explained.

“E-Either way, what kind of measures should we take?” the knight asked, despair evident in his voice. “Town Girl A is approaching our First Kingdom. At this rate, we estimate she will reach here around noon tomorrow. This is the kingdom with the highest population, so if she rampages here...”

“It will be catastrophic. I don’t understand why, but that girl always moves toward the location with the most humans present. When she arrives, she erases every last one of them, like she’s wiping the whole place clean. I’m afraid the casualties will be on an unheard-of scale,” Alan said.

The entirety of humanity would eventually meet the same fate at her hands. According to Yoshida, the girl had ended up in that state at only twelve years old. After that, her aging had slowed to a crawl. In a span of five years, she'd physically aged by only one. In other words, if she lived to be fifty in terms of physical age, 185 years would've passed for everyone else. Would it be possible for humanity to stay on the run for that long, from a monster that could reduce an entire city to nothing in an instant?

"That's why I'll go," Alan said.

Margaret seemed surprised, but also like she'd known what was coming. "Are your injuries all right?"

"Not in the slightest, but I can't do nothing, can I? This is my final task."

"Ha! I heard that your heart was crushed to bits, but you never change, do you?" said the towering Dora Alexandra, a woman of pure muscle, as she entered the room. But she wasn't alone: Kevin, Derek, Norman, and Isabella—everyone in the Seven Heroes save for Yoshida was accounted for.

"Take us along for the ride."

"Heh, like you're one to talk. I heard you were in critical condition," Alan replied.

Every hero had bandages wrapped around one place or another, excluding Isabella, who'd won her fight through a game of chance.

"Ooh! The Seven Heroes have gathered to fight together!" one of the ministers said.

"Sir Yoshida is missing, but he was only made a hero by sheer luck. These six are the essential members," another added.

"With their powers combined, they can defeat even that disaster," said yet another.

"That's not true." Alan shook his head. "In the previous war, that girl appeared at the demon lord's castle after Beelzebub was defeated and the gate was closed. Do you understand what that means? She appeared at the decisive battle, where we had all gathered together."

"I'm not sure I understand your point," a minister said.

"Yoshida was absent then too. Even with the six of us together, we had to resort to sealing her away. It was not a clean victory."

At that, the ministers raised their voices in an incomprehensible commotion.

"Either way!" Alan said above the noise. His voice was unwavering. "We *will* figure something out, just like last time. One way or another."

Yoshida's everyday life had changed ever since his meeting with Aria.

"Good morning, Aria," he said.

"Oh, good morning to you too, Yoshida," she said.

"What are you doing today?"

"I'm going to the river over that way." She pointed. "I want to try catching fish with my hands."

"With your *bare* hands? I think that'll be *pretty* hard."

Whenever Yoshida had the time, he met Aria at the abandoned church and joined in her games. Aria was a master at playing, or more accurately, a master at finding things enjoyable. She could have fun with every bit of nature out in the sticks, things Yoshida had only found gloomy before, as he'd grown accustomed to seeing them every day since he was born.

"Aha ha! Look how clear the water is!" Aria was delighted just from stepping in the river. "Come on, Yoshida, hurry up!"

"You always look like you're having a good time, Aria."

"I am! There're so many pretty things in the world. How can I not have fun when I'm surrounded with the things I love?" she said with her arms spread wide. Those eyes, as clear as the blue sky, reflected a wonderful world that could go on forever, just like she said. "Besides, I have you too."

She fidgeted as a tinge of red spread across her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“Nothing, I’m fine— Take that!” Without warning, she splashed him with water.

“Yeep!”

“Ha ha ha, listen to you!”

“Oh, you’re gonna get it now.”

Thus began the water splashing wars.

Boy, this is the best, Yoshida thought. He felt warm just by being around her. He was still a coward and painfully awkward, but he felt his mood lighten when he was with her.

“Guess what? I’ll get to go to school soon too!” Aria said as they were resting under a tree, their game finished.

“Really?!”

Aria had moved to Yoshida’s village from a faraway town because of her father’s government work. She’d been studying with a private tutor instead of attending school since she was old enough to learn.

“I asked my parents and they said yes. Now I can play with you at school too!”

Thanks to her bright and cheerful personality, Aria fit right in at school. Yoshida was swept along by her current, and the bullying against him lessened. Each day, her life was filled with smiles. A beautiful world would continue to reflect in her eyes—that’s what everyone expected.

However, things started to change two years later.

Yoshida was worried because Aria had looked down in recent days, so he asked what was wrong.

“Lately, my mom and dad are always fighting,” she said. “Mom says she misses our life in the town. She liked parties with fancy people and expensive food, and then my dad doesn’t only love my mom, he also loves our maid. He did a bunch of naughty things with her.”

“Aria...”

Yoshida couldn’t say much in return. The secrets Aria confided in him were

too heavy for a seven-year-old boy to process.

Perhaps that was the moment she started losing sight of the beauty in the world around her.

The changes in the world around Aria didn't stop there. She also started getting bullied at school. As often happens in closed communities, the boy dating the most popular girl in school found his eyes wandering to Aria. At first, the girl and her many friends simply gave Aria the cold shoulder, but the situation later devolved into harassment like hiding her things, and eventually into actual violence.

All of that led up to an inciting incident.

A girl had been pulling Aria's hair and was about to punch her pretty face when the girl's arm suddenly *disappeared*. Since no one at the time realized the cause of this shocking event, there was a huge fuss around the mystery.

Yoshida alone knew what had really happened.

"I saw something strange and heard a weird sound," Aria told him. "This black thing splattered onto her, and it made this creepy sound. She tried to shake it off, but her arm was already gone. Let me show you."

She picked up a branch and tried to stab her arm with it. The moment it came into contact with her, a repulsive black static gushed out of her body and the branch broke into pieces before vanishing for good.

Yoshida was at a loss for words; he'd never seen anything like it.

"What...what's happening to me?" Aria asked with tears in her eyes.

"Aria!" Yoshida pulled her delicate body into a hug. "I'll be by your side no matter what happens. You can rely on me for anything."

"Thank you, Yoshida."

I want to get strong, for her sake, he thought. Strong enough that she'd have no reason to cry when she was by his side.

Over the next five years, Aria's world became gradually consumed by the noise. Her classmates, the villagers, her parents, and finally even the natural scenery she loved so much all started to look and sound like unpleasant noise to

her. The only thing Yoshida could do was stand by her side.

Once the villagers realized she was dangerous, they regarded her with apprehension and tried to ostracize her, but to no avail. The invincible miasma that protected Aria blocked all attacks and retaliated without mercy. Everyone in the village besides Yoshida wondered how they could ever exterminate this perilous entity.

Then the fateful day came.

Yoshida had gone shopping in the neighboring village. He was already twelve, old enough to take such a trip; in his village, kids were expected to help out by that age. He'd left early in the morning, crossed a mountain, finished his errands, and returned—to nothing.

“What happened here?”

The village Yoshida had been born and raised in had vanished. The buildings, people, and even the abundant nature had completely disappeared and been replaced by a vast wasteland. A young girl stood alone in the middle of it all.

“Aria!”

“Yoshida...”

When Aria heard Yoshida's voice, she turned around to look at him. Tears ran down her face and a tremendous amount of noise emanated out of every part of her body.

Yoshida would only learn this later, but apparently, the villagers had summoned soldiers from the kingdom and tried to kill Aria earlier that day. Their intermediary had been Aria's father. Her mother—who'd already divorced her father and was living apart from them—hadn't voiced any opposition either. The hired soldiers and villagers had mercilessly attacked Aria, resulting in the complete erasure of the village.

But as Yoshida still knew none of that, he could only stand and stare in complete bewilderment.

“What should I do, Yoshida? Everyone disappeared,” Aria said. She started walking toward him, staggering like a sleepwalker, tears still spilling from her

eyes. “Everything looks like noise to me now,” she said in a trembling voice. “It’s always so loud, this constant buzzing. It never stops!”

“Aria...”

“Hey, Yoshida, will you do me a favor?” She took out a knife from her breast pocket—it had been part of her father’s collection—and handed it to Yoshida. Her eyes were imploring. “Please...just kill me.”

Yoshida was so overcome with shock he couldn’t reply.

“Every last thing will soon become noise. Anything covered in it can’t hurt me, but it hasn’t covered you for some reason. Probably because I like you—oh, I went and said it.”

“I...” Yoshida had no room to feel any happiness despite the confession of love he’d just received. He couldn’t even tell her that he felt the same.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be able to see you, so please, kill me.” Aria pointed the knife in Yoshida’s hand at her throat.

“I...” His hand trembled. He already knew that someone who wasn’t covered in noise could touch Aria without interference. He was even touching her hand at that very moment. Her protective noise wouldn’t even let her hurt herself, but *he* could kill her, just as she wished.

She’s right. Only I can do this.

Aria was a gentle girl. At this rate, everything in her sight would be enveloped in noise and she’d lose her mind, turning into a vile monster that erased the people around her in her quest to stop the buzzing. Yoshida didn’t want to see that happen to her, so he had to do this now.

Right then and there, he had to grant this pure and sweet girl’s earnest wish.

“Haah...haah...haah...” He could hardly breathe as nausea washed over him. He mustered every last ounce of his resolve and gripped the knife tightly. Its blade dug into the surface of her skin, and red blood trickled down her throat.

At that moment, Aria smiled a lonely smile.

That was too much for him. Yoshida ran away screaming, tripping over himself as he pounded his feet with everything he had, too scared to look back.

“Dammit! You worthless coward!” Yoshida shouted at himself. “Why couldn’t you grant Aria’s wish?! How much of a pathetic weakling are you?!”

After running away from Aria, he’d moved in with relatives in the neighboring village, but he still condemned himself every single day. He couldn’t forgive himself for his cowardice, and wished he could stop being so weak and frail.

He’d searched for news of Aria, but her whereabouts remained unknown. If she’d moved around in that state, trying to erase all the unpleasant noise around her, it would’ve surely caused an uproar. Perhaps she’d found a way to die, or how to escape from her condition and live a tranquil life. Yoshida hoped the latter was the case, as unlikely as he thought the odds of it were.

Yoshida eventually volunteered to join the war against the demon army, but his aptitude was unfortunately only for the supportive ether element. Moreover, his mana reserves and output, sense for combat, *and* reflexes were awful. He wasn’t cut out to be a heroic figure valiantly fighting on the front lines.

Maybe that was just an excuse. After all, there was a man named Alan Granger who excelled on the battlefield despite having even less talent than Yoshida. With his fierce courage and resolution, Alan racked up military achievements. In the end, the reason Yoshida didn’t fight at the front was because of his own cowardice and weakness.

Even so, running away is the one mistake I don’t want to repeat.

Yoshida tagged along with Alan or other heroes and did all sorts of odd jobs for them. Powerful people like them confronted countless dangerous locations and strong enemies like it was second nature. Each time, he was frightened to his very core. The thought of running never once left his mind. Despite that, he managed to make it to the decisive battle at the demon lord’s castle, but it was only to protect some worthless sense of pride. He felt that running away at that point would make him look so pathetic he’d want to crawl in a hole and die.

It was there that fate once again knocked at Yoshida’s door.

“Alan has finally done it,” Yoshida mumbled to himself. He’d just received the

report of Alan's victory over Beelzebub at the support base built in a clearing in front of the demon lord's castle—not that waiting inside the base guaranteed his safety.

“Grah!” A demon with immense mana burst through a nearby wall. He was Zircus, one of the Seven Black Stars, an imposing centaur guaimo with a body over five meters long.

“Impossible...! Lord Beelzebub was defeated by the likes of you humans? I refuse to accept it!” Many of the Black Stars of the Titanomachy had practically worshipped Beelzebub, but Zircus took his faith further than most. “With the gate destroyed, we don't have long in the human world. The only thing to do now is kill as many humans as possible and offer them as tribute to Lord Beelzebub!”

“Damn! This is bad!” Yoshida was the only support personnel who'd come all the way to the demon lord's castle, but he didn't have any means of fighting that he could boost with his own magic. His only option was to buy some time and escape.

Remarkably, as that thought passed through Yoshida's mind, a lone girl emerged from deep inside the forest.

“Hmm? Who's this little girl?” Zircus eyed her with suspicion.

Meanwhile, Yoshida was completely rooted to the spot. “Aria...”

It had already been five years since the last time they'd met, but she looked practically the same. However, those clear eyes that had once found beauty in every part of the world around her were muddy.

“I don't know how you made it here, but you'll be my first tribute. Prepare to die, inferior creature!” Zircus swung his three-meter-long axe at the slender girl.

The rest was history. Her Miasma of Rejection rushed out like a raging river and erased Zircus from existence. The other Seven Heroes felt something was off and rushed to band together to take down Aria. Yet, they couldn't defeat her. Instead, they used the Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array, the most powerful sealing magic known to humanity, and sealed her away.

Yoshida could do nothing at the time. He was blown away the moment Aria

erased Zircus and could only watch in a daze from a distance as Alan and the other heroes fought her. While he had multiple bone fractures, he *was* able to move—physically, at least. The reason he still couldn't act this time lay elsewhere.

Despair took over Yoshida's heart. He hadn't changed at all. He'd thought he'd improved a little after managing to accompany Alan and the others, but he was still the same person deep down. His childhood friend lived in a world engulfed by noise, constantly suffering from the buzzing in her ears and forced to slaughter people against her will. She'd been right there in front of him, but all he could do was watch.

In the end, the weak boy from the countryside had remained weak.

"Things ended up the same this time too, huh? Including Yoshida's absence, unfortunately," Alan said as he walked through a forest with the rest of the Seven Heroes, bar Yoshida. During the Titanomachy, that girl had *also* appeared right after they'd defeated Beelzebub and thought everything was over.

He glanced back. "Though we do have significantly worse injuries than last time, not to mention our age."

"You're the one in the worst shape here, bud!" said Norman Lockwood, History's Strongest Sage. He'd dropped the facade he'd built for himself after the Titanomachy and returned to his raucous looks and manner of speech. As a result of his fierce magic battle, his body was covered in burns, and though his mana had fully recovered, it was still weakened.

"I'll have you know I feel young as a spring chicken," said Dora Alexandra the Godfist Saint. Though not to the extent of Alan's, she'd also survived a brush with death in her hand-to-hand fight with Georgios. She was certainly full of energy, but her footing was a little unsteady.

"Likewise. Besides, I only endured injuries the last time," said Isabella Stuart the Final Form Villainess. In a stroke of luck, she was essentially unharmed, though if one looked closely, they'd see a hint of fatigue on her face. That demonstrated how hard her battle had been on her nerves—Alan knew just how powerful she was in battles of wits, so he could guess how formidable her

opponent must have been. But in terms of physical injuries, she'd fared far better than last time, when she'd fought on the front line with her lightning magic.

"Oh man, why is this happening again? This is a serious pain in my rear," said Kevin Laphicet the Unrivaled Gadabout. He was as listless as ever, but the wounds riddling his body and missing right arm were a testament to the deadly fight he'd experienced. Despite his complaints, he'd joined the others.

"I don't really care what, I just need to do anything to keep my mind distracted," said Derek Henderson the Exiled Dark Priest. His usual sinister presence had receded and revealed an air of loneliness. Given that Derek usually brought his wife along everywhere but there was no sign of her, Alan could more or less guess the situation.

"Thank you for sticking with me to the end, though you each have your own problems to deal with," Alan told his reliable comrades. He bowed.

"Now, let's go! We have one last job to take care of," he said before facing forward.

A single girl was moving toward them in the distance. She looked to be around thirteen years old and was dressed in nothing more than tatters. Her eyes, which seemed like they concentrated all of the world's chaos and nihilism inside them, had fallen on the heroes.

Alan once again drew the sword he'd received from Margaret. The rest of the Seven Heroes followed with their own combat preparations.

"Yoshida has told me everything, little girl. I know that none of this is your fault, but I can't let you destroy humanity, so I must end your life here. I'm sorry."

The final battle was about to begin.

Yoshida arrived at one of the Seventh Kingdom's military bases completely out of breath.

"Mister Yoshida! You're safe!" A soldier ran up to Yoshida as soon as he saw

him. “I heard that the disaster’s seal was broken and the front line was blown to bits, so I was worried.”

“Y-Yeah, that’s true, but I made it out somehow,” Yoshida replied. Privately, he thought it was only because he’d immediately run away.

“The rest of the Seven Heroes are heading to stop the disaster as we speak.” The soldier pointed at an image displayed on the wall thanks to Norman’s magic. It showed Aria facing Alan’s group. “Will you be joining them, Mister Yoshida?”

“No, I’ll pass. I may look fine, but I’ve broken several bones. I can hardly walk.”

“You could always receive some first aid recovery magic.”

“N-Nah, it’s okay. It’s not like I’ll be of much help even if I go.”

Yoshida wasn’t lying about the broken bones. But, even if they were restored to normal, the most he could do was provide support with his mediocre ether magic.

You never run away, do you, Alan? Yoshida thought as he stared at the image.

Alan had experienced Aria’s hopeless power firsthand in the past, yet he still decided to face her. Unlike Yoshida, he’d always been strong; the same was true for the other heroes too, but Alan especially. Even though Alan could be said to be worse than Yoshida in terms of raw talent, he’d eventually become stronger than anyone thanks to his steady efforts and countless do-or-die battles on the front lines. Courage, determination, and the mental fortitude to never run away had transformed Alan into the man he was today.

Yoshida had none of that. He’d enlisted in the hope of changing his weak self, but he still ended up running away with his tail between his legs no matter what.

“I’m sorry, Aria. The one you fell in love with is a pathetic excuse of a man,” Yoshida mumbled while squeezing his fist hard enough to draw blood.

The girl had been suffering, struggling. The world she saw was completely

covered in nauseating noise, and the constant buzzing cacophony in her ears didn't allow her a single moment of rest.

This girl was a gentle soul. She knew that erasing that noise would take the things that were precious to her—or should have been precious, at least—along with it, so at first, she'd secluded herself in a place with no one but herself. That way, there would be no one there for her to hurt. But the noise never stopped. Day in, day out, it grew louder and louder, covering ever larger parts of her world.

Please, I beg you...be quiet!

The incessant, unpleasant noise—both visual and aural—eventually broke her spirit.

“Shut up...”

Her only wish was for it to disappear from around her, to finally give her peace and quiet. So, the girl erased the noise, and transformed into a monster. She'd long since forgotten what the things that appeared as noise to her originally were; she might have even forgotten who she was. All she wanted now was to get rid of the noise. She acted with that sole goal in mind, and in doing so, had become destruction and devastation itself.

Now, six massive sources of noise stood before her. A deafening buzzing spread around her, making her sick to her stomach.

I have to erase it.

All in order to return to a warm, quiet world, like the one where she'd played with that boy.

“Here it comes!” Alan shouted.

Not even a second later, a wave of Miasma of Rejection spouted out of Aria's body and assaulted the six heroes. Of course, none of them were amateurs who'd simply stand there and take it. They swiftly leapt away before their original position was swallowed up. The massive quantity of miasma rushed onward like a tsunami for several kilometers and eradicated everything in its

path.

“How terrifying,” Kevin said with cold sweat running down his body.

“Yeah, and all that with only three wings,” Alan said. He pointed at Aria’s back. Three rainbow-colored wings shining ominously grew unevenly out of her back. “Just like last time, her Miasma of Rejection grows stronger with every new wing.”

Alan looked to Isabella. She and Derek had split away from the rest of the group. Each quickly drew a magic circle on the ground and started pouring mana into it.

“Six high-grade magic circles surrounding the target are necessary to set up the Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array. It will take us quite some time,” Isabella said.

“I know, but please hurry. Last time, we barely managed to seal Town Girl A when she’d reached eight wings. If we don’t move quickly, she’ll keep growing more of them, so we have to finish this before things get out of control,” Alan said.

While Alan was talking, Aria’s Miasma of Rejection aimed for him, but Dora bashed it from the side with a club and deflected it.

“Your brute strength never disappoints. Strongest human indeed,” Alan told his comrade. It was hard to believe she’d just stopped an all-erasing miasma with brute strength.

“No, it got me a bit,” she admitted. A small part of Dora’s arm had been eaten away, and blood now dripped from the wound.

“Sing, o whirlwind that gallops across the meadow. First Spring Breeze, Morning Swallow!” Kevin attacked Aria with deadly wind magic, but her miasma stood in its way. A thunderous roar echoed at the moment of impact, clearly demonstrating that the “Unrivaled” part of his epithet wasn’t just for show. The spell held such tremendous power that the two forces were equal for an instant.

“And another one on the house!” Norman provided backup with his signature blaze magic, instantly turning the tide in their favor.

However, a grotesque cracking sound rose from Aria as her flesh and bone tore apart to reveal a fourth wing that sprung from her back. Her miasma immediately grew more powerful with terrible momentum.

Kevin and Norman grunted in pain as their combined offensive was pushed back and they were tossed away.

“Are you okay?!” Alan shouted.

“Yeah, more or less. I switched over to a defensive spell that helps me dodge attacks by knocking me away right before they hit,” Norman said.

“As for me, well, it’s not so bad that I can’t fight anymore, at least,” Kevin said as blood ran down his brow.

“Then, it’s as we feared?” Alan asked.

“Exactly. Seems like injuries from her Miasma of Rejection don’t recover even if I go back in time.”

“I see. The destruction we’re facing defies everything in its wake,” Alan said while looking at the sinister noise rising from the girl’s body. “Let’s try this instead.”

Alan combined shukuchi—a martial arts move that increased his movement speed—with Basic Warp to perform a lightning-fast maneuver. He disappeared from Aria’s line of sight before she could even blink. He reappeared behind her and aimed a sharp slash right at her neck, but though her back was turned, his sword was blocked by the Miasma of Rejection.

“It works even if I take her by surprise. It really is automatic.”

Aria turned around without uttering a single word. Alan swiftly darted away to avoid the miasma’s counterattack. The ensuing wave of noise was much more intense than the first one and spread like a polluted river of death for many kilometers.

If we let this go unchecked, humanity really will be done for, Alan thought anew as he took in the miasma’s power.

He turned back to the girl and noticed another rainbow-colored wing growing out of her back. “That’s already the fifth one. They’re growing faster than last

time.”

She’d already grown two more wings in the span of this battle. Only three more and the seal would barely work, if at all.

Alan checked Derek and Isabella’s statuses. They’d finished drawing the first two magic circles and were now working toward completing the third and fourth ones. They wouldn’t make it at this pace, and they both knew that. They had to find a way to cut down on the necessary time.

Please hurry, you two! If she grows more than eight wings, we’re truly out of options.

“Alan...”

In front of the light of the projection screen, Yoshida watched his comrades fight his childhood friend. He knew how powerful Aria’s Miasma of Rejection was, so the fact that the other heroes could fight her on somewhat equal footing filled him with newfound admiration for them. Nevertheless, the situation was far from favorable for them; the future looked bleak, indeed.

She’s sprouting wings at a brisk pace, faster than they’ll be able to seal her.

If they couldn’t seal her, defeating her would be the only option left, but there was no doubt she’d emerge victorious in a direct confrontation. The Miasma of Rejection she leaked was both an immovable object and an unstoppable force. It made her existence itself similar to a natural phenomenon—a natural *disaster*. In her realm, strength itself lost all meaning.

And she’s the worst possible matchup for Alan.

Alan, famed leader of the Seven Heroes, most accomplished individual on the Titanomachy’s front lines, and the one who’d defeated Demon Lord Beelzebub in *this* war too. Against Aria, he was essentially powerless. His fighting style demonstrated flawless swordsmanship achieved through extensive training of the fundamental techniques, but no number of feints or agile strikes had any effect against the miasma’s defense, which blocked every conceivable attack against Aria. As the cherry on top, her attacks covered a wide area of effect, something Alan struggled against.

Another factor against Alan was Aria's humanity. The Miasma of Rejection she emitted shifted into mana of the same nature as a demon's over time, but she herself was still human. As a result, he couldn't activate his mana of light. It was necessary to block her miasma with magical firepower, so his inability to use elemental mana was a fatal weakness.

"But...it'll be fine. Alan always pulls through," Yoshida mumbled like a mantra to himself. Unlike him, Alan was an incredible person. He overcame any situation, no matter how adverse, with courage and determination. That was how it'd always been, and this time would be no exception.

Even without me there, he'll figure something out! He always does, Yoshida thought. As for himself, he could only stand and watch his fellow heroes struggle.

Yoshida then heard a familiar voice from one of the beds the injured were resting on.

"Let me go, dammit! I'm joining the fight!"

Griffith was the one making a fuss atop his bed. The rest of the Great Six were also there, alive but unconscious. They'd gotten lucky like Yoshida and survived, but unlike him, they'd been gravely injured.

"Stop being reckless! For some reason, recovery magic doesn't work on your injuries! Just lie down, please!" the nurse said.

"Shut up! They're injured too! I'm going to fight with— Ugh!" Griffith shook the nurse off and forced himself to stand, but he collapsed to the floor. That was when his eyes met Yoshida's.

"Mister Yoshida? Wait, why aren't you at the fight?" Griffith asked. He seemed genuinely surprised to see Yoshida there. "The rest of the Seven Heroes are fighting as we speak. Is this part of some strategy?"

"A strategy? No, not really," Yoshida replied.

"Then, why are you here?" Griffith asked again with earnest eyes. His gaze hurt Yoshida so much that he had to avert his own.

"There's no point in me going. I'll drag them down if I join such a difficult

battle.”

“But you have your support magic. Its power might be below average, but it should still be useful, right?”

“Perhaps it will, but...I’m scared. I’m just a coward,” Yoshida admitted, though his true feelings were something he’d never wanted to put into words. “I don’t have the same courage as the Seven Heroes or your team. I’m just a weakling who couldn’t change, even when I really tried.”

Courage was the most indispensable quality for a fighter. It was something everyone who fought on the front lines possessed, like the Great Six and the Seven Heroes, and Alan especially. It was something that Yoshida sorely lacked, and the reason he couldn’t be a true hero.

“You’re wrong!” Griffith shouted. He simply couldn’t stomach Yoshida’s meekness. “You made it all the way to the final battle at the demon lord’s castle last time, didn’t you?”

“Well...”

“We’ve fought together once, so I can tell. You might have only offered logistical support, but you’re still a man who has survived the dangers of battle! I could *tell*, and it made me respect you, so I don’t want to hear any more of that wimpy crap out of you!”

The young warrior’s passionate words resounded across the entire base.

“One more step! Your courage is only one step away from you! So step forward, sir! Show your successors how amazing you can be— Urk!”

After shouting his heart out, Griffith ran out of his last bit of strength and passed out.

“Griffith?!” The medical staff panicked and quickly returned Griffith to his bed to resume treatment.

“I...” Yoshida stood frozen on the spot as he focused on the floor. His legs wouldn’t move. Even he was dumbfounded at himself for doing *nothing* after hearing such a passionate speech.

“She kinda looks like she’s suffering,” someone watching the battle muttered.

Who would sympathize with the disaster responsible for putting humanity at risk of extinction? Even the one who'd said as such was probably voicing a mere passing thought.

However, that single sentence shook Yoshida out of his stupor. He looked up at the fight and saw the face of a girl he could never forget projected there. Her expression was devoid of any visible emotion, as empty as a deep chasm—but to Yoshida, who had long cared for her, she did seem to be in pain.

Before he realized it, his legs started moving.

“Six wings,” Alan mumbled as he darted away from Aria’s Miasma of Rejection.

More rainbow-colored wings had grown out of her back, sending her mana even higher. Each attack she wielded against them was now magnitudes more powerful than the one she’d started with. If she reached the First Kingdom in her current state, she could reduce it to no more than an empty lot in less than a day.

“Not gonna lie, balancing offense and defense is pretty hard,” Norman said.

Aria acted more like a force of nature than an enemy. If all the heroes wanted was to avoid her attacks, they could run away. However, the Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array needed its target to be right in the middle of its six magic circles, and the heroes also had to ensure that the ones drawing the circles didn’t come under attack. They had to fight back Aria in order to keep her in the same spot, but weak attacks wouldn’t draw her attention. On the other hand, if they made their attacks too powerful, they would run out of mana and have no strength left to dodge or block.

With a mighty roar, Dora conjured a large boulder with earth magic and forcefully launched it at Aria. The speed at which it flew made it seem like she’d tossed a pebble instead of a thirty-meter-diameter monolith. Regardless, the noise—which had grown in both quantity and density thanks to Aria’s additional wings—pulverized the boulder before it even drew close to her. She didn’t so much as blink in response.

“Hah, so an attack of that level is no longer worth her attention,” Dora said.

“In a regular battle, I think that would’ve been strong enough to reduce half a military base to rubble. I guess that means nothing save for our ultimate moves is gonna cut it anymore,” Kevin said in a bout of exasperation.

This girl really is like my natural enemy, Alan thought once again. Since he couldn’t use his mana of light against Aria, he had no attacks powerful enough to draw her attention. *I’ll have to try a different approach.*

Alan glanced over at Derek and Isabella. They were still working on the third and fourth circles, though they were almost finished.

“Let’s change our strategy, guys,” he said, then relayed the plan he’d just come up with to Dora, Kevin, and Norman. The three of them nodded their affirmation.

Aria stood as silent as ever and unleashed another wave of her miasma. The four heroes scattered to the winds and managed to dodge the assault by a hair’s breadth.

“I’m counting on you!” Alan shouted to the other heroes.

“Gotcha.”

“It’s a good call.”

“Talk about a pain.”

Norman, Dora, and Kevin each replied, in turn.

Another wing grew out of Aria’s back—the seventh one—causing the noise to grow denser. Her presence alone had started to warp the space around her. The seal could only handle one more wing.

The final bout began. The heroes poured mana into their powerful attacks. Somehow, they would have to hold Aria in place while also keeping her devastating noise at bay.

“Have some of this!” Norman was performing particularly well, thanks to his high mana.

“Hah, someone’s having a good time.” Dora tossed a boulder more than

double the size of the previous one.

“I hate being compared to you two!” Complaining all the while, Kevin delivered a powerful slash cloaked in intense wind magic.

The three heroes poured their bodies and souls into attacking Aria. Their attacks formed craters in the ground around her, and the ensuing cloud of dust covered the sky as far as the eye could see. With such power on display, one might expect even Aria to take some damage.

But when the smoke cleared, the girl stood unharmed. And on her back was...

“An eighth wing,” Dora said with sweat pouring down her forehead. They’d reached the seal’s limit.

With every new wing, a curse-like pattern spread to another part of Aria’s body. Now that she’d reached eight of them, the pattern practically covered her. She looked much like she had before the end last time, a sight that had once chilled even Dora to the bone.

“But we made it in time.” Alan’s voice rang out loud and clear. He was standing on a completed magic circle.

“We’re fortunate the Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array is nonelemental magic,” Isabella said.

Alan had entrusted the diversion against Aria to the other three and switched his role to drawing the magic circles. Since his mana quantity was low, he’d only helped a little bit, but that small push made all the difference.

“We’re starting! Move to position!”

At Derek’s signal, Norman, Dora, and Kevin each moved to one of the six magic circles.

“Ferocious man and gentle woman, dazzling light and chaotic darkness, writhing life and still death, mix and govern the whole of creation.”

As Derek chanted, the six of them poured high-quality mana into the magic circles, forming shining lines on the ground that connected them into an enormous hexagram. Then, they shouted in unison:

“May fortune be upon humanity! Seal this disaster away! Imperial Flower

Hexagram Seal Array!”

A massive crystal appeared to surround Aria, but she instinctively resisted. Her noise battered against the encroaching crystal, but it formed faster than she could destroy it. The Miasma of Rejection that had boasted unmatched strength until moments ago was being suppressed.

The Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array was the human world’s oldest and most powerful sealing technique. No one knew for certain if the legend was true, but according to Continental Orthodoxy scripture, it was a technique that had once sealed God himself.

As the story went, God once appeared in the human world, granting the emperor authority and magic and blessings to the people. However, he couldn’t forgive the indelible stains on people’s hearts, and over time he began to judge them, yet he also wanted to forgive them. To prevent his own rampage, he created the seal stones from imperial blood, devised the Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array, and bestowed it upon humanity. Humanity used the array to seal God, and he placed his hope in those who were willing to oppose even him to carve their own future.

The seal array only worked against God and the creatures who’d received his blessing, so it couldn’t be used against demons. As Aria was human, the ultimate sealing magic could engulf her inside its crystal, just as it had once before.

“This is the final push!” Alan shouted.

The six heroes intensified their mana input into the circles, wringing every last ounce of strength they could from themselves, holding nothing back. The crystal grew even faster and surpassed the force of Aria’s miasma. In the end, the girl became completely enclosed in the crystal.

Alan panted heavily with both hands on his knees. He raised his head and looked at the crystal towering over the surrounding area.

“It’s over. Finally.”

It was a long battle. In terms of the actual time span, it was a far cry from the

Titanomachy, but the peril and severity were an order of magnitude higher.

The other five heroes had also exhausted most of their mana and were as much out of breath as him.

“Are you watching, William? This old man gave it his all,” he said softly.

Then, he noticed something out of place inside the crystal.

Hold on. She still has her wings.

Eight wings still sprung from Aria’s back, even while she was trapped in the crystal. The Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array should have rendered its target powerless and immobile. Her wings were like the power inside her body given form, so they’d disappeared with the previous seal. What did the fact that they were still present mean?

Another rainbow-colored wing started growing out of Aria’s back.

“It’s not over yet, everyone!” Alan shouted.

A cracking sound filled the air. Soon enough, the crystal shattered, and a wave of noise as thick and dense as a mudslide blew the heroes away.



The current situation could only be called a *catastrophe*. The scenery had been replaced by a massive crater spanning several kilometers, and around it stretched an empty wasteland that spread across the horizon.

“Are you guys alive?” Dora asked, her brawny body splayed on the ground.

“Yeah, miraculously,” Kevin replied. He was also down and injured all over.

Dora and Kevin weren’t the only ones in poor shape; all six heroes lay motionless. They’d each sustained heavy enough injuries from the discharge of Aria’s Miasma of Rejection to be put out of commission.

“I never expected her to break the Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array,” Derek said in disgust.

“Indeed. And that’s not the end of our problems,” Isabella said as she looked at Aria.

She now stood before them, framed by sixteen rainbow-colored wings. The Miasma of Rejection surrounding her had grown several times over, the cursed pattern on her skin had made further progress, and a chunk of her body had twisted into a grotesque, monstrous shape. Her form was that of despair itself.

The Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array was the only way to stop Aria. Her miasma’s unbreakable defense made defeating her in a fight downright impossible. However, she now had double the wings than what the seal could handle, and her miasma was thick and impenetrable. Sealing her away was no longer an option. In this state, it was easy to imagine her reducing an entire kingdom to dust in a second.

“This is a bit too much,” Norman said with a dry laugh.

All Seven Heroes were experienced fighters who’d overcome many challenges, but even they couldn’t help but lose heart before such a predicament.

“Not yet!”

However, one man stood up before anyone else: Alan Granger the Champion of Light. Falling to his knees and cowering before a threat was out of the

question for him. No matter how desperate the situation was, or how overwhelmingly powerful the enemy was, he would stand strong.

“Hah, you never change, do you?” Watching Alan’s back inspired Dora to stand.

One after another, the remaining four heroes got up and followed after Alan. It was the same during the Titanomachy. They’d all thought the same thing the first time they’d seen Alan: that they’d never seen anyone with such meager talent before. But, by the end, his gallant back had served as a source of encouragement for all of them. That was the reason such willful heroes recognized Alan as their leader.

The six of them practically dragged their battered bodies toward the monster wielding hopelessly devastating power. *This* was bravery, the very essence of being a hero.

“Haah...haah... Sorry for being late, guys!”

The last hero had finally appeared.

The first thing that came into Yoshida’s view when he arrived at the battlefield was the altered appearance of his childhood friend. The pattern scrawled like a curse on her skin, the lopsided shape of her right arm and shoulder, and the terrible sixteen rainbow-colored wings that had torn through the flesh of her back.

Aria...

He wanted to avert his eyes, but he stopped himself. The whole reason he’d come here was to face her.

“Yoshida? You’re really here?” Alan said.

Yoshida’s fellow hero stood up straight despite the grave injuries riddling his body, valor and resolution brightly burning in his eyes. Yoshida actually felt a little intimidated to be directly addressed by Alan, someone he considered a true hero and the polar opposite of himself.

“Yeah. I might only drag you guys down, but I’d like to fight alongside you,”

Yoshida said, swallowing his fear and apprehension.

Alan silently stared into Yoshida's eyes. If he told Yoshida to stay back because he wouldn't be much help anyway, there was nothing Yoshida could say in response. After all, he'd only offered logistical support during the Titanomachy. During the final battle at the demon lord's castle, he'd only stood guard at the supply base they'd built on the way there. His work had been simple, the sort anyone else could've taken care of. His only possible contribution in combat was below-average support magic.

"All right. That's reassuring to hear." Despite those reasons, Alan accepted Yoshida's help with a smile.

"Are you sure? I'm a coward with no combat skill! I've only ever done logistical support that even a kid could manage," Yoshida said.

"Ha! What kind of nonsense is that?" Alan looked Yoshida straight in the eyes as he spoke. "Sure, maybe you're no good in a fight, and you can only take care of odd jobs, but so what? No one but you stuck with us until the end."

Yoshida listened silently.

"Your courage and attentive support were always reassuring."

Yoshida was at a complete loss for words. Alan wasn't the kind of guy to offer idle flattery. Yoshida had no idea that the man he glorified thought so well of him.

"One more thing. If you regret running away from her and believe it's because you're weak-willed, then I can't agree. If you really were a coward, as you said, you couldn't have made it all the way to the decisive battle at the demon lord's castle despite having zero combat ability." Alan patted Yoshida on the shoulder. "You weren't weak, just kind. You didn't want to hurt the girl you love. You wanted her to keep living, right?"

"..."

"And I'm sure you came here because you want to help her. Or am I wrong?"

Oh man, why? Tears welled up in Yoshida's eyes. How could the Champion understand people's feelings so well despite being so strong?

“Yes, that’s exactly it. I wanted her to keep living,” Yoshida said. “I just wanted her to smile again. Like she used to.”

Wasn’t it natural? The reason he’d wanted to get stronger in the first place was in order to protect her, his first love.

“That’s why I *have* to grant her final wish. I can’t let such a sweet girl who hated hurting people keep existing as a destructive monster.” He took a moment to wipe his tears and looked straight ahead as he said, “I will use my kindness to release Aria from her suffering.”

Alan gave Yoshida a hearty slap on the back and said, “Then allow me to help, my brother-in-arms!”

Yoshida was so moved by Alan’s words he almost started crying again, but he didn’t have time for tears.

“You sure took your time, Yoshida,” Dora said as she stood next to him.

The remaining heroes also drew close and stood side by side with Yoshida. None of them looked displeased to see a “burden” joining their ranks. Instead, they were happy that a reliable ally had come to their aid, just as Alan had.

“I’m not the only one. Everyone here acknowledges you as a hero,” Alan said.

“I see. So, that’s what you really thought of me,” Yoshida said.

I’m blessed with such trustworthy comrades, he thought as he observed the other heroes lined up to his left and right, three on each side. His own weakness was but a trivial matter when he was surrounded by them. Uplifted, he turned away from them and faced forward once more.

The girl he had come for was silent as she stared off into space, the ominous noise leaking from every inch of her body. The density of Aria’s mana was already beyond human comprehension. Even if they gathered every last drop of mana in this world and tried to strike her with it, her Miasma of Rejection might come out on top. If the most powerful seal in the world shattered like glass before her strength, then defeating her was impossible.

“There might be a single way to win,” Yoshida told the other six. “Aria’s Miasma of Rejection protects her automatically and won’t let anything she sees

covered in noise touch her. Conversely, someone not covered in noise can touch her. Before her entire world became consumed by noise, the one thing not covered in noise to the very end...was me.”

Yoshida lifted a knife from his breast pocket. It was an ornamental knife he’d never been able to let go of—the same one Aria had handed him on the day she’d asked him to kill her.

He continued. “There’s a chance that if I get close enough and call out to her, she’ll recognize me and the noise will dissipate. I can use that opportunity to stab her.”

“Interesting. I can understand the logic behind your plan, but what’s the chance of it succeeding? And on what basis?” Isabella asked, ever the realist.

“Er... The chance of success is...honestly? Pretty low. As for my basis, well, how about the love between childhood friends?” Yoshida replied, with a distinct lack of confidence. He still didn’t believe in himself much.

“Love? Listen here...” Isabella narrowed her eyes in exasperation.

“Love, huh? Yeah, that might work,” Derek said. Unexpectedly, he was the first one to approve of Yoshida’s plan. In his eyes, there was a sense of liberation weighted with sadness that he’d lacked before.

“Sounds fine to me. I don’t mind gambling on a plan like that,” Kevin said in a cheerful tone, despite the perilous situation.

“Now, wait just a second, you two. Give this a little more serious consideration, will you?” Isabella said.

“I’m also in,” Dora said.

“Even you, Dora?” Isabella asked.

“I like the face Yoshida’s wearing right now. I can put my faith in a man with that expression,” Dora replied.

Isabella breathed a sigh of frustration. “Well, we don’t exactly have any other options. Besides, he offered us his undying support in the Titanomachy. Very well, Yoshida. I will also help with your plan.”

“You’ll be totally badass if you pull this off, Yoshida. Get in there and give ’er

hell,” Norman said, his arms crossed in a pompous manner. He’d returned to his old self—a little cringeworthy, but he was having a blast.

“Thanks, all of you,” Yoshida said.

“All right, we’re going with Yoshida’s plan. The six of us will somehow get you in front of Aria. The rest is up to you.”

With Alan summarizing the plan at the end, their course of action was decided. All that was left was executing it—with courage and determination, like always. The seven of them turned to once again face their final, most powerful enemy.

“This is pretty moving, you know,” Alan said softly. “Although I was always grateful for your logistical support, to tell you the truth, I wanted to fight alongside you one day, Yoshida.”

“You did? Really?” Yoshida asked.

Everyone called them the Seven Heroes, but he was forever on the sidelines, handling the support. This was the first time they would fight as one on the front line.

“Now, let’s go! To our first fight as all Seven Heroes!” Alan said proudly.

In the same breath, the Seven Heroes started running toward Aria. The real, *actual* final fight was about to begin.

Aria was roughly one hundred meters away from the heroes. Everyone besides Yoshida could close that distance in a flash using some form of magic or martial art, but this time around, they had to get *him* in front of Aria. She would not surrender peacefully.

The air itself creaked as the sixteen-winged Aria unleashed a colossal wave of noise, like a terrible mudslide crashing down the side of a mountain, leaving only destruction in its wake. In her eyes, even her childhood friend appeared covered in noise. Her attack surged mercilessly toward Yoshida, who was running straight at her. If the miasma touched him, he would be reduced to ash in but a moment, but—he wasn’t alone.

“I’m counting on you, Kevin, Isabella, Norman, Dora!” Alan shouted.

“Of course!” the four of them replied in unison as they charged forward. They’d already exhausted most of their mana to create the seal earlier, but they would have to muster any remaining strength they had.

“The whistling winter wind sings the end, while the first breeze through the pine trees signals the beginning. As the seasons come and go, so too does life.” Kevin was the one to start them off with his incantation. “This is the final task.”

He poured wind mana into the sword in his left hand, covering it in a layer of wind. The temperature around the sword started to drop, until the wind had cooled to a freezing chill. When wind mana was rotated at ultrahigh speed, it started to rob the surrounding air of its temperature. The resulting attack was similar to a localized blizzard.

“Snowy Wind Dance, Frost Crane!”

“High Grade Thunder Nail, Jewel Flower!”

Thunder Nail, Isabella’s signature move, utilized enchanted nail polish she’d painted on before the fight. It enhanced the power of her lightning magic and allowed her to omit the incantation. However, the nail polish on her right ring finger was different from the rest. Its design was that of a three-dimensional flower. Combined with the custom-made magical catalyst jewel on the same finger, it could unleash a devastating electric shock, if only once per day. The ensuing blast struck like lightning from the heavens and was so deafening it sounded closer to an explosion than thunder.

“Roar, O Mother Earth! Earth Breaker!”

Dora gathered strength throughout her body and slammed the ground as hard as she could. The earth elemental spell she was using was straightforward: it delivered an impact through the ground. With Dora as the user, it was truly earth-shattering. Her strength produced a tremor so powerful it split the earth in half as it traveled toward the Miasma of Rejection.

“Infernooooooooo!”

Last but not least, Norman blasted blaze mana with raw momentum, no incantation or technique necessary.

The four heroes' ultimate attacks clashed with the Miasma of Rejection, blanketing the entire area with a cataclysmic roar. It was a magnificent display worthy of the Seven Heroes. The miasma was repelled for a brief moment, but it started reasserting itself soon afterward.

This outcome was natural, though. Even all of this world's mana combined—the underworld's included—couldn't hold a candle to Aria in her current state. While the four heroes had performed their most powerful finishers, Aria had just used a regular attack. One could never hope to overcome such a wide gulf in strength.

"We can at least change its direction," Kevin said.

The four heroes shifted the angle of their attacks at a slight diagonal, pointing upward, diverting the miasma toward the sky and away from Yoshida and the other two heroes.

"Hell yeah!" Norman pumped his fist in the air.

Yoshida, as well as Alan and Derek flanking either side of him, took advantage of the opening created by the others stopping the miasma and moved forward.

Seventy meters left.

Aria swiftly directed her attention to the three of them. Despite the heroes' momentous efforts to stop her miasma, she was as powerful as ever. They'd only managed to create a momentary opening. This time, rather than an area attack that threatened to overwhelm them, she fired thin, concentrated beams of miasma toward Yoshida and the other two. Not just one or two beams, but hundreds all at once.

Dodging an attack like that was impossible. The three heroes were mercilessly run through by the barrage of miasma, but *then*, with a little popping sound, they vanished into puffs of mist.

"Phantom Fog," Derek said, his arms folded. He had instantly appeared in a completely different location. "Water magic's property is adaptability. Those fog copies were made of water from the human body. Looks like they were just as covered in noise as us, and she mistook them for real enemies."

The other two weren't next to Derek. They'd made their way behind Aria

unnoticed and pressed onward.

Forty meters left.

Aria couldn't react to them yet, but there was still one problem. It wasn't her attacks; since they'd sneaked up on her, she wouldn't fire her Miasma of Rejection at them. They also had no reason to use any attacks that would provoke her automatic defense until Yoshida was close enough to stab her. Unfortunately, the problem was that Aria still passively emitted a tremendous amount of noise. The moment they tried to approach her, they would be swallowed up and erased as easily as bugs jumping into the sun. Worst of all, Alan, who was running in front of Yoshida, had no means to deal with the miasma.

"Raaaaaaah!" Alan let out a fierce roar. The next moment, despite everything, mana of light surged from within him. He'd managed to activate it, thought it was a power that could only be used against demons. Alan and his impossibly light-clad sword drove away the miasma swirling around Aria.

"Go, Yoshida!"

"Thank you, Alan!"

Yoshida ran with all his might.

Thirty meters left.

Alan is an incredible guy through and through, Yoshida thought.

How had Alan managed to use the mana of light when it only triggered against demons? If Yoshida had to name a reason, well, it was probably because Alan was the Champion. There wasn't some kind of complicated explanation behind it: he was a truly incredible hero. Unlike Yoshida, he'd defeated a mountain of foes and saved many people time and again.

That's why I have to do the same—at least once, Yoshida told himself. He dashed toward Aria.

Twenty meters left.

Now that he could observe her more closely, he could see that she'd grown just a little older, and although part of her had become monstrous, she was still

the same Aria. She looked exactly like his first love, the girl who'd made him feel warm and fuzzy just by standing next to him.

But thirty years had already passed since that day. He was now a forty-two-year-old, middle-aged man. Even the little running he'd done was enough to make him out of breath. He'd never had much stamina even when he was younger, but it had clearly decreased. His age had grown evident on his face, his skin wrinkled and worn.

Will Aria even recognize me? At the eleventh hour, that worry crept into Yoshida's mind.

Ten meters left.

The face of the girl he'd once loved came into sharp relief as he drew near. The girl who'd lost sight of all beauty in the world, trapped in a relentless prison of despair and nihilism, stood before him. The familiar shape of her made the determination to see this through boil up inside him.

Five meters left.

Yoshida clenched his knife, the one Aria had given him thirty years ago, in his hand. She'd asked him to kill her in a trembling voice, but he hadn't been up to the task back then. Now, though, he pointed the knife's blade directly at her.

Three meters left.

She was right in front of him.

"Aria!"

Yoshida called her name. He wanted his voice to reach her, for her to realize it was him, here to *finally* keep his promise.

The next moment, a glimmer of light returned to the girl's murky eyes.

"Ah, it's you..." she said, smiling at him, just like the time they'd first met.

As Yoshida saw Aria's smile, memories of their time together flashed into his mind. Many of them were painful. Most of their memories after she'd started seeing things covered in noise were bitter ones. However, the happy ones shone strongly enough to burn the painful times away. Above all else, no matter how painful or difficult those times had been, just being next to her had made

him happy.

She was a precious person to him, none other than his first love. He wanted her to keep living, to stay smiling forever. Those thoughts almost brought him to a halt.

Almost.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

Yoshida acted this time. With tears running down his face, courage, determination, and kindness welled up in his heart.

One meter left.

Then, he was there. His knife pierced through her heart.

“Ah...” Fresh blood dripped down Aria’s chest, and the Miasma of Rejection surrounding her started to vanish.

“I’m sorry. I made someone as kind as you suffer so much because of my cowardice.”

Yoshida wept as he held Aria in his arms, her body gradually growing colder. He should’ve done this much sooner. If he’d killed her back when she’d asked him thirty years ago, she wouldn’t have had to kill any more people, nor would she have continued to suffer from the noise for so many years.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...” He couldn’t stop apologizing.

Aria reached her slender arms around Yoshida’s body.

“Ah, it’s quiet, and so warm.” She turned to look at the sky with eyes that found the world so beautiful, just like the time they’d first met. “What a pretty sky... Thank you, Yoshida.”

Aria breathed her last in Yoshida’s embrace, a peaceful smile on her face.



“Aria... Urgh... *Aria*...”

Yoshida sobbed as he kept calling his childhood friend’s name, her now-cold body lying heavy in his arms.

Humanity’s second major war came to a quiet conclusion, ended by the death of a lone girl at the hands of a man who’d once been a boy swept up by fate.

Epilogue: Their Respective Twilight Years

The Seven Heroes put a stop to the demon lord's second invasion.

Empress Margaret once again awarded them a medal of the highest honor—a new one created especially for them. All seven were present at the award ceremony, and this time around, Yoshida didn't shrink back in fear and received his medal with dignity and grace.

As it must, time went on.

The victims of the war were buried, the destroyed towns and villages were rebuilt, and humanity pressed on thanks to the sacrifices of yesterday. Even hundreds or thousands of years from that day, humans would overcome many more crises and live on humbly yet resolutely, with great tenacity.

To remember those who left such a large mark on history, the final moments of the Seven Heroes are recorded here.

Dora Alexandra. Age of Death: Sixty-Three Years Old.

Dora vigorously hunted down monsters and protected Asch Sanctuary right until the day she died. The news of her sudden death due to heart disease saddened the people greatly. The date was henceforth named "Great Mother's Day" and became a public holiday for the Second Kingdom.

Derek Henderson. Age of Death: Sixty-Five Years Old.

After the war, Derek's wicked aura disappeared, and he seemed like a different person. He further developed the Third Kingdom's economy and earned the trust of his subjects and closest supporters. His will was unexpectedly short, stating that he would leave the rest up to his trusted family and vassals. "Please bury me in the same grave as my wife," was briefly written at the end.

Isabella Stuart. Age of Death: Seventy Years Old.

Isabella continued reigning as the Fourth Kingdom's queen, showing no weakness to the end. Her thorough skill in politics was feared by those around her, but she repeatedly silenced them with her influence and political maneuvers.

"Who would imagine I'd become more infamous than even Derek?" she'd said with a self-deprecating laugh.

As a result, barely anyone attended Isabella's funeral, which was rather unexpected for a head of state. However, her longtime attendant, Alicia, took charge of every aspect of the funeral herself, continuing her support of the queen even after her death.

Norman Lockwood. Age of Death: Seventy-Two Years Old.

Following the war, the Sincere Magic Society was renamed to the "League of Extraordinary Minds," and made a fresh start with "Enthusiasm, Momentum, and Enjoying Life" as its motto. Naturally, most of the existing members left due to the abrupt change in policy, but eventually Norman living his truth slowly drew people to him. It ended up a much smaller-scale community than before, but it still had around fifty members. Norman and those close colleagues did things that might or might not have always made sense and enjoyed their lives while researching and practicing magic in their own enthusiastic way for many years to come.

Yoshida. Age of Death: Seventy-Seven Years Old.

Yoshida spent a portion of the vast wealth he was rewarded to erect a grave for Aria in his garden. He spent his life quietly in a rural village in the Seventh Kingdom, focused on agriculture and making simple weapons and tools. Various monarchs of other kingdoms or heroes occasionally visited and spent time at his rather frugal home out in the ordinary countryside, giving the other villagers the shock of a lifetime.

This time, he was properly recognized as a hero who helped end the war and a man of good character, so many marriage proposals came his way, but he

politely turned them all down.

Kevin Laphicet. Age of Death: Eighty Years Old.

After the war, Kevin's vassals whipped him into shape, and he more or less worked for the sake of his kingdom for the rest of his life. He remained loved by his people.

When he saw his comrades in arms pass away before him during his final years, he'd complained, "I wanted to pass away first and quickly join Reece's side, yet I'm almost the last one remaining. Pretty ironic, huh? Man, living is such a pain."

As for Alan Granger, he collapsed from disease in the year following the death of Kevin, his last comrade.

An old man lying on a white bed, staring at a white ceiling. He couldn't even stand up with his own strength, his body old and frail; the end of his life was truly before him.

I feel like it's going to happen tonight, Alan thought as he felt the state of his own body. He'd come close to death countless times in the past, and he had memories of actually dying once. This sensation was much the same.

Alan struggled to look to his side.

"Darling..."

"Pops..."

After the war was over, Rosetta had pushed Alan into marrying her. She was there now, with their son and his own family, worriedly hovering over Alan.

"How's Mister Alan?!" The hospital room's door opened and Griffith—now a remarkable middle-aged man—rushed in.

"He's still with us...for now," Rosetta said.

"So, I made it in time!" Griffith approached the bed. "The Underworld

Countermeasures Council we discussed before has finally been established. I will keep vigilant watch over the system to ensure corruption doesn't take hold over it this time. You can rest assured."

Griffith was now head of the Humanity Defense Coalition, which had been reborn as a borderless anti-monster organization and a regulatory body for each kingdom's interests. Despite his prestigious position, he still played an active part in the coalition. He'd become both a welcome and meddlesome presence for the younger members, either giving them useful advice or scolding them for unacceptable conduct.

Ah, so it's done. That's reassuring to know. Alan was grateful to receive such a wonderful report on his deathbed.

"Th..." Alan mustered every bit of his strength to sit upright and talk. "Thank you...Griffith. You've become a truly dependable man."

"Mister Alan..."

"You are also a splendid hero, no less than us."

"I— Thank you!" Griffith nodded with deep gratitude at hearing Alan's recognition.

"And...Rosetta." Alan turned to his wife next.

"Yes, darling?"

"At first, I thought you could find a younger and better man than me, but, now...I'm truly glad I married you. Thank you for bringing me happiness. I hope I did the same for you."

"You *did*. You made me the happiest woman in the world. How could you still be worried about such things? How rude," Rosetta said with a small pout. Despite getting on in years herself, her expression was still adorable.

"Take care of your mother," Alan told his son.

His son nodded with tears in his eyes. "Of course. You can leave her to me, dad."

Alan was proud to have such a brilliant and compassionate man as his son, but he worried his son was too sensitive. But it would probably be all right. He

was his son, after all, and he had a dependable family around him.

Alan took a long breath and lay down again. His entire body lost strength, and his consciousness drifted until it grew distant. He could feel his final moments approaching. Then, the memories came flooding in.

An old man lying on a white bed, staring at a white ceiling. He couldn't even stand up with his own strength, his body old and frail; the end of his life was truly before him. Humanity had progressed in these past forty years, and though its advances were still nowhere near those of his old world's, all sorts of medical equipment reminiscent of the hospital he remembered lay around the room.

Oh, I've returned to the same place.

His final sight almost matched that of his previous life's. However, his emotions were completely different this time.

I completed it. I lived my life to its fullest.

He'd fulfilled his dream, entrusted the rest of it to the young generation, and had loved and been loved. He'd devoted body and soul to living a life with no regrets.

Are you watching, me from that day? This was a good life. A wild, brilliant, amazing life.

Alan's consciousness finally faded away.



Alan Granger. Age of Death: Eighty-Two-Years Old.

This time, there was no reincarnation waiting for him. His soul could rest in peace.

Afterword

I'd like to thank you for reading all the way to the end. Everyone, this is Kiraku Kishima. It's been a while. This was the fourth volume, with our god-tier illustrator's art knocking it out of the park to the very end. This marks the conclusion of the *Veteran Heroes* series, as well as Alan's life. In the end, he was fully satisfied with his life and his soul could pass on in peace without reincarnating a second time.

If you'll allow me to take a moment to talk about myself, ever since I quit my government work and aimed to become an author, I swore an oath similar to Alan's: I want my life to be without regrets. Since I have a tendency to make the easy choices when I get even a little negligent, that's something I tell myself every day. I live my life by it.

Various aspects of my life have changed for the better since then. My dreams have been granted one after the other, and I've obtained the things I wanted piece by piece. The attachment to life that used to terrify me has grown weaker, and a brighter thought along the lines of, "I would be content even if I died now," has sprouted in my mind.

I think that's probably how human beings are. The longer the many things they want to try remain inside them, the more they hate the thought of things coming to an end without the chance to try, and they continue to suffer. If any of you have things you'd like to try in your lives, I think you should take up the challenge—by all means. If this book helps you find the necessary courage, even just a bit, I couldn't be happier.

Finally, in a world where series get discontinued left and right, I'm truly blessed to have written everything I envisioned for my series from the beginning. I've completed one more of the things I wanted to give a shot, so I feel quite happy. There are a lot more things I intend to challenge as a creator and a human, but I feel like it would be ideal if the end of my life was similar to Alan's, feeling satisfied and optimistic.

I'll be looking forward to our next meeting, either in my *Novice Middle-Aged Adventurer* series, or the new one I'm sneakily working on at the moment.











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Back to the Battlefield: The Veteran Heroes Return to the Fray! Volume 4

by Kiraku Kishima

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