

STORY LIGHT TUCHIHI
ILLUS. Saori Toyota

5



"NO, YOU APPEAR
TO BE AN ASS!
STOP
USING ME AS YOUR
GUINEA PIG!"

"I wanted to
test it out one
more time, **just**
in case. Hmm...
It appears to
be **safe enough**
for me to try."





CERCEUS

The muscle-bound God of Swords who helped Seiya train at Aria's request.

RISTARTE

A novice goddess who summoned Seiya to save Ixphoria.

JONDE

A former general of Termine who was turned into an undead by Grandleon.

ADENELA

A goddess—despite appearances—who teaches Seiya swordsmanship.

KIRIKO


A Killing Machine with a heart.

NEPHITET

The Goddess of Ghosts who speaks in halting phrases from time to time. She helps Seiya train his astral body.

SEIYA RYUUGUIN

The overly cautious Hero summoned by Rista.

A full-page illustration of Seiya in his Phoenix Drive form. He is shown from the waist up, leaning forward with a determined and intense expression, his mouth open as if shouting. His spiky brown hair is blowing in the wind. He wears his signature bronze armor with gold trim and a large, flowing brown cape. His right arm is extended forward, and a bright, fiery red and orange energy blast is being released from his hand. The background is a swirling, turbulent mass of red and orange flames, creating a sense of intense heat and power. The overall color palette is dominated by these warm, fiery tones.

**Seiya's
berserker aura
rages like
wildfire as he
pushes his
final attack
to its limit!**

“Phoenix Drive...”

THE HERO IS
OVERPOWERED
BUT
OVERLY CAUTIOUS

STORY

LIGHT TUCHIHI

ILLUS.

SAORI TOYOTA

5

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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TRANSLATION BY MATT RUTSOHN

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Prospects

I, Ristarte, narrowly escaped death thanks to the overly cautious Hero Seiya Ryuuguuin, who used his quick wits to save me from the Vengeful Empress Celemonic's persistent curse.

...And by *quick wits*, I mean he hid under my bed like a stalker and waited for his chance to strike.

I wake up early the next morning and head straight to Great Goddess Ishtar's room to tell her about the brindle-haired demon that somehow appeared in the depths of my mind.

"It is very possible that this demon you speak of is actually a Dark God," exclaims Ishtar with a solemn expression after hearing my story. I was hoping she would be able to identify this Dark God from her unique hair color and come up with a plan, but just as there are countless deities in the unified spirit world, there are apparently also many Dark Gods as well. There's nothing Ishtar can do until we figure out her name.

"This Dark God possesses great power. She has not only hindered my foresight but was also able to invade your mind. While she may not be able to directly harm you or Seiya Ryuuguuin, you mustn't let your guard down."

"I—I know."

After a deep bow, I retire from Ishtar's room. When I arrive at Cerceus's café, Seiya's already there with Kiriko and Jonde, who are packed and ready. I wave Seiya over to tell him about the Dark God.

"Hey, Seiya. I was just talking to Ishtar about the brindle-haired demon, but —"

Hiss!

Out of nowhere, there's a hiss, and an earth serpent leaps out from under the

lapel of my dress.

“Whoa?! What the...?!”

“I know. I was listening in on your conversation the whole time.”

“...?! You say that like it’s not a big deal, but that’s a crime, you know!”

“I’m not always eavesdropping on you. I was simply keeping tabs just in case Celemonic’s curse hadn’t been completely lifted. Overhearing what you two discussed was a bonus.”

“R-really? I—I guess that means you don’t need me to tell you what she said then, right?”

“All you figured out was that the brindle-haired demon we keep hearing about in Ixphoria is a Dark God. In other words, we have no new info.”

“Wait! You knew she was a Dark God?!”

“I considered the possibility. Normally, no ordinary monster would be aware of what we were doing. Nor would they be able to grant any sort of power to Grandleon, Ozerio, and Celemonic. This Dark God appears to be a supervisor who can’t fight on her own and delegates instead. While this poses a number of problems, I can’t take any specific measures to deal with something that exists in another dimension.”

Seiya then throws his bag over his shoulder.

“Regardless, it’s time to return to Ixphoria. Open a gate to Little Light.”

“O-okay.”

I call Jonde and Kiriko over and summon a gate, which can now lead directly to the plaza in the underground settlement since the spell stone is gone. Seiya is the first to go through, with Kiriko, Jonde, and I following closely behind.

“Hmm... It’s hard to believe this is underground.”

“I can’t believe such a huge town exists beneath the surface!”

Jonde and Kiriko gasp in admiration as they survey the countless houses and the people working in the fields by glowstone light. This area’s residents used to live in Galvano, but when beastkin took over the town, they were forced to

create an underground settlement and go into hiding. Even though Seiya was able to defeat Grandleon, he recommended they continue living underground for now.



Before long, the people of Little Light notice us. We made Kiriko wear a hood that almost completely obscures her face. The hope was that we'd be able to prevent potential panic at the sight of a Killing Machine. In just a few moments, we're completely surrounded. The young Eich and the settlement's leader, Braht, are among the crowd.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Hero."

As Eich offers a deep bow, Seiya gets straight to the point without bothering to return her greeting.

"I defeated Ozerio in the north and Celemonic in the south, so I think it's about time you returned to the surface."

The crowd gasps in unison. Before I realize it, there are people weeping around me as well, and I can't blame them. They've had no choice but to live underground day after day ever since the beastkin took over their town. Now they'll finally be able to bask in the sun again.

"A few golems that I created are patrolling the town, but don't worry about them. They're there to protect you from monsters. And, Eich, don't seal off this settlement. Think of it as an emergency shelter you can send the people to if the need arises."

"Okay, I'll do that. Thank you so much for all you have done for us."

"All right, let's get you all back to the surface. Rista."

I open another gate leading to the surface just above Little Light. After Seiya passes through, the villagers follow. Although we find ourselves standing among ruined houses, still in the same partially destroyed state the beastkin left them in, the villagers...

"Light...! Sunlight...!"

"We're free! No more beastkin!"

"We can finally live on the surface again!"

...are overjoyed to be home. I even notice Braht rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, Braht. Are you crying?"

“I—I am not! My eyes are just adjusting to the sunlight!”

Heh! Yeah, yeah. *Whatever you say, tough guy.* I thought he was an arrogant jerk when we first met, but it looks like he’s got a soft side as well. It isn’t only Braht, though. Men and women of all ages are shedding tears of joy. Even Jonde and Kiriko seem touched by the sight.

“It warms my heart to see them like this.”

“I’m so happy for them!”

Before long, the townspeople gather around Seiya and me.

“Hero, Goddess! Thank you! Thank you both so much!”

“How can we ever repay you?!”

Now that I think about it, the people of Little Light cursed and insulted us when we first met, but now they’re practically worshipping the ground we walk on.

I’m so happy! This is amazing!

The hard work we put in freeing the people of Little Light has finally paid off. Right as I start to get choked up, doing my best to fight back the tears, Seiya suddenly puts on a serious expression and snaps his fingers.

“Iron Dome.”

The ground shakes as stone walls rise around the entire town, curving toward the center of Galvano.

“...Huh?”

I stare blankly as the ceiling of the dome spreads across the sky, completely blocking out the sunlight and enshrouding the town in total darkness.

“Whoa?! Where’d the sunlight go?!”

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

“Mommy, I’m scared!”

The townspeople cry out in terror. I scream at Seiya: “Why are you using Iron Dome?! It’s even darker now than it was underground!”

“The sudden exposure to sunlight isn’t good for their eyes after living so long in the settlement.”

“But this defeats the whole point of bringing them back to the surface!”

“Did you not see them tearing up? The sunlight was clearly burning their eyes.”

“Their eyes weren’t irritated or anything! They were just shedding tears of joy!”

“*Sigh*. These villagers are such a pain in the ass.”

“The only pain in the ass here is you!”

The townspeople grieve and shout in the darkness until Seiya finally removes Iron Dome. Their faces light up again immediately.

“Okay, that should do it for this place. Rista, Termine’s next.”

“O-okay.”

I open a gate to Termine as requested. We’ve had our share of challenges, but in the end, Eich, Braht, and the people of Little Light see us off with a smile as we depart from Galvano.

After arriving in Termine, Seiya starts barking orders at Jonde.

“Jonde, go get the queen.”

“Very well. What for, though?”

“We’re going to have a meeting.”

After sending Jonde off, Seiya heads toward the conference room in the palace, so Kiriko and I follow him. There’s a large, rectangular table in the center of the room, likely for holding strategy meetings. Kiriko and I find seats at the sides of the table while Seiya sits at the head.

“Rista, why are we having a meeting?”

“Beats me. He didn’t tell me anything.”

Before long, Jonde enters with the queen, and they arrange themselves across from us. After taking a look at each one of our faces, Seiya speaks up

with a solemn tone: “We no longer have to worry about being outflanked now that Oxerio and Celemonic have been defeated. You could say that the continent of Rhadril is relatively safe now, so I’d like to discuss future prospects.”

Seiya rises from his seat and walks over to a map of Ixphoria plastered on the wall. With his back to the map, he quietly stares at us like a teacher standing at a podium.

“Our next opponent, the Death Emperor, is the last general-class enemy in Ixphoria.”

I whisper to Jonde, who’s sitting across from me.

“Is that true, Jonde?”

“Yes. Now that the Beast Emperor, Machine Emperor, and Vengeful Empress are dead, the Death Emperor SIRRUSHT is the Demon Lord’s last general.”

“The Death Emperor SIRRUSHT... So after he’s taken care of, the only threat left is the Demon Lord!”

“Hey, you. Did I say you could talk? Keep your mouth shut unless I call on you.”

“Y-yes, sir...”

Jonde and I lower our gazes, feeling like we’ve been scolded by a teacher. Wait... Why am I being treated like a student?! I’m a goddess, dammit!

Oblivious to my feelings, as per usual, Seiya points to the map with his sheath.

“The Death Emperor is across the ocean on the western continent of Aeris. Furthermore, to the north of Aeris is the continent of Gustrail, which is where the Demon Lord’s castle is. If the Demon Lord is currently sleeping to accumulate more power, then this would be the ideal time to strike. However...”

Seiya uses his sheath to circle the continent of Gustrail as well as the continent of Aeris to its south.

“The only thing separating the two continents is a small ocean. Trying to cross it by ship would take no more than a few days. Even if the Demon Lord is

hibernating, though, going straight to Gustraid could put us in the middle of a pincer attack, so we'll have to deal with the Death Emperor before killing the Demon Lord."

"Well, that sounds reasonable. Shall we set sail for the continent of Aeris?"

"No. We're going back to the spirit world."

Jonde, who was in the middle of packing his belongings, explodes.

"What?! We're going back already?! Then what was the point of even coming to Ixphoria?!"

"To free the people of Little Light and inform the queen of our plans. Now, it's time to head back to the spirit world and train for the battle against the Death Emperor. Is there a problem?"

"No, but... D-dammit!"

Jonde grumbles. I understand how he feels. I really do. Even so, I open a gate to the spirit world at Seiya's request. Although his mood is shot, Jonde follows us.

"Oh, you're coming, too, Jonde?"

"What's that supposed to mean?! I'm one of you now, aren't I?! We've been fighting side by side this entire time... M-my queen! I—I can go with them, too, can't I?!"

"I don't mind, but do the Hero and goddess really need you?"

Jonde turns to me with a desperate look.

"G-Goddess, I've already come this far! I want to devote myself to saving the world! The Death Emperor's attributes are most likely the same as the Vengeful Empress's. Surely someone like me, who can't die and is immune to curses, would be useful to have around, right?!"

"Hmm... Let me think about it."

While weighing the pros and cons in my mind, I feel Kiriko tug at my sleeve.

"I—I think it would be better if Jonde came with us!"

"Kiriko...! I knew you'd understand! All that time working together in the spirit

world really helped us get to know each other!”

“Yeah, but...Jonde smells like rotten eggs.”

I hesitate, but Jonde cries:

“Then I’ll just make sure to carry some tea leaves with me to mask the odor!”

Pffft! Jonde’s so desperate that he’d even douse himself with tea just to come with us!

“Ha-ha-ha! Fine, you win! Hey, Seiya. How about we take Jonde with us?”

Jonde, however, doesn’t seem to like how I’m treating him and gives me a stern glare.

“Listen, you seem to be enjoying insulting me for my odor...but your stench makes even *me* gag!”

“What the...?! H-how dare you say such a thing to a lady, you dirty, lying zombie! Kiri, I don’t smell, right?!”

“Right! I’m a machine, so I don’t really mind your stench at all!”

Ack... So I *do* stink! This is no different than when we were in Gaeabrande! The fact that this innocent little girl was trying to be nice makes me feel even worse. I mean, I’m a goddess. Do I even have a smell?

Kiriko notices I’m still depressed and tries to cheer me up.

“Your smell doesn’t bother me at all when Jonde’s with us!”

Apparently, Jonde smells even worse than I do. I grin and place a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, Jonde. Let’s go.”

“You can’t be serious! I’m not your own personal air freshener!”

Seiya clears his throat in the middle of our argument.

“Normally, I would leave you all behind to let you deal with your putrid odors yourselves, but I have to bring Rista with me, since she’s a goddess. I also need Jonde around because I want to try something out on his rotting flesh in the spirit world.”

“Th-then that means...?”

“Yes, Kiriko. It means we have to bring them with us.”

Kiriko gives an excited shout.

“Yay! Rista! Jonde! I’m so happy we get to go together!”

“Y-yeah, me too...”

“Y-yes, I guess...it’s a good thing... I hope.”

It appears that somewhere along the way, Seiya started to rank both Jonde and me below Kiriko.

Goddess of Ghosts

Back in the spirit world, Seiya heads straight for Cerceus's café. Jonde, Kiriko, and I tag along as well. Upon arrival, Seiya approaches Aria and Adenela, who are enjoying afternoon tea at a garden table. Adenela's eyes light up the moment she notices him.

"S-Seiya...! I-it's so nice seeing you again!"

"Mm-hmm. Go away."

As Adenela approaches, Seiya knocks her out of the way with his sword's sheath and begins talking to Aria. How can he be so cruel to her?! Adenela's really helped us out time and time again!

"Aria, do you know any deities who possess techniques effective against spirit-like enemies that don't have physical bodies?"

"You're talking about ghost-type enemies, yes?"

Aria places a hand on her chin and ponders. I ask Jonde: "Hey, Jonde. Is the Death Emperor a ghost-type monster?"

"I do not know for certain, but I hear he rules over the dead, as his name implies. While he may not be a ghost himself, it is highly possible he commands ghost-type monsters, so the Hero is probably going about this the right way."

"Hmm... Oh, Seiya! Isn't your fire magic effective against ghosts? Plus, didn't Valkyrie already teach you Astral Break?"

But Seiya shakes his head.

"What am I going to do if fire magic doesn't work? Even if Astral Break is effective against ghosts, that's still only one move. I want more options."

Aria nods in response to Seiya.

"If you would like to learn moves effective against all types of ghosts, then

your only option is to talk to the Goddess of Ghosts herself, Nephitet.”

Nephitet—another deity I’ve never heard of. The fact that I don’t know her doesn’t matter, though, because she’s going to teach Seiya a move that works against all ghost-type monsters!

“Aria, do you know where she is?”

“The spirit world’s graveyard.”

“Oh, that’s cool—wait! What?! ‘Graveyard’?! There’s a graveyard in the spirit world?! But deities can’t die!”

“Although it’s an extremely rare occurrence, some deities have been killed with powerful weapons like Chain Destruction while trying to save other worlds. And...”

“‘And’...?”

“Let’s just say that things aren’t always as perfect as they seem.”

Aria seems to be withholding something from me, but I decide not to pry since I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. Instead, I only ask her to point me in the direction of the graveyard.

Our destination is apparently at the base of the secluded celestial mountains where Rasti, the Goddess of Shape-Shifting, resides. On the way there, Kiriko latches onto my arm.

“R-Rista...I’m scared...”

“D-don’t worry, Kiri! This is the spirit world, after all!”

I try to cheer her up, but the countless eerie crosses and tombstones at the desolate foot of the mountains aren’t helping. I feel like the sky is getting cloudier as well. As my eyes pass over a nearby tombstone, I notice it reads: AGE: 35,422,442. *W-wow! That god lived for a really long time. I wonder how they died.*

While thinking this to myself...

“For some, the eternal life of a deity becomes nothing more than endless suffering.”

“Eek!”

I hear an unfamiliar woman's voice coming from behind me, so I turn around. She has a pale complexion and long hair. While beautiful, she looks exhausted, and she wears a white, triangular piece of cloth on her forehead. What startles me most, though, is...

...sh-she doesn't have any legs!

In fact, she doesn't have a lower body at all! She's just floating in the air!

I step back in fear when...

"Oops. Sorry...for bothering you. But it's okay. I'm the keeper...of this graveyard."

Sh-she's a goddess?! And judging by the fact that she looks like a ghost... Is this Nephitet?!

She motions me over for some reason.

"No need to be...afraid. Come here."

"Huh?!"

"I can see it...in your face. It's nothing to be...ashamed of. It's normal."

She speaks in halting phrases while placing a hand on my shoulder.

"You have traveled here...to become...an Eternal Being."

"What do you mean 'Eternal Being'?!"

"It's what we call those who have grown tired of living an eternal life and desire death."

"O-oh, is tha—wait! What?! I didn't come here to die!"

"Oh? You didn't? But you look so hopeless."

What the...?! Rude! I've still got plenty of life in me!

"Then why did you come here?"

Just as I'm about to fire off a fresh round of complaints...

"Move, Eternal BO."

"Hey! Stop talking about my body odor!"

I yell at Seiya, but to the surprise of no one, he completely ignores me. Nephitet is the only one who matters to him right now.

“I want to learn a move that can damage ghosts with absolute certainty.”

“There are many...types of ghosts. Some are immune to fire, some to ice, and some to light. But even so...”

Nephitet draws the thin sword at her waist. There doesn't seem to be anything special about it at first glance, but...

“Ghost Buster.”

A white film envelops the blade.

“Wh-what's that...?”

“I granted spiritual powers to the blade. This sword has become spiritual matter. Its attacks will work...on any ghost.”

“Oh? So that technique makes spiritual attacks possible. That looks promising. Very well. Teach me that Ghost-whatever move.”

As always, the Hero's attitude is nothing less than arrogant, but Nephitet doesn't seem to be bothered in the slightest. However, she quietly shakes her head.

“First, we need to raise your spiritual power.”

The Goddess of Ghosts pulls a wooden hammer out of her pocket.

“One hit with this wooden hammer will turn you into a spirit. Only after becoming a spirit will you be able train your spiritual power.”

Whaaaaaat?! So Seiya needs to become a ghost?! This method sounds sketchy at best, but...

“All right.”

...Seiya gives her the okay without a fuss. He then takes the hammer from Nephitet and...

Bonk!

He hits me on the head!

“Oof!”

Why the hell are you testing it on me first?! Test it on yourself!

I want to get mad at him, but my body feels so light.

...That’s when I notice I’m looking down at my body collapsed on the ground.

“Wh-wh-wh-what the—?!”

Something resembling a white piece of thread is sticking out of my head. The other end of the “thread” is attached to the head of my spiritual self. I feel like I’m having an out-of-body experience like with Celemonic’s curse. The only difference is...

“Whoa...! The goddess was split in two! So this is what an astral body looks like!”

“I—I can see another Rista attached to the Rista on the ground!”

“Kiri! Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you!”

It looks like I can still talk to people after becoming a ghost, but when I try to touch Kiriko, my hand goes right through her. Seiya firmly nods to himself as he watches.

“Nephitet, how do you return to your original body?”

“Just lie down on it and let yourself sink back into your physical self.”

“All right. Rista, do it.”

Wh-who does he think he is, turning me into a ghost and then giving me orders?! Although I’m angry and annoyed, I obediently lie down on top of my physical body.

“Ah...”

And just like that, I’m back to normal.

Oh, thank goodness! It worked!

But just as I sit up—

Bonk!

—I receive another blow to the head, collapse, and find myself staring down at my body again!

“What the...?! Seiyaaaaaa!!”

“I wanted to test it out one more time, just in case. Hmm... It appears safe enough for me to try.”

“No, you *appear* to be an ass! Stop using me as your guinea pig!”

Before I even finish my sentence, Seiya is already floating next to me as a spirit. His physical body is lying peacefully next to mine. Nephitet then addresses our astral forms.

“Now, let’s begin your spiritual training.”

“‘S-spiritual training’...?”

“It goes beyond Nikola Tesla levels of research. It’s miraculous training that extracts the astral body using scandium and the Odd Eye.”

I have no idea what she’s rambling on about, but it sounds really occult! I wonder what kind of training they’re going to do. Nephitet looks over at Seiya and gives him his first task.

“All right, let’s start with one hundred push-ups and one hundred crunches.”

“How the hell is that spiritual?!”

I can’t believe my ears. Meanwhile...

“Okay.”



Seiya doesn't even bat an eyelid and just goes with it. He gets low to the ground and starts doing push-ups in silence. W-well, uh... Seiya does love working out, I guess. I don't actually know if this counts as a workout, but yeah...

After watching Seiya exercise for a while, Nephitet approaches him with a cup of white liquid.

"Here. It's a whey ghostein shake."

"A whey ghostein shake?! The hell is that?!"

"It has all of the essential amino spirits necessary to build a healthy astral body. It will raise your *spirits*, too."

"Was that a pun?!"

Seiya takes the cup and blankly stares at it for a short while. He then slips behind me and grabs my nose!

"Bwah?!"

He pours the shake down my throat the moment I gasp for breath.

"Glllahhh?!"

The sludgy liquid creeps down my throat.

"How do you feel? Any different?"

"*Cough! Hack...!* How many times do I have to tell you to stop using me as your guinea pig?!"

"Hmm... You seem to be in high spirits."

"See? She's perfectly fine. Whey ghostein is a safe spiritual supplement."

"All right. I'll try it, too."

"Let's get you two spirit-buff."

Nephitet then pats Seiya and me on the shoulder, but...when did I ever say I wanted to get "spirit-buff"?! I never asked to do spirit training, and I didn't want to drink that supplement, either! Furious, I lie on my original body and return to normal, but Seiya keeps at it. Jonde gulps at the sheer level of effort Seiya is

giving.

“Unbelievable... He’s still going...”

Beads of sweat drip down Seiya’s body. I have no idea how he’s sweating as a ghost, but watching him work out so intensely and push himself to the limit is so...

“...So cool!”

Hearing Kiriko mutter, I admit there’s something really attractive about how stoic Seiya can be even while working out. After a long push-up session, he stops for a ghostein shake when, all of a sudden, Kiriko approaches him.

“I—I want to be strong like you one day, Seiya!”

“Oh? Do you want a whey ghostein shake, too?”

“Oh, no... It’s not that...”

Ugh! That’s not what Kiriko’s trying to say! What’s wrong with him?

“I should take a break. I don’t want to overdo it.”

Seiya finally returns to his physical body.

“There’s something I want to try out during my break. Nephitet, if the thread connecting my physical body to my astral body was severed, would I die?”

“You mean the phantom thread? Yes, you will die if you cut it and leave it like that for an extended period of time. However, you should be okay if the separation only lasted a short while. You could even find another vessel to attach your soul to.”

“Interesting. So I can remove this man’s soul from his body and place it in another vessel?”

Seiya then approaches Jonde and hits him on the head with the wooden hammer.

“Oof!”

Jonde collapses to the ground, and his astral body appears above him.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”

Paying no heed to Jonde's rage, Nephitet hands Seiya a pair of scissors.

"You plan on cutting his phantom thread, yes? Then use these spirit scissors. With these, you should be able to cut it without hurting him."

Paying her no mind, Seiya grabs Jonde's thread with both hands and uses brute force to rip it in two!

"Arrrrrrgh! H-have you lost your mind?!"

"I didn't want to waste any time."

"The spirit scissors would have been just as quick!"

Seiya ignores Jonde and pulls out a doll made of glittering gold "straw" from his pocket. I immediately recognize the eerie item. After all, I was the one who originally made it.

"This is the Ristarte Hair Doll made from Rista's actual hair, or what's left of it after I created Mega Rista anyway. I'm going to use this to perform an experiment."

Seiya then takes Jonde's snapped phantom thread and wraps it around the Ristarte Hair Doll. And sure enough, Jonde's soul is sucked into it!

"Huh?! I-is this...? Is this me?!"

What the...?! I can hear Jonde's voice coming from the doll as it flails its arms and legs. The ghastly sight causes Kiriko and me to shriek.

"Eeeeeek! The Ristarte Hair Doll is moving!! It's moviiiiing!"

"I-I'm so scared, Rista!"

But Seiya nods to himself with his arms crossed.

"Good. Very good."

""What about this is good?!"""

Jonde, now a doll, screams with me. *What is wrong with Seiya?!*

All of a sudden, Nephitet speaks up as if she just remembered something.

"His soul is going to synchronize with the doll if you leave him in there too long."

Jonde the doll starts to panic.

“Then hurry up and put my soul back into my body!”

“Y-yeah, I don’t like this, either! Seiya, put him back!”

“Okay.”

Seiya hits the Ristarte Hair Doll with the hammer. He then unravels Jonde’s spirit’s phantom thread from around the doll and sticks it back on the head of his physical body. Jonde sits up and asks: “D-did you make sure it’s attached properly?! It’s not going to randomly snap off or anything, right?!”

“Eh. I think you’ll be fine. Probably.”

“Why don’t you sound sure?! I thought you were always cautious!”

While Jonde is furious, Seiya seems to be nodding with satisfaction, contrary to his usual lack of expression.

“Today turned out to be very productive. I might’ve even found a solution to the other matter as well. Yes, this is promising.”

After the short break, Seiya returns to his astral body and resumes training.

“Let’s get out of here.”

We head over to Cerceus’s café, leaving Seiya behind to train on his own.

After meeting up with Cerceus and asking if he has a room for Jonde and Kiriko for the night, we’re invited in. He seems to have taken a liking to them during their part-time stint at his café, so he’s going to lend them a room like he did last time. However, since it’s still too early for bed, we decide to hang out for a bit. Kiriko merrily mentions: “It looks like Seiya was able to take care of whatever was bothering him.”

He did say something about finding a solution to another matter. I still have no idea what that is, but... Well, I’m glad he was able to figure it out.

That’s when I notice Jonde frowning. I don’t blame him, though. Seiya put me through hell today, too. Feeling slightly empathetic, I recommend he have a drink to blow off some steam.

“I don’t blame you for being mad. Come on, drink some coffee. Let’s relax.”

After accepting the cup, Jonde solemnly mutters: "I'm not mad. I mean, I was angry at the time, but when I really think about it...could he have been...?"

But Jonde strongly shakes his head.

"N-no, that can't be! He would never do something like that for me! Anyway, I'm exhausted! I must be off to bed!"

"...Jonde?"

He heads to his room, leaving me and Kiriko to our confusion.

A Gift

The next morning, I head over to the spirit world's graveyard to check up on Seiya, only to find him training his astral body. No surprise there. His spirit looks even more toned than it did yesterday. Nephitet, standing by my side, nods to herself with satisfaction.

"Nice. He's becoming quite spirit-buff."

Apparently, by training his astral body and strengthening his spiritual energy, he'll be able to use the divine skill Ghost Buster, which grants spiritual energy to corporeal swords.

"Nephitet! You mean he'll soon be able to move on to Ghost Buster training, right?!"

"He could start right now if he wanted to. If he continues training like this and toning his astral body, though, he'll probably be able to take first place at the Best Astral Body Competition for lean and toned athletes."

"Wh-what...? Who cares about some stupid contest?!"

"Well, that's unfortunate. Then I guess I'll start teaching him how to grant spiritual energy to his sword after his break."

With Nephitet's approval secured, I walk over to Seiya, who's in the middle of working out.

"Seiya, she said you can take a break now! It looks like you've got enough spiritual energy to learn Ghost Buster!"

"Not yet. I'm going to train a little more."

"What?! Don't tell me you're going to enter that astral body competition!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Do you really think I have time for that? I just want to increase my spiritual energy, since it would increase Ghost Buster's power as

well.”

“O-oh. Thank goodness... Just don’t overdo it, okay? Make sure you take breaks.”

Seiya continues his training in silence, so I decide to go check on Jonde and Kiriko.

It’s still early, so while Café du Cerceus is still closed, Jonde, Kiriko, and Cerceus are standing near the garden tables talking about something.

“You’re the God of Swords, right? I beg of you!”

“Cercean, we beg of you!”

“Hmm...”

Cerceus wears a solemn frown and has his arms crossed. *Huh? What’s going on?*

“Good morning, Kiri. What’s up?”

“Oh! Good morning, Rista! Um... We were just asking Cercean if he could teach us swordsmanship between shifts at the café!”

Jonde turns to me, his eyes brimming with determination.

“I have officially become a member of the Hero’s party. Though my body rots, I can still fight. I want to help save the world.”

“Hmm... And you feel the same way, Kiri?”

“Y-yes! I want to become stronger so I can help Seiya!”

Hmm... It doesn’t matter if they train, since Seiya’s going to end up defeating all the enemies by himself anyway. But, well...if this is what they want...

“Come on, Cercean. Do you think you could teach them some swordsmanship?”

I try to urge Cercean to help, but he doesn’t seem into it.

“I have laid down my sword. It is a part of me no longer.”

“I—I know you think you can just retire, but you *are* the Divine Blade, you know!”

I know why he's hesitant. His spartan training with Seiya really traumatized him, so sword fighting triggers him these days.

"I, too, have been devoted to the way of the sword from a young age! There is no greater honor than getting to meet the God of Swords in the spirit world!"

"Hmm..."

"Cercean, I beg of you!"

"Cercean, please...!"

Cercean lets out a deep sigh as they lower their heads to him. He then takes off his café uniform and dons a suit of armor before tossing two wooden swords on the ground in front of them.

"What's wrong? I thought you said you wanted to train. Pick up your swords."

"C-Cercean, are you sure?!"

"We've already finished getting the café ready. We have a little time to spare."

"Cercean...! Thank you so much!"

"Hmph. My training is strict. Come at me when you're ready. Both of you."

...And that was the last badass thing Cercean ever said.

Jonde attacks, thinking he is facing a much stronger opponent, but his wooden sword hits Cercean right on the head.

"Ow!"

Kiriko follows up with a clean hit to Cercean's solar plexus.

"Gwah?! W-wait! One second! Just give me a second!"

But after using Scan on both of them, Cercean's face goes completely pale.

"K-Kiriko's attack stat is over eighty thousand?! And Jonde's is over one hundred thousand?! Y-you two are already strong enough!"

Well, they do live in an SS-ranked world, after all. Their stats are far from normal. Both Jonde and Kiriko shake their heads.

"It's nowhere near enough! I must become stronger!"

“Me, too! I want to be as strong as you, Cerceus!”

“N-no, um... My attack is actually, uh...only around thirty thousand, so...”

Cerceus speaks in such a tiny voice that they don't seem to hear his confession.

“Cerceus! Don't go easy on me, okay? Please come at me with everything you've got!”

“Kiriko! He is the Divine Blade! Use your sword, not your words! It is the only way he will start taking us seriously!”

“All right! I'll give it everything I've got!”

Jonde and Kiriko then proceed to beat Cerceus black and blue with their wooden swords.

“J-Jonde! Kiri...! Stop! Cerceus is foaming at the mouth!”

“I feel really bad about what we did to Cerceus...”

“Yes... I never expected the Divine Blade to be so weak...”

After carrying the unconscious deity to the bedroom in the back of the café, Jonde and Kiriko take seats at a table as a dark cloud of gloom hangs over their heads. Before long, Seiya comes walking over with a long object wrapped in cloth.

“Oh! Seiya, are you done with your astral training already?”

“Yeah. That should do it for now.”

“Then how about taking a break?”

I offer him a seat, but he ignores me. Instead, he holds out the long item wrapped in cloth.

“Hmm? What's that?”

“I've been messing around with Synthesis between workouts...and I was finally able to create it.”

“You were synthesizing...? Wait. So you haven't been taking breaks and resting?! Are you okay?! You're not going to pass out again, right?!”

“I’m fine. In fact, this has taken a load off my mind.”

It has? Does that mean he’s found a solution to that “other matter” he was talking about?

“Anyway, check it out. I created a new sword to replace the platinum sword. It’s called a killer sword.”

Seiya removes the cloth, revealing three swords. He unsheathes one, exposing a silver, glittering blade.

“A killer sword, you say! What a fine blade you have created!”

Jonde probably has an eye for swords. He reverently stares at it and gasps in admiration. Using Appraise reveals that it’s a top-class weapon in both attack power and durability. It’s absolutely incredible that he was able to make such a powerful sword since Ixphoria lacks materials for Synthesis, but there’s something that’s bothering me.

“H-hey, um... Seiya? How exactly did you make that sword?”

“I combined fur from Grandleon, machine parts from Oxerio, some hair from Celemonic, and a little something extra along with a platinum sword to create it.”

So he’s been collecting parts from these powerful enemies to use for Synthesis?! When he gets fixated on something, he becomes obsessed! B-but more importantly...

“Hey... When you say ‘a little something extra’...”

I tremble, wondering if I’m missing handfuls of hair, but...

“Don’t worry. I only needed one hair from you this time.”

“What?! Just one?! Not a hundred?!”

“Just one. But instead, I had to use a large volume of body hair from an undead to make the killer sword, leaving me with no choice but to secretly pluck a hundred hairs from Jonde’s body.”

Contrary to my sigh of relief, Jonde is bewildered.

“Y-you used that much of my hair?!”

“You’re a walking corpse. Who cares if you go bald?”

“I—I do! Am I bald?! Mirror...! I need a mirror!”

Paying no heed to the flustered undead, Seiya holds out one of the three swords to Kiriko.

“Kiriko, you want to become stronger, right?”

“Huh? Y-yes...!”

“Then take this.”

“Thank you so much!”

W-wow. It’s not every day Seiya gives someone a weapon! That’s when I notice something written on the grip of the killer sword. I strain my eyes...and spot the name **Kiriko** carved in it.

“Wow! Kiri, it has your name carved on it, too!”

“I’m so happy! I promise I’ll treasure this sword!”

“It’d be confusing to figure out whose sword is whose if they ever got mixed up, so I carved your names in them.”

Uh-huh. I wonder what’s gotten into Seiya? I don’t think I’ve ever seen him give someone a present before. Seiya hands Jonde, who’s still worried about his hair, a killer sword as well.

“Here.”

“Wh-while I still have mixed feelings about this, I do appreciate it.”

“Hey, did you carve Jonde’s name into the grip as well?”

Kiriko and I look at the sword in Jonde’s hand, only to find the words...

Dead Body.

“What?! Why couldn’t you have just carved my name?!” Jonde shouts.

“It’s more straightforward this way.”

Seiya dismisses Jonde’s concern. I awkwardly laugh as if I have nothing to do with this, but...

“I made one for you, too.”

“R-really?!”

After Seiya hands me a killer sword, I bashfully say: “I-I’m sure you wrote something like *Idiot* or *Worthless Goddess* on my sword!”

I timidly look down at the grip...

But there’s nothing carved in it.

“What the...?! At least write something!!”

What am I, thin air?! Am I invisible to him?! I’d rather have gotten Jonde’s treatment and had something rude written on mine, but I guess Jonde’s just as upset as I am. He’s massaging his temples, and his eyebrows are tightly knit.

“So we have three swords altogether. And the Hero has one, too, of course, which means...h-he pulled out four hundred strands of my hair?!”

“No. I plucked over six hundred in total.”

“What?! What possessed you to take that many?!”

“A hundred for my spare and a hundred for my spare’s spare.”

“Did you really need that many?!”

“Yes. Burning through multiple swords in the fight against Grandleon proved as much.”

Jonde clenches his teeth, unable to argue. Seiya then declares: “Anyway, I’ll be heading back to Nephitet’s place to learn Ghost Buster after lunch, thus concluding my training for the time being.”



Later, we all head over to the spirit world's graveyard together. As Seiya takes a battle stance with his unsheathed killer sword, Nephitet explains: "Imagine you're sending part of your astral self into the sword and that the blade is an extension of your body."

With his sword in hand, Seiya closes his eyes, takes in a deep breath, then exhales. He doesn't move a muscle, but the moment he opens his eyes, a white, filmlike aura surrounds the blade.

"Ohhh!"

Jonde cries in admiration.

"You're a quick study. Yes, that is Ghost Buster. You can damage any ghost-type monster with that."

"You did it, Seiya!"

Seiya learned Ghost Buster surprisingly easily. It must be because of all the astral training he did, coupled with his natural talent. Seiya walks over to me after sheathing his sword.

Huh?! N-no way! Is he so happy that he's going to hug me?!

But just as my heart starts to race...

Bonk!

...Seiya's fist slams right onto my head!

What the hell are you doing?! is what I want to yell, but I find myself staring down at my unconscious body. He brought out my astral body again!! Wh-what's going on?! All he did was punch me, and now I'm a ghost?!

"Nice. Very nice. You learned how to extract your opponent's astral body without the wooden hammer. You are...truly talented."

Nephitet seems impressed, but what the hell?! I didn't even know a move like that existed! I mean, what's even the point of a move like this?! At any rate, I lie down on my collapsed body and return to my normal self.

"S-stop pulling out my spirit like that!"

I chastise Seiya, but he just stares at his hand.

“All I need now is to find a substitute vessel.”

“A ‘substitute vessel’?”

Jonde parrots Seiya’s murmur.

“Hrnnnnnnggh!!”

He then groans as tears pour down his cheeks.

“Jonde?! What’s wrong?!”

“Hrngh...! I’m sure of it now! This Hero may punch me and pluck my hair—he may seem like a terrible person at first glance, but...”

Unable to hold back the tears, Jonde faces Seiya and continues.

“You’ve been searching for a way to turn me back into a human, haven’t you?!”

“What?! I-is that true, Seiya?!”

Kiriko suddenly speaks up for the silent Hero as if she had an epiphany.

“Oh! So that’s the ‘other matter’ he’s been talking about!”

Is that why he put Jonde’s spirit into the Ristarte Hair Doll yesterday?! That means he’s been thinking about ways to save Jonde in between training sessions! Man, I knew you were a nice guy deep down, Seiya! We each look at Seiya with eyes full of adoration, but he simply stares back at us like we’re stupid.

“What are you talking about?”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Jonde pats Seiya on the back and laughs.

“Ha-ha-ha! I know, I know! You’re a man! It’s embarrassing for you to express your emotions!”

Jonde tries to wrap his arm around Seiya while acting like he has him figured out. Seiya, however, pushes him away.

“Get off me. You’re gonna make me smell like a corpse.”

“Oh, come on! Let’s bond, buddy!”

“...That’s enough.”

In the blink of an eye, Seiya punches Jonde on the top of the head.

Bam! Wham! Crunch!

With a thunderous roar, Seiya's earth magic splits open the ground, sending Jonde's body deep beneath the crust until he can no longer be seen!

"S-S-Seiya?!"

"Seiya?! You went too far! Jonde's forehead isn't even poking out this time!"

Kiriko and I are horrified, but Nephitet approaches us with a smile. She then picks up the killer sword with the words **Dead Body** on it and hands it to Seiya.

"Here. Stick this in the ground."

"Good idea."

Seiya drives the sword into the ground where Jonde is buried, almost like a grave marker. He then says: "I was able to master Ghost Buster, succeed in creating the killer sword, and dig a grave for a really annoying man."

He brushes his hair back in trademark fashion.

"I'm perfectly prepared."

Nephitet gives a thumbs-up, Kiriko is at a loss for words, and Jonde is buried deep underground. It makes me wonder if the "other matter" really was about Jonde. I don't even know anymore.

Sandy Village

After digging Jonde out, I get permission from Ishtar to open a gate to the continent of Aeris so we can fight the Death Emperor. To my surprise, however, Seiya doesn't ask to be sent there right away.

"We don't know where in Aeris the Death Emperor is, but I want to avoid the north since it's close to the Demon Lord's continent of Gustraid. Let's start with the south."

"Seiya, there's a town in the south called Fulwahna. How about I open a gate there so we can gather information?"

"A town on a continent ruled by the Death Emperor? It's highly likely that it's already been overrun by ghosts and undead. It would be too dangerous to open a gate right in the middle of town, so get us five hundred meters south of it."

"O-okay. Sure."

Although his trademark overly cautious attitude makes me want to roll my eyes, he has a point, so I create a gate away from the town. Seiya places a hand on the door and slowly opens it, and we follow him through as always.

"Wow... It's nothing but sand!"

Kiriko makes this observation as soon as she passes through. Just as she said, it's sand as far as the eye can see. To make matters worse, the blazing sun is hanging just overhead, which doesn't help since we appear to be in the middle of the desert. Jonde squints his eyes as he looks off into the horizon.

"Is that the town of Fulwahna?"

The heat haze makes every faraway object look like a mirage, but there does appear to be a town in the direction Jonde's pointing.

"It sure looks like it. Let's head over there."

“Wait. Rista.”

Before we even start walking, Seiya stops us. Curious, I turn around to find him squatting while placing a hand on the searing sand.

“Seiya...? What are you—what the...?!”

Suddenly, a golem emerges from the dune! Then another appears. And another. Soon, we’re surrounded by four of them. Seiya explains: “We’re going to be riding on their backs from here on out.”

A golem scoops me up with a giant hand and places me on its back. The same happens to Jonde and Kiriko.

“Seiya?! What’s the meaning of this?!”

“We’re in the desert. It wouldn’t surprise me if there were monsters like antlions that could grab your legs and drag you beneath the burning sand. We can travel safely on these giant golems. Besides...”

“‘Besides’?” asks Jonde.

Seiya puts on a smug grin, then boasts:

“It’s fun, isn’t it?”

“N-no! This is not fun at all!”

Jonde’s right! What’s fun about this?! I have no idea how the Hero’s mind works sometimes! Even so, Kiriko cheerfully replies: “I’m having so much fun!”

Seriously?! Is it like riding on the back of an elephant for her?!

“Good. Now let’s go.”

And just like that, the golems carrying us on their backs proceed. After only a few steps, a nearby patch of sand begins to swell, revealing some bones with the flesh rotting off.

“Wh-what is that?!”

A skeleton holding a sword emerges from the sand, and it’s not just one! There are close to a dozen of them!

“H-Hero, there’s a band of skeletons! Should we get off our golems and

fight?!”

“That won’t be necessary. Just let the golems handle them.”

The rattling skeletons raise their swords while approaching us, but the golems’ mighty blows promptly send them sailing into the distance. The walking corpses are easily reduced to rubble without even getting a chance to fight back. What power! Th-that’s Seiya’s golems for you! He didn’t master earth magic for nothing! Riding on the golem’s back, Seiya extends his hands toward the skeletons and uses Endless Fall, dropping their bodies into the center of the planet. However, I notice there’s one he doesn’t drop. While its head is crushed, its body is still in pretty good condition, unlike the others.

“Jonde, want to try out those bones as a replacement body?”

“N-no, I think I’ll pass. Going from undead to skeleton seems rather pointless.”

“You wouldn’t smell like a corpse, at least.”

“Smelling bad still beats becoming some random person’s discarded bones! At least this is *my* body!”

“*Sigh*. Beggars can’t be choosers. Know your place.”

“Am I really being that picky?!”

Jonde refuses the offer, but I...don’t blame him. Now that I think about it, Jonde won’t be able to borrow the body of a living person, so are monsters his only option? At any rate, after taking care of the skeletons, we resume our journey to Fulwahna. But the peace is short-lived, and numerous red clouds of mist soon appear up ahead. I have no doubt that these incorporeal monsters are...

“Seiya! Ghosts! Lots of them!”

Faces twisted in agony and remorse emerge from the mist. The Demon Lord’s powers must have revived the deep-seated grudges of the dead and turned them into monsters.

“Ghosts, huh? Then it’s time to reap the benefits of my training.”

Seiya channels his spirit into his killer sword and activates Ghost Buster just as

Nephitet taught him. A white, filmlike aura covers the blade as Seiya gets into a combat stance on his golem.

“You three, unsheathe your killer swords as well.”

“O-okay!”

We brandish the weapons Seiya gave us, revealing that their blades are already covered with a white film.

“What the...?! When did you use Ghost Buster on our swords?!”

“I infused them with my spiritual energy back in the spirit world. It’s time for you guys to be useful.”

Seiya’s asking us to do something for a change! I’ve always wanted to help him, but now that the time to fight has finally come, I can’t stop my hands from trembling! I’m gonna do it, though! Really! ...Is everything gonna be okay? A-ack! What’s wrong with me?! It’s my duty as a goddess to support the Hero! I have to give it my all!

Unused to holding a sword, I try to copy Jonde...but Seiya glares at me.

“What do you all think you’re doing? Hurry up and give your swords to the golems.”

““What?! You want us to give up our swords?!””

Jonde and I, while taken aback, surrender our weapons to our colossal mounts. My golem then charges at a ghost with its spirit-infused blade and swings its heavy arm down, sending the sword right through it.

“Ooooooo...”

The ghost groans as it vanishes into thin air.

...After that, we continue riding on the golems’ backs as they freely swing their Ghost Buster swords. The number of ghosts depletes rapidly, but Jonde seems to be in a foul mood.

“We’re just going to let our golems take care of all the enemies? It... It doesn’t feel like I’m doing anything.”

“Who cares? The most important thing is that we’re safe.”

“I understand that, but...”

Ha-ha... That reminds me of Mash. He really wanted to fight monsters as well. I guess boys will be boys. However, when I look over at Seiya, I notice him staring at something with knitted eyebrows.

“Kiriko. What are you doing?”

When I look back to Kiriko, I can see why Seiya’s upset. She didn’t hand her killer sword over to the golem. Instead, she’s holding it in her trembling hands.

“I—I want to try...and fight the ghosts myself!”

“Kiri?!”

W-wait! You’re going to make Seiya angry! Besides, the golems are already doing a fine job of handling the ghosts, so we should just let them do their thing!

Seiya glares at Kiriko.

“Do you really want to test yourself that badly?”

“Yes! I want to get stronger!”

Silence follows. I fear that the back of Kiriko’s head is going to get acquainted with Seiya’s fist, but...

“Very well. Give it a try. But don’t get off the golem until I tell you it’s okay.”

“Okay!”

Wh-what the...?! He’s gonna let her fight?! But the Seiya I know would never allow something like this!

I puzzle over why he was so quick to accept, when suddenly...

“Astral Break.”

...he uses Valkyrie’s special move, which is effective against ghosts. Chains emerge from his palms before tightly wrapping around one of the ghosts. Seiya then looks at the firmly bound monster and nods.

“All right, Kiriko. Try attacking this incapacitated ghost.”

“Okay!”

H-how overprotective can a person be?! I mean, it’s not a bad thing, but still...!

After hopping off the golem's back, Kiriko timidly approaches the chained ghost. However, right as she gets close enough to attack, she just stands there, trembling.

"What's wrong, Kiri? All you need to do is hit it."

"U-um... I started to think about how this ghost used to be a human, too, and I..."

The sweet Killing Machine hesitates, so Seiya lets out a brief sigh and slays the chained monster himself.

"If you can't do it, then don't even bother. Just let the golem take care of things."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Kiri! You don't have to force yourself to do anything! Just take things slowly!"

Right after I try to cheer Kiriko up, Jonde shouts: "More ghosts have appeared! It's a much larger group than last time!"

I look ahead to find dozens of ghosts descending on us from every direction. *Jonde wasn't kidding! There are so many! What are we gonna do?!*

Yet, in spite of our mounting panic, Seiya extends his hands.

"Class Change: Earth Spellblade to Fire Spellblade."

He then aims both hands at the approaching spectral horde.

"Maximum Inferno."

Multiple streams of fire erupt from his palms, burning a hole through each and every ghost.

"Aaaaaa...!"

Engulfed in the blaze, the monsters wail in agony before vanishing.

"Wait...! That's right! Fire magic works on ghosts! So why do you even need Ghost Buster?!"

"It might come in handy later. Besides, it's better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it, right?"

“Y-yeah, I guess...but it’s kind of depressing since you trained so hard to learn it...”

“More importantly, I need to make sure I thoroughly burn the monsters since I can’t use Endless Fall on enemies without corporeal forms.”

While there were dozens of ghosts a moment ago, all Seiya’s doing now is unloading his fire magic onto empty space.

“What is he doing?”

Jonde and I glare at him for the next ten minutes until he finally decides to resume our trip. After we get back on our golems and trek for a while, the town of Fulwahna comes into view.

“Seiya, it’s Fulwahna! We’re almost there!” I announce, but...

“Ack?!”

A sudden blast of wind blows sand right into my eyes, forcing them shut. I hear Jonde grunt next to me as well.

“M-mn...”

I rub my eyes and try to open them.

Huh...?

I feel like something’s off. The town of Fulwahna, which I’ve been staring at from a distance for a while now, looks a little different. I try to convince myself that it’s just my imagination, but Seiya clicks his tongue.

“Tsk. Be careful, Rista. Something didn’t feel right when that gust of wind blew by.”

“Oh, you thought so, too?”

“We probably walked right into the Death Emperor’s territory. Don’t let your guard down.”

“O-okay!”

Jonde and Kiriko nod with serious expressions. Although nervous, we cautiously enter the town of Fulwahna.

Near the entrance is a woman wearing local garb, which completely covers her head. When she notices us, she uncovers her face, revealing beautiful brown skin. She casts a dubious glance at us at first, as we come riding in on our golems, but she breaks into a smile as soon as she sees Seiya.

“Seiya!!”

She screams while approaching his golem. Seiya unsheathes his sword.

“Who are you? Stay back.”

“What?! Don’t you remember me? It’s me, Mirei! Glesden’s wife!”

“I don’t know any Mireis or Glesdens.”

“What...?!”

The woman named Mirei is bewildered. Sh-she must have known the old Seiya from a year ago!

“Sorry about that! Seiya has amnesia!”

I force a smile and try to play it off.

“O-oh, he does? But he seemed perfectly normal just the other day.”

Hmm? How does “just the other day” sync up with events from a year ago? I’m a little confused, but Jonde and Kiriko are all smiles as they look at the houses made of hardened mud.

“It looks like this town is still okay!”

“The Death Emperor must have overlooked it!”

Mirei gives me a quizzical stare.

“‘The Death Emperor’? What’s that?”

“What?! You don’t know?!”

How does she not know the name of the monster that rules her entire continent?!

As we exchange glances, Mirei gleefully smiles and says:

“Things have been peaceful around here ever since Seiya defeated the Demon Lord Ultimaesus.”

Another

“Seiya defeated the Demon Lord?!”

I find myself taken aback by Mirei’s claim.

Wh-what is she talking about?! A year ago, Seiya lost to the Demon Lord, which is why Ixphoria was destroyed! It’s why we’re back here now!

But Mirei wears a puzzled expression as well.

“I totally thought that Seiya had finally come back with the dirt Kurio asked for. Is that not why you’re here?”

“‘Kurio’? ‘Dirt’?”

“Kurio is my son. My husband, Glesden, runs an inn in town, and when Seiya traveled here from Termine and stayed with us a few weeks ago, Kurio asked him if he could bring back some dirt from Rhadral, since you can make some really high-quality clay by mixing it with the dirt here.”

“Uh...”

I have no idea what Mirei’s talking about. They asked Seiya to pick up some dirt? Seiya’s been traveling with me the entire time we’ve been in Ixphoria. Her story doesn’t add up.

Could there be something wrong with her? Just when I start wondering this to myself, Seiya grabs me by the neck and jerks me away from Mirei.

“Gwah?! What the hell?!”

“Rista, see if you can open a gate.”

“Now?! Why?!”

“Just do it.”

I reluctantly cast the spell, create a gate, and open it...only to find a white wall

on the other side!

A—a spell stone's preventing us from leaving!!

Seiya nods gravely.

“Hmph. This confirms that the town is already under the Death Emperor’s rule.”

“Wait. Does that mean the people living here are...?!”

A chill travels up my spine as I look at Mirei and the bustling townspeople behind her. *A-and they call him the Death Emperor... Does that mean everyone in this town is...dead?!* I shudder. Seiya, on the other hand, is wearing an annoyed frown.

“Unbelievable. We walked right into the enemy’s lair. I had sent earth serpents out to patrol Fulwahna’s perimeter, but apparently, they didn’t deem it necessary to report anything to me because they didn’t find any monsters. I’m going to need to make some adjustments so they’ll notify me the moment they detect something even slightly odd.”

“I—I don’t think anyone could have prevented this from happening.”

While Seiya regrets entering the town of Fulwahna, Jonde and Kiriko survey the area.

“This is strange. It’s hard to believe that such a peaceful town currently exists in Ixphoria.”

“There were so many ghosts and skeletons outside, too, but this town is fine for some reason...”

Seiya quietly nods.

“It doesn’t matter that these people are strange. What matters is why. A town where the dead gather, an illusion, monsters that transformed into humans, clay dolls—there are too many possibilities. I’m just going to have to investigate every possibility one by one.”

“But how?”

Seiya takes a pair of hemp gloves out of his pocket as he approaches Mirei,

then puts them on. She seems puzzled at first, but without warning, Seiya reaches for her chest and rips open her shirt! Mirei's exposed, ample bosom bounces free.

"S-Seiya?!"

He sends me a contemptuous glare, then begins groping Mirei's body: her chest, her hips, and even her hands and legs! Her cheeks redden.

"Unf! Seiya?! Y-you're making me—a-ahn!"

"Seiya?! What the hell are you doing?! I-I-I'm so sorry, Mirei!"

But Mirei appears to be exhilarated, even.

"No, it's okay. It's...very okay. My husband doesn't touch me like this anymore..."

"Mirei?! Don't tell me—are you turned on right now?!"

The married mother doesn't seem angry in the slightest. In fact, she seems pretty excited.

What the...?! So you can just molest whoever you want if you're good-looking?! If Jonde tried something like that, he would've been arrested in record time!

As I lament how unfair the world is, Seiya moves away from Mirei and mutters to himself: "She didn't react to my holy-water-infused gloves. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary when I used Scan on her, either. It appears she's neither ghoul nor ghost but a living human."

Jonde narrows his eyes while observing the humans walking by.

"The others do not seem to be undead, either. I hate to admit it, but I can sense these things."

I guess undead can sense the presence of other undead. Now that I think about it, my goddess senses aren't picking up an evil aura from the townspeople, either. It doesn't seem like they're trying to trick us.

"What's going on with this tow—huh...?"

I stop midsentence, taken aback after looking at Seiya. His sword is

unsheathed, and he plunges it into the back of his own hand! The blade goes right through, and blood drips to the ground.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

“Inflicting pain on myself. Nothing seems to have changed, though, which means this probably isn’t an illusion.”

He stabbed straight through his own hand to try and wake himself up just because he thought the enemy might have put him under a spell?!

“Well, it was highly unlikely that the enemy cast a spell on me without my knowledge, but I had to make sure. Rista, heal my hand.”

“Already on it!”

Ugh! How can someone so cautious do something so careless with a straight face?!

While I’m healing Seiya’s hand with my magic, he casually conjectures.

“In short, ‘the townspeople are alive but have been hypnotized or placed under some sort of spell’ seems to be the most plausible explanation at the moment.”

After I manage to close Seiya’s wound, he rubs some medicinal herbs over the back of his hand for good measure.

“At any rate, this place is suspicious. I’d like to leave, but—”

“But, Hero...! If what you say is true, that means the townspeople here are still alive, right?”

“Yeah! We need to protect them before the Death Emperor tries anything!”

Each of us stares at Seiya until he eventually lets out an exaggerated sigh.

“Fine. We’ll stay for the time being and gather information. Besides, going outside the city right now might not be such a good idea.”

“Huh...?”

Seiya looks up. The sky above Fulwahna is clear, but the clouds around the city are a dark, eerie shade. If anything, it feels like the outside world is far more ominous than anything inside the town.

“All right, let’s start investigating. Don’t let your guard down and do not leave my side.”

Seiya walks ahead. We start to follow him farther into town, but Mirei stops us.

“H-hey, our inn is right at the end of this street. As always, we won’t charge you, so...stop by later if you want.”

Just as one would expect from a town in the desert, the ground hasn’t been paved. Tents stand one after another on the sides of the street, each with numerous goods lined up on the ground like a bazaar.

“Hello, Hero!”

“Nice to see you, Hero!”

“Thank you for coming all the way from Termine to visit!”

The people of Fulwahna shower Seiya with friendly greetings as we pass. Unlike the usual glares of resentment we’ve been getting since we came to Ixphoria, everyone’s eyes are brimming with respect. They really are treating him as if he defeated the Demon Lord.

“What a rare sight! There’s a weapon shop!”

There is?

Jonde points at a tent. Lined up on the ground are swords shaped like sabers. This world is ruled by the Demon Lord, so we haven’t actually been able to buy weapons like this since we got here. Seiya curiously approaches the weapon shop, but after staring at them for a bit, he apathetically says: “This is all junk.”

When I Appraise the weapons, I notice that not only are they unsurprisingly weaker than a killer sword, but they’re nowhere near as strong as a platinum sword, either.

“I figured as much. These are weapons sold by people being controlled by a monster. I bet they’re not even swords.”

“Huh? They look like normal swords to me.”

“I read a picture book long ago about a tanuki who deceived a traveler. Not

only were the people in the town an illusion, but everything in the town was illusory as well. Whatever we buy here might turn into balls of mud later.”

“That’s actually a good point.”

While Seiya is usually too suspicious for his own good, I completely agree with him this time. There doesn’t seem to be anything at this weapon shop worth buying. Just as I’m about to walk away, though, I witness something unbelievable. Seiya has taken his money pouch out of his pocket and is now talking to the turban-wearing shopkeeper.

“I’ll take a hundred of these swords.”

“What the...?! So you *are* going to buy them?! What was all that about mud balls, then?!”

“While highly unlikely, I decided to buy a few on the off chance they don’t turn into mud balls.”

“Okay... But you still don’t need a hundred! What are you going to do if they *all* turn into mud?!”

“Even then, they could still come in handy down the line.”

The shopkeeper, who has been quietly listening the entire time, erupts in a rage.

“I ain’t sellin’ any mud balls!”

Anyway, after I’ve convinced Seiya not to buy a hundred but only ten mud balls—I mean swords—he decides to stop by the item shop’s tent next. Herbs that heal wounds, poison, and paralysis are lined up on the ground.

“Hey, you. Sly old man.”

“M-me?!”

“Yes, you. These are just ordinary, useless leaves, aren’t they?”

“How dare you! These are highly effective medicinal herbs!”

“Hmph. Yeah, I bet. At any rate, I’ll take all of them.”

Despite his complaints, Seiya ends up buying every last herb there.

“S-so, uh... It looks like you bought everything you could get your hands on... just like you always do!”

“It beats the potential regret of not doing so later.”

The sun gradually starts to set while we’re shopping. As we’re carrying loads of new items down the street, we see a large building at the end of it. It looks like a home made of mud, and it’s the biggest house we’ve seen here yet. *That has to be the inn that Mirei runs with her husband.* A young boy stands to the side of the building.

“Oh! Seiya!!”

He rushes over as soon as he notices us, then looks up at Seiya and beams with joy.

“You brought the dirt so I can make more pots, right?!”

“Who are you? I don’t carry dirt with me.”

“What?! Those aren’t bags of pottery material you’re carrying?!”

“They’re bags of assorted leaves.”

“Why are you carrying so many leaves around?!”

In the midst of the excitement, Mirei and another man come rushing out of the building. The honest-looking man, who seems to be in his forties, walks over to Seiya and lowers his head. This must be Mirei’s husband, Glesden.

“Kurio, stop that! I—I am deeply sorry, Seiya!”

“But Seiya didn’t bring me the materials he promised!”

“Kurio, Seiya has amnesia.”

“What?! But...!”

Kurio whines. It sounds like Mirei filled Glesden in on what happened. He wears a gentle smile and holds his hand out.

“You all must be exhausted, and it’s getting late. Please come this way. I’ve prepared the best room for you like always.”

Glesden tries to take us to the inn, but Seiya shakes his head.

“No thanks. What kind of idiot would willingly enter a monster’s den?”

“A what?!”

Seiya ignores the innkeeper—currently in shock after hearing his inn being referred to as a monster’s den—and walks to an open space.

“This should do.”

Seiya then places a hand on the ground, and the patch swells, transforming into an earthen dwelling just as remarkable as the inn.

“M-my god...!”

Seiya casts a scornful gaze at the stunned couple, then creates a few golems and earth serpents with his earth magic before positioning them around the structure. He then shoots a glare at Glesden.

“Glesden, was it? A bit of advice: Things won’t end well for you if you plan on attacking us while we’re sleeping. These monsters will not hesitate to crush you.”

“M-my dad would never do something like that!” Kurio yells before continuing, “*Sigh...* Seiya didn’t bring what I asked, and now he’s acting like a weirdo. This sucks.”

This time it’s Mirei who scolds Kurio.

“Kurio! He saved the world! Show some respect!”

“Is he even the real Seiya?! He looks scary, and he’s a jerk! It’s like he’s a completely different person!”

Kurio glares at Seiya, and Seiya glares at Kurio.

S-Seiya?! Stop trying to start a fight! He’s just a kid!

“He’s different. The Seiya I know is nothing like this.”

Kurio then turns away from the Hero. He looks down the street as a tinge of red illuminates his face. A shadowy figure approaches with its back to the evening sun. I squint until I can make out the face...causing my heart to skip a beat. Rather than armor, he wears the clothes of a nobleman bearing the crest of Termine, but his shiny black hair and gallant profile are one of a kind.

N-no way!! How is this even possible?!

Kurio merrily yells:

“See! I told you! *There’s* the real Seiya!!”

Another Seiya gently smiles as he walks toward us.

A Parallel World

While Jonde, Kiriko, and I are astonished, Kurio yells out: “I knew that other Seiya was an impostor!”

“N-no, he isn’t! That Seiya’s obviously the impostor!” I scream.

Bubbling with rage, Kurio walks over and pulls down Kiriko’s hood.

“Ah...!”

The moment Kiriko grunts, her mechanical head is already exposed. His hand trembling, Kurio points at Kiriko and Jonde.

“Look! A machine and a zombie! This guy’s friends with monsters! What more proof do you need?!”

Glesden and Mirei tense up. There’s no denying that we look like the impostors now. Even then, I try to act normal.

“Kurio, calm down and look at me.”

“Wh-why?”

I slowly comb back my long, blond hair and strike a pose.

“You can sense my divine aura, can’t you? Yes, I am the goddess Ristarte, and this man is the Hero Seiya who will save the world.”

But Kurio glares at me with a look of disgust.

“He’s friends with monsters and some brain-dead girl!”

“...?! Listen here, you little shit!”

“Ah!! And she’s a potty mouth, too!”

Kurio swiftly hides behind the impostor Seiya.

In a panic, I shout:

“I-it doesn’t matter! Just get away from that man! He’s so obviously a monster pretending to be a human! Right, Seiya?”

Seiya just quietly stares at the impostor, though.

“Rista, check his stats.”

“Huh...?”

I use Scan as instructed.

SEIYA RYUUGUIN

LV: 36

HP: 70,024 MP: 12,077

ATK: 48,651 DEF: 47,999 SPD: 42,187 MAG: 9,685 GRW: 475

Resistance: Fire, Ice, Wind, Water, Lightning, Earth, Poison, Paralysis, Sleep, Curse, Instant Death, Status Ailments

Special Abilities: Fire Magic (LV: 10), Explosion Magic (LV: 4), Magic Sword (LV: 4), EXP Boost (LV: 8), Scan (LV: 7), Synthesis (LV: 3)

Personality: Extremely Reckless

His stats really do look like they belong to Seiya... But what’s up with that personality?! Extremely reckless? That’s just like the old Seiya before he became overly cautious!

“I-impressive! You can even imitate his stats!”

The impostor shoots me a quizzical glance, then hands something to Kurio.

“Here, Kurio. I brought the pottery materials I promised.”

“Thanks, Seiya!”

Even his voice sounds like Seiya’s. Mirei and Glesden look back and forth between the two Seiyas, just as bewildered as I am.

“There are two Seiyas! Wh-what in the world is going on?!”

Kurio hides behind the fake while pointing at the real Hero.

“I told you already! That man’s an impostor! Show him who’s boss, Seiya!”

That’s when the impostor finally takes a hard look at my Seiya.

“Hmm... He does look a lot like me.”

He then confidently approaches him.

“Ah?!”

I naturally hide behind Seiya as the impostor asks: “What’s your name?”

“Seiya Ryuuguuin.”

“Oh, wow. Not only do you look like me, but we share the same name as well.”

I watch with bated breath, trying to imagine how the impostor will react until...he laughs.

“Ha-ha-ha! What a funny coincidence. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

This obviously isn’t a coincidence! What is wrong with this guy?!

“I feel like I already know you. Let’s be friends.”

The impostor laughs while extending a hand of friendship to Seiya, but Kurio cuts in between them.

“Seiya! They’re bad guys! You have to defeat them!”

He took the words right out of my mouth. The impostor, however, shakes his head.

“Kurio, I don’t think they’re bad people. Take this lady who claimed to be a goddess. She has the same aura Aria did when she helped me save this world last year.”

“Y-you know who Aria is?!”

“But, Seiya...! Even if she is a goddess, those two are clearly monsters!”

“Hmm... A zombie and a Killing Machine.”

Kurio knits his brow and points at Kiriko.

“I mean, come on! Look at that monster’s disgusting mechanical body!”

“...!”

Kiriko hangs her head, and the impostor gives Kurio a reproachful look.

“You mustn’t judge others by their appearances. While they may look like monsters, I sense no malice coming from them.”

“B-but being friends with monsters—”

“Kurio. Apologize to the Killing Machine.”

Kurio hesitates after being scolded by the impostor, but he eventually lowers his head to Kiriko, albeit timidly.



“I’m...sorry...”

“O-oh, don’t worry about it! I’m fine!”

The impostor watches Kurio’s and Kiriko’s exchange, then smiles with evident satisfaction. *Wh-what is this feeling...? When we first tried heading to Ixphoria, Seiya was attacked by a werewolf, causing him to temporarily become reckless like he used to be. This impostor reminds me a lot of him, but—ahhh! Don’t let yourself be fooled, Rista! That’s clearly what the Death Emperor wants!*

Before I even realize it, the impostor Seiya is looking at me. When he approaches, I jump.

“Wh-what do you want?!”

“Goddess, what brings you to this town?”

“We came to save Ixphoria from the Demon Lord!”

“That’s strange...because I already defeated the Demon Lord Ultimaesus and saved Ixphoria one year ago.”

“You what?! That’s ridiculous! Ultimaesus had two lives, you know! After you thought you defeated him, he came back to life, attacked when you let your guard down, and e-e-everyone was...”

I can’t even finish my sentence, but the impostor Seiya’s eyes open wide.

“I’m impressed, Goddess. You know things that only we would know. Yes, Ultimaesus did have two lives during the final battle...but the elders at Sage Village had already warned us of that.”

“Y-you went to Sage Village?!”

When Ishtar showed me the past in her crystal ball, Seiya went straight for the Demon Lord’s castle and ignored Sage Village because he wanted to save Ixphoria as quickly as possible.

“The day before, Tiana had cried, saying she had a feeling something bad would happen. I was reluctant at first, but I decided to change course and visit Sage Village. Looking back, I’m glad I listened to her. We probably would’ve died, otherwise. When the Demon Lord revived himself, he went straight for

Colt, but I was able to block his attack and defeat him using the move I learned at Sage Village.”

“You’re lying!”

“I’m not lying.”

When he stares at me with conviction, I freeze. It’s as if a ghost were telling me a frightening tale. By the time I realize it, the sun is already disappearing into the horizon, and it’s getting dark. The impostor surveys the area.

“Goddess, it’s getting late. How about we finish this conversation at the inn?”

He points at Glesden’s inn, but the real Seiya shakes his head with a stern mug.

“No. We’ll finish it tomorrow. For now, we’re going to rest in this cave.”

“S-Seiya?!”

Seiya then briskly walks inside the cavern he created.

After parting ways with Glesden and the others, we walk through the entrance guarded by numerous golems and find ourselves in a wide, open space lit by glowstones. Unable to hold it in any longer, I scream to Seiya, Kiriko, and Jonde.

“I’m losing my mind! What in the world is going on?!”

Seiya leans against the dirt wall and crosses his arms without a word. Jonde, however, replies: “Obviously, there’s something suspicious about that Hero. Perhaps it’s the Death Emperor in disguise?”

“Y-yeah! That’s the only thing that makes sense!”

But Kiriko softly mutters:

“I don’t think that Seiya was lying.”

“What? Kiri?! What makes you think that?”

“I—I just don’t feel like he is. That’s all...”

Seiya, who has been quietly listening, gently nods.

“He isn’t lying. After using Scan and Appraise, it’s clear that he isn’t using Fake

Out or any other kind of disguise.”

“H-he’s probably just using some kind of tricky Transformation ability!”

“That is possible, but I mastered Rasti’s Transformation abilities in the spirit world. If he’s deceiving me, that would mean his Transformation level exceeds even Rasti’s.”

A transformation that surpasses the ability of the Goddess of Shape-Shifting?! Th-there’s no way that’s possible...!

“I consider each and every possibility every day, and one explanation is...”

After a brief pause, Seiya continues:

“Everything he’s saying is the truth, and here, I defeated the Demon Lord Ultimaesus one year ago and saved the world. In other words, this town is the materialization of a world where I was able to defeat the Demon Lord.”

“Th-that’s impossible...!”

Jonde is terribly taken aback...and I’m having an extremely hard time believing it myself! “So this is part of another world—the materialization of a town in another dimension?! That would need God of Creation levels of power! I don’t care how strong the Death Emperor’s gotten with the Dark God’s Blessing! Is something like this even possible?!”

“Keep in mind, this is nothing more than a hypothesis. The Death Emperor could still merely be disguising himself and deceiving us somehow.”

As a heavy silence falls over our group, Kiriko asks Seiya: “If this really is a world different from ours, then what was the Death Emperor thinking, inviting us here?”

“That much isn’t clear yet. I used my earth serpents to check out every person in town, but they didn’t sense a single monster’s presence, let alone the Death Emperor. I thought he might be trying to slow us down, so I checked the surveillance earth serpents in Galvano and Termine, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.”

“What’s going on?! What is the Death Emperor plotting?!”

Jonde clicks his tongue. There’s something eerie about not knowing what the

enemy looks like or what they want from us. Nevertheless, Seiya's demeanor is as calm as always.

"I've positioned numerous earth serpents and golems throughout town. We'll just have to keep our guard up until the enemy makes their next move."

Seiya then lies on the ground.

"It's probably going to be a long battle, so get some rest. I've prepared a room for each of you."

I have no way of knowing how much of a handle Seiya actually has on the situation, so I head to my room and go to sleep.

Early the following morning, after a poor night's sleep, I roll out of bed, leave my room, and take a peek outside the cave entrance. The sky still has a pale, grayish tint as it hangs over the town of Fulwahna, tents and mud buildings crowding the streets.

Is this town really a different world from ours? I find that hard to believe.

While I wonder that to myself, I suddenly notice Seiya standing next to me.

"Oh, morning, Seiya."

"Mm-hmm."

He's holding a basket of bread.

"Here. Breakfast. Make sure to share with the others."

"Thanks."

Huh. He seems to be in a good mood today.

After I accept the bread, Seiya narrows his eyes and stares at the sky. There's a large cluster of clouds off in the distance.

"Look. It's a sandstorm."

"Oh, no wonder it looked so cloudy."

"You won't be able to leave Fulwahna for the next two to three days with that there."

"Wow. Look at you, Mr. Smarty Pants."

When I turn back to Seiya, I realize he's not wearing any armor!

"Wh-what the...?! Wait! Are you the impostor Seiya?!"

"I'm not an impostor. But, well, I'm not *your* Seiya, either."

"Eek!"

Terrified, my knees give out as I try to retreat, and I fall onto my butt. *O-oh no...! He's going to kill me, isn't he?!*

Noticing I'm scared, though, the impostor Seiya sweetly protests.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. While we may have differing opinions, I know you people aren't evil. So in the grand scheme of things, whether I defeated the Demon Lord matters little, does it not?"

"N-no, actually, I think that matters *a lot* in the grand scheme of things!"

More importantly, does this Seiya seriously believe us?! He's acting just like Seiya did when he was extremely reckless!

Whatever the case, it doesn't look like he's going to hurt me. Right as I heave a sigh of relief, a crack appears in the ground below me and something pops out!

"What the...?!"

It's none other than Seiya, fully armored!

"Why do you always have to appear like that?!"

"I was hiding underground just in case this impostor forced himself on you and I had to save you."

"I would never do such a thing."

"Right."

Seiya brushes the dust off his body while approaching his doppelganger.

"Let me ask you something. You know a skill that I don't. 'Drain: Charged Attack'—is that the move you learned at Sage Village?"

"Yes. It's a skill where you absorb your opponent's power while blocking their attacks. Although you can't attack while using the move, once your attack is

completely charged, you can unleash a massive counterattack, which adds the enemy's attack power to your own."

"And that's how you defeated the Demon Lord, huh?"

The impostor looks at Seiya with an amicable expression.

"Wanna know more? I could teach you if you're interested."

"Fine. I guess it won't hurt to learn just in case."

What?! Seriously?!

I call Seiya over and whisper:

"Seiya! Are you sure you should be learning something from an impostor?!"

"Relax. I'm always on my guard. Besides, I want to talk to him so I can learn more about whatever the hell's going on here."

"O-oh, that makes sense! Well, be careful!"

The two Seiyas assume combat stances, swords at the ready. The double then instructs Seiya to draw back his sword. It looks like any ordinary training session at first, when suddenly...

"Now, firm up like you did in elementary PE when you were at the bottom of the human pyramid."

"Okay."

"Next, while loosening up, try to savor the moment the enemy attacks like you would savor a nice stick of gum."

"I see."

How is that making any sense to him?!

The impostor's teaching method sounds like nonsense to me, but as I watch his bizarre mannerisms, I can't help but feel like he's the real Seiya, too. After some time goes by, Jonde and Kiriko emerge from the cave and watch the two Seiyas as well.

"A-are they training together?"

"Wh-what an unusual sight."

Jonde's right. Seiya is teaching Seiya swordsmanship. The identical Heroes' training seems like it could go on forever.

...After around an hour goes by, I ask Seiya if he wants to take a break, but...

""What?""

They both look back at me.

"Oh, no, uh... I was talking to this Seiya—"

""Which one?""

"Ugh! Can you be any more aggravating?!"

I point at the Seiya wearing armor.

"From now on, I'm calling the Seiya who came with me 'Cautious Seiya'!"

The other Seiya roars with laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha. 'Cautious Seiya,' huh?"

"And you're 'Reckless Seiya'! Got it?!"

"Why am I the reckless one? Meh. Doesn't matter. Let's continue training."

"That's why!!" I scream, but Reckless Seiya innocently smiles back.

Slowly but surely, seeing him smile so cheerfully—something the Cautious Seiya usually never does—causes me to lower my guard.

The Shape of Love

Two hours have passed, and they've gone from training to actual sparring. The sound of metal against metal echoes as Reckless Seiya's sword clashes against Cautious Seiya's. But as they trade blows, I notice Kiriko is no longer standing next to Jonde.

"Hmm? Jonde, where's Kiri?"

"Oh, Kiriko? Kurio came over a few minutes ago, took her hand, and brought her back to the inn."

"Jonde, seriously?! You were supposed to be watching her! She's still a child, you know!"

"Then why weren't *you* watching her?!"

I rush over to the inn, leaving the two Seiyas behind. I never got the impression that Kurio was dangerous, of course, but I'm worried he's bullying her again for being a Killing Machine. Kurio's father, Glesden, is standing behind the front desk when I walk in. When I ask, he tells me that Kurio is out back in the tent, so I hurry straight there.

"Kiri, are you in here?"

"Oh! I'm right here!"

When I enter, I find Kurio and Kiriko sitting next to each other. Kurio's hands are covered in mud as he kneads clay. His mother, Mirei, is also nearby, standing in front of various earthenware pottery lined up on the shelves.

"Um... What are you doing?"

"Making a pot!" Kiriko happily replies.

Mirei walks over to me and whispers into my ear:

"Kurio felt really bad about his behavior yesterday, so he wanted to teach

Kiriko how to make a pot.”

“Oh, so that’s what’s going on!”

Not only was he not bullying her, he was actively trying to be friends with her.
Hmm. I thought he was kind of a brat at first, but...he’s okay.

“Pottery, huh? Pretty mature hobby for a kid.”

Mirei giggles.

“We people of Fulwahna are very thankful for nature’s bounty. We love the land that provides for us, so we use it to create pottery.”

Kurio kneads the clay by hand without even using a pottery wheel, and before long, he’s made a small vase. When he’s done, he proudly shows it to Kiriko.

“And that’s all there is to it! Got it? Give it a try!”

“Okay!”

Kiriko takes the clay Kurio hands her and tries to imitate his actions, but it looks like she’s having a hard time. Kurio rolls his eyes.

“You’re really clumsy for a machine. Y’know that?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“See? Like this.”

“Oh! I think I get it now!”

Ha-ha! He’s acting just like an older brother!

Watching Kurio take Kiriko’s hands to help her knead the clay warms my heart. Yep... Mirei’s here, too, so she should be okay. I randomly notice a large earthenware plate decorated inside the tent. Painted on it are warriors fighting scorpion-like monsters.

“Hey, Mirei. Is this...?”

“Yes, that’s Seiya and his party. When Seiya visited Fulwahna one year ago, he defeated the King Scorpion, a monster that had been terrorizing our land. This painting is a depiction of that battle.”

Mirei continues, her gaze distant.

“I got to watch Seiya battle up close that day. It was difficult, to say the least, but Seiya was able to defeat the King Scorpion even with the end of its tail piercing his stomach.”

“What...?! He won with a scorpion stinger in his stomach?! What about the others?!”

“They were in terrible shape as well—either poisoned, paralyzed, or unconscious.”

“H-he must have rushed in to fight it, despite being under-leveled again! I swear! That Seiya is so reckless!”

While I find myself dumbfounded by just how different he is compared to Cautious Seiya, Mirei simply laughs.

“It was harrowing to watch if I’m being honest. Even so, everyone in this town respects Seiya, who bravely fought against an enemy far stronger than him.”

“*Sigh*. They’re both extremes on opposite ends. I wish I could just add them together and divide by two...”

After talking to Mirei, I leave Kiriko to her practice and head back to see how Seiya’s doing.

To my surprise, the two Seiyas are still crossing blades in front of the inn.

“They’re still training?!”

“Yes, they haven’t even taken a break yet. The cautious one is fine, but the reckless one looks like he is about to collapse any minute now.”

Just like Jonde said, Reckless Seiya’s face is clearly strained with exhaustion. Apparently already at his limit, Reckless Seiya groans: “Y-you already learned the move. Haven’t you trained enough?”

“Not yet. I need to perfect it. I have to save the world, after all.”

“Oh... I see... Your world...hasn’t been saved yet...!”

Reckless Seiya clenches his teeth.

“All right. Then let’s keep going while we can still stand.”

But Reckless Seiya’s body is already trembling. He only lasts a few more

exchanges before he collapses face-first onto the ground like they do in comic books.

“A-are you okay?!”

I rush over and help the unconscious Hero up while scolding Cautious Seiya.

“Enough already! This Seiya is a lot weaker than you, you know!”

“Hmm...”

After approaching him, Cautious Seiya places a hand over the unconscious Hero’s heart, then opens his eyelids as if checking for signs of life.

“I took various things into account, but it looks like he really is just like the old me...for now, at least.”

Without showing even a hint of worry, he intricately analyzes Reckless Seiya. Once that’s done, he returns his focus to the cloudy sky outside of town.

“He said the sandstorm would pass in two to three days. Until then, I will continue observing the town.”

Then, he briskly walks off somewhere on his own.

What the...?! Hey?! What am I supposed to do with this Seiya?!

I can’t just leave him here, so I ask Jonde to carry him to the inn. We tell Glesden what happened, get a room, and lay Reckless Seiya on the bed. Jonde leaves once his task is done, leaving only Reckless Seiya and me in the room. I decide to use Scan to check his HP just in case...and can’t believe my eyes.

HP: 3/70,024

What?! He only has three HP left! Who the hell trains until they’re on the verge of death?! He must have gone far past his limit just to help Cautious Seiya train.

Reckless Seiya slept for an entire day after that.

It was noon the next day when Reckless Seiya finally awoke.

“...Hey, Goddess,” he mutters after noticing me in the chair by his bed watching over him.

“Don’t ‘hey’ me! You almost died!”

His lips curl slightly upward.

“The me from your world is amazing. Although he already mastered the skill, it’s still not enough for him. I, on the other hand, was already satisfied after hearing the basics and immediately stopped practicing. He’s the same as me, yet he’s completely different.”

“Yeah, a lot happened to make him that way.”

“I heard that your world was destroyed by the Demon Lord. Such a painful experience must have changed me...”

Reckless Seiya appears to be pondering what happened to Cautious Seiya, but I suddenly realize something.

“H-hey, you defeated the Demon Lord, right? So is Termine in your world okay, too?”

“Of course. I currently watch over the world from the peaceful nation of Termine. I simply came to Fulwahna to check up on things and see Kurio, but I plan on returning to Termine once the sandstorm dies down.”

“So that means Princess Tiana’s there, too, right?!”

“Of course. Tiana and our child are waiting for my return.”

My heart races.

“Sh-she was able to give birth...!”

“She was.”

“A boy? A girl?”

“A little baby girl.”

“How is she? Is she eating well? Is she happy?”

“She’s doing wonderful, but...Goddess, why are you crying?”

I gasp. I had no idea that tears were running down my cheeks until he pointed it out.

“O-oh, um... It’s nothing. Anyway, you ended up not going back to Japan,

huh?”

“I found something worth risking my life to protect here, so I decided to stay.”

Those words push me over the edge, and I can no longer hold back the tears.

This must be the world I always dreamed of when I was Princess Tiana. Even now, I...

...Why couldn't that be my reality?

Just as I think that to myself...

“Rista, the grass is always greener.”

A distant voice echoes in the room, even though Reckless Seiya and I are supposed to be the only ones here.

Eeeeeek?! Wh-where is that voice coming from?

My heart nearly stops as I survey the room until Cautious Seiya comes sliding out from under the bed.

“Again?! Do you always just hide under people’s beds?!”

Seiya slaps me on the back of the head as I scream.

“Ow! What the hell?!”

“It’s time to get your head out of the clouds.”

“Huh?!”

With that, Seiya leaves the room. After a few moments of muted incredulity, I’m finally able to quell my rage.

“U-unbelievable! I mean, how long was that stalker even hiding there?!”

“Are you okay, Goddess?”

“Yeah... I’ll be fine...”

Reckless Seiya is worried about me. *Ugh! He’s so much better than my Seiya!*

The following day, Cautious Seiya is already gone by the time I wake up in my cave room. I’m sure he’s either working out, making golems, or investigating the town. *Whatever.*

Kiriko went back to the tent today to play with Kurio, and Jonde is merrily chatting with Glesden at the inn's front desk.

Oh, wow. When did Jonde and Glesden get so friendly? They seem to be laughing and having a good time.

I decide to watch them from the shadows.

"I told the townspeople that the Seiyas are twin brothers."

"I really appreciate it. Seeing them together would surely cause some confusion for the townspeople, otherwise."

After that, Jonde looks out the inn window, watching people come and go. Then, he speaks in a voice full of admiration.

"What a wonderful town. Termine used to be bustling with life like this."

"Hmm? I hear that Termine is prospering even now. The beautiful princess and Hero work alongside their wonderful queen and exceptional general to ensure the safety of this world."

"O-oh, so everyone's still doing fine! I was never turned into an undead, and I'm still by Princess Tiana's side..."

While Jonde is close to tears, a beautiful woman carrying a tray with a tea set comes walking out from the back of the inn.

"It's just a small gesture, but I prepared some tea. Care for a cup?"

"Oh! Much appreciated!"

As Jonde reaches out for a teacup with a smile, the woman hurls the tea right in his face.

"Pffffff?!"

Despite her horrible mistake, the woman doesn't look the least bit sorry.

"G-Glesden?! Wh-what is wrong with her?!"

"I—I don't know! She doesn't work here!"

The woman's body then starts to glow, and in an instant, she transforms into Cautious Seiya, fully dressed in armor! He coldly scolds Jonde: "And you call

yourself a general. Wake up. Never let your guard down.”

Whaaaaaat?! He transformed into a woman just so he could keep an eye on Jonde?!

Seiya then briskly walks away like he didn’t do anything wrong, and Jonde yells: “Are we sure *he’s* not the impostor?!”

I’m painfully aware how he feels. After watching Jonde get hot tea splashed in his face, I decide to go check up on Kiriko. Seiya left in the opposite direction, and I highly doubt he would go as far as spying on children. Still, my eyes can’t help but dart in each and every direction to make sure he’s not there. *Yep! Looks like the coast is clear!*

Mirei is once again watching over Kurio and Kiriko as they knead clay together. They seem to be in good spirits. Kiriko also appears to have gotten better, and clay plates and vases line the shelf. They must be leaving them out to dry. As their fingers move deftly, I ask: “Hey, what are you two making?”

“Ornaments. I’m making the sun.”

“I’m making the moon.”

“Tee-hee. They said they’re going to trade later.”

Mirei smiles as she chimes in, then glances at Kurio with a hint of sorrow in her eyes.

“They said the sandstorm outside of town should clear up by tomorrow, Kurio, so make sure to finish your mold before then.”

“What?! You’re leaving already, Kiriko?!”

“Y-yes. I’m in the middle of a journey to defeat the Demon Lord.”

“*Sigh.* But we only just started to get to know each other...”

“I’m sorry...”

Mirei then turns to me.

“Goddess, it will take a month to finish them, so do you think you could stop by after your journey is over?”

“Yes, of course. I promise.”

“Then let’s start firing them.”

Mirei walks over to a large kiln outside the tent, with Kurio not far behind.

“Mom! Hurry! We don’t have much time before Kiriko leaves!”

“Yes, sweetie. I know.”

Thoughtfully watching their exchange, Kiriko mutters:

“Rista, if the Demon Lord hadn’t taken over our world, do you think I would have been able to have a future like this?”

“Kiri...”

The moment of melancholy ticks by slowly. Mirei grabs a tool to open the kiln safely, but as soon as she removes the lid, we freeze, for hidden beneath the lid is...Seiya’s face! Seiya crawls out of the kiln, engulfed in flames.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek!!”

“Ahhhhhhh! It’s a monsterrrrrrrrr!”

Although Mirei and Kurio are screaming their heads off, Kiriko and I are at a loss for words. He’s wearing a nonchalant expression despite the fact that he’s literally on fire. Eventually, I manage to spit out: “S-S-Seiya! Are you not hot?!”

“I’m protecting my body with fire magic. It’s only a little hot.”

“So it *does* feel hot!!”

Seiya, still on fire, approaches Kiriko.

“Kiriko, we already have our own world. Don’t ask for the impossible.”

“Y-yeah... Sorry...”

Already at my limit, I scream:

“Seiya! Stop spying on us!!”

“I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t let your guard down. Do not forget that this town is already under the Death Emperor’s control.”

“B-but still...!”

“The sandstorm will be gone by tomorrow. Make sure you’re prepared.

Provided everything goes smoothly, we'll be leaving."

As always, Seiya says whatever he wants and then leaves before anyone else can get a word in.

We actually had a pretty comfy mood going! Why did he have to show up just to ruin it?!

Kurio, astonished, mutters:

"Yeah... I hate that Seiya! He's a borderline criminal...!"

Kurio, I couldn't agree with you more...

Mirei's inspecting the oven Seiya crawled out of, so I decide to apologize on his behalf.

"I'm so sorry about that creep—I mean—Seiya."

"Oh, no. It's fine. It doesn't look like the oven's broken, either."

Mirei wears a sweet smile in contrast to the irritation painted on my face.

"Some people use their favorite pottery every day, but others carefully store theirs away to make sure it doesn't break."

"...What?"

"I believe that some people are able to be outwardly expressive with their love while others find it easier to watch over their loved ones from afar. I had that thought after observing your Seiya."

"Mirei, he's not the nice person you think he is. He was just keeping an eye on us so we wouldn't cause any trouble."

Even then, Mirei's smile doesn't waver.

The next morning arrives. It's our day of departure.

In the middle of my beauty sleep...

"Owwwwwwwwwwww?!"

...I feel a sharp pain shoot through my right leg, causing me to jump out of bed. I look down to find an earth serpent tightly coiled around my calf.

"Wh-what the...?!"

The snake opens its mouth, and I hear Seiya's voice come out.

"It's morning. Get up, Rista."

"What kind of wake-up call is that?!"

"Just get ready. Now. I've discovered signs of the enemy outside town."

"Wh-what?! Huh...?! Hello? Hello?! ...That jerk!"

With no other choice, I change into my clothes and rush outside.

Cautious Hero

I storm out of the cave to give Seiya a piece of my mind, but my rage vanishes when I step outside. Dozens of wooden buckets are lined up next to each other on the ground, projecting live footage of what's happening inside and outside Fulwahna. Kiriko, Jonde, and Seiya are gathered around the buckets, which are linked to the earth serpent cameras.

"Hey, now. What's going on?"

"I know, right? I just woke up a few minutes ago."

Golems are collecting the townspeople, one after another.

"Seiya?! What's going on?!"

"I told you. The enemy is approaching, so I gathered the townspeople in one place to reduce casualties."

"O-oh... Wait! 'Enemy'?!"

Seiya wordlessly points at a bucket showing a few golems fighting a massive brown dragon.

"A—a dragon?! Are you telling me a dragon is attacking us?!"

"This is live footage of what's happening northwest of here."

Seiya points out multiple buckets to me after that, and cold sweat trickles down my back.

A cyclops?! And a chimera?!

Numerous bizarre monsters are fighting Seiya's golems outside Fulwahna!

A local peers into a bucket and screams:

"L-look! It's the King Scorpion!"

A colossal golden scorpion appears on the scene playing out in another

bucket.

“Wh-what?! That’s impossible!”

I turn in the direction of the familiar voice to find Reckless Seiya standing behind me with a panic-stricken face.

“I defeated the King Scorpion! The cyclops, dragon, and chimera—these are all monsters we fought and defeated a year ago!”

What?! Then does that mean they came back to life?!

The townspeople who saw the footage turn to Reckless Seiya, their eyes full of fear.

“S-Seiya! Are we going to be okay?”

Reckless Seiya unsheathes his sword.

“I’ll take care of this. I will protect the people of Fulwahna.”

“Seiya...!”

A chorus of cheers echo all around us. *Th-this Seiya is so much more heroic! But...*

“You’d just get in the way. Stay put.”

Cautious Seiya scoffs at him.

“...What?”

Reckless Seiya frowns, but Cautious Seiya doesn’t seem the least bit apologetic.

“The golems I positioned outside of town are already handling the enemies. Plus, my earth serpents are keeping an eye on everything happening in town as well. There’s no need for you,” remarks Cautious Seiya, his tone somewhat annoyed, before looking back at us. Jonde knits his brow and says: “The enemy came out of nowhere.”

“The Death Emperor probably had a change of plans.”

“A ‘change of plans’? What do you mean?”

“...Wait.”

In the middle of his chat with Jonde, Cautious Seiya's eyes snap open wide. I follow his gaze, and my heart skips a beat. Reckless Seiya is heading out of town! After clicking his tongue, Cautious Seiya catches up with him, places a hand on his shoulder, and pulls him back.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going out there to defeat the enemy."

"Are you stupid? I already told you that you aren't needed."

"The town is under attack! I can't just sit back and watch!"

"You're useless. How many times do I have to tell you that? You're even weaker than Jonde and Kiriko."

Regardless, Reckless Seiya confidently replies:

"Everything's gonna be okay."

I notice Cautious Seiya's nose twitch.

O-oh no! He is definitely angry!

Sensing danger, I slip in between them and try to persuade Reckless Seiya to stay put.

"I-it's gonna be okay! Just let the golems take care of things! In the worst-case scenario, we can build a wall around the town with earth magic! Right, Seiya?"

Cautious Seiya nods. Still, Reckless Seiya stands his ground. He glares at Cautious Seiya with a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"I'm going. I'm a Hero, and I am the one who defeated the Demon Lord."

"You defeated a weak Demon Lord from a weak world. You wouldn't even be able to defeat these monsters at your level. How many times do I have to repeat myself?"

"I won't lose. I have justice on my side."

"Your justice is a joke."

This time, it's Reckless Seiya whose nose twitches.

"Take that back! You've gone too far this time!"

“All I did was state a fact.”

The two Seiyas are staring daggers at each other! I feel like I’m on pins and needles. The tension between them feels ready to explode! Kiriko, however, yells: “P-please calm down and look at the buckets!”

When I peer into one, I can’t believe my eyes. The cyclops is collapsed on its back while the dragon and chimera are in pieces.

“What...?! The golems already won?!”

It looks like the golems took care of all the enemies while the two Heroes were arguing. I let out a sigh of relief, but Cautious Seiya wears a stern expression.

“Don’t let your guard down. The battle isn’t over yet. If my hunch is correct, it’s only just getting started.”

He then looks back at the buckets. Before long, trails of black smoke rise from the monsters’ bodies while forming a cloud of darkness over Fulwahna!

“I am SIRRUSHT, the Death Emperor—the one who rules over death and destruction.”

Out of nowhere, a voice echoes throughout the town. It sounds like it’s coming from the pits of hell. The eerie voice continues: “Hero, I’m impressed. If your souls had truly accepted this false world created by the Dark God’s ritual, it would have swallowed you whole, and you would have vanished into nothingness.”

O-our souls would have been destroyed if we accepted this reality?! Seriously?! During my time in Fulwahna, I was beginning to think I would have been happier here, and it’s not just me. I’m sure Jonde and Kiriko feel the same. But...that was all part of the Dark God’s plan! We might not be here if it wasn’t for Cautious Seiya spying on us and ruining the mood!

Astonished, Jonde asks Cautious Seiya:

“Don’t tell me...you *knew* about this?!”

“I considered the possibility, obviously.”

As always, this was one of the dozens...if not hundreds of possibilities for

which Seiya had accounted. Whatever the case, though, the Dark God's plan has failed.

"It appears there's no reason to keep this world around any longer."

The Death Emperor's ominous words terrify me.

"Is he planning on getting rid of the townspeople?! Seiya, what should we do?!"

"I hid a special earth serpent in each of the townspeople's pockets just in case. The moment the serpents bite them, their spirits will be drawn from their bodies. I applied the move that Nephitet taught me."

"Oh...! Then we can still help them even if they lose their bodies!"

"It's far from ideal, but they should be fine if I temporarily link their souls to an earth serpent or golem."

Kurio anxiously looks up at Kiriko.

"H-hey, Kiriko, we're going to be okay, right?"

"Of course! Seiya is always prepared for anything!" Kiriko says with a cheerful note. As if on cue, Seiya snaps his fingers.

"Ghost Bite."

The people of Fulwahna all collapse, and their astral bodies slip out of their physical vessels.

Incredible! I can't believe Seiya even prepared for something like this! Everyone's going to be ok—... What the...?

I can't believe what I'm seeing. The townspeople's physical bodies are turning to sand, and their astral bodies are disappearing!

"It didn't work...", Cautious Seiya quietly mutters to himself.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Speaking for the silent Hero, the Death Emperor says: "You can't save them. There is no escape for those who never existed in this world to begin with. Once the source's power—the power of the Dark God—disappears, all that derived from it will disappear as well."

The townspeople around me crumble one after another, so I shake Cautious Seiya's shoulders in a panic.

"Seiya! What do we do now?!"

Seiya simply lifts the Ghost Bite spell without saying a word, and their souls return to their original bodies.

"There's nothing we can do."

"What?! S-Seiya...!"

I thought that Seiya would be able to figure something out like he always does, but he doesn't even move. Only the Death Emperor's voice breaks the silence.

"It would be foolish to believe even you could save the people of a false world. Now, enjoy their final moments. Watch as their memories from the true world return...along with their despair."

As they watch their bodies turning into sediment, Glesden and Mirei mutter: "Oh yeah... We were killed one year ago...by the Demon Lord's army."

"Oh, Kurio... Oh, my sweet Kurio..."

Glesden and Mirei try to walk over to Kurio, but their bodies crumble and scatter across the ground.

"Glesden! Mirei!"

Jonde screams. Kiriko lets out an earsplitting cry:

"Seiya! Kurio's...!"

Kurio's legs slowly turn to sand.

I-is there really nothing we can do?!

Seiya continues to stand immobile, not saying a word. Kurio looks at Kiriko and whimpers.

"I... I was already dead..."

While the tears stream down his cheeks, he smirks like a brave little boy.

"Hey, Kiriko! You better beat that Demon Lord for me! Make sure there are

no more people like us in this world!”

“Kurio...!”

“I’m glad I got to be friends with you, Kiriko.”

Before Kiriko’s hand can reach him, Kurio’s smiling face turns into sand, and he disappears.

“Sniffle... This is... This is too much... How cruel...”

As Kiriko drops her head in despair, the Death Emperor’s voice echoes throughout Fulwahna once more.

“Return to the sands, ye who no longer exist.”

It’s not just the people. Even the buildings of Fulwahna gradually crumble. Despite this, Reckless Seiya is clenching his teeth, still desperately fighting fate.

“Seiya!!”

I rush over to Reckless Seiya. He’s trembling.

“Oh... Right. None of it was real. I never went to Sage Village. I failed to protect my beloved...and our unborn child...”

Reckless Seiya approaches Cautious Seiya as if using up his last bit of strength, but his legs disintegrate, and he collapses before reaching him.

“It looks like you were right... My justice was a joke...”

I suddenly notice tears welling in his eyes. This is the first time I’ve ever seen Seiya cry.

“I should have been more careful... I should have prepared for anything—and then prepared some more...”

“Seiya...!”

Reckless Seiya’s regret is so palpable that even I can feel it. My heart is being wrenched in two, and I can feel tears trickling down my cheeks.

“Tiana, forgive me...,” he begs with his eyes to the sky.

Unable to control myself, I throw my arms around Reckless Seiya as he slowly fades away.

“I’m fine...! You don’t need to worry about me!”

There’s no way for him to know that I’m Princess Tiana reborn, but even then, he...

“Thank you, Goddess...”

His voice is weak. Almost a whisper.

Cautious Seiya looks down at Reckless Seiya.

“Pathetic. You really are an idiot.”

“I’m sorry...”

“But I wouldn’t be here if you weren’t an idiot.”

“Please...defeat the Death Emperor...and the Demon Lord... You must...”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?”

I feel like I can see the shadow of a smile on Reckless Seiya’s face.

“I’m counting on you...Cautious Hero.”

Immediately after that, Reckless Seiya’s body turns into sand and scatters about Seiya’s feet. It’s such a cruel sight that I can’t look away, and yet...in a way, it feels like both Seiyas merged into one.

“E-everything is turning into sand...!” Jonde mutters in utter astonishment.

Before I even realize it, we are standing in the middle of the ruins of the past. Everywhere I look, there’s only desert sand and the bones of the lost. Dark clouds now blanket the sky as they twist into the shape of a giant skull.

“One cannot alter fate even after a false rebirth.

“Though a lie, a second chance at life will not allow one to change their fate. They experienced death twice. Their despair was overwritten with yet greater despair, and so my power grows.”

Drowned out by the Death Emperor’s delighted voice...

“Kurio...! Kurio...!”

Kiriko sobs, holding the sand that was once Kurio to her heart.

“You wretched monster...!”

Jonde furiously clenches his fist. It’s been a while since I’ve been this pissed off. The people of Fulwahna were killed twice at the hands of the Demon Lord’s ilk. I can’t even imagine how painful...how frustrating...how frightening it must have been when they turned into sand.

Death Emperor Sirrusht...! You’re gonna pay!

I hear someone take a step forward. When I see Seiya’s battle stance in profile, his sword brandished, I get goose bumps.

...He seems perfectly fine, even after all that—as if he’s forgotten how to feel anger or sadness. There isn’t a hint of his reckless self left. He already threw away the emotions he deemed unnecessary for battle. Now standing by my side is a Hero whose only focus is defeating the enemy.

“You said fate couldn’t be changed.”

Seiya regards the skull in the sky.

“I guess that means your fate of being killed by me won’t change, either.”

Charge

A chaotic, reddish-black aura seeps from Seiya's body. His hair is tinged vermilion as fangs peek from the corners of his mouth. After entering Berserk Mode, Seiya leaps high into the air toward the skull-shaped cloud and raises his sword. The blade is wrapped in a white, filmlike aura.

Then, Seiya hurls his sword at the Death Emperor like it's a javelin. The increased power of his berserker form sends the sword in a straight line at blinding speed until it penetrates the skull in the distance—or so I thought. Just as the sword connects, the skull vanishes into thin air before immediately returning to its original form.

I-it didn't work!!

"Oh? I was not expecting you to be able to damage my astral body, even if only a little."

Death Emperor SIRRUSHT's voice echoes in admiration. After taking a closer look, I realize the skull isn't completely back to normal. A tiny piece is missing.

Ghost Buster is effective against SIRRUSHT! B-but that attack was nowhere near enough to kill him... Hmm?

Clink. Seiya stomps on the ground with one leg, causing a great number of sheaths to jut out of the earth. My eyes pop open at the sight. There are over twenty swords!

"Seiya, are all of those...?!"

"Yes, I used Ghost Buster to infuse every one of them with my spiritual energy."

Seiya grabs a blade in each hand, raises them into the air, then launches them at SIRRUSHT before grabbing two more and doing it again. The Death Emperor disperses and regroups over and over as Seiya continuously attacks. Eventually,

a voice echoes from the sky.

“I was not expecting you to come prepared with such a weapon, either. The demon was right. You are shrewd. At this rate, I’ll be reduced to little more than a target.”

The dark clouds in the sky gather in one spot, slowly transforming into a jet-black vortex, and eventually, something crawls from the center of it. The first thing I see is an arm wrapped in bloody bandages, gradually followed by the rest of its bound body. What ends up emerging is a monster reminiscent of a mummy.

Sirrusht changed his form?! He must have switched from an astral body to a physical one because he couldn’t take Seiya’s attacks anymore!

“He’s coming down to the surface!” Jonde yells.

The Death Emperor’s physical form emits a black aura as he slowly descends to the ground in front of us. Seiya fixes the Death Emperor with a menacing glare. He must be using Scan. I decide to check, too, but no matter how much I squint, all I can see is static. While most monsters in Ixphoria don’t hide their status menus, Sirrusht seems to be using Fake Out like Seiya.

Seiya was able to drive Sirrusht into a corner using Ghost Buster, but it’s still unsettling that I can’t see his stats! I feel like there’s something different about him compared to the other enemies we’ve faced. Maybe Seiya feels the same, which is why he’s just watching the Death Emperor in silence...but the moment Sirrusht’s feet touch the ground, a cacophonous explosion shatters the eerie calm. The shock wave is so powerful that my entire body trembles.

“Slithering Mine.”

Seiya mutters behind me as I watch in mute amazement.

“W-was that explosion your doing, Seiya?!”

“It was an earth serpent that explodes on contact. I created it by combining fire and earth magic with Valkyrie’s Techniques of Destruction.”

So Sirrusht landed on an earth serpent hidden in the ground! Seiya must have prepared for the battle while we were in town! Anyway, I’m just impressed he

was able to pinpoint exactly where the Death Emperor would land! He's so good at preparing for any scenario!

"Stand back and stay still. Slithering Mines explode on contact, and there are countless mines buried out here. It doesn't matter who steps on them. They will explode."

"Eek...!"

No wonder he was able to pull it off! He considered tons of different possibilities and made plans under the assumption that at least one of his traps would work!

"K-Kiri! It's dangerous here! Let's go over there! ...Kiri?!"

"Huh...? Oh... O-okay!"

I wrap my arms around Kiriko, who is still in shock over Kurio's disappearance, and take her far away from where I'm guessing the mines are buried. Nearby, Jonde narrows his eyes while looking ahead.

"I wonder how much damage that explosion did to the Death Emperor."

The smoke clears. I was hoping that Sirrusht would be lying on the ground, but the mummy stands tall as if nothing had happened. Jonde and I clench our teeth as the Death Emperor boasts.

"Surely, you didn't believe you could kill me with such a petty trick, did you?"

"Of course not."

While we may be disheartened by the fact that the Death Emperor doesn't seem to have taken any damage, Seiya is already charging forward with a killer sword. As he swings the blade, my eyes naturally light up.

H-his sword is wreathed in flames... He turned into a Fire Spellblade?! Of course! Fire magic would be way more effective against an undead monster compared to earth magic!

"Phoenix Drive."

Right in front of Sirrusht, Seiya unleashes a skill—something that should be impossible while he's in Berserk Mode. Seiya's fiery blade dances in the air as

he draws geometric patterns resembling magic circles. Before I even realize it, SIRRUSHT's bandaged body has countless red lines running through it. Rotten, zombified flesh peeks out from the torn bandages. I brace for the explosion that follows Phoenix Drive, but the Death Emperor's exposed flesh gets patched by new bandages, and the red lines carved into his body disappear as well.

Automatic undead regeneration?!

Furthermore, a black aura erupts from the Death Emperor's body. When I notice, I cry out to Seiya:

"Seiya! Watch out! I just sensed Chain Destruction!"

SIRRUSHT's lifeless eye lights up between his bandages.

"Even the slightest touch will ensnare your soul forever. Deadly Bandages."

Coils of gauze unravel from SIRRUSHT's arm and speed toward Seiya. They slither through the air like snakes, but Seiya burns each to ash before they can reach him. Bright-red flames engulf Seiya's body.

"Self-Immolation. By the way, I thought of this move when I was hiding in the oven the other day."

S-seriously?! And here I was, thinking he was just acting like a stalker!

"I'll continue defending against the Death Emperor's attacks while reducing everything to ash with an attack power that exceeds his regeneration speed," Seiya says as two earth serpents each bring him a sword.

He takes one in each hand.

"Mode: Double Phoenix Drive."

He instantly appears right in front of SIRRUSHT with his lightning-fast berserker speed, and the superfast fiery trails of his swords become geometric patterns in the air! Countless crimson lines are carved all over SIRRUSHT's body! I thought Seiya had him this time, but the Death Emperor still doesn't explode. Eventually, the crimson lines fade in color and disappear as well.

"...! The Death Emperor's regenerative ability is even greater than the Hero's attack power!" JONDE groans.

Now it's SIRRUSHT's turn to go on the offensive. He shoots the Deadly Bandages around his body at Seiya, but again, they are reduced to ash before reaching their target. Seiya's attacks may be getting negated by the regeneration, but SIRRUSHT's attacks aren't landing, either. Right as I thought they had reached a stalemate, SIRRUSHT insists:



“Even with such tremendous power, your attacks are nothing in the face of absolute darkness.”

Sirrusht moves his arms in an arc, and a black vortex appears in the air.

“M-magic?!”

The distortion grows until it’s around the size of one of my gates. Seiya creates some distance between them. Sirrusht then explains: “After the Demon Lord received the Dark God’s Blessing, all monsters he created possessed his remarkable power inside of them. I hear that Grandleon was planning on leading a rebellion, but he simply did not understand how this world works. We cannot exist without the Demon Lord.”

I don’t really understand what he means, but an ominous feeling takes root in my heart and begins to swell. Sirrusht holds a hand out at the vortex.

“Arise, corpses of all those who perished on Ixphoria. Cemetery: Night Again.”

In a similar manner to how Sirrusht had appeared earlier, a new, yet very familiar monster crawls out of the black vortex.

“I-is that a beastkin?!”

It’s a beastkin with the face of a dog. After the first appears, he is followed by a catlike beastkin, then fox and rhinoceros beastkin. Before long, a horde resembling the ones who once ruled over the continent of Rhadral has been assembled, but their faces are devoid of life. When I take a hard look, I notice their bones are exposed here and there all over their bodies. Jonde furrows his brow.

“Those beastkin are undead...!”

I panic at the sudden sight of undead beastkin, but...

“Maximum Inferno.”

Seiya is already holding his arms out at the beastkin. His flames completely devour them. They try to approach the Hero through the scorching blaze, but the overpowering heat reduces them to ash. After letting out a sigh of relief, I yell: “Hmph! You’re gonna need more than a few weak, undead beastkin if you plan on giving Seiya a run for his money!”

“That was merely the beginning...of the end.”

“O-oh, stop trying to sound so cool and cryptic!”

“As long as the Demon Lord is alive, my powers allow me to resurrect even corpses that have already decayed. Even the tip of one’s pinky can be used as a medium to resurrect the dead in full. Now, behold as I resurrect every monster the Hero has killed in Ixphoria.”

“Wh-what?!”

He’s bluffing, right?! Every monster Seiya’s faced in Ixphoria? Every beastkin and Killing Machine? How many thousands—no—tens of thousands of enemies does that make?!

“And it won’t just be the underlings. The Beast Emperor Grandleon, the Machine Emperor Oxerio, and even the Vengeful Empress Celemonic will be resurrected. In addition to their automatic undead regeneration, all of their attributes besides speed will increase as well.”

“B-b-b-but...!! S-Seiya?!”

“This is bad...”

Seiya seems unnerved, but I can’t blame him. An army of thousands of undead are going to be resurrected along with Grandleon, Oxerio, and Celemonic?! J-just saying “this is bad” really undersells how bad this really is!

“Seiya!! You have to defeat him before he summons the undead and—”

Before I even finish my sentence, though, I realize it’s already too late. Multiple black vortices have appeared around Sirrusht, even more than before.

“The door to hell has opened. Behold my greatest ritual—Cemetery: Night Again.”

“Th-this is bad! This is very bad!”

Jonde stands in front of Kiriko to shield her and draws his sword. The Death Emperor’s voice echoes.

“Arise, those who cannot accept death. Come forth, my army of lost souls.”

I stare at the distortions, my breath unsteady. Countless monsters are going

to attack us along with their leaders!

“Rise...my puppets...”

But nothing emerges no matter how long we wait.

“Impossible... But why...?” SIRRUSHT whimpers.

“Oh, so that’s what happened.”

Seiya slaps his hands together.

“‘Even the tip of one’s pinky can be used as a medium.’ I found it hard to believe that I left any remains of the enemy that large, but...the first wave of beastkin must have been monsters I killed when I used to be reckless. That’s why I didn’t properly dispose of their corpses.”

“‘Dispose’...? Absurd. Are you claiming you reduced every enemy you fought to dust, leaving no trace of them behind?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

SIRRUSHT falls speechless, but me...?

Yessssssssss!! Every time Seiya defeated an enemy, he obsessively torched their bodies and dropped them into the center of the planet. Honestly, I always thought, *What’s wrong with this guy?* But that weird, overly cautious habit finally paid off!

“‘Cemetery: Night Again,’ was it? That move won’t work on me.”

SIRRUSHT growls deeply, making it evident he’s flustered.

“You bastard...!”

SIRRUSHT deploys his Deadly Bandages once more. Every one of them burns to ash before they can reach Seiya, but this time, even SIRRUSHT himself is rushing toward the Hero with his bandaged arms stretched straight ahead.

“Seiya!!”

Seiya knocks the Death Emperor’s arms away with his sword.

“Phoenix Thrust.”

The burning blade pierces SIRRUSHT’s stomach, followed by a swift kick to the

sword's hilt. He flies into the air before hitting the ground. Without delay, Seiya holds his hands over the monster and casts the high-level spell Maximum Inferno. Despite being relentlessly attacked and engulfed in flames...

“Permanent Rot.”

The flames vanish, and Sirrusht returns to his feet like nothing happened. New bandages now cover his body where the old ones were burned off.

“Preventing me from using Cemetery: Night Again is deserving of praise, but none of your attacks can surpass the speed of my regeneration.”

The Death Emperor then resumes his attack. While dodging Deadly Bandages, Seiya blocks the monster's strikes with his sword, but all of a sudden, the flames around his body appear to wane.

What...? Is Seiya's fire magic weakening?

I finally realize Seiya is only deflecting the bandages with his sword. He's able to evade since he's still in Berserk Mode, but it looks like it's taking everything he has just to block the attacks.

He's on his back foot now!! Is he tired?! Ah...! But if those bandages touch Seiya, his soul will...!

Much to my unease, Seiya quietly mutters to himself: “Forty percent.”

“Huh? D-did he say something?”

“D-do you think he's planning on using *that* move?”

“‘That move’? Jonde, do you mean...?”

“Sixty percent.”

Hearing those words convinces me.

That's it! There's no doubt about it! That's the move Reckless Seiya taught him! Seiya's focused on defending so he can absorb the Death Emperor's power!

Watching over the battle, Jonde mentions:

“If you asked me my reasoning, I wouldn't be able to give you a clear answer, but as a warrior, I'm sure of it. If there is a move that surpasses even the Death Emperor's regeneration, then it has to be that one!”

I silently nod in agreement. The Dark God and the Death Emperor created a parallel world to lure us inside and trap us, but it looks like not even the Dark God imagined Reckless Seiya would teach Cautious Seiya that skill.

It's a bizarre twist of fate. Cautious Seiya is using Reckless Seiya's move to defeat a powerful enemy. I clench my fists while riveted by the battle.

Sirrusht...! I hope you're ready, because the past and the present—the dual technique of the two Seiyas is going to surpass the speed of your regeneration!

Finally, it happens.

“One hundred percent.”

Yessssss!! Get him, Seiyaaaaaa!!

My spirits rise...but even then, Seiya continues to defend.

“One hundred and twenty percent.”

What the...?! He's still charging even after reaching a hundred percent?! Wh-what cautiousness!

Then...

“One hundred and fifty percent.”

Okay. That should be enough! Get him, Seiya! Reckless Seiya's heart is in that attack with—... Huh...?

Seiya is still just defending. Jonde stomps the ground.

“How long does he plan on doing this?!”

“I-I'm sure he plans on attacking once he reaches two hundred percent! Two hundred's a good, round number!”

The Death Emperor continues to barrage Seiya with attacks until the time finally comes.

“Two hundred percent.”

This is it! Seiya is finally going to avenge the people of Fulwahna!!

““Attaaaaaaaaaack!!”” Jonde and I yell.

“Two hundred and ten percent.”

“...Seriously?! How much do you plan on powering up that move?! Hurry up already!”

“You’ve already charged more than enough! Just do it!”

Having grown impatient, we jeer at Seiya, and yet...

“Two hundred and thirty percent.”

...the percentage just keeps rising.

Power Overwhelming

Deadly Bandages spread out and target Seiya from all directions. He dodges the attacks with his extraordinary berserker speed while using his fire-type magic sword as a shield to burn the bandages. Although completely focused on defense, not even Seiya would be okay if Chain Destruction hit him.

And yet...

“Two hundred and forty percent.”

...Seiya continues charging his attack.

“Hero! Don’t you think that’s enough?!”

“Yeah!! Get on with it!!”

“Two hundred and sixty percent.”

D-don’t tell me he plans on going up to five hundred or even a thousand?! Give me a break! Jonde and I were frustrated at first and yelling “Hurry up!” but the longer we wait, the more our yelling turns into praying.

“P-please, Hero...! Please use the move!”

“I’m begging you, Seiya!”

“Two hundred and eighty percent.”

But he still doesn’t budge. Even Sirrusht seems to be getting frustrated. After taking a step back, he unleashes countless Deadly Bandages from all over his body like snakes.

“S-Seiya...!”

From above, below, and the sides—Seiya manages to slice and burn the deadly bandage attacks with his killer sword. While I’m relieved...seeing him do nothing but defend still has me on pins and needles. The onslaught does seem

to have greatly increased Seiya's charged attack, however.

"Three hundred and twenty percent."

"H-he passed three hundred!"

"Magnificent! The time has finally come!"

Clenching our fists, Jonde and I yell:

""Pleeeeeeeeease!!""

It's as if our prayers have been answered. Seiya finally says: "Here I come. Drain: Charged Attack."

Yes!! Finally, it's the explosive attack we've been waiting for!!

Seiya's body glows, and another powerful shock wave rocks my body! Sirrusht, who was right in front of Seiya and mid-attack, is blown dozens of meters back! While flying backward, he glares at Seiya with his yellow, cloudy eye.

"I do not know what you are planning, but nothing you do can surpass Permanent Rot's regeneration speed."

Sirrusht is all confidence, but both Jonde and I are confident as well. We know the move that Seiya charged and charged...and charged...will be able to break through the Death Emperor's defense!

"Look at the Hero's radiant aura! You can see that he's practically bursting with all the energy he charged up!"

"Yeah, you really can!"

I nod at Jonde with a smile, then eagerly wait for Seiya's special move. But all too soon, I have to doubt my own ears because Seiya quietly mutters to himself: "Suspend."

Immediately, the blinding aura wrapped around Seiya's body fades.

"...Huh?"

A moment of silence passes, and then...

""Whaaaaaaaaaat?!""

...Jonde and I scream.

“‘Suspend’?! What does that do?!”

“D-does that mean he isn’t going to even use the move after all that charging?!”

“Th-this can’t be happening! Why?! Seriously?!”

“This doesn’t make any sense! What is...that Hero...thinkiiiiiiiiing?!”

We scream, utterly thrown by behavior so far outside the realm of rational thought. Regardless, Seiya ignores us and grabs the two swords that some earth serpents brought over, then deeply exhales.

“Berserk: Phase 2.7 and Mode: Dual Ultimate Eternal Sword—Phoenix Drive.”

The berserker aura explodes out of Seiya’s body, mixing with his fire magic to create a searing wind, which draws Jonde’s and my attention back to the battle.

“Hmm...! A-an aura of fire as well?! What is this move with an extremely drawn-out name?!”

“Th-those are Seiya’s most powerful moves! He combined all of them with his Berserk Mode!”

Seiya’s eyes lock on Sirrusht like a hawk.

“Here I come... Max fire power...!”

A dark-crimson trail streaks in Sirrusht’s direction! I can barely see Seiya’s sword move as numerous crimson geometric patterns appear right before the Death Emperor’s eyes. Once a pattern disappears, Sirrusht’s flesh tears open and is engulfed with flames. Despite being on fire, the Death Emperor creates new bandages and tries to regenerate the wounds, but Seiya carves another pattern into his body before the regeneration takes place.

“Impossible...,” Sirrusht groans in agony.

Over a dozen flaming patterns surround him before vanishing, followed by a blast of fiery winds. Every bandage on his body is scorched, revealing his glowing eyes and undead, rotting flesh.

“My regeneration is not quick enough to keep up...! Is this truly something a

human is capable of?!”

The Death Emperor moans as his necrotic flesh is ravaged by all-consuming flame.

“U-unbelievable...!” Jonde mutters.

Seiya creates an even larger fiery fractal with his blades right in front of the Death Emperor. And then, another earsplitting explosion. Only the charred, limbless body of the Death Emperor remains as it floats in the air.

Seiya faces the body to deal the final blow and casts Maximum Inferno. Then, the floating corpse explodes into nothingness.

D-d-did he win?! I—I can’t believe how powerful that attack was! W-wait... Then what was the point of charging that other move for so long?!

Seiya stares at the empty space. The flames looked like they disintegrated Sirrusht’s body, but...there’s still something floating in the air. It’s a ball about the size of a fist, and it’s emitting an ominous aura, almost like it’s being protected by some sort of outside power.

“A spell stone?!”

After I scream, the ball shapes itself into a writhing skull. It opens its tiny mouth.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Cemeteryyy: Night Againnnn!”

After mockingly cackling, the skull cracks and unleashes a toxic mist, which promptly assumes a humanoid form! Jonde gawks.

“Th-the Death Emperor is resurrecting?! Impossible!”

Wh-where was the Death Emperor hiding part of his body?! Did he make it so the spell stone would resurrect him on the off chance he was killed?!

Jonde and I swallow our breath as we watch the mist transform into a monster. The pitch-black skeleton with horns emits an ominous aura for battle. The bare skull’s mouth slowly opens.

“The Death Emperor has died and been reborn. This is my final form—the fusion of flesh and soul—an indestructible body that is half matter, half spirit.”

Sirrusht's body appears blurry to the naked eye, almost like we're watching a distorted broadcast.

A-an indestructible body that's half matter, half spirit?! Wh-what is that thing?! Don't tell me that neither physical nor spiritual attacks will work now!

Never did I even imagine that Sirrusht would have a second form. The first thing that pops into my mind is, *Is it even possible to defeat this monster?! I instinctively sense this is going to be a hard battle...and that's why I didn't even realize what was happening almost simultaneously with his transformation until the very last second.* I have no doubt that Jonde is just as lost as I am. Seiya is already floating in the air right over Sirrusht's head with his sword held high.

"Resume Drain: Charged Attack."

Seiya's body is once again engulfed in a radiant light, which concentrates around his right arm!

"Power overwhelming... Ghost Buster: Overdrive!"

The instant the swinging sword hits Sirrusht, the area is swallowed by a blinding light as a powerful roar causes the very land to quake. It's so loud that I even lose my hearing for a bit. Yet, somehow, I manage to look ahead while struggling to keep myself from being blown away by the blast wave.

The physical attack power of Drain: Charged Attack that Seiya charged and charged, combined with Ghost Buster's spiritual energy, turn not only Sirrusht but the strip of land nearby to dust. The only thing left in front of Seiya is a wide fissure carved into the sand. There's no sign of the Death Emperor anywhere. I scramble over to Seiya.

"S-Seiya! Where's Sirrusht?"

"Gone, most likely."

"'Gone'? You mean that single attack...?!"

"We still can't let our guard down, though."

Seiya continues staring at the spot where Sirrusht once was. Jonde's lips quiver.

"A-are you telling me you were saving that charged attack to defeat the Death

Emperor's second form?! Impossible! You knew he had a second form?!"

"No. I couldn't see his status."

Unable to keep silent, I chime in:

"Then why did you save the charged attack for later?!"

"That was the last of the four leaders of SS-ranked Ixphoria. I figured it might try something on the verge of death, so I saved the move for later. If it ended up not having a second form, I would've been fine with that, too."

"W-wouldn't that have made charging the move a waste of time, though?"

"It gave me peace of mind. That isn't a waste."

"" ...?!""

Seiya sounds just like an insurance salesman, much to our surprise. Then, in a slightly annoyed voice, he bemoans: "I wish I could've charged it to one thousand percent, but any more than three hundred and twenty percent would have destroyed my body, so I had to stop there and store what I had."

"Th-that's more than enough! Don't charge so much that your body explodes, okay?!"

During our exchange, Seiya does things like staring at empty space and placing a hand on various spots on the ground, but...

"It appears there's no third form."

He was still concerned Sirrusht was going to resurrect again. After wandering around the area for a bit...

"Good. It looks like the monster has been completely destroyed."

He then sheathes his sword. Standing next to me, Jonde looks at Seiya like he's just witnessed something horrifying.

"I can understand what the Hero is saying. Saving your most powerful attack is a good strategy, but seeing someone able to do so in actual combat..."

"Hmph."

Jonde lets out a short breath, then mutters to himself: "He's amazing."

I watch Seiya's back as he stands a short distance away. He doesn't have a scratch on him. If I hadn't seen the fight, I would have thought it was an overwhelming victory for Seiya.

But what if he used Drain: Charged Attack before Sirrusht entered his second form?

Who knows what would've happened after the Death Emperor became a half-physical, half-spiritual being. Not only that...but what would have happened if Cemetery: Night Again had actually resurrected the upgraded versions of Grandleon, Oxerio, and Celemonic along with a whole army of the dead? It would have been the toughest challenge Seiya had ever faced. Thanks to his hypercautiousness, he was able to prevent all of these disasters before they came to pass.

We might never have been able to defeat the Death Emperor if we'd fought normally. This victory was a miracle, and perhaps only Seiya—only Seiya after becoming cautious—could have done it.

I feel my heart swell as I look at him, but the victor himself doesn't seem happy at all. He wears an indifferent expression while staring at something. It's Kiriko. She's hunched over and staring vacantly at the sand in her hands. Seiya approaches her. Noticing him, Kiriko looks up and shows him something.

"This...is the pendant I made with Kurio...but it's gone now. The town, Kurio, the memories—nothing's left."

Kurio was the first friend Kiriko ever had. It's impossible to even imagine the pain she's feeling right now.

"Kiriko."

Seiya speaks up, but just when I think he's going to say something considerate for a change...

"Get ready to go. We're leaving."

I'm actually weirded out by how normal he's acting.

"O-okay...", Kiriko listlessly replies as she stands.

Seeing her so despondent tears at my heart. Those lost will never return. We

defeated the last high-ranking monster of Ixphoria...yet it doesn't feel good.

"H-hey, Seiya. Don't you think you could say something to Kiriko that's a little more...heroic?"

As I approach him, though, I notice...Seiya's face looks unusually grim.

"...I'm right back where I started."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

I don't understand, but Seiya doesn't explain.

"Rista, we should be able to return to the spirit world now that the Death Emperor is dead. Open a gate."

"O-okay."

There's no longer a white wall when I open a gate and check inside.

"All right, we're returning to the spirit world."

While this may be Seiya's usual routine for preparing, I think this could be great for Kiriko as well...and not just her. I want to rest and refresh myself, too. I'm sure Jonde feels the same. A dark cloud hangs over our hearts, painfully reminding us of the lost townspeople. We silently follow Seiya's instruction and return to the spirit world.

In One Breath

When I slip through the gate, I'm welcomed by the spirit world's warm sunlight and comforting air. Just being here brightens my mood, if only a little. I made sure the gate would take us to the plaza, and sure enough, I see the familiar sight of Cerceus cleaning the area around his café. Our eyes meet.

"Ack...!"

Cerceus drops his broom and dustpan, then ducks into the shadows. Jonde, however, approaches him.

"Cercean, I apologize for the other day. I will not ask you to spar with me anymore, so there is nothing to worry about."

"Wh-what? Really? Thank goodness! I mean...ha-ha-ha! That was the first time I trained in a while, and I wasn't feeling good at all! I was sleep-deprived, and had a cold, and had a touch of diarrhea, and was basically dying, and—"

Cerceus fires off excuses one after the other as he recalls how Jonde and Kiriko beat him senseless during their sparring session... *How pathetic can you get?! Just admit that's the best you can do!* If Seiya were here, he'd say something like, *Okay, then show me what you can do at full strength. Now.* Jonde, though, is an adult.

"At any rate, could you let us borrow a room again like last time? Kiriko needs to rest."

"Yeah. Of course..."

Cerceus seems to have noticed Kiriko hanging her head. He bends down at the knees before her.

"You must have been through a lot, Kiriko."

"Yes..."

“Those who endeavor to save the world will often meet with pain... Okay, give me a few minutes.”

Cerceus eventually returns with a pot of tea and some teacups on a tray.

“Here, have some warm tea.”

“No, I...”

“Don’t be shy. It’s really good tea.”

“But...”

“I only use one hundred percent pure tea leaves from the spirit world. It’ll really cheer you up. I guarantee it. Come on.”

“N-no, I... I can’t drink tea because I’m a machine...!”

I charge over to Cerceus, unable to watch any longer.

“Ugh! How stupid can you be?! If you forced her to drink that, she’d break!”

“Wh-why did you have to call me stupid?! I was just watching out for Kiriko and—”

“Maybe you should stop using ‘one-hundred-percent-pure spirit world tea leaves’ and start using at least one percent of your brain!”

“Excuse me?!”

In the midst of our exchange, I notice Kiriko giggling. She then pours some of the tea Cerceus brought her into a teacup and brings it to her face.

“Although I can’t drink it, it still smells really good!”

Hearing the cheerful ring back in her voice brings a smile to my face.

Oh, thank goodness! It sounds like Kiriko’s feeling a little better now! Cerceus, while an idiot, can prove useful from time to time!

I look around for Seiya, but he’s nowhere in sight.

“H-huh? Kiri! Where did Seiya go?”

“I saw him walking that way.”

“I knew things were a little too quiet! Ugh! There he goes again! I’m going to

go look for him!”

I rush off, leaving Jonde and Kiriko behind at the café. After running through the plaza for some time, I see Aria.

“Oh! Welcome back, Rista!”

“Hey! Have you seen Seiya?”

“He’s at the sanctuary. He said something about going to see Great Goddess Ishtar.”

“Thanks!”

After a quick thank-you, I zip over to the sanctuary.

“Excuse me! May I come in?”

I knock on the large door to Ishtar’s room, then slowly open it to find Ishtar and Seiya sitting across a table from each other. There is a big crystal ball between them, which Seiya is staring into.

“Stop disappearing like that! ...Hmm? What are you doing?”

Ishtar speaks up in Seiya’s place.

“Seiya Ryuuguuin requested to see what happened in Ixphoria one year ago.”

“O-oh...”

After taking a seat by Seiya’s side, I peer into the crystal ball as well. Seiya sternly watches what appears to be a peaceful town. A waterwheel spins in a small river while elderly, white-haired villagers poke around the water.

“Is this village...?”

Before I can even finish my sentence, the liquid being churned by the waterwheel is dyed a deep red.

“Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Die, die, die, die, die!”

A monster’s voice, tainted with hatred, echoes. The two-headed monster appears on the crystal ball wearing a filthy dress and holding an old man’s head in her hand.

“C-Celemonic?!”

My heart skips a beat when I lay eyes on the creature I wish I could forget. I don't even want to look at her after the trauma I faced because of her curse... but I won't allow myself to look away. Upon closer inspection, I notice another woman's head behind Monica and Celena.

Shanak! It looks like their third sister was still alive a year ago!

The village shown in the crystal ball turns into hell after Celemonic appears. In a monotone voice, Seiya mentions: "This is Sage Village, which I skipped last time."

"Th-this is Sage Village...?!"

Many of the villagers appear to be enlightened elders just like the name implies. However, each of them is slain one after the other by Celemonic.

"After killing me and growing even more powerful, the Demon Lord must have sent Celemonic to the village to kill the sages who knew his secret."

"How awful...!"

While I look away from the headless, bloodless corpses lying on the ground, Seiya calmly comments: "I was curious what kind of village it was. Hey, old lady, could you show me what the village is like now?"

"The mist, which was once hiding Ixphoria from sight, has cleared substantially since you defeated all of the Demon Lord's high-ranking monsters. While I still cannot look into the near future, I should be able to take a peek at Ixphoria's current state."

Ishtar focuses her thoughts until the scenery in the crystal ball changes. Similar to Seiya's earth serpent cameras, it's a bird's-eye view of a dilapidated village.

"Hmm. What's that?"

Seiya points at one corner of the village. Ishtar zooms in, revealing bizarre creatures wearing masks and robes, standing around a red magic circle. Even Ishtar herself stares hard at the sight.

"These are not human. They appear to be demon priests of some sort. I do not know what kind of ritual they are performing, though..."

Seiya crosses his arms for a while until...

“It looks like I’ll just need to go there and see for myself.”

He doesn’t seem content to simply look through the crystal ball. I ask Ishtar: “Would it be okay for me to open a gate that leads directly to the Sage Village?”

“Very well. You have my permission.”

“Thank you so much! Seiya, what do you wanna do? We can go now if you want.”

“No. Our enemies are in the village. I need to prepare.”

With a smile, Ishtar tries to reassure us.

“While there are a few demon priests in the village, I’m sure they’re no match for you anymore.”

“They might not be the only ones I need to worry about. Although the village seems to be destroyed, there might be some resentful survivors who want to kill me.”

“I—I don’t know... Do you really think a sage is going to attack you?”

“No matter what may happen, I still need to prepare for the battle against Ultimaesus as well.”

Ishtar firmly nods.

“You are free to stay in the spirit world for as long as you like. I will provide you with as much help as possible so you can save the SS-ranked world of Ixphoria.”

“Then let me ask you one more thing, Grandma. Do you know of any deities with these skill sets?”

He must have thought it’d be quicker to ask Ishtar where to find a specific deity than to search with me. Seiya gives a detailed description of the type of god he’s looking for, and I start to feel like the third wheel.

“H-hey, Seiya! Is there anything I can do to help?”

He fixes me with an intense glare.

“Actually, there is. Go to your room in the sanctuary.”

“Okay! Then what?”

“You have a bed that you always sleep in, right? Lie down in it.”

“Okay, sure. Then what?”

“After that, just quietly close your eyes. Hopefully, forever. That is all.”

“Oh, okay... Hold on!! Take a nap?! That’s it?!”

“Enough with the screaming. If you don’t want to do that, then go play with Kiriko or something.”

“You’re missing the point! Ugh! Great Goddess Ishtar, you know what I’m talking about, right?! Tell him!”

She cheerfully smiles.

“I agree with him. You should go play.”

“Y-you agree with him?!”

“Spending time with your allies is important, too.”

“B-but...”

D-don’t tell me even Ishtar thinks I’m useless... I bet she does. I mean, just the other day I got cursed and caused so much trouble for everyone. Sigh...

I end up hobbling back to Cerceus’s café alone after that. Aria and Adenela are there now, and Kiriko seems to be enjoying conversation with Jonde. Jonde spots me in no time at all.

“Goddess, where is the Hero?”

“He’s apparently going to start training again. He said we’re going to the Sage Village after that.”

Jonde’s eyes grow serious, and he places a hand on his chin.

“I see. Perhaps this will be his last training session.”

“Huh?”

“We don’t have to worry about a pincer attack now that the Death Emperor is

gone, and he said he planned on attacking the Demon Lord while he was still storing energy, right?”

“O-oh yeah...!”

“So he has probably started making final preparations for the battle against the Demon Lord. I assume we’ll be heading straight for the Demon Lord’s castle after training and stopping by the Sage Village.”

Jonde’s assumption makes my heart pump wildly in my chest.

H-he’s right... Our next major battle is with the Demon Lord himself! I’m so nervous!

We’ve run into various hardships, but before I realized it, we were already taking the final steps toward saving the SS-ranked world of Ixphoria. Just thinking about it makes my heart race.

Seiya risked his life to defeat the Demon Lord of the S-ranked world Gaeabrande, and I’m sure this fight isn’t going to be easy, either.

Adenela, who was listening to our conversation, looks over at the sanctuary and mutters: “S-speak of the Dark God. S-Seiya’s c-coming this way.”

When I turn, I jump, and it’s not just me who’s surprised. Aria speaks up with a startled tone: “Look at all the gods Seiya brought with him!”

Standing behind Seiya are numerous deities, but the only ones I recognize are the Goddess of Wind, Fraala, and the God of Lightning, Orand. I rush over to Seiya.

“Seiya!! What is going on here?!”

“I asked Ishtar to summon various deities for me. Unlike with Gaeabrande, the special abilities such as magic in Ixphoria are subdivided, so I plan on focusing on the classes I have an aptitude for and perfecting them.”

Seiya swiftly thrusts his notepad at me: Monk, Lancer, Mage (Wind, Lightning, Fire, Earth), Merchant, Seer, Jolly Piper.

Written on the notepad are the classes that Enzo said Seiya had an aptitude for when we first went to Little Light in Ixphoria.

“W-wait... Are you telling me you plan on mastering all of these before you fight the Demon Lord?!”

“Yes. But I have already mastered fire magic, earth magic, and Jolly Piper, so we can ignore those.”

As Seiya speaks, he unravels the long bundle he’s carrying. An old spear twirls out, and he takes a few practice swings with it.

Whoa?! I’ve never seen Seiya use a spear before, but he already looks like a natural!

A few moments go by until one of the gods wearing armor that looks distinctly Japanese walks out of the crowd.

“Oh? So it looks like you want to spar with me, the Spear God, first.”

The other deities take a step back.

“We’ll be waiting over here, so let us know when you need us.”

“What are you talking about?”

Seiya glares at the remaining deities.

“Don’t waste my time. I’ll take you all on at once.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m telling you to attack me with magic while I’m sparring with the Spear God.”

“Y-you’re going to train magic *and* spar at the same time?!”

“It’s more efficient that way. I’ll learn all the moves in actual combat.”

Fraala wryly chuckles, but Orand’s face turns fiery red.

“What hubris. You’d better not regret those words, human...!”

My heart races as I watch until I hear a slightly goofy voice.

“U-um... What should we do?”

Standing side by side are a portly god wearing a kimono with an abacus in hand and a mysterious goddess wearing a mask and gray hood. Judging by their attire, I’m guessing the God of Merchants and the Goddess of Divination.

Annoyed, Seiya repeats himself.

“I already told you. I’ll take you all on at once. You, try to make a deal with me. And you, tell me my fortune.”

““““Seriously?””””

The deities yell in unison.

S-seriously, though...what?! Not only does Seiya want to simultaneously spar with the Spear God and deities of elemental magic, he also wants to train with the Goddess of Divination and the God of Merchants, too?!

The Spear God draws back his weapon with a fierce expression while Fraala and Orand raise their staffs into the air as well! The deities are surrounding Seiya!

“I’m going to smack that smug look right off your face!”

The Spear God makes the first move, lunging right for Seiya. However...

“Berserk: Phase Two.”

Transforming into a berserker, Seiya uses his spear to deflect each of the Spear God’s wild thrusts! He then narrowly evades Orand’s attack from the left before swinging his spear behind himself and canceling out Fraala’s extremely fast strike without looking. After that, the Goddess of Divination and God of Merchants approach Seiya and hand him a hex-shaped box of fortunes and an abacus, respectively. Seiya then calculates something on the abacus while shaking the box of fortunes until one comes out.

“The Blessed Stock Average will suffer a 3.22 percent drop from yesterday’s figure. Today’s lucky color is blue.”

Seiya casually mutters as the deities gradually retreat.

“Mn...! Th-this human’s...!”

“He’s calculating our next moves—”

“While calculating on the abacus...!”

The other deities shudder, but...

“What kind of training is thisssssssss?!”

I can't just sit back and watch this without pointing out how absurd it all is. And "he's calculating our next moves while calculating on the abacus"?! That pun's really stretching it!!

Jonde and Kiriko are gawking now.

"I—I have no idea what is going on, but this is incredible!"

"It really is! I'm at a loss for how to describe what I'm seeing!"

The deities' onslaught starts to waver, as if they're afraid of Seiya, but he slowly approaches them with a spear in one hand and an abacus in the other.

"What's wrong? If you're not going to come here, then I'll just have to go over there."

All of a sudden, someone takes a step toward the group from behind me.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...!"

"A-Adenela?!"

"I-I'm just tingling w-with excitement...!"

The Goddess of War, Adenela, blissfully cackles with bloodshot eyes before unsheathing the sword at her waist and charging into battle! The fighting causes a cloud of dust to rise into the air where flashes of magical light can be seen and the sound of steel against steel can be heard. And that's not all...

"Oh, what's going on? Is there a festival or something?"

I turn around at the sound of the husky voice to find a half-naked goddess wrapped in chains. It's the number two goddess of the spirit world: Valkyrie—the Goddess of Destruction!

"Looks like fun. Let me join."

Valkyrie joins the fray while swinging a chain in the air. Magical explosions roar alongside the clangs of clashing weapons. Eventually, a bolt of lightning shoots out from among the jostling mob, striking one of the garden tables at Café du Cerceus.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!! My café is going to be destrooooooyed!! Go fight over there!!"

Th-this is nuts!

Aria and I somehow manage to run away with Kiriko and Jonde until we find somewhere safe.

And that's how this unprecedented mob training session began.

Toy Box

Explosions echo throughout the spirit world's plaza as if it has turned into military training grounds. Clouds of dust rise into the air as swords, spears, and magic all clash while occasionally knocking over tables and coffee cups at Café du Cerceus.

"Please stop...! Pleeeeeeeeeeease...!"

Cerceus is crying so pathetically that I'm actually starting to feel bad for the guy, but Seiya won't stop training until he feels he's done, no matter how much you beg, plead, or cry. However...

"Okay, that should be enough for the day."

Seiya says this just as the evening sun paints the spirit world red. It's only been around two hours since he started training, though.

Wh-what the...? Is he really gonna stop training already?

I find it unusual. Seiya usually trains deep into the night or until his training partner passes out, so it actually seems like he called it quits a little early today. Still, the deities do seem exhausted. Even the Spear God is out cold. A spear is stuck in his butt. Fraala has tears pooling in her eyes.

"*Sniffle!* What's the point of my wind magic if he can avoid it while fortune-telling based on blood type?!"

"F-Fraala! Don't let it bother you! You didn't use Order, so you couldn't use your true divine powers! That's all!"

I try to cheer her up, but...

"But even then, I... *Sniffle!*"

Fraala, who's usually so calm and collected, is crying like a little girl.

Meanwhile...

“Man, that was fun! Time for a bath!”

Valkyrie’s face glistens with sweat and satisfaction as she heads home. The other deities, some wearing expressions of joy and some of sorrow, gradually leave until not a single god or goddess remains. Looking around the plaza, I can see that the ground caved in here and there. I catch a glimpse of Seiya walking toward the sanctuary alone.

Ack! That was a close one! You take your eyes off of him for a second and he disappears!

I chase after him, determined to find out what he’s up to this time.

“Seiya, wait! Where are you going?”

“I plan on training during the day as you saw, but at night...”

“At night...?”

“I have something else I need to do.”

“Something else? Like what?”

“...”

“Come on, Seiya. Tell me. What are you going to do?”

“Stop bugging me. I told you to go play.”

Seiya stops in his tracks, stomps on the ground, and causes something to rise to the surface with his earth magic.

“What the...?! ”

It’s a large toy chest. When I peek inside, there are cups and balls, building blocks, spinning tops, Hacky Sacks, and bubble wands with liquid soap.

“I prepared a toy chest just for you. Enjoy.”

“What am I, a toddler?! ”

And don’t even get me started on his selection of toys! I’m not a Japanese child from the early twentieth century!

“Seriously?! Seiya, I’ve had enough of you teasing me!”

As I furiously give him a piece of my mind, Seiya mutters: “Berserk: Phase

Two.”

“Eek!”

He’s not gonna punch me in Berserk Mode, right?! While deities may be immortal, a punch that powerful would paint the ground with my brain matter. I grab my head with both hands, cowering in fear...but nothing happens. After another pause, I cautiously take a peek with a half-open eye...only to discover that Seiya’s already gone.

“He disappeared on me again!! Ugh! I can’t believe him!!”

I kick the box of toys out of frustration, and building blocks fly out onto the ground. Not wanting to leave a mess, however, I reluctantly pick up after myself when I accidentally bump into Cerceus. He bitterly yells: “Get outta the way! Take your toys and go play somewhere else!”

“I’m not playing!!”

Cerceus is cleaning up what’s left of his café’s scattered equipment. His bright-red face makes it clear he’s furious, but I’m frustrated as well. We glare at each other, ready to snap, when...

“P-please, calm down! Let’s just get this cleaned up for now, okay? I’ll help.”

Kiriko picks up a few building blocks and hands them to me. After that, she grabs a broom and begins sweeping the broken café equipment into a pile. Cerceus is moved to tears.

“Kiriko...! You’re such a sweet person, you know that?”

Aria comes walking over and nods a few times as well.

“She’s like an angel. An angelic Killing Machine.”

Cerceus then glares at me reproachfully.

“Rista! You could learn a thing or two from her!”

“Oh, shut up.”

I don’t want to help Cerceus clean up if he’s gonna talk to me like that, so I take a *kendama* out of the toy box and start playing by myself. I started doing it just to kill time at first, but...

“Ho! Ha! Hm! Ha!”

This is actually kinda fun!

I become obsessed before I realize it.

It's already dark outside by the time I finally get the hang of the *kendama*. When I look around, I notice the café's tables are already back in their original positions, and Café du Cerceus somehow managed to return to normal. Kiriko walks up to me.

“Rista...”

“Oh, you wanna try, too? It's actually pretty fun!”

I chuckle, but Kiriko's tone is serious.

“U-um... Do you think we could sleep together tonight?”

“Sure, of course... Wait. Do you even sleep?”

Kiriko's a machine, so she shouldn't need to eat or sleep. She fidgets like she's having a hard time explaining herself.

“Actually...Seiya told me that from now on, I should sleep with you whenever I can.”

“Really?! I wonder why.”

“I asked him, and he told me that it's just in case Celemonic's curse wasn't completely lifted.”

“He's still worried about that?!”

That was quite a while ago, wasn't it? I feel like he's worrying way too much about this!

“I'm sure it's just because he cares about you, Rista!”

“I don't know. I kinda feel like he's forcing you to keep an eye on me because he doesn't want to deal with me himself.”

“Whatever the reason, it would make me really happy if we slept together!”

“Really? Then come on.”

Kiriko and I head over to the room Cerceus loaned us. It's still too early to go

to bed, though, so we end up playing with building blocks and *kendama* from the toy chest Seiya gave me. I was aggravated when he first showed me the toy box, but watching Kiriko innocently playing and enjoying herself is so heartwarming. It even seems to be taking her mind off of what happened at Fulwahna.

“It looks like Seiya made these himself.”

“Hmm? What makes you think he made these?”

“Look at this.”

Carved into the bottom of the building block is the name Seiya Ryuuguuin.

“Y-you’re right...!”

“Look. Here, too.”

After a closer look, I notice that Seiya’s name is written on each and every toy.

“Ew... Who writes their full name on every toy?”

“Seiya is very methodical, after all! I’m sure he just didn’t want to lose them!”

“Yeah, but this is creepy. This is something an elementary school kid would do.”

“But it’s so like Seiya to do this, isn’t it?”

Kiriko giggles. It doesn’t make any sense to me, though. Why would someone who hates wasting time when he could be training take the time to make these? And when did he make them?

“...Ready to hit the sack?”

Even thinking about it starts to feel absurd, so I crawl into bed with Kiriko and close my eyes.

Day two. Noon.

Seiya’s training hard with the same deities today as well, so I grab a bubble wand from the toy chest and blow bubbles while I watch them. Just like yesterday, Seiya is overpowering and outmaneuvering his opponents. At times, I notice a bolt of lightning or gust of wind shoot from his hands, letting me know his magic training is going smoothly. I look over at Aria, who’s sipping some tea

at a table outside the café, and ask: “Hey, Aria. Did you happen to see Seiya last night?”

“No, I never saw him.”

“Ugh. What in the world is he up to?”

I take in a deep breath before blowing countless rainbow bubbles into the sky.

“R-Rista, what are you doing?”

“Blowing bubbles. Wanna try?”

“N-no, thank you. I’m fine... Anyway, maybe you shouldn’t worry so much about what Seiya is up to. I’m sure that, whatever he’s doing, it’s a necessary preparation for the final battle.”

“I get that. It’s not like I want to pry, but I hate how it feels like something big is happening behind the scenes and I’m not part of it.”

Being so close to the final battle makes me even more curious about his covert actions. I feel useless. Is blowing bubbles really all I can do right now? All of a sudden, I notice the undead getting antsy by my side as well.

“Hmm... I want to train with multiple deities like the Hero as well.”

Jonde must have been inspired by Seiya’s battle.

“Jonde, any deity’s divine aura other than Cerceus’s would destroy you.”

“I have actually grown quite accustomed to the spirit world’s divine energy.”

“Uh-huh.”

I place a hand on Aria’s back and lightly push her toward Jonde.

“Ack! So bright...! My eyessssss! They buuuuuurn!!”

“What did I tell you? Just give up already.”

“I—I will not give up!”

Jonde glances at a goddess sitting at another table.

“Just like Cerceus, I hardly sense any divine aura coming from her! In fact, I figured she was some sort of demon, given her eerie appearance, so I have

been avoiding her every time I see her at the café.”

Sitting at the table is the Goddess of War, Adenela, staring at Seiya’s training, enraptured.

“I watched your swordsmanship yesterday. Do you think you could teach me that magnificent skill you used?”

“T-teach Eternal Sword t-to a dead body?”

Adenela eyes Jonde up and down a few times before firmly nodding.

“E-eh, I guess I could. T-training you could help S-Seiya, after all.”

“Wonderful! Much appreciated!”

It sounds like Adenela’s going to help Jonde with his swordsmanship.

“Oh, wow...”

Kiriko stares at them. *Is she jealous?*

“Kiri, come on. Let’s play.”

I pull a Hacky Sack out of the toy chest, but Kiriko shakes her head.

“I—I want to train, too, if that’s okay!”

“Whaaat? Seiya’s a one-man show, so I really doubt he’d let you help even if you did train.”

“But I can still train myself mentally! I want to be strong!”

“Oh...”

Wanting to respect Kiriko’s wishes, I decide to take her with me over to Adenela.

“Hey, Adenela. Do you think you could teach Kiri some moves, too?”

“First a z-zombie and now a K-K-Killing Machine? W-well, I’m already going t-to be teaching him, s-so why not?”

“Thank you so much! Oh, and go easy on her, okay? She’s just a little girl deep down inside.”

Adenela can be scary from time to time, but Aria’s nearby, so I’m sure they’ll

be okay.

After leaving Jonde and Kiriko in Adenela's care, I turn back to Seiya's training. Each one of the deities is now lying on the ground around him. Seiya sheathes his sword. It looks like he's done training for the day. But just as I think that...

"Berserk: Phase Two."

Seiya transforms into a berserker and vanishes into thin air! Aria's jaw drops.

"D-did he just do that so he could run away?"

But I give Aria the thumbs-up.

"Too bad for Seiya, I saw a red line heading right for the sanctuary! I'll be right back!"

"Rista! Maybe you should just leave him be?"

"Don't worry! I simply want to see what he's been getting into at night!"

I sprint toward the sanctuary. I am almost positive that's where he went, but the unified spirit world's sanctuary is huge. Finding him isn't going to be easy. I decide to ask Hestiaca if she's seen him when I pass by her in the hallway.

"Hey, have you seen Seiya?"

"Your Hero? I actually just saw him talking with Valkyrie. They seemed to be hitting it off."

"Thank you so mu—... What?!"

I freeze.

C-could he be doing something weird with her again?! After giving Hestiaca a brief bow, I make a mad dash for Valkyrie's room.

"Valkyrie, I'm coming in!"

I barge into her room without knocking and am completely staggered by what I see. Valkyrie, who's usually only covered with no more than a few chains, is completely naked!

"Ahhhhhhh! I knew it! Seiya, come out this instant!!"

But Valkyrie shoots me a quizzical stare.

“Whatcha talkin’ about, Ristarte? I’m the only one here.”

“What?! But Hestiaca said she saw you two talking in the—”

“We were just talking. Seiya went off somewhere after that.”

“Th-then why are you naked?!”

“I’m always naked when I’m in my room.”

Oh... Huh. So this is just who she is. Right as I let out a sigh of relief, Valkyrie glares at me, fed up.

“Are you seriously still tryin’ to get with Seiya? Goddesses aid the Hero, not babysit them. Leave him alone.”

“B-but...”

“He knows what to do, and he’s taking care of it without anyone’s help. You just need to do what he told you to do.”

Maybe it’s my imagination, but it kind of annoys me that she’s talking like she knows Seiya better than I do.

“The only reason you can say that is because you have no idea what Seiya said to me! Get this: He told me to play with toys!”

“Oh? Then that’s probably what’s best for you.”

“What?! That’s stupid! How could playing with toys be what’s best for me?!”

I raise my voice, but the nude goddess slowly approaches me.

“More importantly, Ristarte, you do understand the risk of coming to my room this late at night, right?”

“Huh?”

Before I even realize it, the Goddess of Destruction is already behind me, and she grabs my breasts over my clothes!

“Eeeeeek! H-hey!”

“Wow! You’re even bigger than last time!”

“Q-quit it...!”

The nudist kneads my breasts while whispering into my ear: “How about I play with you then? I have a few *toys* of my own.”

“I—I—I—I think I’ll pass!!”

I tear her hands off me and sprint out the door.

Hff! Hff! Hff! *Oh, man. That was terrifying! She almost robbed me of my innocence!*

While fixing my disheveled clothes in the hallway, I happen to find Seiya, of all people, talking to a goddess who has a cold mist emitting from her body.

Th-there he is!

The goddess he’s facing is the Goddess of Ice, Kiorne, garbed in a glittering crystalline robe.

“Are there any skills that allow you to permanently freeze a target?”

“While you can temporarily freeze something, perhaps not even the highest-level ice spells will allow you to freeze an enemy for eternity.”

Hmm? What in the world are they talking about?

But when Seiya notices me approaching them, he sighs.

“You again?”

“Seiya, your base magic has a fire affinity. You can’t learn ice magic.”

No matter how gifted Seiya may be as a Hero, he can’t overcome his nature. Just like how healing magic is my specialty, fire magic is Seiya’s, which means there is no way for him to learn the opposite element—ice.

“I was only asking her a question.”

“Does this have anything to do with the Demon Lord? Did you want to freeze the Demon Lord forever? That sounds pointless, since we would still need to defeat him.”

Putting on airs as a goddess, I smugly continue.

“Listen, vicious monsters will continue to be born on Ixphoria as long as the Demon Lord is alive. The Dark God’s Blessing will eventually destroy the world if

we don't stop it. The Demon Lord's demise is the only way to save the planet."

Seiya suddenly smacks me on the head.

"Ow! What the hell?!"

"I don't need you of all people telling me that."

"Then what are you doing talking to Kiorne?!"

Seiya ignores me and pats Kiorne on the shoulder.

"Anyway, could you freeze this goddess for me already?"

"What?! What did I do?!"

Seiya briskly walks away, leaving me with my anger, and Kiorne can't contain her giggles.

Wh-what the...?! Was he seriously talking to Kiorne because he wanted to freeze me?! Th-there's no way, right?! I have no idea what Seiya is trying to do. But...now that I really think about it, I've never been able to sense his intentions ever since we first met.

Utterly exhausted and defeated, I decide to head back to Kiriko's room.

Sage Village

Day three in the spirit world. Noon.

While Seiya continues his joint training session, Jonde and Kiriko receive guidance under Adenela near Café du Cerceus.

“O-okay, I-let’s take a b-break.”

Adenela stutters while looking at Kiriko, her head drooping in exhaustion. Just like Seiya, Adenela gets absorbed in training when it comes to swordsmanship, but even then, she suggests that everyone take a break, giving special consideration to Kiriko. She takes a seat at a garden table in the distance and intently watches Seiya train. Jonde, on the other hand, is sitting on the ground next to me while staring at his sword with a pained expression.

“I hear the Hero was able to learn Eternal Sword very quickly, but this is an unbelievably difficult move to pick up.”

“I—I was thinking the same thing! Even figuring out the basics is hard!” Kiriko admits while nodding in agreement.

Seeing how much trouble they’re having learning the move, in spite of their extremely high stats, reminds me just how insanely talented Seiya is. Cerceus approaches Jonde and Kiriko before striking up conversation with a smile.

“Learning how to use Eternal Sword, huh? That’s rough.”

“Oh. Hey, Cerceus. *Sigh...* Yes, I am ashamed of myself.”

“Don’t worry about it so much. Eternal Sword isn’t easy to learn.”

“C-Cerceus, have you learned Eternal Sword from Adenela before?”

“You could say that.”

I am taken aback by how Cerceus responds to Kiriko.

“Seriously?! You can use Eternal Sword?!”

“Oh, uh... Kind of...? Ack?!”

Before I even realize it, Adenela is quietly standing behind Cerceus. She glares at the flustered deity.

“I—I tried teaching him, but h-he quit a-after only a f-few minutes. K-Kiriko and Jonde show p-promise. Unlike Cerceus.”

“Cerceus?! Don’t act like you mastered Eternal Sword when you barely even learned the basics!”

“I—I never said I mastered it! I didn’t lie!”

“What are you, four?!”

How can this guy call himself the Divine Blade and act like this? While I may be disgusted, Kiriko, being an angel, stands up for him.

“I know what you mean, Cerceus! It is hard! I’m having no luck so far!”

“Right?! It is hard, isn’t it?! There’s no way to learn a move like that, right?! It’s impossible! Totally impossible!”

Crack. Pop.

I hear bones cracking.

“While it may be a powerful skill, you shouldn’t use any more force than necessary. You need to focus on keeping your arms’ joints relaxed and improving your range of motion.”

I turn around to find Seiya holding his sword in his sheath at Cerceus.

“Take this... Eternal Sword.”

Seiya’s sheath produces afterimages as the lightning-fast attack rains down on Cerceus.

“Blaaaaaaargh!”

Cerceus flies backward with a scream! Seiya turns to Kiriko, not sparing an ounce of concern for the Divine Blade, who had been tossed aside like an old rag.

“Kiriko, my analysis demonstrated that Killing Machines have a greater range of motion with their arms than humans. You should improve in no time as long as you try not to use any unnecessary force.”

“R-really?! Thank you so much!”

Kiriko bows, and Adenela’s eyes become hearts.

“Wh-what an impressive d-demonstration of Eternal Sword! I—I love you...!”

“Anyway, how long have you been there, Seiya? Wait. What about your training?”

“I’m done.”

“You are...?”

A quick glance at the plaza leaves me in shock. All of the deities who were practicing with Seiya are now collapsed on the ground.

“D-did you already learn all of their skills?!”

“Yes.”

As I fall speechless, Aria comes walking over with a smile from behind Seiya.

“The secret is Berserk Mode, isn’t it? He’s able to learn moves at an incredibly fast pace by training as a berserker.”

Ohhh! Seiya has always absorbed new skills and lessons like a sponge. I guess he was able to further increase the speed at which he learned things by training in Berserk Mode.

Seiya, who doesn’t seem happy in the slightest, then states: “Rest well tonight. We’ll be heading to Sage Village tomorrow morning.”

“Th-the time has finally come!”

Jonde cracks a smile. Kiriko, on the other hand...

“What?! Already...?”

She looks down at her sword. Jonde smirks, perhaps realizing how she feels.

“It is a bit unfortunate, since we’ve only just begun learning Eternal Sword.”

“Yes... I wanted to practice more...”

Adenela nods while observing their exchange.

“I—I laid out the groundwork for you. Y-you can practice on y-your own now. I-I’m sure you’ll i-improve in n-no time.”

“Really? Thank you so much for helping us!”

Kiriko deeply bows to Adenela.

At night, Kiriko and I continue playing with the toys Seiya gave me, but we decide to go to bed sooner than usual since we’ll have to wake up early.

...I wonder how much time has passed since I fell asleep by Kiriko’s side. When I wake up, I feel something vibrating.

Is that an earthquake?

But it isn’t. Kiriko is faintly trembling.

“Kiri! What’s wrong?”

Startled, I immediately turn on the light. Kiriko is latched onto me.

“Are you okay?”

“Wh-what does it feel like to have a dream? When I closed my eyes, I saw a dark shadow swallow the world. It felt so real.”

“‘A dark shadow’?”

“I’m sure of it... That was the Demon Lord Ultimaesus,” Kiriko exclaims, her voice trembling. “I could feel his powers growing exponentially. It was terrifying...”

“Kiri...!”

Not even Ishtar knows what Ultimaesus is currently doing, but Kiriko once shared sensory organs with Ozerio. Maybe she learned of the Demon Lord’s powers the same way.

I send her a smile.

“I understand that you’re scared, but peace will finally return to Ixphoria once this is all over! You, Queen Carmilla—all the residents of Ixphoria—will be able to live your lives however you please!”

“Y-yes... I see what you mean...”

I was trying to persuade myself along with Kiriko, but...

“What was I thinking, getting depressed over a dream? I have to become stronger like Seiya!”

I rub Kiriko’s head.

“Seiya will defeat Ultimaesus. There’s nothing to worry about.”

I decide to leave the lights on after that, holding Kiriko in my arms until we fall back asleep.

The next morning.

Kiriko and I hold hands and head to the plaza. When we get there, Jonde and Seiya are already packed and waiting for us. According to Ishtar, Sage Village is located on a remote island to the south of Aeris, which the Death Emperor once ruled. I cast a spell and open a gate.

“I figured you wanted to avoid the demon priests, so I chose a spot thirty meters away from the village ruins!” I boast, knowing how Seiya thinks.

However...

“Hmph. Only thirty meters? You should have picked somewhere farther...but I guess it’ll do.”

Seiya snorts. As always, he peeks through the gate before being the first to walk through. We follow him, but when we arrive, we see Seiya rolling on the ground.

“S-Seiya?!”

“Hero, what’s wrong?! Is there an ambush?!”

Jonde and I brace ourselves, but the area around us is not only desolate but peaceful. Seiya stands back up, unbothered.

“Wh-why did you fall like that?!”

“I dropped to the ground *just in case* of an ambush.”

Jonde’s nose twitches.

“Who does that?!”

“Yeah! Seeing you rolling on the ground for no apparent reason startled us!”

“W-well, at least everyone’s okay.”

Kiriko tries to calm me down while Seiya brushes the dirt off his clothes.

“All right. Let’s head to the village. Don’t let your guard down... Cave Along.”

After slipping underground, we quietly walk through the caverns. Before long, Seiya makes sure the surface is safe, then turns off the spell. After returning to the surface, we stare at the village ruins from within the thick shrubbery. In the distance, the masked demon priests we saw in the crystal ball are marching around a magic circle. Seiya looks ahead, his eyes serious.

“If that’s some sort of summoning ritual, then I have to stop them before it’s too late.”

“G-good idea!”

“Fortunately, one of them appears to have separated from the rest of the group. I’ll use that one for information, then destroy the others around the magic circle.”

Seiya extends his arm straight forward and mutters:

“Class Change: Jolly Piper—Earth Mage.”

Seiya’s clothes transform into what appear to be those of a jester.

Whoa! It feels like forever since I’ve seen him like this!

I think back to the countless days we spent underground as he sniped the beastkin. While I was starting to suffer from mild depression at the time, I can look back at those memories fondly now. However, what Seiya pulls out of his equipment pouch is not the blowpipe I remember.

“Wh-what is that?!”

Seeing the nearly one-meter long cylindrical pipe startles me.

“Platinum Blowpipe—Type: Cannon. I’m going to use Burst Air to wipe out those demon priests in one go.”

After Seiya lowers the Platinum Blowpipe, thick as a club, to the ground, it starts to suck up dirt like a vacuum cleaner. He then bites down on the tip like he's eating a roll of sushi.

Boom! There's an explosion in the distance less than a second after he blows into the pipe. I look ahead only to see flames climbing toward the sky as black smoke rises. After the smoke clears, all that's left are body parts of what were once demon priests. I scream: "How powerful is that thing?!"

I feel like I just watched a rocket launcher unload. Not only is that not a flute, it's not even a blowpipe anymore!

"It appears they're dead, but I need to check to make sure."

"Forget about that, Seiya! That other one ran away when it saw the explosion!"

"It's fine. My earth serpents have already gotten ahold of it."

When Seiya snaps his fingers, a larger-than-usual earth serpent drags the segregated demon priest over toward the magic circle. After a closer look, I notice there are various earth serpents of all shapes and sizes wrapped around the priest.

Seiya changes into a Fire Spellblade and uses Maximum Inferno to burn the bodies, then drops them into the planet's core. After that, he makes sure to keep his distance from the last living priest before asking: "What were you doing here?"

The monster doesn't answer. It makes sense, though. After all, Seiya's over ten meters away, so who knows if the priest even heard the question.

"H-Hero! What's the point of being so far?"

"Who knows what this monster may do out of desperation? It's too dangerous to get any closer."

"I get that, but we can't even hear what it has to say from this distance!"

"Then I'll use an earth serpent mic."

Seiya poses the same question but through the earth serpent microphone this time.

“Like I’d tell you...!” hisses the earth serpent at our feet.

It appears this creature is relaying what the demon priest over there is saying.

“Tell me what you were doing, or that earth serpent will strangle you.”

Seiya threatens it, but the priest cackles.

“Do you think I care! You’re all going to die! Demon Lord Ultimaesus has become invincible! Now nobody can stop him! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hmm...”

Seiya stomps the ground, instantly creating a stone wall around us. A moment later, an explosion shakes our bodies along with the walls.

“Wh-wh-what just happened?!”

“It self-destructed. Just like I thought.”

“Wow, Seiya! You were right about keeping our distance!”

Kiriko sighs in admiration while Jonde groans. After giving Jonde an *I-told-you-so* look, Seiya turns to Kiriko.

“Kiriko, there’s an old saying that goes like this: ‘a cornered rat will self-destruct.’ Never forget that.”

“Okay!”

“I thought it was, ‘a cornered rat will bite a cat’? Eh, whatever. Seiya’s cautiousness actually did save us, after all...”

“Anyway, I wonder what kind of ritual that was.”

Right as I mutter those words...

“They were offering up prayers to the Dark God...”

...I hear a hoarse voice.

“Hmm? Jonde? Did you say something?”

“No! That wasn’t me!”

“But I heard an old man talking, and it definitely wasn’t Seiya’s voice. That was you, wasn’t it?”

“My voice doesn’t sound like an old man’s, either! But I did hear a voice in my mind!”

“I—I heard someone’s voice, too!”

I hear the voice again.

“They used to call me Imel when I lived here. Well, technically, I am nothing more than Imel’s consciousness, so I guess you could call me The One Who Was Once Called Imel...”

Wait! What?! This voice is a ghost of a sage! Was he waiting all this time for the Hero to come?! After the Hero was killed by the Demon Lord, the village was attacked, and the sages were killed. This probably would have never happened if Seiya had visited this place a year ago.

H-he must resent Seiya!

I’m worried. Seiya, on the other hand, nonchalantly poses a question to Imel.

“Could you not detect the enemy was coming? Not very smart for a so-called wise man.”

“Seiya?!”

But Imel chuckles with a dry voice.

“Nobody knows the future, especially when that future is their own.”

“If you really are the ghost of a wise man, what do you want from me?”

“I came to tell you what I couldn’t tell you then.”

A short while later, Imel’s stern voice echoes in our heads.

“The Demon Lord Ultimaesus possesses two lives.”

“I know that already.”

Seiya sounds fed up. Thanks to Ishtar’s crystal ball, we were already able to see what happened in the past against the Demon Lord. Seiya continues: “After receiving the Dark God’s Blessing, the Demon Lord has grown even stronger, which means he probably has more than two lives by now.”

“Y-yes, I suppose so.”

“Is that all you wanted to tell me?”

“I wish we could have taught you the Sage Village’s hidden skill, Drain: Charged Attack, but unfortunately, the wise man who could have helped you was already killed...”

“It’s fine. I already learned it.”

“What...?!”

The sage’s voice trembles.

“H-Hero...! If that’s true, then you must have transcended time and space! You could very possibly defeat the Demon Lord now, even though he has grown even stronger with the Dark God’s Blessing...!”

“Of course he can! This time, we’re going to defeat the Demon Lord! Right, Seiya?”

I’m sure he’s going to say, *Of course*, as if it’s a sure thing, but instead, he frowns and asks Imel: “I have one thing I need to ask you. Is there any way to save this world without defeating Ultimaesus?”

What...? Seiya...?

“There is no way to save Ixphoria other than defeating the Demon Lord.”

“Okay.”

Wh-why would he ask something so obvious? Don’t tell me that Seiya’s not confident he can win?

“If—if you are able to defeat Ultimaesus, you shall most certainly become a true Hero. When that happens, come visit me once more...”

The ghost of Imel continues talking to Seiya, but I suddenly hear footsteps. When I look back, he’s walking away.

“S-Seiya?! Seiya, wait!”

Jonde and I panic, but...

“There’s nothing left for us here,” Seiya quietly mutters as he makes his exit. I chase after him while nervously swallowing my breath.

Wh-what is this vibe Seiya's giving me?! He isn't seriously planning on going straight to the Demon Lord's castle, is he?!

My heart is pounding out of my chest as I feel the final battle drawing ever closer.

An Ominous Feeling

“It’s finally happening...isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Seiya nods in response to Jonde. We watch the Hero with bated breath until he finally turns and looks at us.

“Rista, open a gate to the spirit world.”

“Hero...?! Are we not going to the Demon Lord’s castle?!”

The tension in my shoulders eases as Jonde screams.

W-well, this is Seiya, after all. It was ridiculous to ever even imagine he’d jump straight into the final battle without any preparation...

“Hero! You said you wanted to strike while the Demon Lord’s guard was down!”

“The tide of battle is constantly changing. That demon priest mentioned that the Demon Lord had become invincible, which means I have to make sure I’m perfectly prepared just in case the Demon Lord is already perfectly prepared as well. In other words, I need to train in the spirit world.”

“But you already mastered most of your classes when you trained with the deities! What’s left for you to—?”

“Rista, hurry up and open a gate.”

“Hey! Don’t ignore me!”

“Jonde, Jonde, Jonde. You saw for yourself how useful training in the spirit world was, right? Let’s let Seiya handle this!”

“Besides, Jonde, we get to continue practicing Eternal Sword now!”

Jonde silently looks back and forth between Kiriko’s face and mine until...

“Very well.”

...he reluctantly agrees.

And just like that, we return to the spirit world yet again.

“I told you not to come.”

“Well, too bad! I’m your support goddess!”

After leaving Kiriko and Jonde with Cerceus, Seiya heads straight for Ishtar’s room. Despite being told repeatedly to not follow him, I persistently refuse until I end up at Ishtar’s chamber as well. Seiya opens the door and barks a demand: “I want to talk to Chronoa.”

He doesn’t even greet Ishtar.

“S-Seiya?! You plan on training with the Goddess of Time, too?!”

“Yes.”

I-is he serious?! It never even crossed my mind to ask a deity of the heart of the spirit world for help! But if he somehow manages to learn the Goddess of Time’s skills, then it wouldn’t matter how strong Ultimaerus was! He could just stop time!

Ishtar, however, wears a slightly troubled expression.

Yeah, I guess that would be considered cheating, though! I mean, can you even train under the deities at the heart of the spirit world?!

“Chronoa is a very kind goddess. You should be able to speak with her, but it would be best not to get your hopes up.”

“All you need to do is get me there, Grandma.”

Ishtar quietly nods. After that, we make our way to the Chamber of Eternal Stasis, then slip into the heart of the spirit world through the painting there.

When Ishtar speaks up, the doors to the heart open, revealing the graceful, smiling Goddess of Time.

“Chronoa, I need to ask you something...”

As Seiya starts to speak, though, the doors to the sanctuary open once more,

revealing a colossal god.

It's Nemesiel, the God of Logic and Reason! The last time we saw him, Seiya used the Granny Rista Sword—also known as the Holy Power Draining Sword—to turn him into an old man! *H-he's pissed, isn't he?!*

But when Nemesiel sees Seiya, he mutters:

"Hmph. You again? I remember you coming to the heart of the spirit world to save Ristarte from the curse, but I'm having a hard time remembering what happened after that. According to Chronoa, I apparently granted you permission to go back in time, but..."

...?! Nemesiel doesn't remember being turned into an old man?!

Without hesitation, Seiya adds:

"Yes, and I am very grateful for your kindness and cooperation."

"Hmph. I see. It appears I did help you, after all..."

Whoa! Seiya just lied to a god with a straight face!

Chronoa, who knows exactly what happened that day, sounds amused.

"Tee-hee. So, Seiya Ryuuguuin, what is it you wanted to see me about?"

"Would it be possible for me to learn skills that accelerate time or stop it completely?"

"Humans cannot control time, unfortunately; whether it be stopping time, traveling back in time, or speeding up time."

I—I figured as much. After all, there's no way a human could manipulate time, since no deity other than Chronoa can. Although I'm disheartened, Seiya stands his ground.

"Have you ever tried teaching a human before?"

"No. Such a thing simply isn't possible."

"I'm the kind of person who has to see something for himself before making up his mind. I want to train under you and judge whether it really is impossible."

After pondering, Chronoa cheerfully smiles.

“Very well, then. Shall we begin?”

But just then...

“No! A deity of the heart must not cooperate with a mere human! Even if it is to save a world, manipulating time violates the laws of the gods!”

Nemesiel’s furious roar echoes throughout the plane! Seiya, however, appears puzzled.

“Oh? But you helped me the other day. Did you not?”

“No, that was—”

“I would understand if you’d refused to help me last time, but you didn’t. So why was last time okay and not this time? You’re the God of Logic and Reason, yet I don’t see any rationale behind your decision.”

“Tch...!”

His groan is followed by silence. Before long, Nemesiel’s lips skew into a frown as he barks: “V-very well! Nothing will come of your training anyway! There is no way a human could ever control time!”

Y-yes!! He convinced Nemesiel to let him train!

I inwardly jump for joy. Both Chronoa and Nemesiel think it’s impossible, but Seiya isn’t your average Hero! He’s one in a billion! So just maybe...!

As hope swells my heart, Seiya says to me:

“Well, I’ll be training here with Chronoa for a while.”

“Okay! Good luck!”

“I’ll be here three days at most, so let Jonde and Kiriko practice Eternal Sword while they wait.”

“O-okay, but...what about me?”

“Just go play somewhere.”

“Again?!”

While Seiya usually makes fun of me or ignores me when I scream at him...

“Rista, you really should relax every once in a while.”

“...!”

I sense a faint warmth in his words, and something feels extremely off about that. In the midst of my blank amazement, Seiya walks over to Chronoa’s side.

“Ristarte, shall we head back to the unified spirit world?”

“O-okay.”

After bowing to Chronoa, I leave the heart of the spirit world with Ishtar.

I think back to what Seiya said while walking down a hallway in the sanctuary with Ishtar.

Hmm... I feel like I've heard him say something like that before...but when?

“Ristarte.”

Ishtar calls my name as I ponder.

“Oh?! Yes?”

“Regardless of whether or not Seiya’s training under Chronoa bears fruit, Demon Lord Ultimaesus was granted a powerful Dark God’s Blessing. You can never be too prepared. There is still time before the Demon Lord awakens, so I would like Seiya Ryuuguuin to train as hard as he can until then.”

Ishtar seems to be looking out for Seiya as well. Struck with sudden curiosity, I ask: “Great Goddess Ishtar, why did the Demon Lord receive the Dark God’s Blessing in the first place?”

“The demon most likely wants to gain more power as well. Both the Demon Lord and the demon are trying to obtain the negative energy created through defeating the Hero.”

No wonder they’re trying to help the Demon Lord...

“I would prefer not to imagine it, but if Seiya Ryuuguuin were to lose to Ultimaesus again, the Dark God’s powers over Ixphoria would grow exponentially.”

“S-Seiya isn’t going to lose!”

“Yes, I believe so as well.”

Ishtar then mutters:

“Ristarte, you need to be just as careful. If the Demon Lord were to defeat you, the demon would gain far more power than it would from defeating the Hero.”

We arrive at the door to Ishtar’s room. I lower my head, thank her for the help, then say good-bye.

Oh. So even if I die, the demon would still gain immense power... Hmm? Even if I die...?

My heart brims with frustration and confusion as I walk through the sanctuary alone.

Death Flag

After I return to the café and tell the others that Seiya is training under Chronoa, Aria's face lights up with a smile.

"He would be unstoppable if he learned the Goddess of Time's skills!"

Kiriko, who's in the middle of practicing Eternal Blade with Adenela, looks our way and cheerfully chimes in:

"Wow! He's training to manipulate time? Seiya really is incredible!"

"But would he truly be able to do something like that?"

Jonde tilts his head in doubt, but I smile at him.

"Normally, it wouldn't be possible, but who knows with Seiya? I think he's got a pretty good chance of pulling it off!"

"Hmm... So, Goddess, should Kiriko and I continue training, then?"

"Yep. At least, that's what Seiya said to do."

"What are you going to do, Rista?"

I frown at Aria, then vent my frustration.

"Wait until you hear this! Seiya told me to go somewhere and play again!"

Kiriko bounces up and down, mirthfully swinging her arms about.

"I knew it! What do you want to play today?"

"Hmm? What do you mean... 'you knew it'?"

"Oh! Seiya told me to play with you while we were in the spirit world!"

"What...?!"

"Give me a little more time to practice, okay? I'll be done before you know it! I can't wait!"

“O-okay...”

Kiriko seems to be genuinely excited to play with me, but I can't make sense of it at all. I recall his words as I watch Jonde and Kiriko practice.

“You should relax every once in a while.”

Hmm... When have I heard Seiya say something like that before? I'm so close to remembering, but it keeps slipping away. Frustrated, I continue to watch Jonde and Kiriko train and have a flashback of my time with Mash and Elulu.

Now that I think about it, Mash and Elulu trained in the spirit world like this, too.

I'm overcome with nostalgia when I suddenly realize something.

Th-that's it! It was that time! During our last days in Gaeabrande, Seiya left us behind and went to fight the Demon Lord alone! Seiya, who usually does nothing other than train and fight, and stoically so, unusually showed compassion that day and suggested we rest. We were thrilled, but that was all part of Seiya's plan as he left us behind and went to fight the Demon Lord alone.

W-wait...! Does he plan to go off by himself?! No, he can't! He can't leave the spirit world unless I open a gate for him! Then why did he...?!

“Seiya Ryuuguuin will lose someone else very important to him. This is not prophecy. The future has already been determined.”

I remember what the Dark God said to me and break into a cold sweat.

I-I'm going to die during the battle against the Demon Lord...! Is Seiya telling me to enjoy myself and relax because he knows?! B-because he doesn't want me to have any regrets before I die?!

I wasn't afraid of dying when I received a death sentence from the Dark God during the battle against Celemonic, but now that it has a ring of truth to it, I can't stop trembling.

I—I don't want to die! There are still so many things I want to eat and places I want to visit! I want to dress up sometimes, too!

I sternly shake my head.

R-relax, Rista! You'll be okay! Once Seiya learns how to manipulate time, he'll have no problem defeating the Demon Lord!

...I start to feel like Seiya's training with Chronoa is my last hope for survival.

For the next three days, I try to act as cheerful as possible in an attempt to forget my fears. Being alone would just make me depressed, so I hang out and chat at the café with the others during the day and spend time with Kiriko at night. I feel at peace when we play with the toys Seiya gave me. Before long, though...Seiya's training comes to an end. On the third day, I anxiously wait for him in front of the Chamber of Eternal Stasis. The door soon opens, revealing the Hero.

"Seiya! Have you finished your training?"

"Yes."

I wonder how it went. Seiya's usual stoic demeanor makes it hard to guess.

"S-so were you able to learn how to manipulate time?!"

"I've hardly slept the past three days. I tried everything I could."

"Oh, really? And?"

"...I failed."

"What?!"

"It appears humans really can't manipulate time."

"Oh..."

I feel a knot of despair in the pit of my stomach.

I-it makes sense, though. Not even Seiya would be able to control time. Which means...sniffle...I can't escape my fate...!

My knees start to tremble, but Seiya walks forward without a care.

"S-Seiya, wait!"

I manage to chase after him as he heads back to Ishtar's room.

"Oh, if it isn't Seiya Ryuuguuin and Ristarte."

Ishtar is seated in her usual chair, wearing a compassionate smile. Just when I

think Seiya's going to thank her for helping him train with Chronoa, he says:

"Hey, old lady. I want to watch the past fight against Ultimaerus in your crystal ball as a kind of simulation before the final battle. Oh, and make sure to show me the unedited, violent version."

"Very well..."

Ishtar places a hand over the large crystal ball in her room until we can see the final battle from our past play out within. The Demon Lord, in his final form, brutally slaughters Princess Tiana and Seiya. It takes everything I have to not look away, but Seiya watches in silence. After the battle is over, he places a finger on the crystal ball, rewinds the events, and curiously studies the battle once more with a penetrating stare.



“H-how many times are you going to watch that?”

“Until I’m satisfied. Who knows if a simulation like this is going to help, though? The Demon Lord has probably evolved into something incomparable.”

...Seiya reviews the battle ten times in a row after that. Before long, the sun sets, and the room grows dark.

“Hey, um...Seiya? You’re going to ruin your eyesight like that.”

“Even so, I still need to do this.”

Ishtar timidly speaks up:

“I could loan you the crystal ball if you would like.”

“I appreciate it. I would need to borrow it for around a week. Is that okay?”

“A-an entire week...? V-very well...”

This isn’t a video rental shop! Does he seriously plan on borrowing it for that long?! Even Ishtar seems taken aback!

But Seiya casually holds the magic item under his arm and says: “By the way, I’d like to ask your opinion while I’m here. Let’s imagine the Demon Lord has completely powered himself up. Do you think it’s possible for him to have an attack power of two million or more?”

“While he may be the Demon Lord, he is still a living creature. I could not imagine him having attributes greater than yours in your berserker state.”

“I see.”

“However, I am worried. I feel as if something is going to happen that goes... beyond normality—something unrelated to status attributes.”

“I have already prepared as best as I can in that regard.”

With that, Seiya turns on his heel and leaves, so I bow to Ishtar and retire from the room as well.

“H-hey, Seiya? How much longer do you plan on analyzing the Demon Lord?”

“It’s gonna be awhile. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

“Oh... Okay.”

My life is on the line here, so there's no reason for me to rush him. Soon after, we go our separate ways.

A few more days pass. Adenela, Jonde, and Kiriko are crossing blades in the plaza today as well, but Adenela suddenly stops and smirks.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. G-good work. Y-you have completed y-your training."

"Thank you so much!"

"K-Kiriko, y-you will a-always be my pupil."

Kiriko is filled with glee as Adenela pats her head. I rush over to congratulate them.

"Jonde, Kiriko! Did you learn Eternal Sword?"

"Yes!"

"Wow, Kiriko! You're amazing! Jonde, you too, right?"

"...Yes."

"Hmm? What's wrong? You don't look so happy."

"Goddess, what is the Hero doing right now?"

"He's using a crystal ball to analyze his last fight against the Demon Lord."

"I see. But ten days have passed since we came to the spirit world."

"Oh... Has it already been that long?"

Now that he mentions it, this might be the longest we've ever stayed here. Usually, Seiya would give a firm timeline and train for about three or four days.

"I-it'll be fine, though! Time moves slower in the unified spirit world, after all!"

"You still have to draw the line somewhere. Countless people in Ixphoria are suffering because of the Demon Lord."

Ixphoria is Jonde's home, so of course, I can understand why he's worried.

"But this is going to be the final battle, right? Just let him do his thing."

"Hmm..."

While trying to calm Jonde down, I notice Seiya walking in the distance.

What the...?! I thought he was analyzing the fight!

Jonde is going to be pissed if he sees Seiya wandering around. I decide to sneak away from the café and follow the Hero. He's usually hyperaware of his surroundings, so I make sure to keep plenty of distance as I tail him. Now that I think about it, I guess I've become a little more cautious as well.

I follow Seiya until we arrive at the base of the secluded celestial mountains. Countless tombstones populate the otherwise deserted space. Yes, Seiya has chosen to visit that eerie cemetery, and floating in front of him now is the Goddess of Ghosts, Nephitet, with a triangular piece of cloth on her forehead.

What in the world does he need from her now? He already mastered Ghost Buster...

I hide behind a tree and spy on him from afar.

"Nephitet, I want to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"You said that some deities consider eternal life a curse, so they willingly choose death, right?"

"Yes, Eternal Beings."

"What happens to their souls after they die?"

"All things are in a state of flux. That includes the spirits of humans, deities, and even monsters. Once a spirit is released from its shackles, it is free."

"Does that mean it's reborn?"

"I cannot say for sure. Some spirits are reborn while some are not. However, there is no way to find out unless the spirit is freed. And being free is far better than being trapped for an eternity."

"I see."

Seiya then turns around and walks away. I hold my breath as I watch him go.

Th-there's no doubting it now! He's thinking about what to do after I die!

The thought of imminent death turns my entire body pale as my legs tremble.

Awakening and Resignation

It's another lovely day in the spirit world, but my mind is consumed by my impending demise. I can't enjoy it. In the distance are Jonde and Kiriko, swinging their wooden practice swords. Sitting at a café garden table are Aria and Adenela, sipping on the tea that Cerceus brought them while chatting away. It's a peaceful day. A normal day. That is, until Aria freezes. I sense the air grow tense around us.

"What's wrong, Aria?" I ask as I approach her.

She notices my presence and looks up.

"Rista, I received a message from Great Goddess Ishtar. She asks that you come to her room immediately."

"O-okay! Thanks!"

I rush over to Ishtar's room in the sanctuary. My heart is racing. When I burst through the door, Ishtar puts on her usual calm expression and sternly tells me: "The Demon Lord of Ixphoria has awakened."

A-ah...! I-it's finally time...!

I had a feeling this was the case... Why else would Ishtar ask to see me personally? I can't remember the last time I was this nervous.

"The Demon Lord, who has been enshrouded in mist up until now, briefly revealed himself...as if he knew I was watching and wanted to announce his awakening..."

"I—I—I have to tell Seiya!"

"It appears Seiya Ryuuguuin is in the plaza right now."

After expressing my gratitude, I rush out the door.

Just as Ishtar's power of clairvoyance demonstrated, I find Seiya in the plaza

speaking with a god.

“No, I’m the God of Wine. I don’t know anything about that.”

Seiya appears to be asking the stout god something, but this is an emergency, so I butt in.

“Seiya!! Ishtar said the Demon Lord has awakened!”

“Okay.”

The God of Wine scratches his cheek.

“Well, uh... It sounds like you’ve got a lot on your plate, so I’m going to leave you to it.”

After the God of Wine leaves, I suggest that we open a gate back to Ixphoria. Seiya, however, quietly shakes his head.

“Not yet.”

“What?! Seriously?!”

“Just wait a little longer.”

That comes as a shock. I thought he would want to leave right away once he heard the Demon Lord had awakened.

“O-oh. Okay... I guess we could wait a little longer...”

If Seiya isn’t ready, then I plan on waiting until he is.

“Hero, exactly how long is ‘a little longer’?”

I turn in the direction of the serious voice to find Jonde and Kiriko standing behind me. It looks like they were listening to our conversation.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Jonde? That look on your face... You’re scaring me.”

Jonde raises a hand to stop me, then faces Seiya once more.

“I have been watching you fight for a while now, so I know relatively well how slow you are to act. I heard you failed last time because of your impatience—because you wished to save Ixphoria and its people from suffering as soon as you could. Therefore, it pains me to have to say this, but recently, you appear to be doing nothing more than wasting time in the spirit world.”

“S-Seiya would never just waste time like that! Right, Seiya?”

I turn around and look at Seiya, but he doesn't say a word.

“Even just now, I heard you talking to the God of Wine about spirits and whatnot. I find it hard to believe that such idle chatter is going to help you defeat the Demon Lord.”

I'm standing on pins and needles, waiting for Seiya to tell Jonde to shut up or pour tea on his head. Despite all my worries, Seiya just turns his back to us.

“I'll let you know when it's time to go.”

Seiya then walks away, leaving us with those words. Jonde clicks his tongue. Kiriko, however, mutters: “I feel like Seiya...is waiting for something.”

“‘Waiting for something’? Like what?”

“I don't know. It's just a feeling I have.”

Kiriko has a sixth sense when it comes to things like this. Unfortunately, I have no idea what that *something* could be.

Once again, Kiriko and I sleep together in the room Cerceus is lending us.

“Rista...”

Kiriko, lying by my side, calls out to me.

“Wh-what's wrong, Kiri?”

“I love spending time with you every day. It's so fun... Jonde sounds like he wants to save Ixphoria as soon as possible, and I do, too, of course...but at the same time, I kind of wish we could keep doing this forever.”

She pauses, then bashfully scratches her head.

“It's not right for me to feel this way...is it?”

“I feel the same way, Kiri. I'm so happy, and I don't want this to end.”

Those are my honest feelings.

“Rista, remember when I was sad back in Baraque, and you told me that ‘good things happen to good people’?”

Kiriko wraps her hand around mine. Even though she's a machine, her hands

always feel so warm to me.

“Well, the best thing that could happen to me is for you to always be happy!”

“Kiri...!”

A warmth spreads in my heart. At the same time, I feel ashamed of myself. Kiriko is always putting others before herself, and yet here I am—a goddess—only worried about myself.

That’s when it dawns on me. Deep down, I’ve been avoiding the final battle against the Demon Lord. I was afraid of dying. But...what if Seiya knew exactly how I felt?

Then that would mean that Seiya was waiting for...!

The next day, I head over to Ishtar’s room alone.

“Great Goddess Ishtar, I have a request.”

I clearly state my intentions.

“Seiya might use Valkyrie’s final attack, Gate of Valhalla, again during the battle against the Demon Lord Ultimaesus. If that happens, I will use Order to save him, even if that means being punished by the deities of the inner plane once more...”

After a beat, Ishtar, wearing a serious expression, firmly nods.

“Very well. It appears you have made up your mind. If such a time comes, I will permit you to use Order.”

“Thank you very much.”

I straighten my back before continuing:

“I will defeat Ultimaesus and save Ixphoria even if it costs me my life!”

“Even if it costs you...your life...?”

“Yes! I am a goddess! I must save the world, and I’m willing to risk my life to do so!”

“Ristarte...”

“Of course, I don’t plan on dying! When Celemonic put a curse on me, Seiya

told me, *‘Don’t give up so easily. Keep fighting until the very end,’* and that’s what I plan on doing!”

After thinking about it all night, I finally put my determination into words. My fear has vanished. I feel cheerful, even. After grinning at Ishtar, I deeply bow before leaving her room.

At Café du Cerceus, Seiya takes a seat at a garden table, crosses his arms, and closes his eyes. He doesn’t look like he wants to talk to anyone right now, but I approach him without even hesitating for a second.

“Seiya, are you ready?”

“I told you I’d let you know when it’s time to go.”

After taking in a deep breath, I face Seiya and raise my voice: “I’m ready to go! I’m ready to face whatever fate awaits me!”

Seiya looks my way. I notice he’s staring at something behind me. When I turn around, Jonde and Kiriko are there staring at Seiya, too. Their eyes burn with determination.

“Hero, I am ready to meet my fate as well!”

“M-me, too!”

We stand in silence for a while until Seiya shoots me a piercing glare, but I don’t back away from his wrath. Instead, I put my unwavering will into words: “Seiya! Let’s defeat the Demon Lord! We’re going to save Ixphoria this time!”

“Seiya...!”

“Hero...!”

We’re going to restore peace to Ixphoria so people like Queen Carmilla and Kiri can freely live as they please! Even if that means I’ll...!

“Let’s go, Seiya Ryuuguuin! For the future of Ixphoria!”

Seiya eventually stands, then looks at Kiriko, Jonde, and me in that order before glancing sharply at the sky above.

“I’m perfectly prepared.”

...A chill runs down my spine. Seiya didn’t even say that before our battle

against the Demon Lord in Gaeabrande. But he did this time... Just like he did before every other battle from which he emerged triumphant.

An Absolute Being

After hearing Seiya declare his readiness, I'm convinced he was waiting for me to resign myself to whatever comes next. In other words, my death is most likely inevitable. But I'm not afraid. Right now, whether I live or die isn't my biggest concern. All I feel is a strong desire to save Ixphoria.

"Seiya! Great Goddess Ishtar has given us permission! The closest I can open a gate is one kilometer away from the Demon Lord's castle!"

"All right."

I chant the spell to open a gate. Jonde and Kiriko seem a little excited as well.

"Wonderful! Let's do this, Hero! For Ixphoria!"

"I—I can't believe this is the final battle!"

But before Seiya passes through the gate, he stomps the floor. Immediately, the ground at the plaza rises, and scores of golems crawl out of the dirt like zombies.

"There might be a great number of low-level monsters waiting for us, along with more powerful enemies nearby. If that happens, these golems will deal with as many of them as possible, allowing us to conserve our energy. I plan on creating even more golems after we arrive."

Seiya gives orders to the few hundred golems. They open the gate, then walk through it in droves. Jonde, Kiriko, and I watch in bewilderment. Other deities, such as Orand and Fraala, crowd around in astonishment as well.

"Hmph. He's sending the golems into the first wave of the final battle?"

"It is very like him if you really think about it."

Despite their bitter smirks, they seem to be cheering Seiya on from the sidelines. Aria and Adenela are nearby as well.

“You can do it, Rista!”

“You can count on me!”

“K-Kiriko, Jonde. D-don’t get reckless. O-only use Endless Sword to p-protect yourselves. S-Seiya will handle the rest.”

“Okay!”

“You have our eternal gratitude, Goddess of War!”

Even Cerceus shows up to shake Kiriko’s and Jonde’s hands.

“Good luck, you two! I don’t want my favorite part-time employees getting hurt, so be careful!”

“Thank you, Cerceus! See you again soon!”

During their exchange, the last golem finally makes its way through the gate.

“All right, let’s go.”

Unlike Seiya, who walks through the portal without even looking back, we smile and wave to the deities seeing us off as we head into the final battle.

The instant we emerge on the other side, I notice the damp, lukewarm wind. A purple, stagnant sky hangs over us. An ominous miasma engulfs the heavens. A giant castle stands tall before us, piercing the sky and emitting a dark mist as if it were a living creature itself.

“So that’s the Demon Lord’s lair...!”

“Ultimaeus must be inside!”

Our path is clear, but I timidly say to Seiya:

“H-hey, Seiya? I can’t see anything around me...”

We are surrounded by the golems who preceded us through the gate, and their large builds are making it impossible to see what’s going on in the immediate area. Seiya claimed he was going to create more golems once we arrived, but all he’s doing is surveying the landscape while sitting on a golem’s back. Curious, I poke my head between some golems and manage to check out our surroundings.

“Wh-what happened here?!”

Countless monsters in the wasteland around the castle lie on the ground. Some look like the demon priests we saw in Sage Village while others are bizarre-looking, inhuman creatures.

“Are they dead...?” Jonde asks as he pokes his head out.

The stench of death clouding the air is apparent.

“I’ll check to see if they’re truly dead.”

After Seiya gives orders to a few golems, they prod and roll the monsters’ bodies while Seiya closes his eyes. It looks like he’s linked his eyes with theirs.

“I can say with absolute certainty that the monsters I checked were dead. They don’t seem to have any traps hidden inside their bodies, either.”

Jonde strokes his beard.

“It seems someone has already invaded the Demon Lord’s castle.”

“What?! Does that mean we have allies we didn’t even know about?!”

Maybe some of the survivors of Ixphoria came to help us! I’m overjoyed with the thought until...

“B-but look at the bodies! How cruel...!”

I glance back at the monsters at Kiriko’s request. Some are missing arms, legs, and heads while others have their guts splattered about. Whoever killed them seems to have taken great delight in the act. I shudder.

“No matter how they died, I’m still going to bury them with Endless Fall. We wouldn’t want them coming back as undead, after all.”

Seiya drops the bodies into the planet’s core, then sends the golems marching toward the castle once more. The golems are surrounding us to protect us from potential attacks from any direction, but there isn’t a single living monster in sight. Seiya continues using Endless Fall on any corpse we encounter while we slowly approach the Demon Lord’s lair.

“Stop here.”

Seiya comes to a halt a few dozen meters before the gateway to the Demon

Lord's castle. The entryway yawns as if to swallow us whole. Seiya places a hand on the ground, and in an instant, nearly a hundred golems appear on either side of him. Seiya leaves a dozen or so to guard us but sends the rest to surround the castle. Then, after switching classes from Earth Spellblade to Fire Spellblade, he creates around a dozen Automatic Phoenixes. With their mighty talons, they clasp bomb boulders on the ground, which Seiya had created earlier, and depart toward our destination.

"Wh-what do you plan on doing?"

"I'm going to bomb the castle."

"What?!"

By the time I realize it, the golems surrounding the fortress are holding bomb boulders as well. And then...

"Fire."

On Seiya's command, the golems throw their explosives at the castle! The Automatic Phoenixes, soaring high in the sky, drop theirs as well! The blasts should have engulfed the Demon Lord's castle in flames, but as soon as the detonations ring out, a pale, wall-like force field appears around the castle. After the smoke clears, the Demon Lord's castle stands tall and without a scratch.

"There's a barrier protecting the castle! The bomb boulders won't work!"

"Hmph. As expected. Looks like I'll just have to go inside and defeat the Demon Lord myself."

"O-obviously. I mean, I've never heard of someone defeating a Demon Lord with explosives..."

Jonde sounds shocked, but I think it's very like Seiya to test out anything he can. With the golems leading the way, Seiya heads toward the castle, muttering: "Berserk: Phase Two."

A dark-crimson aura trails off his body. Startled, I look around.

"A-are we under attack?!"

Jonde and Kiriko brace themselves for battle as well, but the only monsters

around us are the dead ones.

“No. I’m preparing for the final battle.”

“Then why didn’t you tell us that?! What kind of Hero suddenly turns into a berserker without saying anything?!”

“Shut up, zombie. While I’m not thrilled about going through the front door, it looks like it’s our only point of invasion. So pay extremely close attention to your surroundings.”

When we finally make it to the castle gate, two fiendish-looking monsters lie on the ground, brutally murdered. Kiriko tugs at the hem of my dress.

“Do you think these two were the gatekeepers?”

“M-most likely...”

Just as before, Seiya drops the creatures into a bottomless pit using Endless Fall, but the knot in my stomach only gets worse the more I think about how bizarre this all is.

Are the monsters fighting among themselves? Wh-what in the world happened here?

“We’re going in. Prepare yourselves,” Seiya says after resealing Endless Fall’s abyss.

The golems naturally take the lead as we proceed. It’s almost like they’re the Heroes and we’re just tagging along. Still, I find myself taken aback again once we’re inside.

“...?!”

Faint candlelight illuminates the stone hall, revealing many more corpses. Powerful-looking creatures such as dragons and undead lie on the ground, battered and broken. The fact that the castle’s interior is in a similar state to the scene outside confuses me further.

Since Seiya can’t use Endless Fall inside the castle, he meticulously burns the bodies. As we press onward, we follow each of his orders without question, and though it takes a while, we eventually come to a spiral staircase. It winds toward the ceiling with several doors lining the surrounding wall.

“Who made this place? It’s so confusing.”

“Let’s go up that staircase first.”

Despite the castle’s complicated structure, Seiya chooses the right path every time, almost like he has a map.

“That room next. After that, we’ll take that path over there.”

“H-hey, Seiya? How do you know where you’re going?”

“I’m using the special ability Divination. This passage just feels right.”

“Oh, wow! So Oracle wasn’t a trash class, after all!”

But after continuing down the path for some time, we find ourselves standing before a wall.

“S-Seiya! It’s a dead end!”

“Interesting. It appears to have a sixty percent success rate. I guess that’s fortune-telling for you. Always hit or miss.”

““““What?!””””

After that, we hit a few more dead ends here and there, but in the grand scheme of things, I feel like we’re still making considerable progress. This is the Demon Lord’s castle. There could be countless traps waiting for us, and this Divination ability is probably the only reason we’re okay.

After passing by a statue of a demon, we take a long staircase upstairs before walking down a winding path. Usually, you would have to engage countless fierce monsters in battle to get to the Demon Lord, but we haven’t encountered even one enemy yet. It isn’t long before Seiya stops right in front of an enormous, morbidly decorated door.

Th-this must lead to...!

My goddess senses detect a dreadful malevolence coming from the room behind this door. Kiriko speaks up in a trembling voice: “I—I can sense him! The Demon Lord is in this room...!”

I nod at Kiriko before glancing at Seiya.

Knowing Seiya, he’s probably going to tell us to wait here! B-but I came

prepared to risk my life to save this planet! I'm going to go with him no matter what he says!

Surprisingly, though, Seiya doesn't dismiss me.

"Come on. Let's do this, Rista."

"Huh?"

"You have a duty to see this battle through to the end."

"O-okay!"

What the...? Does this mean he finally recognizes me as a goddess?

The happiness I feel disappears, though, when the golem pushes open the heavy door. A bloodred carpet stretches across the floor. The room is even more spacious than the throne room in Termine, but it's dim with an ominous atmosphere. The first things that catch my eye are the...

"D-dead bodies?! *Here?!'*"

Even the Demon Lord's sizable throne room is littered with the ravaged corpses of monsters, just like outside. Standing at the end of the trail of death is a man, calmly looking out the window. Seiya raises a hand into the air and gives us orders.

"Hide behind the golems and don't move."

"O-okay. I won't get in your way. But let me know if you need me for anything."

I stare at the man by the window. He's wearing a black cloak over his frail body and holds a staff. Still facing the window, he says: "There seems to be quite a number of golems surrounding the castle. I, too, once created powerful subordinates to protect this castle—the Beast Emperor, the Machine Emperor, the Vengeful Empress, the Death Emperor..."

He speaks in a distant yet articulate manner and finally turns to face Seiya.

"It's a strange feeling to face a man I've already killed. Unfortunately, you seem to have no recollection of the event."

Th-that's the Demon Lord Ultimaesus...?

When I saw Ultimaesus in Ishtar's crystal ball, he was a giant, hideous monster with green skin, a mouth split from ear to ear, and eight limbs. The monster in front of me, however, hardly resembles the one in my memories. While he does have pale-green skin, he looks just like a lithe human.

"I learned something recently. Once you have unparalleled power, you no longer need subordinates. Therefore, I tested my newfound powers on them. I'm not entirely certain they were happy to die for the cause, however."

"Y-you're the one who killed all of those monsters out there?!" I scream.

"Yes," he replies dryly before continuing.

"First, allow me to congratulate you for making it this far. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem we'll be able to have a fair fight."

Ultimaesus walks toward us.

"I'm more than aware that overconfidence often leads to defeat. However, this is not self-conceit. Our matchup is akin to an adult fighting a newborn baby. There is no way I can lose..."

The Demon Lord continues his approach. Seiya, who is standing by my side, takes a step forward as well.

Seiya!!

The final battle has begun at last. My body tenses up, and I see something I can hardly believe. A red trail shoots forward and curves to Ultimaesus's left—Seiya's berserker aura!

Th-there are two Seiyas?! No, I don't sense Seiya's aura coming from the one walking toward the Demon Lord! He must have switched himself out with a clay doll while we were focused on the Demon Lord back when he was looking out the window. He's going for a surprise attack while using the doll as a decoy! That's so like Seiya! But his sword bounces off an invisible wall, creating a high-pitched sound.

"Heh-heh-heh... I have already surrendered one of my lives to the Dark God."

He lets out a muffled laugh, then throws back his cloak.

"Stage One—Defined Domain: Magician. Now only magic will work on me."

“Physical attacks won’t work anymore?!”

I use Scan to see if he’s telling the truth, but all I can see is static. I can’t see Ultimaesus’s stats at all.

“Now, let us see whose magic reigns supreme, Hero. Show me what you’ve got.”

He suggests this in an amused manner while the air around his raised staff distorts.

“Dark Wind.”

A dark miasma gushes from his staff and heads straight for Seiya. I tremble with fear. I have no doubt the mist is thick with Chain Destruction, but Seiya doesn’t show a hint of hesitation.

“Class Change: Wind Mage.”

He changes classes, then extends his right hand.

“Wind Shield.”

That’s the move he learned from his training with Fraala, the Goddess of Wind! A barrier of wind appears around Seiya and the rest of us standing far behind him. The incoming black mist blows around and past us. However, the Demon Lord’s overwhelming magic turns Seiya’s clay doll decoy and the surrounding golems into dust, sending a chill down my spine.

“Impressive. You could only use fire magic when we last fought, but it seems you’ve learned wind magic as well. Then how about this?”

Ultimaesus twirls his staff.

“Dark Lightning.”

A jet-black bolt of lightning shoots out of his staff, leaving behind ebony trails of electricity as it soars toward Seiya.

H-he can use both wind and lightning magic at the same time?! But the magic in Ixphoria is supposed to be segmented! So how is he able to use multiple types of magic like that?!

Seiya, on the other hand, would need to change classes each time he wanted

to use a different element. While I thought he would be at a great disadvantage...

“Class Change: Lightning Spellblade.”

Seiya quickly changes into a Lightning Spellblade! It looks like his training with Orand paid off. He fires a lightning spell of his own from his hand, and it clashes with the black lightning, canceling it out. Without a moment’s delay, the Demon Lord casts another wind spell.

“Seiya!!”

I scream his name in panic, but...

“Class Change. Wind Shield.”

Seiya changes classes once more, blocking the Demon Lord’s attack nonchalantly.

“I—I had no idea you could change classes so quickly!”

“It’s a move I learned from training with the God of Merchants—Quick Change.”

“So that silly training wasn’t a waste of time, after all?!”

Despite his magic not affecting Seiya, the Demon Lord speaks up in admiration.

“Impressive. Then let’s see how you fare against ice magic, your praiseworthy fire magic’s opposite element. Dark Icicle.”

In the blink of an eye, dozens of black icicles form on the high ceiling of the throne room.

“Th-there are so many! Hero! If you don’t want to be skewered, watch out!”

“Seiya...!”

Jonde and Kiriko try to warn him, but...

“Class Change: Fire Mage.”

Apathetic as ever, Seiya strikes the floor with the ball of his foot, causing pillars of fire to appear all over the floor. The dozens of pillars then gradually

change into what appear to be sharp weapons.

Th-they look like spears! This must be something he learned to do by training fire magic and spearmanship at the same time!

Ultimaeus swings his staff, causing the countless icicles to fall from the ceiling. However...

“Phoenix Spear.”

Flaming spears launch toward the ceiling like missiles, intercepting the black icicles and incinerating them before they reach Seiya.

“Simply marvelous. But I think you missed a few.”

Ultimaeus chuckles. Seiya launched all of his Phoenix Spears, but there are still a few icicles in the air!

“Die... Dark Icicle.”

A few dozen coal-black icicles pick up speed as they descend toward Seiya, skewering his body.

“S-Seiya!!” I scream.

But his impaled body crumbles into sand!

“Don’t worry, Rista! That’s a clay doll!”

“O-oh, thank goodness. Wait! What?!”

I scream again...because by the time I realize it, there are countless Seiyas all over the place! One, two, three—there are over a dozen of them!

“Are all of these clay dolls?! But there’s no dirt around here. How was he able to make this many?!”

“He must have transformed the golems guarding us into dolls that look like him!”

Ohhh! That makes sense! Now that Kiriko mentions it, there do seem to be a lot fewer golems than there were a few minutes ago!

“The ability to transform? Hmph. It appears I’ll have to destroy them all.”

Black icicles reappear and rain over the clay Seiyas. The sluggish decoys easily

crumble before the Demon Lord's attack.

"Mmm...!"

I watch in suspense, worrying one of them might be the real Seiya, but Ultimaesus stops moving completely and looks down. A slain monster, with one missing leg and exposed entrails, lies by Ultimaesus's feet. While clearly dead, and horrifically so, it's somehow grasping one of Ultimaesus's legs. Before the Demon Lord can point his staff at it, the dead creature opens its mouth: "Thunder Strike."

Ultimaesus's body begins buzzing as electricity surges through him. In the midst of the attack, the deceased monster rises to its feet and transforms into Seiya!

"Y-you disguised yourself as a corpse?!"

"Yes. And I have temporarily paralyzed the enemy with a lightning attack, so I'm not going to let this chance go to waste."

After switching his class to Fire Mage, Seiya unleashes Maximum Inferno on the paralyzed Demon Lord, engulfing him in flames. He then raises both hands into the air.

"Phoenix Spear."

Similar to the Demon Lord's icicles from earlier, countless flaming spears emerge from the ceiling before raining down on Ultimaesus. As soon as a spear hits him, it explodes until the entire area around him has become a lake of fire and scorching hot air.

"D-did he kill him?!" Jonde asks from behind an arm raised to guard against the incredible heat. Despite being covered in flames, however, Ultimaesus starts to laugh.

"Heh-heh-heh. What power. It appears I've been fatally wounded."

Ultimaesus's body gradually turns into ash amid the raging flames. Even after admitting his wounds are fatal, though, the Demon Lord's voice is ripe with confidence.

"Allow me to offer two more lives to the Dark God, then."

In the blink of an eye, Ultimaesus's burned body expands!

"Impossible...! Is he immortal?"

"H-he's changing forms again!"

Jonde's and Kiriko's voices tremble. By the time the flames vanish, Ultimaesus has already transformed into a massive giant. He's built like an armored cyclops.

"Stage Two—Defined Domain: Fighter. Magic will no longer affect me. Let's see what you're capable of when you're limited to hand-to-hand combat."

Transcendent

The Demon Lord who now stands before Seiya is a new life-form that can only take physical damage.

“Dark Assault.”

Ultimaesus draws back his fist, which is enshrouded in a black mist. It's clear his arm is infused with Chain Destruction. While I expected such a large monster to move sluggishly, I blink, and he's already standing before Seiya with his arm raised.

Wh-what speed! Seiya...!

But Ultimaesus only passes through air. Seiya has vanished as well.

“He dodged...,” Ultimaesus mutters.

I follow his eyes and see Seiya off in the distance, taking a deep breath and then exhaling.

“Berserk: Phase 2.7.”

He's raised his berserker phase to its highest level! He becomes cloaked in a dark-red aura overflowing from his body.

“Oh? Your aura has grown even stronger. So that's how you defeated Grandleon.”

Seiya and Ultimaesus face each other, waiting for a chance to strike...and then, they both vanish. A clash rings out in the distance, causing Kiriko and me to jump. I can only see snippets of their battle. One moment, I see Seiya dodging Ultimaesus's punch. The next, I see Ultimaesus blocking Seiya's fist with his arm. With every passing blow, their attacks become faster and faster until all I can see are two clashing red and black blurs.

Then, after a particularly loud crash, they snap back into view and face each

other from separate parts of the room. Confirming that Seiya is okay with my own eyes, I let out a sigh of relief. Meanwhile, Ultimaesus's arms seem to have turned a dark-reddish color.

"I'm impressed you were able to damage my body, even with its iron defense. How did you do it?"

"I applied moves I learned from the Goddess of Destruction, which work only after surpassing the target's defense."

"Interesting. Very interesting. It appears I'll have to get serious, then."

Ultimaesus's body starts to change! The skin below his arms begins swelling until two new, bloody arms tear their way out of his body. Our eyes shoot open wide at the sight of the four-armed beast.

"Tsk...! The Hero was already struggling, yet the Demon Lord wasn't even using his full power!"

I get a bad feeling in my stomach as Ultimaesus fiercely charges the Hero!

Seiya...!

As the two auras meet once again, I hear a collision unlike any other. My heart pounds against my chest as I wait to see what happened. The first to come into view is Seiya.

Th-thank goodness he's okay... Wait! Is that...?!

I'm shocked by what I see in Seiya's hand. It's a silver, glittering sword with a saw-like blade.

That's Seiya's killer sword.

"H-he did it!"

Jonde, standing by my side, marvels at the sight, so I look back at Ultimaesus and see...he doesn't have a head! It's rolling on the ground by his feet as violet blood spews from his neck.

I can't believe it! Seiya cut off Ultimaesus's head with the killer sword!

...Wait! He used a sword?! Ultimaesus said this was supposed to be hand-to-hand combat! W-well, if the sword worked, then it worked! Who cares about

some silly rule the Demon Lord made?

“Heh-heh-heh. What a cruel man you are.”

In spite of everything that’s happened, the Demon Lord laughs, which causes fresh goose bumps to dot my skin. The head rolling on the floor cackles as it speaks to Seiya. The headless body then picks up its head and places it back on its neck. The flesh seamlessly knits itself back together.

“What...?! Are Seiya’s attacks not affecting him?!” I scream.

Aloof as always, Seiya replies:

“I’ve already killed the Demon Lord several times, but he possesses multiple lives.”

Ultimaeus only had two lives last time! Now that he’s more powerful, it seems he has even more!

Seiya continues speaking like it isn’t a big deal.

“The number of lives you have matters little.”

“Hmph. You’re rather confident, I see. I will offer three lives to the Dark God, then.”

Wh-what?! He’s going to transform again?!

“Stage Three—Defined Domain: Ghost.”

The flesh melts off Ultimaeus’s muscle-bound frame until he is nothing more than a jet-black skeleton with horns. His new form looks extremely familiar. In a way, it looks almost identical to the Death Emperor Sirrusht’s final form.

“Only spirit attacks will affect me now... Oh, and let me increase my domain another stage so you won’t be able to use the same trick on me.”

Huh?! Wh-what did he just say?!

The Demon Lord raises his skeleton hand high into the air.

“Furthermore, I shall offer four more lives to the Dark God.”

Ultimaeus’s sternum opens up with a creak, revealing another horned skull inside! It’s as if he combined the Death Emperor’s appearance with the

Vengeful Empress's wickedness. The skull inside his sternum cackles.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Stage Four—Defined Domain: Curse!"

"Hmm." Seiya grunts while looking at his killer sword. Thousands of years seem to pass by in seconds as the blade rusts and starts to disintegrate. The rot travels down to the grip until the entire sword turns into dust.

"Destroy, destroy, destroy! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! All your weapons have been destroyed!"

The skull in the chest continues cackling.

"S-Seiya's sword...!"

"Don't worry, Goddess! The Hero has many spares for this sort of scenario!"

"O-oh yeah!"

"I'll grab you another!"

Jonde turns to fetch the Hero a fresh weapon, but Kiriko is already behind him shaking her head and shaking the item pouch while holding it upside down.

"J-Jonde, all of the swords... Even the spares' spares' spares are gone!"

"Impossible...!"

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! I told you all of your weapons have been destroyed! That's what Defined Domain: Curse does! Ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaa!"

"A-an ability that makes all weapons disappear?! How cheap can you get, you coward?!" I scream, unable to hold back, but it isn't the skull in his chest that responds. It's the Demon Lord himself.

"Heh-heh-heh. That's payback for earlier."

He then gets into his attack stance, extending his skeleton arms at Seiya. A dull sound echoes as both arms transform into sharp blades.

"I still have a weapon, though. These are the swords—the Bone Glaives—I will use to end you, Hero."

Ultimaeus takes an offensive posture after his arms finish transforming. Sweat drips off my cheeks and lands on the floor.

Seiya used Drain: Charged Attack, then Ghost Buster Overdrive to defeat the Death Emperor's final form, but he won't be able to use it this time without a weapon! Can he even fight like this?!

As Ultimaerus charges toward the unarmed Hero, Seiya swiftly raises his right arm into the air.

"Fourth Valkyrja: Astral Break."

An Astral Chain emerges from his palm. It extends while forming multiple arches as it floats around Seiya's body to protect him.

"Using spiritual magic to defend, hmm? However..."

Ultimaerus closes the distance between them before swinging his arm like a sword. While the chain ends up saving Seiya from a direct attack, the Demon Lord's blade easily cuts through it like butter.



“You cannot defend against my Bone Glaives’ half-spiritual, half-physical attacks with that. You won’t be able to damage this body, either, of course.”

Ultimaeus’s voice oozes with confidence, but I notice that the chain, which I thought had been severed, is still floating in the air. It curls around a Bone Glaive like a snake and constricts his arm.

“Hmph. Enough with your petty tricks.”

“It isn’t a petty trick.”

Seiya then snaps his fingers, causing a chain of destruction to appear by the Demon Lord’s feet, which binds itself around his ankle.

“The second our battle started, I’ve been using every spare moment to lay this trap. There’s nothing petty about it.”

Chains materialize on the floor, walls, pillars—every single surface in the Demon Lord’s throne room. The chains of destruction coil around Ultimaeus’s arms, legs, torso, and even his neck. New chains then wrap around the old ones, despite the fact that he can’t even move. It’s just like when Seiya firmly bound Celemonic to defeat her. Seiya stares the Demon Lord dead in the eyes as he is cocooned.

“From now on, I’m going to grant my spiritual energy to Chain Destruction, which I learned training under Nephitet.”

A white mist creeps from Seiya’s body and spreads a few meters around him. I shudder.

“Wh-what power! Your spiritual energy is even stronger than when you fought the Death Emperor!”

“I haven’t missed a day of spirit training ever since Nephitet trained me. Incidentally, I took first place at the Best Astral Body Competition for lean and toned athletes the other day while we were in the spirit world.”

“...?! You entered that contest after all?!”

I clearly remember him mocking me and saying, “*Do you seriously think I have time for that?*” when I asked! Even though I’m dumbstruck, Seiya’s spiritual energy must have been really amazing to get first place at the contest.

“Astral Break: Revised.”

The spiritual energy being emitted from Seiya’s body runs through the chains of destruction like lit fuses. The chains glitter white as a steam-like substance rises from them.

“The attack’s working! So you’re going to be able to disintegrate him like you did with Celemonic, right?!”

“No, things are different this time. Spiritual energy alone probably isn’t enough to destroy a half-spiritual, half-physical body. That’s why...”

Seiya approaches the bound Demon Lord while he speaks.

“...I’m going to punch him.”

“You’re what?!”

Seiya draws back his arm and starts pummeling the chained Demon Lord. Deeply contrasting his calm demeanor, his every relentless punch causes the cocoon of chains to tremble. He’s abusing it like a worn-out punching bag with his increased berserker power.

He finishes with a powerful high kick that sends the bound Demon Lord flying into a pillar. After he removes Astral Break, the chains vanish, revealing that the Demon Lord is nowhere in sight.

“You vaporized him!”

“Did the Hero win?!”

Jonde and I strain our voices, but Kiriko points at something.

“L-look over there! Ultimaesus is...!”

...Clapping. Before anyone even realized it, Ultimaesus was slowly clapping on the throne in the back. I stare at him with a look of utter amazement. The Demon Lord is holding a staff and wearing the same clothes he did when we first met him.

“Magic, hand-to-hand combat, spiritual energy—all of it has exceeded my expectations.”

Still sitting in his throne, Ultimaesus gives Seiya an admiring smirk.

“Rejoice, Hero. You have defeated the Demon Lord Ultimaesus.”

“Wh-what do you mean ‘defeated’?! You’re still alive!”

“Heh-heh-heh... I suppose I should say, ‘You defeated the Demon Lord before he received advice from the Dark God and fell into a deep slumber.’ We are in unprecedented territory now.”

Ultimaesus slowly rises from his throne.

“I offer five lives.”

Ack! What in the world is he going to turn into now?! Seiya doesn’t even have a weapon anymore!

“Stage Five—Defined Domain: Infinity.”

Ultimaesus begins glowing like the sun. It’s so bright that I can’t look directly at him... And it’s not just bright.

“Mmm...!”

“I-it’s so hot...!”

Jonde and Kiriko groan in agony.

Th-this is clearly different from Ultimaesus’s other forms! What’s going on?!

I squint to catch a glimpse of what is happening, but what I see sends a chill down my spine. In the light, white swan-like wings spread from Ultimaesus’s back!

Th-this aura...! It’s almost like he’s...!

I can’t believe what I’m seeing, but the aura flowing from Ultimaesus’s body is all too familiar to me. It’s something I have felt countless times in the unified spirit world.

“D-divine energy?! Th-this can’t be happening!”

Ultimaesus, radiating a divine aura just like a high-level deity in the spirit world, sternly announces:

“I am the God Emperor Ultimaesus. The demon’s power has warped my very existence as a Demon Lord.”

Jonde closes his eyes in the blinding light and clicks his tongue.

“Tsk! Damnable Demon Lord...! The scumbag thinks he’s a god now...!”

“Jonde... No, he’s... That’s...”

My voice trembles as I continue.

“That divine energy is real...! Ultimaesus really has become a god!”

“Wh-what?! Impossible!”

Ultimaesus smirks.

“Now that I’ve achieved divinity, the only thing that could possibly damage me is a dark-type weapon, which unfortunately cannot be used by humans. Then again, you no longer possess any weapons, regardless.”

Ultimaesus knows we have no way to defeat him, especially after Defined Domain: Curse destroyed all of Seiya’s weapons. That’s why he’s so calm. Ultimaesus slowly approaches us.

I-is defeating him even possible now?!

“S-Seiya...!”

I shift my eyes toward where Seiya was standing, but he’s no longer there.

Wh-where did he go?!

The Hero has vanished into thin air, and before I even realize it, Ultimaesus is already standing right in front of me.

“Eek?! ”

“The Hero appears to have gone into hiding. No, he is probably coming up with some sort of plan—a futile ploy to defeat me, no doubt.”

I try to run away but can’t move for some reason.

“Now, my kin, it is time to become part of my power.”

I’m not your family! is what I try to scream, but my voice is gone. Unbeknownst to me, my divine aura was being swallowed by Ultimaesus’s, as if it were being assimilated. I’m...losing strength. My mind goes blank. Lacking the energy to resist anymore, I sink to the floor.

“R-Rista!”

“Goddess!”

Kiriko and Jonde scream my name, but Ultimaesus’s divine aura is making it impossible for them to get any closer as I gradually lose consciousness.

O-oh... So this is how I die. Seiya predicted this would happen, which is why he was waiting for me to come to terms with it and prepare myself in the spirit world.

I’m not afraid to die, but I’m worried. Can Seiya defeat Ultimaesus now that he’s a god? He did say he was perfectly prepared before we left the spirit world, though. That has to mean there’s a chance he’ll win, no matter how small.

Good luck after I’m gone... I’m counting on you, Seiya...

I close my eyes, praying for Seiya’s victory when...

“Gwah!”

I hear a deep grunt, and my sapped energy returns.

Wh-what’s going on?!

I open my eyes to find Ultimaesus’s face contorting as Seiya stands before me with a sword in hand.

“This body can still take damage even after becoming a god...?”

Ultimaesus clutches his chest. He looks unnerved for the first time since their fight began.

“A dark-type weapon...? Impossible...! There shouldn’t even be any weapons here! All your weapons should have turned to dust!”

But for some reason, Seiya is holding a sword with a dark-crimson blade. I can’t process what’s going on, either! Seiya calmly explains:

“I considered the possibility I might lose all weapons effective against Ultimaesus before or during the battle, so I hid this here.”

“You what?! Wh-when?!”

“One year ago.”

“...What?”

“To be more precise, it was when Celemonic put a curse on you and Chronoa reversed time.”

“You mean when we went back in time?!”

“Yes. There was plenty of reason to believe the final battle would be fought in the throne room again, so it would have been a waste not to use the time-traveling opportunity to my advantage. I wouldn’t have been able to sneak inside the throne room otherwise.”

D-does that mean he was already preparing for the final battle when I was about to die because of Celemonic’s curse...? When I was bawling my eyes out, he was comforting Princess Tiana...and calculatingly hiding a weapon in the Demon Lord’s throne room?!

“Incidentally, I hid everything in that pillar. While it goes without saying that I hid weapons of every elemental type, I also included kits for Synthesis from raw materials just in case all my weapons became unusable for some reason.”

“Synthesis kits, too?!”

“I temporarily dismantled a Dark God’s Amulet and a Drain Sword and turned them back into raw materials, which came in handy this time.”

“W-wait! Then the sword you’re using—”

“Yes, and I was able to improve it by adding the Ristarte Hair Doll to the item Synthesis. I call it...”

Seiya points the tip of the dark-crimson blade at Ultimaesus.

“The Holy Power Draining Sword: Revised—also known as the Great Granny Rista Sword.”

“What kind of name is that?! It makes me sound like I’m a really old lady!”

“More importantly, Rista, stand back. The Great Granny Rista Sword’s power to absorb divine energy is incredible. Not only will it turn you into an old woman, you’ll probably die almost instantly.”

“Eek!”

After I leap as far away from Seiya as I can, I cast a glance at Ultimaesus.

This sword would work on Ultimaesus even though he's a god! *How does it feel, Ultimaesus? I bet you weren't expecting the Hero to go back in time and make a comeback! This is Seiya Ryuuguuin!*

Every enemy Seiya has ever faced has been taken aback and flustered by just how overly cautious he is, so I was sure Ultimaesus would be panicking and confused by now, but...

"You even prepared a sword that can absorb divine energy and defeat Defined Domain: Infinity. I can see why that demon was so worried about you. It's as if you are a completely different person from the Hero I vanquished a year ago."

Ultimaesus grins audaciously.

"Nevertheless, you still cannot defeat me."

Wh-where is that confidence coming from?! He was hurt even after becoming a god...!

"Allow me to show you something. After becoming a god, I can learn what you may call my 'ultimate attack' by offering the rest of my lives to that Dark God. While I will only be able to use it once...I will possess the ability to briefly stop time."

"S-stop time'?!"

What?! Ultimaesus can use a skill that only the Goddess of Time, Chronoa, can use?! That's impossible... B-but he seems so confident! And I doubt he would bluff about something like that now!

"I offer my last six lives."

"S-stop him!!"

Jonde shouts. No matter how strong or cautious Seiya is, he will be helpless if Ultimaesus stops time! But Ultimaesus is already raising his arms high into the air!

"It's too late! Stage Six! Defined Domain: Time Traveler!"

No...! Don't tell me... Don't tell me the Demon Lord can really stop time...!

To become a god and control time and space—this is why the Demon Lord fell into a deep slumber. He wanted to make sure he could kill the Hero without a shadow of a doubt.

I tremble before the Demon Lord's obsession with victory. Seiya, Kiriko, Jonde, and I probably won't even recognize we're dead because Ultimaesus is going to kill us after stopping time. Despair draws closer, and then...

"Why...?"

Ultimaesus's voice echoes. Cracks run down his arms raised toward the ceiling, and his face violently twists.

"Why?! Why won't Defined Domain: Time Traveler work?!"

"You said it was already too late. And you weren't wrong. It was too late...*for you.*"

Seiya speaks with his usual emotionless tone.

"Anti-Clock Field went into effect the minute I stepped inside this throne room."

"A-are you saying you can control space and time as well?!"

Jonde and I exchange glances. I face Seiya once more and yell:

"Wait! Seiya?! I thought Chronoa said humans couldn't manipulate time!"

"She did. However, I was able to learn a skill that ensures the enemy can't, either. That's what I studied while training under her. As long as Anti-Clock Field is in effect, Ultimaesus cannot stop, reverse, or advance time."

"Hero...! Does that mean you even predicted that the Demon Lord was going to attempt to stop time during the final battle?!"

"Ultimaesus was trying to become invincible, and there actually aren't that many ways to do that when you think about it. It essentially boils down to eternal life, nullifying both magic and physical attacks, and manipulating time. So I prepared for each of these options."

Seiya slowly approaches the Demon Lord.

"Th-this... This can't be happening...!"

Ultimaeus's attitude does a one-eighty. His face turns pale, and he is clearly panicking as he backs away from Seiya. I watch the Hero with bated breath.

The Demon Lord became a god and even tried to stop time...yet Seiya was still able to prepare for every eventuality.

I'm so blown away that my lips naturally curl into a smile. He's always a step ahead of the enemy! Seiya has overcome his past failure, considered every possibility, and made sure to prepare for absolutely everything! All that he has done has been in preparation for this day!

Ultimaeus turns and tries to escape, but Seiya is already in front of him.

"Atomic Split Slash."

While in Berserk Mode, Seiya uses an earth skill with a sword that absorbs divine energy— The unparalleled attack slides right between Ultimaeus's brows, followed by an explosion. The floor in the throne room shatters along with it.

"Gwaaaaaaah!"

Ultimaeus grabs his head and howls in agony. A crack appears on his forehead, then spreads down the rest of his body. His insides expand, and his cheeks tear open. Before long, he has transformed into a monster with multiple arms. The giant beast draws ragged breaths. However, this isn't a new form. This is Ultimaeus's true form, which Seiya drew out with his attack. The Demon Lord has returned to the same hideous beast we saw in the crystal ball. Seiya glares at the monster.

"It looks like I won't have to use Gate of Valhalla this time."

Some Things Aren't Meant to Be

I have no words when I see the blade of Seiya's other unsheathed sword. It's the killer sword that turned into dust earlier. He must have synthesized a new one with the material he was hiding when he made the Great Granny Rista Sword—also known as the Holy Power Draining Sword: Revised. Seiya faces Ultimaesus, who is no longer a god but a colossal monster, and thrusts his saw-like blade toward him.

"You're winning! You can do this!" Jonde cheers while watching Seiya take the offensive.

I'm so worked up that I can't hold back my feelings anymore, either.

It's over! You can't defeat him, Ultimaesus! You never had a chance against this Hero!

"Ultimate Eternal Sword."

Seiya slices through the Demon Lord's body using the skill he learned from Adenela. Blood spews from the Demon Lord's wounds and paints the throne room violet. The monster lets out a low growl and collapses to the floor.

"Y-yes!!"

"He did it!"

Jonde and I join hands and celebrate, but...

"Stop pretending you're dead."

Seiya's cold voice echoes.

"You still have another life, don't you? You won't catch me off guard."

Ultimaesus, decorated with cuts, slowly rises to his feet. Seiya was right. He isn't dead yet, but he is panting like an animal with its back against the wall. Seiya cracks his neck like he's ready for the next round.

“I can keep this up for as long as it takes you to die.”

“H-human...!”

Ultimaeus bares his fangs and bellows. He was probably planning on using his newfound ultimate power to defeat Seiya, but the tables have turned. The Demon Lord is the one being toyed with now. The Hero has a clear advantage.

D-does this mean my fated death has been avoided?! I'm saved!

There's no doubting that I could have died during the last battle. Having my divine energy almost completely absorbed by the Demon Lord is proof of that. That's why Seiya was waiting for me in the spirit world to prepare myself for the worst. Even so, he still saved me. After Ultimaeus dies, Seiya, Jonde, Kiriko, and I will all be able to go home. We're going to be okay...or so I thought.

“W-wait! You're about to do something that cannot be reversed!”

Ultimaeus strains his voice, but Seiya continues moving forward, paying no heed to the Demon Lord's cries. Ultimaeus's attention shifts to me.

“Stop this, Hero! Or you *will* regret it!”

“Wh-what are you babbling about?! You're going to be the only one with regrets here! Just give up already, Ultimaeus!”

“Heh... Heh-heh-heh...! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

Ultimaeus's vile laughter echoes throughout the room.

“I—I know who you really are! You, the Hero...and one more life were all lost that day when I killed you!”

“...!”

“Listen well, reincarnation of Princess Tiana of Termine! All three of your fates are in the palm of my hand!”

“Hngh...?!” I instinctively grunt.

Jonde reacts to Ultimaeus's loud declaration as well, then turns to me in utter disbelief.

“Th-that can't be...! Y-you're the reincarnation of Princess Tiana...?!”

“I, uh... I’m—”

With my cover blown, I panic and yell to Ultimaesus: “Wh-what do you mean you control the fates of Jonde, Seiya, and me?!”

“Oh, you’re mistaken, Goddess. The third life lost that day wasn’t that undead soldier’s. It belonged to *that one*.”

I follow the line of the Demon Lord’s finger, and my eyes land on...Kiriko.

K-Kiri? Wait... What?!

I’m taken aback when I lay eyes on Kiriko. She’s lying listlessly on the floor.

“Kiri?! What’s wrong?!”

After rushing over, I shake her body, but she doesn’t reply. The light in her eye is flickering weakly. My eyes shift to the Demon Lord.

“What did you do to her?!”

“Make no mistake, Goddess. I am not the one to blame for her enfeebled state. That would be the Hero himself.”

“Seiya would never attack Kiri!”

When I glance in Seiya’s direction, though, he’s no longer advancing on Ultimaesus. He stands still with a sword in his hand. The Demon Lord then points at Jonde, relieved that the Hero has stopped his attack.

“As luck would have it, the soul of that undead soldier appears untainted. However, that Killing Machine is different. I created it from scratch and used my magic to give it the soul of a dead human. The soul was tainted, and its source of power was transferred from the spirit world to me.”

“Wh-what are you trying to say?!”

“It’s simple. If you kill me, then that Killing Machine dies, too.”

“Wh-what?!”

Seeing me panic brings the Demon Lord great joy.

“Mwah-ha-ha-ha! And that’s not all! That Killing Machine’s soul isn’t just any soul! Ha-ha-ha! That demon’s wisdom defies imagination! While one can expect

little from an unborn child, it can become capable of so much more once adjusted to a Killing Machine's high-level magic circuit!"

Wh-what is he trying to say?!

Ultimaeus smirks as if all the evil of the world has found a new home on his face.

"The soul inside that Killing Machine belongs to the unborn child of Princess Tiana!"

A violent pulse travels through my entire body. I look down at Kiriko on the floor.

Kiri is my—?!

"Y-you're lying!"

"Oh, but I'm not. This was all part of the Dark God's plan. For me, this is a trump card...and for you, I guess you could say it's an act of kindness? Heh-heh-heh! Because you got to meet the child you were never supposed to know!"

"No...! You're lying...!"

"Do you understand now? I own that child's life force! You cannot kill me! Hya-ha-ha-ha-haaa! Ha-ha-ha—"

All of a sudden, Ultimaeus's cackling expression twists in pain. Before we even realized it, Seiya was already standing right in front of him and driving his sword into the monster's giant stomach.

"S-Seiya?!"

Every bit as astonished as I am, Ultimaeus screams:

"Y-you don't believe me?! Everything I said was the truth!"

Kiriko painfully moans as her eye flickers even more rapidly than before.

"Look! There's your proof! That Killing Machine is linked to my last life!"

"Kiri...!"

But even then, Seiya continues inching closer to the Demon Lord. I scream: "Wait! Seiya, stop!"

Seiya stops in his tracks, bringing a smile to Ultimaheus's lips.

"Yes, just like that. You want to spend as much time with your child as you can, don't you? How about we choose a path that benefits both of us, Hero?"

However, Seiya didn't stop because he wasn't going to attack.

"Class Change: Fire Spellblade," he mutters before charging toward the Demon Lord.

His flaming magic sword scorches through the beast's flesh. Ultimaheus wails and writhes in agony.

...I vowed to save Ixphoria when we were in the spirit world, and we're only moments away from avenging our past selves. And yet...every time I look at Kiriko and see all the pain she's in, my determination wavers. My conviction crumbles away.

Kiri!

She's going to die. Kiriko, who has always been by our side—who might even be our child—is going to die. That's thousands—millions—of times more painful than if I were the one to go.

"Seiya, stop! Kiri's going to die!"

But even then, Seiya continues his assault—not once looking back at Kiriko and me. I run over to Jonde and shake his shoulders.

"Jonde, stop him!"

"Goddess—no, Princess Tiana..."

"Seiya is a very skeptical person, so he probably doesn't believe him! But I just know Ultimaheus is telling the truth! Kiri is our child!"

Begging Jonde doesn't work, though. He lowers his eyes.

"It finally hit me. I just figured out why the Hero looked like he was wasting time in the spirit world..."

"What are you talking about?! Who cares?! Hurry up and st—"

"The Hero most likely already knows the Demon Lord's words are true."

“Th-then why won’t he stop attacking?!”

“Because, unfortunately, there is no way to save Kiriko. Not even the Hero can do the impossible.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?! Seiya even saved my mother—Queen Carmilla! He’s a one-in-a-billion genius!”

“And yet there were times when we couldn’t save someone—just like when he couldn’t save the people of Fulwahna... This is no different.”

Even while we talk, I can still hear the sound of flesh being torn. Seiya’s sword runs through Ultimaesus’s arm, sending it flying off with a fountain of blood. Kiriko trembles each time the Demon Lord is injured.

“Please...! Stop!!”

Unable to stand back any longer, I try to sprint toward Seiya, but Jonde grabs me by the arm.

“Princess! You mustn’t!”

“Let go of me, Jonde! There has to be...! There has to be a way to save her! He’s always figured it out somehow! He even saved Mash, Elulu, and me, so there has to be a way to save Kiriko, too!”

“There isn’t...”

“How can you say that without even trying?! Stop acting like you know everything!”

Jonde squeezes my arm until it starts to hurt, then furiously raises his voice.

“Surely, that man—that morbidly skeptical man, the embodiment of cautiousness—considered and exhausted every possibility! And even then, he couldn’t find a way to save her! That’s why...”

Jonde clenches his teeth and falls silent.

H-he considered every possibility?

The “other matter”... I remember Seiya mentioning he had another matter to take care of when we were in the spirit world.

...Oh. So Seiya knew. He knew that Kiri was our child. He’s been worrying

about it all by himself ever since he defeated Oxerio and Ishtar told him the truth.

“Interesting. So I can remove this man’s soul from his body and place it in another vessel?”

...That was all so he could find another home for Kiriko’s soul. Using Nephitet’s skill, he thought it could be possible for him to transfer a spirit from one thing to another and save her. However...

“...I’m right back where I started.”

It didn’t work. After seeing the people of Fulwahna return to dust, he must have realized it would be impossible to save anyone if the source of their being ceases to exist. But Seiya didn’t stop there.

“Are there any skills that allow you to permanently freeze a target?”

“I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

“Not yet.”

“Just wait a little longer.”

Despite being prepared for the final battle against the Demon Lord, Seiya continued searching just in case there was still a chance. Regardless of what he did or how hard he tried, though, he couldn’t find an answer.

Before I even realize it, tears are streaming down my cheeks. As Jonde watches over the battle, he mutters: “He will defeat the Demon Lord and save Ixphoria no matter the cost, and that is exactly why he is here now.”

“But...why...?”

“Because while he may be overly cautious and ill-mannered, he is still a Hero.”

Tears blurring my vision, I watch the Hero, engulfed in flames, as he lays into the Demon Lord. Ultimaheus tries to counter, but when he swings his arm, it is scorched by the flames and reduced to ash.

All of a sudden, an all-too-familiar touch brushes against my hand.

“Rista...”

When I look down, Kiriko is holding my hand.

“Kiri! You’re awake!”

“I-I’m...so happy... You were my mother, after all...and Seiya was...”

Kiriko watches Seiya’s back as he swings his sword at Ultimaesus. With bloodshot eyes, the Demon Lord screams.

“You are going to kill your own flesh and blood! You will forever bear this burden—regret far too great for any man! You will walk the same path to hell as I!”

With his hateful glare still locked on the Demon Lord, Seiya deeply exhales. The aura radiating from his body grows even more intense.

“Berserk: Phase 2.8...!”

“Your future will be stained with blood!!”

Kiriko speaks in a trembling voice by my side.

“It’s strange... I should be scared that I’m going to disappear...but when I look at Dad, I don’t feel scared.”

Kiriko squeezes my hand.

“When Kurio disappeared, I thought there would be nothing left. But I was wrong. Even when I close my eyes, Mom and Dad are right there...”

Although the Demon Lord can’t block Seiya’s attacks, a dark aura envelops his body as his severed limbs begin to regrow. Far from giving up, he roars: “I-I’ll kill you! Even if it costs me my life, I will kill you! And this time, permanently! I will tear open your stomach, rip out your heart, and destroy your soul! I will make you crawl on the ground just like I did one year ago!”

The air trembles. I can even feel Kiriko shiver before the Demon Lord’s determination. But out of nowhere...

“Kiriko, you said you wanted to become stronger, right?”

Seiya addresses Kiriko without even taking his eyes off Ultimaesus.

“You don’t have to change a thing about yourself.”

“Seiya...!”

Just as Kiriko yells her father's name, the Demon Lord throws his four arms, shrouded in black mist, at Seiya. The attack boasts incredible power and speed, but he can't even lay a finger on the Hero. Cloaked in a fiery aura after surpassing the limit of his Berserk Mode, Seiya moves so quickly that he seems to teleport behind Ultimaesus. By the time the monster turns around...

"Phoenix Drive."

...the flaming sword freely flies through the air, painting crimson magic circles before Ultimaesus's eyes. Each of his arms flies off, burning to ash before hitting the floor. After losing his limbs and limply falling to his knees, the Demon Lord's eyes dart around, as if he has just realized something important in the heat of battle.

"My final drop of life...is flowing into the Dark God... I see... Heh-heh-heh... Now I understand..."

Ultimaesus, mangled and defeated, laughs even louder.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It didn't matter if I killed you or if you killed me! I was nothing more than a sacrifice! It was all part of that demon's plan! Your fates won't change! Even if you kill me, you—none of you will ever know peace—"

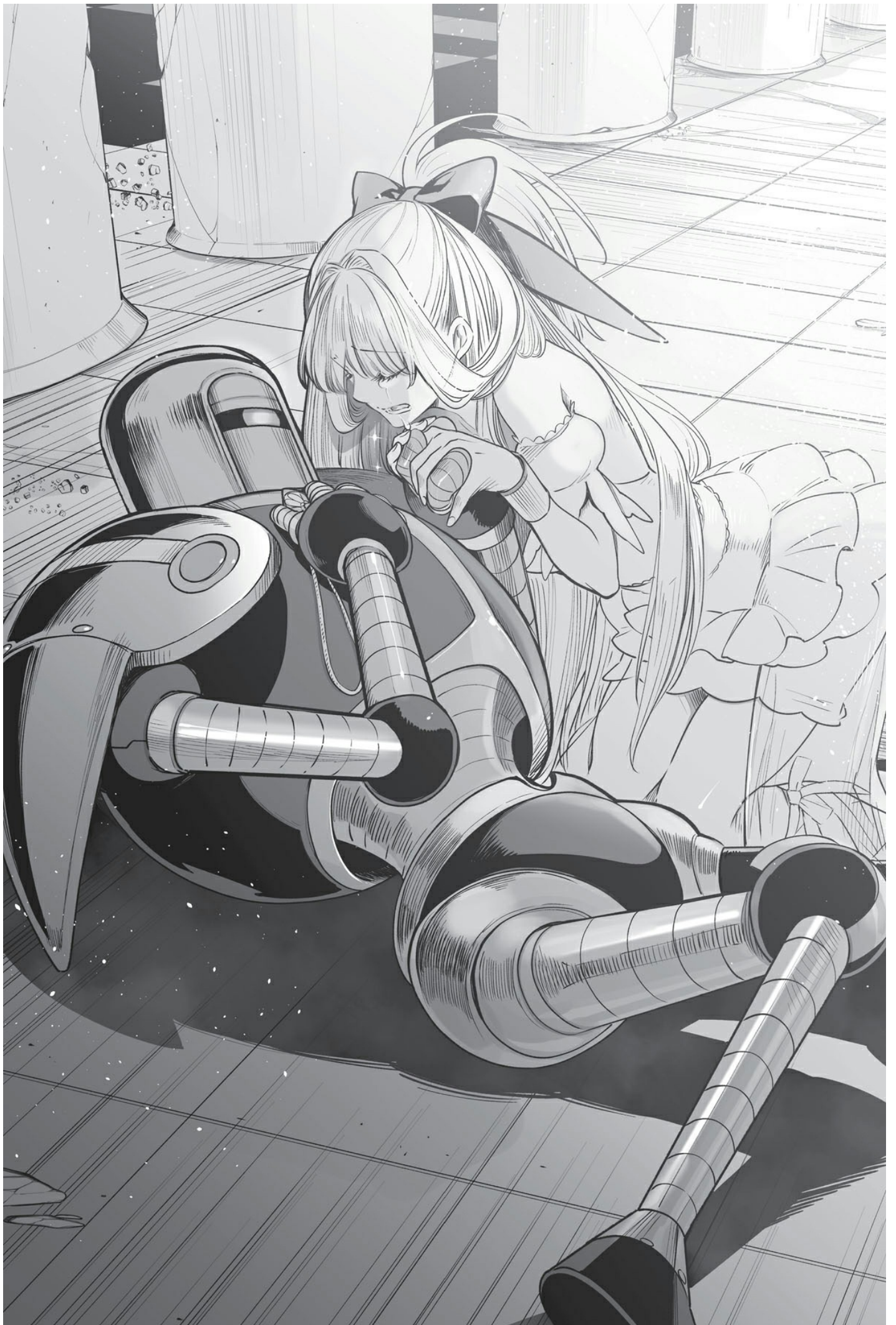
But the Demon Lord's words are cut off by the Phoenix Thrust that pierces his skull.

"Kiri!!" I cry.

She takes her free hand and places it on the flower pendant on her chest. Then, with her last bit of strength...

"Mom... Dad... Thank you..."

Right as the Demon Lord's colossal body collapses with a thud, Kiriko's hand slips out of mine. The light in her eye, which always twinkled so softly, disappears—never to return.



A Farewell

When we return from the Demon Lord's castle, a clear, beautiful sky hangs over Termine. The malevolence that was swallowing Ixphoria must have vanished after Ultimaesus was defeated. Inside the palace stand a great many soldiers who are anxiously waiting for us to speak.

"Seiya Ryuuguuin has defeated the Demon Lord."

Jonde makes this declaration sternly. After briefly exchanging glances, the soldiers erupt in cries of joy.

"The Hero defeated the Demon Lord!"

"Ixphoria has been saved!"

My heart, however, is closed off from the world despite being showered with endless praise, so I force a smile onto my face. All of a sudden, the rowdy soldiers fall silent. Queen Carmilla slowly approaches us with her guards. After bowing deeply to Seiya and expressing her gratitude, she shakes my hand.

"You did it."

The smiling queen looks around as she notices something odd.

"Where's Kiriko?"

"K-Kiri's..."

After Ultimaesus lost his mana and his body turned to dust, Kiriko disappeared as well. All that remains is the flower pendant I gave her. Even though I cried in the Demon Lord's castle until I could cry no more, I can feel my eyes become hot again. The queen throws her arms around me.

"I know. You've been through so much pain."

My mind goes blank as I bury my face in my former mother's chest while bawling my eyes out, and for those few minutes, I even forget that I'm a

goddess.

A banquet is held at the palace after that. Everyone in Termine is invited to come and drink as equals. A waitress offers me wine. I don't usually drink, but I'll make an exception today.

"Hey, give me some more of that..."

"U-um, Goddess? That was your sixth glass, you know. Maybe you should take it easy and—"

"Shut up and bring me the entire barrel!"

"Eek! She's acting like a drunk old man!"

I apparently go into a drunken frenzy, but it's no surprise after what happened with Kiriko. My legs wobble. Jonde and Seiya appear to be chatting nearby, so I idly eavesdrop on their conversation.

"At any rate, I still cannot believe I'm alive. Being undead, I've been thinking to myself, 'I wish I could have died in Kiriko's place.' A meaningless thought, perhaps, but it's something I cannot drive from my mind."

Jonde, don't stay stuff like that. I think that to myself. Seiya, on the other hand, admits: "Yeah, that would've been the preferable outcome."

Y-you didn't have to be so straightforward about it...!

As Jonde places a hand on his head in a disheartened gesture, Seiya continues: "Anyway, what do you want to do? I can transfer your soul into a skeleton or something while I'm here."

"N-no, thank you. I've grown attached to this body. I'm fine the way I am."

"All right. Then let me give you this, instead."

Seiya hands what appears to be a small, wooden box to Jonde. In the dead center are a few buttons.

"What is this?"

"It's a detonator to set off the explosive-filled earth serpents wrapped around your body. If your brain is ever taken over by your undead half and you feel there's no hope, press this button and die."

“O-oh, I see. A twisted act of kindness, but I appreciate it, nonetheless.”

“You don’t need to thank me. By the way, I considered the possibility that you may lose consciousness and become unable to press the button yourself, so I gave a spare detonator to the queen.”

Seiya points at the queen drinking wine in the distance. When he shows her the detonator, the queen pulls out a detonator and holds it up in the air with a smile as well.

“I still have mine!”

One after another, soldiers and waitresses hold their detonators up as well.

“We have one, too!”

“So do I!”

“Me, too!”

As Jonde watches in mute amazement, Seiya tells him: “I gave a detonator to waitresses and soldiers you could trust just in case the unexpected happens.”

“What the...?! Could you *not* hand out so many of those?! What if someone accidentally presses the button?!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Seeing Jonde panic makes me burst into laughter. Jonde notices and walks over.

“Tsk! That Hero is really something...!”

“Well, that’s just like Seiya. Don’t you think?”

“I—I suppose... B-but am I really going to be okay? Like, seriously? I’m not going to randomly explode or anything, right?”

“This is Seiya we’re talking about. You’ll be fine. There’s probably some long-winded procedure you need to follow to detonate it.”

“You’re right! That does sound like something he would do!”

After exchanging a laugh, Jonde looks me right in the eyes and whispers: “Are you sure you don’t wish to tell the queen?”

I'm sure he's referring to the fact that I was Princess Tiana in a past life. I watch the queen enjoying conversation with a few soldiers in the distance.

"Aria told me that, in order to have a truly fresh start, people don't retain memories of their past lives when they're reincarnated. And...that's probably how things should be."

"Princess..."

"Oh! But I'm not going to forget you or the queen...and of course, I won't forget Kiri, either. But I don't think I should make it a point to tell the queen about that."

"...I see."

I glare at Jonde's melancholy face.

"And, Jonde! Stop talking to me so formally like I'm a princess! It's weird!"

"B-but, Princess...! I must show my utmost respect...!"

I wear a menacing grin as Jonde humbly shakes his hands.

"Hey, I forgot to tell you, but...do you remember that fish-person that kicked your ass during the enlistment trial for the Beast Emperor's unit?"

"What?! Why do you ask?"

"Actually...that was me."

"...Huh?"

After a silence...

"Damn you, Goddessssssssssss!!"

Jonde furiously screams, chasing after me as I giggle and run away.

"Rista, get ready to leave."

The sun was already starting to set when Seiya said that to me.

"You're leaving already? You should stay longer and relax..."

The queen is reluctant to see me go. The banquet is probably going to last all night, so I don't see why we can't spend at least one full day in Termine, but it looks like Seiya's in a hurry to depart. He probably doesn't see the point of

staying here any longer now that the Demon Lord has been defeated. The only reason he hung around this long is probably because he was worried about me, since I've been depressed since Kiriko's passing. After telling the queen we have to say our good-byes, she cheerfully smiles back at me.

"Well, to be honest...I won't be *that* lonely when you're gone."

She points to the outskirts of Termine. Far in the distance, casually standing near the castle wall, is Mega Rista.

"Because a guardian angel still watches over Termine."

"Ha-ha... You probably shouldn't rely on her for much, according to Seiya."

Queen Carmilla creases her eyes as she nostalgically regards Mega Rista.

"My loved ones always leave me dolls."

When I was little in my past life, I gave the queen a handmade doll. It was destroyed by Grandleon, though...

"You're leaving me with a really big doll this time, though."

"Huh?!"

The queen smiles. It almost feels like...she knows. She walks over and tightly wraps me in her arms.

"Come back to Termine someday. You're welcome anytime."

"I will..."

After letting go of the queen, I open a gate to the spirit world and walk through with Seiya. When I turn around one last time, I'm met with smiles from the queen and Jonde—even Mega Rista, standing far behind the soldiers, is innocently waving farewell.

The moment Seiya and I step foot onto the spirit world's plaza...

"Rista!!"

Aria comes rushing over. Adenela and Cerceus are nearby as well. In fact, when I take a closer look, I notice that countless familiar faces, like Rasti, the Goddess of Shape-Shifting, and Nephitet, the Goddess of Ghosts, too. I don't say a word. Instead, I silently give them the thumbs-up, and it becomes a

reenactment of the banquet in Termine. The other deities shower us with praise just like the soldiers did. In the midst of the commotion, Adenela pokes my shoulder.

“R-Rista, it l-looks like you’re a h-high-ranking goddess now, t-too.”

“Huh?! M-me? A high-ranking goddess?”

“Of course, Rista! You just saved an SS-ranked world!”

It still doesn’t feel real even after hearing Aria put it into words. Undoubtedly, that’s because it was 100 percent Seiya who saved Ixphoria while all I did was stand there. I find myself at a loss because it’s honestly hard to be happy right now. Eventually, though, Cerceus approaches me.

“Thank goodness the world was saved! Kiriko and Jonde must have been thrilled, huh?”

“Cerceus, about that...”

“Hmm?”

I pause midsentence, then cheerfully smile as I try to lighten my mood.

“They were! They were ecstatic!”

“I’m glad! I really hope they stop by again one day! I could really use their help at the café.”

“Yes, I’m sure they will one day...”

“Then I need to go wash Kiriko’s apron so it’ll be ready for her!”

Cerceus grabs Kiriko’s apron, an apron that will never be worn again, and rushes toward the back of the kitchen. Tears well up in my eyes as I watch him.

I make my way over to Ishtar’s room alone after that in order to tell her that we successfully saved Ixphoria. However, when I step into her room, I’m met with her solemn gaze.

“Ristarte, congratulations on saving the SS-ranked world of Ixphoria. And...”

Ishtar deeply bows her head to me.

“Please forgive me for keeping the truth a secret from you.”

I shake my head with a smile.

“Even Seiya collapsed during the battle against Celemonic after he learned the truth. If I knew about the dilemma between the world and Kiriko—let’s just say I wouldn’t have been able to handle it. Nothing would have changed anyway. So...it was better this way.”

After bowing once more, I start to take my leave when Ishtar stops me.

“Are you really going to go?”

“Yes.”

“But, Ristarte...”

Ishtar probably knows exactly what I’m going to do, since she can see into the near future. Still, I clearly insist: “I’m Seiya Ryuuguuin’s goddess, after all!”

After retiring from the Great Goddess’s room, I find Seiya leaning against a wall in the hallway.

“Rista, open a gate. I need to return to Ixphoria.”

“Sure, but why?”

“I just remembered that the old man in Sage Village told me to stop by after defeating the Demon Lord. I completely forgot about that.”

“Oh yeah. He did say that, didn’t he?”

“It’s not a big deal, so I’ll go alone. I’ll be back soon.”

I open a gate like always, making sure it leads to a spot slightly away from Sage Village. Seiya wastes no time opening the gate, but he closes it the moment he realizes I’m right behind him.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I told you I can handle this myself.”

I stare hard at Seiya’s face.

“You wouldn’t ‘completely forget’ something like that. You acted like you forgot on purpose so you could leave me in the spirit world and go by yourself.

Right?”

It looks like I hit the nail on the head. Seiya clearly furrows his brow, so I boastfully laugh.

“Heh! You’re not gonna trick me again like you did in Gaeabrande!”

“You’re such a pain in the ass.”

Seiya lets out a sigh.

“Ixphoria has been saved. Anything else is redundant.”

“And what’s this redundant thing you want to check?”

“...That old man in Sage Village—he might actually be that so-called demon.”

“Oh? And your evidence is...?”

“There is no Imel of Sage Village. I observed the villagers in Ishtar’s crystal ball and memorized the names of every single one of them.”

“I’m impressed, Seiya. Very clever.”

“That’s not all. The Demon Lord said that his final ripple of life was flowing to the Dark God as he looked in Sage Village’s direction. This Dark God is most likely a discarnate entity. I assume it gave orders to the Demon Lord and the other high-ranking monsters of Ixphoria using a crystal ball or in its own inner world.”

“And the demon gained tremendous power with the death of Ultimaesus...”

“Exactly. In other words, it may no longer be a discarnate entity. It might be able to kill you or me now. This demon and its abilities are entirely unknown. It’s highly possible that I’ll be killed if we end up fighting.”

“Then why are you even going, Seiya?”

“To settle the score.”

“Are you prepared?”

After thinking for a bit, Seiya replies:

“Not at all.”

“That’s not like you.”

“But I can’t rest until I defeat it.”

“Yeah... I feel the same.”

Seiya’s expression is as indifferent as ever. Normally, I have no idea what he’s thinking, but this time, I can read him like the back of my hand.

“You don’t need to come.”

But even then, I stick closely behind Seiya. He shoots me a piercing glare.

“Stay here.”

“No.”

“Stay here.”

“No.”

“I’m going to punch you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Stay here.”

“No.”

Seiya raises a fist into the air, but I neither cover my head nor close my eyes until eventually he gently lowers his hand. I laugh.

“You save me, you make fun of me, I fall in love with you, and I sometimes hate you—I don’t even understand what’s going on anymore, but...you and me—we’re in this together.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I show Seiya the flower pendant Kiriko wore.

“Hey, do you think I can hold on to this?”

“You gave it to Kiriko, right? It’s yours.”

“By the way, Kiriko really loved the toys you made for her in the spirit world.”

Seiya looks away bashfully. I continue.

“Thank you for giving us that time together. I’ll never forget it.”

Silence briefly fills the air between us until Seiya quietly mutters: “Ready to go?”

“Yes.”

He opens the door to the gate once more. Though overly cautious, Seiya doesn’t create any golems this time. Perhaps he knows that bringing them with us would be a waste. After slipping through the portal together, we walk toward Sage Village.

Our hands find each other. It’s almost strange how naturally we hold hands. Usually, Seiya would pull away, but he continues to hold on to me. Our bond strengthens as we press forward—unprepared and heading to a village we may never leave. But I absolutely cannot forgive this demon for toying with Kiriko’s fate.



FINAL CHAPTER

Goddess of Atrocity

The cautious Hero holds my hand and walks toward Sage Village without a hint of hesitation. After passing through the village entrance, he notices that the magic circle, which was supposed to have disappeared last time, is back. All of a sudden, it glows bloodred. Even the area surrounding us begins to twist and distort.

...In the blink of an eye, everything is gone. There is only darkness. It's as if I've been shot into space, yet the scenery feels familiar. This is where *that* demon first appeared before me.

Does that mean this is the inner world?

I don't know whether this is reality or an illusion. The darkness feels like it's part of me—like it'll merge with my body and disappear. But even then, I can still feel Seiya's warmth in my hand, so I'm not afraid. Perhaps I've been incapable of experiencing fear ever since we started heading toward the Demon Lord's castle.

Seiya's hand twitches. He releases mine, unsheathes the sword at his waist, and puts himself between me and potential danger. Just like last time, someone appears before him, standing quietly in a jet-black robe. The hood, however, is no longer covering the individual's head, revealing brindle hair. Long wings like those of a black swan jut from its back.

"I'm impressed you were able to defeat Ultimaheus even after he transcended his existence."

The demon speaks softly as a pale bluish-purple aura radiates from its body. It is a surprisingly beautiful woman with almond eyes, a prominent nose, and pale lips.

"But I am not surprised. 'To do the impossible and save the world'—that is

what it means to be a true Hero. I know that better than anyone.”

“You’re not going to impersonate an old man today?”

The demon gives a stifled laugh at Seiya’s question.

“I’m having a hard time controlling this overwhelming power. Also, I was finally able to materialize into a physical form. Ultimaesus’s soul, even after becoming a god, has vaulted my powers to extraordinary levels. And it’s all thanks to you.”

Seiya responds with a simple *hmph*. The demon then runs her fingers down her long hair, seemingly amused.

“I destroyed countless worlds while awaiting this day. My hair’s color changes like this with every world I shatter. Perhaps this is a representation of my sin?”

“...Who are you?” I ask.

The demon shifts her focus to me. Her expression is surprisingly warm.

“I am Mersais. Long ago, I lived in the unified spirit world just like you.”

“Y-you what?!”

What she’s saying is shocking, assuming it’s true. Yet Seiya just nods.

“Mersais, the Goddess of Atrocity, yes?”

“Oh?”

The demon stares at Seiya with a look of admiration, but... *Wh-what the—?! Hold on!*

“Seiya! How did you know she was the Goddess of Atrocity?!”

“Because Zet, the Goddess of Warfare, already told us about her.”

“Wait! She did?!”

“She did. It felt important at the time, so I made a note of it.”

Seiya whips out a book of straw paper from his breast pocket and opens it, so I take a peek inside. There, I find the following: *Important* Goddess of Atrocity, Mersais (メーサイス). First learned about her from Zet, the Goddess of Warfare’s tale. [Brief Note] Started a war in the unified spirit world? Zet took part. Were

probably other gods involved as well. Assuming she was kicked out of the unified spirit world and sent to another dimension, it's possible she has become a malevolent god/Dark God.

“Wow! What is this?! It's like an encyclopedia of people!”

He was already taking notes like this when we met Zet?! He wanted to keep reminders...and he even included his speculation. What a frea—ack! No, Rista! Just think about how many times this thing has probably saved us! If anything, Seiya needs to be praised! So many feelings are jumbled together. I just don't know how to feel, but Seiya continues: “You told us to meet you here after defeating the Demon Lord. That was only so you could kill Rista and me to make yourself even more powerful, wasn't it?”

While Seiya sounds sure of himself, Mersais silently shakes her head.

“After watching you triumph in battle after battle, I was beginning to think you had some sort of supernatural powers, but...it looks like you really can't see into the future. So sorry to disappoint you, but you're wrong. I asked you to come here because I wanted to invite you.”

“I-invite us to what...?”

Mersais's lips curl as she looks at me.

“What do you say? How about we fix this world together?”

“What?! Are you mad?! Why would we help a demon like you?!”

I scream, but Mersais, on the other hand, continues as if talking to a close friend.

“Goddess Ristarte, do you enjoy your life in the unified spirit world?”

“Of course I do!”

“Just because you currently think something is the way it should be doesn't mean you'll always feel that way. Ristarte, the current state of the unified spirit world is wrong.”

“I—I don't know what you've got against the spirit world, but this goes beyond that! Do you seriously think we'd help you after what you did to Kiri?!”

“You mean the unborn child’s spirit inside that Killing Machine?”

Mersais seems sad.

“I once had something irreplaceable long, long ago as well—something so important that I would have gladly given up my eternal life as a goddess. And now...”

Mersais glances behind herself.

“You have lost, and I have gained.”

Wh-what...?

Someone slowly approaches us from the abyss behind her. Wearing a mask akin to those worn by the demon priests we saw earlier in Sage Village, the figure leans in close upon reaching Mersais’s side.

“I eventually got it back. I have finally regained what I lost that day.”

She affectionately traces her finger down the mysterious newcomer’s mask while focusing on me.

“Goddess Ristarte, I can resurrect your child as well if you help me.”

“K-Kiri can be resurrected?!”

“With my help, she can.”

She can resurrect my child “as well”? Does that mean she resurrected the person wearing the mask?! I-is that even...?!

While I understand in my mind that this is a trap, just thinking about Kiriko cheerfully talking to me again stirs up my emotions. However...

“Don’t let her fool you, Rista. It’s too good to be true.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right!”

Seiya points his sword at Mersais, and the masked individual perks up.

“Hey, Mersais... Is that my enemy?”

I hear a voice coming from behind the mask, but it’s so muffled, I can’t make out whether it’s a man or woman. They drift from Mersais’s side, square up with Seiya, and then...

“Berserk: Phase Four.”

A dark-crimson aura radiates from behind the mask.

Phase Four?! *B-but that's impossible! It takes every fiber of Seiya's being to even get close to Phase Three! Even Zet, who created the move, can apparently only reach Phase Three!*

They have to be bluffing, but I've never seen an aura this intense. I can almost see the face of a demon as the aura writhes in the air. A chill runs down my spine like lightning. Even Seiya slowly takes an uncharacteristic step back. The individual in the mask, on the other hand, advances a step but loses balance and drops to one knee. Mersais places a hand on their shoulder.

“You mustn't push yourself too hard. Your body still isn't used to this world.”

Mersais helps them up and lends them her shoulder. I don't know why, but her behavior makes it seem like they're best friends or more.

“Let's go. Our enemy is elsewhere.”

Mersais then turns her back to Seiya and me before proceeding toward the abyss.

“W-wait!” I scream.

Mersais glances back and mutters:

“Nothing will ever be the same after today. A new world that follows the correct path will soon be born.”

I blink, and the darkness is gone. I'm standing on a magic circle with Seiya in the ruins of Sage Village once more.

That wasn't an illusion, was it?

Seiya pokes me in the shoulder in the middle of my speculating.

“Rista, hurry up and open a gate.”

“Huh?!”

“A gate back to the unified spirit world.”

“Ah! W-we're going back to the spirit world?!”

“Yes. Now hurry. We’re probably too late, though.”

“‘Too late’? D-don’t tell me you mean that Mersais went to the spirit world to —?!”

“It’s possible.”

I open a gate in a panic, and my heart rapidly hammers against my chest as I walk through.

Aria...! Ishtar...! Please be okay!

However...

“Huh?!”

Deities are idly chatting and passing through the spirit world’s plaza just like any other ordinary day. After surveying the heartwarming scene, I look back to Seiya.

“Nothing happened, Seiya!”

“Yep. It looks like they need to prepare. Now that I think about it, that masked individual didn’t seem to be in the best shape, either.”

W-wow... So he was just worrying way too much like he always does... He almost gave me a heart attack! Emotionally exhausted, I drop to my knees, but Seiya grabs my lapel and pulls me back to my feet.

“Ack!”

“They’ll be making a move sooner rather than later. Rista, we’re going to see Ishtar.”

“O-okay!”

“Ishtar, we’re coming in.”

“Ristarte! I am so glad you’re safe!”

Ishtar rushes over and gently holds my hand. She must have been worried about me. After expressing my gratitude, I put on a serious expression and tell her what happened.

“We learned the name of the demon of Ixphoria. Mersais, the Goddess of

Atrocity—she is the brindle-haired demon.”

“Mersais...!”

Although Ishtar usually keeps a level head, her eyes shoot open wide as her breathing gets heavier.

“The heart already banished her for starting the war in the unified spirit world, but...yes... I see...”

“Listen, Grandma. She absorbed the Demon Lord Ultimaesus’s life force and gained extraordinary power. I need to talk to the gods of the heart about this. Take me to see them.”

“Very well...”

Ishtar leads us through the hallway to the Chamber of Eternal Stasis where we then travel to the heart of the spirit world.

After making our way up the winding path, we eventually arrive at the sanctuary where we find Chronoa and Nemesiel standing on either side of the entrance. Ishtar gets on one knee before the two pillars of the heart.

“God of Logic and Reason, Nemesiel, Goddess of Time, Chronoa, I have come with news in regards to the demon of Ixphoria.”

“Ishtar, we can talk about that later. First, I would like to congratulate Ristarte, the Goddess of Healing, for saving the SS-ranked world of Ixphoria.”

“Huh?! Th-thank you!”

Suddenly being the target of conversation throws me into panic, but Chronoa’s smile is as warm as ever.

“We must reward you. Brahma, the God of Creation, shall be here shortly.”

“What...?!”

I am about to meet the deity of deities—the highest-ranking god and creator, Brahma—for the first time in my life. The doors to the sanctuary slowly open, but what emerges from the divine light is not a brawny man like Nemesiel, nor a beautiful woman like Chronoa, but a god even smaller than me. They are clothed in a white robe with giant wings, seemingly out of place on Their small

frame. But what grabs my attention most is Their face. The Supreme Deity's face is split down the middle: half like a young boy's and half like a young girl's. Their hairstyle is no different with one half short and the other very long, hanging at Their waist.

—*Wow...! So this is the God of Creation, Brahma! H-he...? She? Anyway, They're different from how I imagined Them.*

Brahma's split face cheerfully smirks.

"Well done, Ristarte. This concludes your punishment. From this day forth, you are officially recognized as a high-level goddess. Keep up the good work."

"Th-thank you so much!"

I reply, albeit nervously. Nemesiel, in a well-projected voice, adds: "I cannot even remember the last time the God of Creation appeared before us. You should feel honored, Ristarte."

"I—I am!"

While both Ishtar and I are nervous, Seiya casually takes a step toward Brahma.

"Hey, Two-Face. We've got more important matters to discuss."

...After a split second of silence, both Nemesiel and Chronoa explode: "Wh-wh-wh-who are you calling 'Two-Face,' you fool?!"

"S-S-Seiya Ryuuguuin, the God of Creation is the embodiment of both the positive and negative—the grand appearance of the creator of the universe!"

I timidly peek at Brahma to see Their reaction, but the half-boy, half-girl's expression hasn't changed. They're still gleefully smiling. *Th-thank goodness! It looks like They're not mad!*

"Seiya Ryuuguuin, allow me to express my gratitude to you as well. You saved an SS-ranked world. You have done a noble thing. So I must ask... Are you interested in becoming a god one day?"

I jump, startled by the unexpected.

S-Seiya?! A god?! If Seiya becomes a god, then we can spend the rest of our

lives together in the spirit world! That would be amazing! But...

“No thanks.”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

Seiya refuses. Brahma’s expression makes it clear They’re just as surprised as I am.

“You would have eternal life as a god, though.”

“I don’t need eternal life. Living creatures can productively live and find meaning in their existences *because* they know they’ll die one day. Nothing good would come from living forever.”

“I see. I can understand your perspective. You two are quite the opposites, hmm? In the past, when I asked Ristarte’s soul the same question, she immediately replied, ‘*Eternal life?! Yahoo!*’”

“My soul said, ‘Yahoo’?!”

Seiya glares at me before facing Brahma once more.

“The mastermind behind the unified spirit world’s war, Mersais, the Goddess of Atrocity, materialized in Ixphoria. It is highly likely that she will be invading the spirit world soon.”

“Hmm. I see.”

While Seiya is being serious, Brahma’s response is as casual as if They were merely discussing the weather.

“Mersais... She was a powerful goddess. Nevertheless, her power is primitive compared to ours.”

“I caught a glimpse of her strength during my fight against the Death Emperor. While I still can’t say for sure, it’s possible she possesses a power that could shake the spirit world itself.”

“It isn’t, though. No one is a threat to a goddess who controls time and a god who controls logic and reason for three thousand worlds. Valkyrie will be there to handle Mersais, no matter what she tries. The spirit world is under no threat.”

“Mersais probably isn’t the only one coming. There might be demons, fallen gods, and even...”

Seiya turns to Brahma with eyes full of conviction.

“...Heroes who will join her.”

The room is as quiet as a placid lake until Brahma giggles.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. There are an infinite number of possibilities, after all.”

“Let’s say it does happen. Would the gods of the spirit world be able to kill the Hero?”

“No, deities cannot kill humans for the most part. It goes against the order of the spirit world.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Well... Hmm... I suppose I could make it so Ristarte can summon you.”

“I’d appreciate it if I could keep my memories again next time, too.”

“Oh, sure... Wait. Did I just play right into your hand?”

Without even a gesture of gratitude, Seiya turns his back to Brahma and begins striding away.

“Oh? Where do you think you’re going, Seiya Ryuuguuin?”

“I’m going to meet Zet to hear more about what happened.”

“You saved Ixphoria. Your job is over.”

“There’s something I need to check. There was someone with Mersais who could raise their Berserk Mode to Phase Four.”

“I have already moved Zet somewhere more secure than the Well of No Return, since she was plotting a rebellion. No one is currently allowed to speak with her.”

“Sh-she was moved somewhere secluded?! No wonder she wasn’t there when I visited last time!”

“We always take preemptive measures like this to prevent rebellions.”

“Then I need data on all the deities who rebelled against the spirit world during the war. There should be a lot of them. It was a war, after all.”

“Seiya Ryuuguuin, this is no business of a human’s.”

“Then I’ll simply investigate things on my own.”

“*Sigh...* You leave me with no other choice.”

Brahma snaps their fingers.

What?!

And just like that, Seiya vanishes from the heart of the spirit world.

“S-Seiya?!”

I look around, but he’s nowhere in sight.

“God of Creation...! What...? What did you do to Seiya?!”

“I sent him back to his world.”

“What...?!”

I shriek at the God of Creation’s casual tone.

“How could you do that?! Seiya risked his life to save Ixphoria! He even worried about the spirit world where we live...and yet...you sent him away without even giving us a chance to say good-bye! How cruel...!”

“R-Ristarte...!”

Ishtar places a hand on my back to calm me, but I’m still too pissed to forgive Brahma for doing that without even a word.

“You’re right. Seiya Ryuuguuin is a magnificent Hero who saved an SS-ranked world. Chronoa has even taken a liking to him. If he ever decided to become a god, I would welcome him with open arms.”

“Then why didn’t you even listen to what he had to say?!”

“That was never an option.”

“Why?!”

The lips of the split face twist into a grin.

“Because until they become deities...chosen one...humans are nothing more than foolish creatures of little significance.”

When I see Brahma’s frigid, two-toned glare, I feel something inside me begin to crumble.

The spirit world is supposed to be filled with truth and love.

Aria, Ishtar—everyone gets along. It’s my home. A peaceful, comforting home.

And yet, after meeting Mersais, I start to doubt everything I ever thought was right. The entire unified spirit world is slowly being swallowed by the chaos yet to come.

(Ixphoria Arc: Fin)



AFTERWORD

First, I would just like to thank everyone for reading *The Hero Is Overpowered but Overly Cautious*, Vol. 5 (hereinafter to be referred to as *Cautious Hero*)! I have two announcements today.

Announcement #1: While I'm sure some of you already know, the comic version of *Cautious Hero* will now be appearing in *Monthly Dragon Age* magazine! The illustrations are being done by Koyuki, who you may know for illustrating *Log Horizon: West Wind Brigade*! Perhaps you've already read it? Seiya and Rista have so much life drawn into them that even I look forward to reading it every month.

Announcement #2: A *Cautious Hero* anime has been announced! I never even dreamed I'd get a chance to see Rista making a fool of herself on TV... White Fox, the studio who brought us wonderful series such as *Steins;Gate*, will be in charge of animating *Cautious Hero*! We will be working hard to make sure the anime is a joy to watch, so please look forward to it!

...Anyway, I was so excited to brag about these two wonderful announcements that I forgot to even bring up Volume 5. Let me start by briefly touching on the story.

Volume 5 concludes the second and final half of the Ixphoria Arc. As a writer, I put more of my heart and soul into the last battle this time than I even did with Gaeabrande's. What will become of Seiya's and Rista's fate now? I hope you come back next time to find out.

As always, I would like to thank Saori Toyota for the cool illustrations of Seiya and for making Rista so cute. I'm sure a good amount of people saw the cover and wondered about the two Seiyas, so I really hope you read the story and see for yourself if you haven't yet.

Before I let you go, I just want to emphasize how wonderfully surprised and

touched I am that the series was not only made into a comic but is going to be animated as well. This would never have happened if those involved directly and indirectly didn't see the potential. This would never have happened without the advice my editor always gives me. This would never have happened without Saori Toyota's amazing illustrations and Koyuki's support as well. But most of all, this was made possible because of you—the reader's constant support of *Cautious Hero*.

While the second arc of the series ends with this book, the third arc has already begun on the web novel site Kakuyomu. I will continue doing my best to produce a story that I hope everyone can enjoy.

I am looking forward to meeting you all again next time during Volume 6.

Light Tuchihi

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