

THE HERO IS **OVERPOWERED** BUT **OVERLY CAUTIOUS**

7

STORY LIGHT TUCHIHI
ILLUS. Saori Toyota





NATOSUS

The watchman of the Infinite Corridor, who teaches Seiya dark magic.

SLAURI

The underworld master of Invisibility, who lives near the spring and instructs Seiya.

Will Seiya be able to master both Invisibility and dark magic to defeat the Dragon Lord, Mash Dragonnight?!

RISTARTE

The Goddess of Healing, who summoned Seiya and is on a quest to save Warped Gaeabrande.


SEIYA RYUGUUN

The overly cautious Hero summoned by Rista.

ROSALIE ROSEGUARD

The former princess of the Roseguard Empire, who joined forces with Chaos Machina to defeat the Dragon Lord.





If I...
If I have the
power of a
goddess...!
Then please...!
Just this once...!

“Conversion!”

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ILLUS.

SAORI TOYOTA

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YEN
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NEW YORK

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TRANSLATION BY MATT RUTSOHN

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Rosalie's Resolution

The Goddess of Atrocity, Mersais, destroyed the spirit world. Every world in existence is now warped. The ruler of the underworld, Hathies, said we have to save three high-level warped worlds in order to revert all the worlds back to normal, so Seiya, Cerceus, and I traveled to Warped Gaeabrande to begin our journey.

The world Seiya and I saved once before is now ruled by the dragonewts, and the one who rules over the dragonewts is none other than our old friend Mash. Rosalie, the emperor's daughter, joined forces with the demons to resurrect the legendary demon, Lucifer Crowe, in order to defeat Mash, but the demons ended up betraying the humans and breaking their alliance. Furthermore, although Seiya ultimately vanquished the legendary demon, the city of Iglu, where humans and demons once lived side by side, has been left in ruins.

Even after reducing Lucifer's body to ash with Hellfire, Seiya keeps his arm wreathed in flames as he glares at the other demons. His powerful aura even makes both Chaos Machina and Eraser completely lose their will to fight. I speak up to make sure they understand.

"Listen! If any of you even think about hurting another villager, all those Phoenixes will turn you into dust!"

I point up at the Automatic Phoenixes that Seiya created, but...

"Huh?!"

There is nothing there but a bright-blue sky.

Whaaaaaat?! Where the hell did all those birds go?!

There are only a few left soaring above Seiya's head.

"H-hey, Seiya! What happened to the Automatic Phoenixes?!"

“I only need a few for self-defense, so I dismissed the rest.”

“This is the one time where it would actually make sense to have a lot, and you got rid of them! You may be safe now, but the town is still swarming with demons! What about Nina and Rosalie?!”

Nina stands next to me, her face racked with concern. Rosalie looms over her defensively. Seiya glances at us, then sighs.

“...Fine.”

“Seiya?!”

He then slowly points his sword at the demons.

“Get out of here. Every last one of you.”

The demons begin to stir, and a hot-blooded member of the bunch, with the head of a bull, marches over and stands in front of Seiya.

“This is bullshit! This town is our—”

But his sentence is suddenly cut short as his bovine head is sent flying through the air. Cerceus jumps out of fright...because Seiya cut the demon’s head off without even a moment of hesitation!

“I told you I would kill you if you didn’t back off.”

After witnessing Seiya casually cut down a demon as if he were chopping vegetables, Chaos Machina raises her hands in the air as if she is surrendering.

“Let’s gooo before we lose our headsss, Eraser.”

“Tch...!”

After glaring at Seiya for a few moments, Eraser and Chaos Machina turn on their heels, and the other demons in the city follow after the former generals in droves. Eventually, Chaos Machina turns around as if she remembers something, looks at Rosalie, then smiles and waves.

“Good-bye, Princess! Take carrrrrrre!”

The resentment doesn’t leave Rosalie’s eyes until every last demon is completely out of sight. I wait a few moments before asking her: “Are you sure you’re okay with this? We did get rid of the demons, but...”

“Once they’re outside the town’s barrier, they won’t be able to get back in without using a magic gate to teleport, and they won’t be able to connect to our magic gate without our permission.”

“Oh, okay. I guess you can relax now, then.”

“Yes. Iglu’s barrier is not simply powerful. It’s flawless. After all, it was created through the great efforts of Flashika and my loyal retainers long ago,” mutters Rosalie with a somewhat melancholic tone.

Eventually, the villagers, who were staring off into the distance, turn their gazes at her until she suddenly bows her head to them.

“I am an incompetent fool. The demons were simply using me. Feel free to put me on trial to punish me. Or do whatever you deem necessary. Even if you decide that my punishment is death, I will not flee.”

The villagers exchange glances as if they have no idea what to do. Nina, however, suddenly holds out her arms in front of Rosalie as if to protect her.

“We... We would have been killed by the dragonewts a long time ago if Rosalie never invited us to live here!”

Several moments of silence go by.

“She’s right... We would have...”

“I would have never had a child if not for Lady Rosalie...”

Everyone begins to mutter, standing up for Rosalie in their own way, but even then, she shakes her head.

“No. I must atone for these ten meaningless years. I must pay for the lives of my people I foolishly sacrificed.”

“These ten years haven’t been meaningless, Rosalie.”

“Everything I did was for nothing. Our peace agreement between humans and demons was broken...and Lucifer Crowe, whom I helped resurrect, was a threat to humanity.”

“No, your desire to save humanity is what allowed a miracle to occur. Finally, the true Hero has come.”

Nina turns to Seiya with an impassioned glance as he switches out one of his bloodstained swords for a new one. The crowd looks to him with smiles and nods. I let out a sigh of relief by Cerceus's side.

"It looks like everything's going to be okay. I was worried things were going to get violent for a moment there."

"Yeah, they're all mature, good people. I wouldn't have been able to forgive her."

"...You're pretty petty for a god, you know that?"

After rolling my eyes at Cerceus, I pat Seiya on the shoulder.

"Come on, let's send a few Automatic Phoenixes to search the town just in case there are any demons left. It's better to be safe than sorry, right?"

"...Rista."

Seiya suddenly fixes me with a piercing glare, causing my heart to do a backflip.

"Huh?! Wh-what?!"

"Why are you so concerned about the residents of a warped world? Just in case you are forgetting, this is nothing more than an illusion created by Mersais."

"I—I know that!"

This isn't the real Gaeabrande. While the cautious Hero may not believe everything Lord Hathies told us, we already experienced a warped world for ourselves while we were saving Ixphoria. There's no doubt that Gaeabrande will turn back to normal once we remove whatever is causing the world to distort, and it makes sense to me in my head...

"Then why do you care? Normally, I would make sure the town's residents were safe and slaughter every last demon that was here, but this isn't the real world. Putting ourselves in danger to save an illusion is stupid."

"I know, but...it's hard to just look away when the people around me are suffering."

I clasp my hands together as Seiya looks down at me as if he simply can't understand.

"Please, Seiya! Send out a few Automatic Phoenixes just in case!"

"That would be pointless."

"Whatever! Just do it!"

Seiya reluctantly creates a few dozen Automatic Phoenixes before sending them in different directions to survey the town. Rosalie, who was watching our exchange, approaches us and lowers her head.

"Thank you for your concern for the townspeople as well... Where will you head next?"

"We're going to go defeat the Dragon Lord, of course! So you just sit back and relax!"

The moment I proudly slap my hand against my chest, Rosalie and the townspeople erupt with cheers. With rosy cheeks, Rosalie then shouts: "Really?! Then allow me to take you there with our teleportation circle! I can take you all to the Dragon Lord's home base, Bahamutros!"

After a high-ranking townsman hands Rosalie a staff, she begins excitedly drawing a magic circle on the ground until Seiya demands: "Stop. I just exhausted my mana during my battle against Lucifer."

"M-my apologies! I forgot you had just finished an intense battle! You must rest!"

"This isn't a problem of simply resting. What kind of idiot would waltz into the enemy's base without a plan? Gathering information comes first, obviously. That thoughtlessness is what let you get tricked by the demons."

"Mn...! Yes, you are absolutely right! I should be ashamed!"

"S-Seiya?!"

While what he said was extremely rude, Rosalie simply hangs her head apologetically.

"A-allow us to provide you with a place to sleep, Hero. Then after you rest,

you can start gathering information—”

“That won’t be necessary. We have a world far better than this warped one we can rest at, so we will be heading back there for now. Rista, open a gate to the underworld.”

“What?! W-wait! What happened to gathering information?!”

“I’m going to go do some information-gathering training.”

“You need to train for that?!”

Rosalie’s mouth hangs open in mute amazement, but...w-well, I don’t blame her. Normal people aren’t able to comprehend Seiya’s cautiousness.

It isn’t long until the townspeople begin to crowd around in a clamor as if they are disturbed by what he said. Seiya taps me on the shoulder.

“I’m sick of explaining every little thing we do. You talk to them.”

“O-okay! Hey, uh... Rosalie? We’re about to go to the underworld to train! But don’t worry! Time flows differently there, so we should be back in around two hours!”

“The underworld...? Time flows differently...?”

“Princess, excuse us, but could we talk?”

The top-ranking townspeople wave Rosalie over, and they begin to talk in whispers. Nevertheless, I have no problem hearing them with my extraordinary divine senses.

“They spoke of an ‘underworld,’ but does such a place even exist?”

“Do you think the Hero is going to abandon us?!”

Rosalie and the high-ranking officials eventually approach us, all smiles.

“Would it be okay if we accompanied you to this ‘underworld’ you speak of?”

They really don’t trust us!

“Wh-what should we do, Seiya?!”

“I thought having you, a goddess, explain things would be convincing enough but apparently not.”

“Yeah. And is it just me, or did they actually start getting suspicious of us once Rista opened her mouth?”

“Wh-what the hell, Cerceus?! Are you saying this is *my* fault?!”

At any rate, there’s no way Seiya’s going to let them come with us. We’re going to have to run away and— “Sure. But only Rosalie is allowed to come with us.”

“What?! Are you sure, Seiya?!”

“Worn-Out Rosalie here has been fighting the dragonewts for over a decade, so I want to get information on the enemy from her.”

“I-is that really the only reason why?”

“Mersais was able to bring the Divine Hero out of a warped world as well, so I want to see if humans from warped worlds share any common traits.”

Interesting. That does sound like something Seiya would do, and there’s no way I can say no to that...

“Please be careful, Princess.”

“I will return soon.”

Rosalie nods to her people. After I open a gate to the underworld, Seiya immediately walks through, followed by Cerceus, Rosalie, and then me.

The underworld isn’t shrouded in thick fog the way it usually is, but Rosalie’s eyes open wide in astonishment as she looks up at the red sky. I connected the gate to some green plains near Uno’s residence. It’s usually a quiet, uneventful area, but today there is a massive slug-like underworld dweller crawling down the dirt path.

“So what do you think, Rosalie? This is the underworld. Trust us now?”

Rosalie stands in stunned silence for a few moments, then looks at me and smiles.

“Unlike the others, I never doubted you for a moment.”

“Then why did you want to come?”

“Because I wanted to learn the secret behind the Hero’s strength.”

Seiya suddenly walks in between us, then stares fixedly at Rosalie before placing a hand on her forehead.

“It seems you don’t have a fever. Stick out your tongue.”

“Huh...? L-like dis?”

Seiya begins checking Rosalie as if he were a doctor. He touches her arms and legs as she stands while occasionally bending and extending them at the joint. Her face gradually turns a bright red as Seiya continues to touch her all over.

“Do you feel any different than you normally do?”

“No... Wait... I feel like I’m burning up...”

“Oh? This might be due to you leaving the warped world. I’m going to need to take a closer look.”

“And I’m feeling a little tingly in my lower body.”

“Which part?”

“Below the abdomen...around my crotch...”

“I see. Mind if I feel around?”

“...?! You better *not* feel around! What the hell is wrong with you two?!” I scream, unable to take it anymore. Seiya, however, lets out a weary sigh.

“I told you already. I’m studying her body for hints to defeat the Divine Hero.”

“I get that, and I know that’s important. But Rosalie’s a woman, so maybe cut out the excessive touching?”

“Hmph,” snorts Seiya before turning on his heel. Cerceus then cheerfully stretches his back.

“Finally, we can rest! I think I’m going to use my free time to go bake a cake at Uno’s place!”

“Must be nice not having a care in the world...”

Cerceus sprints past Seiya and heads straight for Uno’s house.

Seriously? How badly does he want to bake a cake?! What is he, a little girl?!

Rosalie, on the other hand, turns to Seiya while still red in the face and

pleads: “H-Hero! May I please train with you?!”

“Why?”

“The townspeople may have forgiven me, but I still cannot forgive myself! I wish to become strong so that I can help save the world! It is the least I can do to atone for my sins. I would be too ashamed to face my people otherwise.”

Seiya’s eyes light up.

“Are you saying you want to fight the Dragon Lord as well?”

“I am already living on borrowed time! I will do anything you ask, Hero!”

“Okay then.”

Seiya nods as if he has just heard the magic words.

“What the...?! Whatever happened to not wanting any allies?!”

“I don’t care if this warped-world Rosalie dies. Additionally, having someone who would blindly charge in and attack the enemy on command is a great tool to have. I could probably use her as a sacrificial pawn.”

“S-Seiya?! I can’t believe you! She—”

“It would be an honor! Even being your sacrificial pawn would be enough for me!”

“An ‘honor’?! You’re allowed to be mad at him, y’know!”

But Rosalie doesn’t even seem to hear me as she mirthfully asks Seiya: “So what kind of training will we be doing today?”

“I told you I need to recover my mana first. Today, I rest.”

Rosalie gleefully clasps her hands together while watching Seiya walk away with a roaring yawn.

“You’re going to sleep, huh?! Wow! Amazing!”

“Wh-what exactly is so amazing about that? Everyone sleeps when they’re sleepy... Hey, Rosalie? Just make sure you don’t let Seiya use you, okay? You’re easily tricked, after all.” But Rosalie simply mutters to herself with rapture: “Not only is he overwhelmingly powerful, but he has incredible foresight as well! The

Hero possesses every quality that I do not!”

Hmm... It looks like she’s completely obsessed with Seiya already, even though the original Rosalie pretty much hates him. But, well, he did defeat Lucifer Crowe right before her eyes. The Hero she’s been waiting for all these years has finally arrived, so it isn’t hard to understand how she feels. But she seems to have a tear in her eye while watching Seiya enter Uno’s place.

“Ah...! My Hero...!”

Um...?! She just respects him... That’s all...right?!”

The Monster Hero

After arriving at Uno's residence, Seiya immediately heads to his room to replenish his mana. I tell Rosalie to wait at the spacious entrance while I go talk to Uno and Due.

"Hey, um... We brought a woman back with us from the warped world. Is that okay?"

After telling them about Rosalie, Uno looks over at her brother as if she doesn't know how to respond, and he gently smiles.

"If she's a friend of Seiya's, she's a friend of ours."

"Really? Thank goodness!"

"Allow us to prepare a room for her as well. After all, we want to do everything we can to help you all save those warped worlds."

After thanking them, I take Rosalie to her room on the second floor, where I tell her to get some rest tonight, and she reverently bows. Now that Seiya and Rosalie are in their rooms resting, I decide to head to mine, but when I'm walking through the living room, Uno and Due suddenly stop me to talk. We chat while having some tea until Uno asks:

"Rosalie must be pretty special, seeing that Seiya brought her back with him to the underworld, yes?"

"Hmm... While she is way stronger than the average person, that isn't really why Seiya brought her back."

I tell them everything that has happened along with telling them what has been bothering me.

"...And Seiya's been treating the people of this warped world like their lives don't matter. He even told Rosalie that she was nothing more than a sacrificial

pawn to him. Like, is it really okay for the Hero to act this way?"

Uno places her cup of tea on the table and kindly looks back at me just like her brother.

"Our Lord said that everyone in Warped Gaeabrande would return to normal once you remove whatever is causing the distortion. It would be like nothing ever happened, so I wouldn't get too attached to the people there if I were you."

"I—I guess you're right. But..."

After calming down and actually thinking about it, I start to feel that Seiya isn't the least bit wrong. But even then, I can't bear to see anyone get hurt when I'm in Warped Gaeabrande. Due nods a few times while looking at me.

"The reason you cannot look the other way when people of that world get hurt is because you are an extremely compassionate individual."

"Yes, you even express empathy toward illusions. You possess a wonderful heart, which is perhaps why you are a goddess, Ristarte."

"O-oh, come on! Quit it! You're making me blush!"

The sudden compliments make my cheeks burn, but the siblings' smiling expressions suddenly grow tense.

"Nevertheless, Seiya is doing the right thing. While it may seem cruel at first glance, he is doing everything he can to defeat the Dragon Lord and remove the distortion from that world. He is avoiding unnecessary battles and not worrying about the phantoms of that world in order to return it to normal and save the inhabitants of the true Gaeabrande."

"Mmm..."

I find myself at a loss for words. Due makes it sound like I'm being self-righteous, unlike Seiya, who is focused on the big picture. He didn't directly say that, but that's actually what's going on here. Anyone can see that Seiya is right. I unconsciously sigh.

—*Sigh...* I'm supposed to be the deity here, yet it sometimes feels like our roles are reversed.

It's Cerceus who surprisingly clears the gloomy air and brightens the mood when he gleefully walks in with shortcake on a tray.

"Yo! I baked a cake to thank you for letting us stay here! I hope you enjoy!"

Cerceus then places three pieces of cake on the table, one for each of us. Uno's face lights up with joy the moment she sees the colorful, fruit-topped cakes.

"I had no idea you were such an amazing baker, Cerceus!"

"It is my job, after all!"

"Your job is being the God of Swords..."

"Potato, potahto. Anyway, Rista, dig in."

"Oh... I'm good. Give my piece to Rosalie or Seiya."

"I've already given them theirs. Well, technically Seiya just hit me on the head a few times and told me to go away because I was disturbing his sleep, but..."

"He hit you?!"

"Yep! But Rosalie was thrilled when I gave her a piece!"

While Cerceus is smiling, I can't help but notice a massive lump on his head. "Seiya just hit me on the head a few times." Despite how awful that sounds, Cerceus's smile is as carefree as can be, since Seiya usually does even worse things to him. It's terrifying what you can get used to...!

"Anyway, this looks delicious! Thank you!"

But the moment Uno takes the first bite, she immediately vomits blood.

"Bleeehhh! It tastes even better than it looks!"

Due vomits up blood as well while stuffing his cheeks full of Cerceus's cake.

"Blargh! This *is* good! Uweh!"

Taken aback, Cerceus shouts:

"Are you sure you like it?! Because you're making it look like I poisoned you!"

"C-come on, give them a break. They vomit blood like we would sneeze..."

And yet, the sight of fresh blood makes me have even less of an appetite, so I get up and head to my room.

The next morning, I get up surprisingly early, only to find Rosalie and Seiya already in the living room chatting about something.

“What happened to the Demon Lord’s hometown?”

“You mean Nakashi Village? There’s almost nothing left of it, so...”

“That’s fine. There’s something I want to try there. Anyway, I want you to tell me everything you know about the Dragon Lord and those closest to him.”

“I will tell you everything I know.”

Seiya is stone-faced as he asks Rosalie about the Dragon Lord. I feel like I shouldn’t bother them, so I prick up my ears to listen instead.

“The power of the holy sword Igzasion was how he was able to defeat not only the Demon Lord but the seemingly invincible Crossed Thanatos as well. Those who are cut by the blade cannot heal from the wound naturally, nor with magic.”

“What the...?! An ability that prevents his opponents from healing?! Does that mean my healing magic won’t work, either?!” I instinctively shout, taken aback by what I just heard. By the time I realize what I did, Seiya is already glaring at me with a cold gaze.

“It’s not like your magic has ever proved useful anyway.”

“Hey?! My magic has come in handy plenty of times!”

“At any rate, if what you’re saying is true, then Igzasion is an extremely dangerous weapon. If I got injured before defeating him, it would greatly lower my chances of saving other warped worlds and defeating Mersais. I have to make sure I defeat him with certainty and perfection but also safely and with ease,” mutters Seiya with a serious expression and his arms crossed.

Igzasion’s healing-prevention ability is terrifying. It’s a huge threat. But I am hit with a sense of relief when I see Seiya committed to finding a way to defeat the Dragon Lord. After almost another full hour of discussion, Seiya finally stands up from his seat and looks down at Rosalie.

“All right. Let’s get started with your training.”

“R-really?! What an honor!”

Rosalie lowers her head to Seiya. But...Seiya usually prioritizes his own training, right? Which means he’s going to leave her training to Cerceus like he always does.

...Or so I thought.

“Come outside. I’ll teach you some swordsmanship.”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

She’s going to train directly under Seiya?! I—I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like this before!

Feelings of concern and excitement battle inside me. Rosalie and Seiya face each other with wooden swords in Uno’s spacious backyard. They have already removed their armor, since it’s only practice.

“Unleash your demonic powers.”

“B-but this power is...”

Rosalie is hesitant. Being controlled by Eraser and tearing up the human-demon agreement with her own two hands is still fresh in her memory. She probably never wanted to have to rely on those demonic powers ever again. Nevertheless, Seiya argues:

“That power is one of your advantages. You won’t be put under anyone’s control as long as there are no demons around you. Even if someone were to take control of you, I’d take care of things. So unleash that power.”

“...Okay.”

Rosalie unseals her power, appearing to be relieved by what Seiya said. As her arm turns dark red, I approach Seiya and whisper:

“Hey, Seiya? What exactly did you mean by you’d ‘take care of things’?”

“I’ll cut off her arm or something.”

“What?! You’re kidding, right?!”

But Seiya's expression doesn't change as he continues to face Rosalie. I don't think he was joking! He scares me sometimes...

"Now let us begin. Come."

"Here I come!"

They cross blades at lightning speed just like in the movies...or at least that's how I thought it was going to play out. In reality, however, Seiya effortlessly dodges Rosalie's attack, then powerfully thrusts his wooden sword into her gut.



“Gwah...!”

Rosalie immediately crumples, vomiting violently onto the ground. And yet, Seiya raises his sword into the air to strike her once more. Unable to watch, I rush over and spread my arms out in front of her.

“Wait, wait, wait! She’s a woman, you know?! Hold back a little!”

“Rosalie is going to be my shield until I fight the Dragon Lord, so I can’t go easy on her. She has to get stronger if she’s going to wear down the Dragon Lord and his minions as much as possible for me.”

“Your *shield*?! Excuse me?!”

“I—I don’t mind...”

Rosalie struggles back to her feet while using her wooden sword for support.

“This is what I wanted...! Keep going!”

She is hit with a wooden sword until her arms and legs are swollen and red. She then takes another merciless blow to the head, causing fresh blood to stain her white hair. Seiya used to excessively beat Cerceus during their training, and Cerceus once had his revenge and pulverized Seiya, but it was never this brutal.

Right as I realize I can’t watch this anymore, I suddenly hear a small, trembling voice by my side.

“Whoa! What is he doing?! Is he torturing her...?”

Before I even realize it, Cerceus is standing by my side with a face as pale as can be.

“You think so, too, right?!”

“He’s treating her much worse than he ever treated me. I get that she’s just an illusion, but I can’t believe he could do something so cruel to a woman. What a monster.”

“Y-yeah, or a Demon Lord or something... Wait. Cerceus, what’s that in your hands?”

Cerceus is carrying a large barrel filled to the brim with water.

“Seiya told me to fetch him a barrel of water. Training’s going to make him thirsty, you know?”

“He’s not a horse. Is he really going to drink all that?”

Seiya looks down at Rosalie as she groans in agony before passing out. Her body couldn’t take any more. Seiya then marches over to Cerceus, snatches the barrel from him, and dumps the water on Rosalie’s head.

“Wake up. There’s no time to sleep.”

Eek?! So *that’s* what the water was for?! What kind of training is this?!

I rush over to Rosalie to stop the abuse, but the soaked princess’s face is brimming with motivation.

“I appreciate it! I am fully conscious now! Ah, there’s nothing like a cold drink of water to liven you up! That really hit the spot!”

“You ‘appreciate’ it?! You didn’t even drink any, so I’m pretty sure it didn’t hit any ‘spots’!”

“Let’s...keep going!”

She ends up getting knocked unconscious for a third time, and this time she is completely out. No amount of water gets her to even budge.

“Seiya! You’ve gone too far this time!”

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? She’s just an illusion. Don’t worry about her.”

“But she’s out cold! She can’t take any more!”

“Hmph. Then use your healing magic and fix her. We can start training again when she’s awake.”

Seiya then briskly walks off somewhere. I lay Rosalie’s head in my lap and cast a healing spell on her. The merciless attacks have left countless bruises on her face and body.

“Did he really have to go this far?”

“What he’s doing makes sense, though. Seiya’s planning on using Rosalie as a shield while he fights, right? He probably made her take off her armor so he

could raise her Defense through giving her body a good beating.”

“He still went too far.”

I chat with Cerceus while healing Rosalie until she eventually opens her good eye.

“You need not worry about me. Nothing would make me happier than to be a part of the Dragon Lord’s demise, no matter what the cost. Besides, this training is saving me from mental anguish. Only during our training can I forget about the foolish actions I took.”

Rosalie sacrificed her own townspeople to a demon for over a decade, and it’s clear she considers this an unforgivable sin.

“The Hero is a thoughtful man. I wouldn’t be surprised if he even knew how I was feeling.”

“I—I don’t know about that.”

I just think Seiya doesn’t view her as a person. Regardless, Rosalie is very optimistic about her training with him.

All of a sudden, I notice that Rosalie’s eyepatch has slid off her eye, exposing an old scar. A single slash, perhaps from a sword.

“Hey, Rosalie? I think I can heal that eye for you if you want.”

“I appreciate the thought, but it isn’t possible. Not even the highest-level healers could fix it.”

“...! W-wait. Does that mean your eye was—?!”

“Yes, the Dragon Lord robbed me of this eye.”

She sends a piercing gaze into the sky as she fixes her eyepatch.

“The Dragon Lord likes to torture his victims before killing them. After slicing through this eye with Igzasion, he immediately tortured my father, the emperor, to death...laughing all the while.”

“M-Mash laughed while...?!”

I can’t even finish my sentence. Rosalie slowly continues her story with a serious tone: “I understand that you all have come from another world, and I

somewhat understand what's going on now, so let me just say this: The Dragon Lord, Mash Dragonight, is a ruthless monster. You should probably think of him as a completely different person rather than the boy you once knew," suggests Rosalie while she sits up and tries to get back to her feet.

"I must make it through the Hero's training and become an unbreakable shield so we can defeat that monster!"

"Rosalie! Your wounds still haven't completely healed yet! You should rest a —"

"No, I'm fine. I would rather continue training."

"What?! You seriously want to keep doing *that*?!"

"I am fine with whatever the Hero wishes to do with me. Simply being by his side warms my heart. Yes... I must have—"

All of a sudden, Seiya comes walking over, cutting Rosalie off midsentence.

"You're awake. Very well. Let's continue."

"Okay!"

And just like that, they begin their rigorous training once again. Despite how brutal it may seem, Rosalie almost appears as if she is enjoying herself. Every time she is hit and bruised, her cheeks turn pink.

"More! Give me that long sword of yours! Yes! Yesss! Ahhhnnn!"

"Is it just me, or is this getting weird?!"

The Hero continues his harsh training while Rosalie gazes at him with rapture, and I begin to grow very worried for more reasons than one.

A Teat's Worth

Rosalie's semi-abusive training continues for the next few hours as Seiya's ruthless attacks rip apart her clothes. But no matter how many times she is knocked back or falls to the ground, she somehow manages to stand back up.

"H-how much longer are they going to do this?"

Rosalie pathetically pants with an amorous look in her eyes, and I start to feel uneasy for a moment until Cerceus suddenly mutters: "Rosalie isn't losing consciousness anymore, huh?"

"Huh...?"

That's when it hits me: Seiya was dumping water on her to wake her up whenever he knocked her out, but I haven't seen him do that in a while now.

"Does that mean...?"

I use Scan on Rosalie.

Rosalie Roseguard

LV: 70

HP: 141,493 MP: 9,900

ATK: 179,144 DEF: 186,574 SPD: 168,169 MAG: 860 GRW: 78

Resistance: Fire, Water, Ice, Dark, Poison, Paralysis

Special Abilities: Blessing of Darkness (LV: 9)

Skills: Dark Thrust

Personality: Impulsive

I vaguely remember her not even being at level 70 the last time I checked, and it looks like her HP and Defense are increasing pretty quickly.

I can't believe she gained this many levels in such a short amount of time! It looked like Seiya was torturing her, but I guess the training really was effective!

I bet even Rosalie can tell firsthand just how much more resilient she's becoming. As the Hero continues to whip her body, she quietly mutters to herself: "Training under the Hero is amazing! I can feel myself gradually getting stronger!"

Her eye is bloodshot.

"Ahn! More! Give it to me!" Rosalie insists as she pants like a dog.

Wait, what...? There's something definitely weird about this! But despite Rosalie's excitement, Seiya passes his wooden sword to Cerceus with a cold look on his face.

"That's enough training for today."

"I—I can still train! Give me more! ...Hit me harder!"

"Rosalie?!"

"I can't train you all day. I still have my own training to do."

"O-oh..."

Rosalie seems to be disheartened after coming to her senses, but it looks like her training is finally over for the day. Seiya pulls out a stack of papers from his breast pocket and begins looking over them.

"Hey, Seiya? What are you doing?"

"I found a few underworld denizens worthy of training under and wrote their names down. Hold on. I need to examine the list a little more," Seiya replies before he begins staring at one of the names on the list. While it doesn't surprise me in the least that he's doing this, Rosalie seems to be lost in admiration.

"Incredible! The Hero is so meticulous in everything he does!"

That's when I suddenly realize that Cerceus is glaring at me.

"...What's your problem?"

"Rista, you're supposed to be his goddess, yet you don't do anything, huh?"

Seiya's even decided on his own where he's going to train next."

"I—I'm looking into things that could help him, too!"

"Like...?"

"Well, there's apparently someone in the underworld who can control storms! I bet learning their special move would make Seiya even more powerful!"

Uno told me a little about this individual during our chat. Seiya, however, shakes his head.

"You've got your priorities backward. First, you need to think about what kind of move you want to learn based on your future opponents. Only after doing that do you start searching for underworld beings to help you."

"Th-then what kind of moves do you want to learn?"

"Fine. I'll show you."

Seiya lets out a "hmp" before taking another stack of papers out of his pocket. Rosalie and Cerceus groan: "He is always one step ahead of the Goddess with everything he does! He is the epitome of a true Hero!"

"He's efficiently prepared to win. No wonder Great Goddess Ishtar and Aria consider him a top-class Hero."

Ack! I can't argue with that! Seiya really is an amazing Hero!

With that, I turn my gaze to the piece of paper Seiya gave me. It's a list of moves he wants to learn.

A move that stealthily makes the enemy sick.

A move that poisons food.

A move that plants a bomb while the enemy is asleep.

A move that secretly curses the enemy.

A move to sneak up behind the enemy and slit their throat without anyone noticing.

"There isn't a single thing heroic about any of these!"

“Who cares? Safely defeating the Dragon Lord is all that is important.”

“But these moves are dirty... Like cheap tricks...”

Rosalie, on the other hand, yells in a voice charged with emotion: “Simply amazing! Awe-inspiring, even!”

“What?! These are ‘awe-inspiring’? Um... Well, I guess they’re okay as long as he can defeat the Dragon Lord with those moves, but...”

After looking back and forth between his two lists for a few moments, Seiya suddenly nods deeply as if he’s satisfied.

“All right. This is going to be where I train next.”

“It sounds like you made up your mind. So? Who’s going to be teaching you what?”

“If I were to describe the move using the list I just showed you, it would fall under ‘sneaking up behind the enemy and slitting their throat.’ Now that I can’t use Lucifer, slitting the Dragon Lord’s throat before he even notices me is my only option to both defeat him and avoid Igzasion.”

“I—I’m pretty sure there are plenty of other options...!”

“I hear there is an underworld dweller that lives near the spring named Slauri who can turn himself invisible.”

“You’re going to learn how to turn invisible?!”

“Exactly. When Rasti taught me how to transform back in the spirit world, she told me it was impossible to turn invisible, but it appears to be possible in the underworld.”

Seiya used Rasti’s Transformation technique to defeat Grandleon in Ixphoria by turning himself into a beastkin. I got turned into a fish-person, too, now that I think about it... But I remember that was all because turning invisible wasn’t possible.

“I’ll turn invisible, approach Mash from behind, and slit his throat.”

“Th-that is the perfect plan! What an incredible idea, Hero!”

“ ... ”

I fall silent. Seiya begins to walk off on his own, but after a few moments go by, he looks back at us.

“Follow me. I want Rista, Cerceus, and if possible, Rosalie all to master this move.”

We follow Seiya until we find ourselves in a thick forest. We are now far from the Shrine of the Six Realms in the center of the underworld, where Hathies resides. The forest is unbelievably eerie. There are carnivorous plants and trees with trunks in the shape of human faces everywhere I look. Nevertheless, Seiya briskly walks through it with his usual indifferent expression.

“Hff... Hff... Just how much farther is this place?” pants Cerceus as sweat drips down his body. He was lagging behind the rest of us because he was carrying two huge buckets filled with some sort of blue liquid, unlike Rosalie and me, who came empty-handed. I approach Seiya and ask: “Hey, Seiya. What’s in the buckets Cerceus is carrying?”

“I didn’t get much information on Slauri when I asked around, but we might not be able to even see him from the start if he can turn himself invisible. When we get there, he could even say something like, ‘You must find me first if you ever wish to learn my move.’ That’s why I am bringing this paint with me just in case.”

Seiya seems to be looking ahead just like he always does. That does sound like something that could happen, but when I tell Cerceus, his expression turns into a scowl and he complains in a whisper: “Do you really think something like that’s gonna happen? Tsk. Dammit, this is heavy.”

“Cerceus! We should believe in the Hero and trust his judgment!”

Rosalie encourages him before taking one of the buckets out of his hands. It isn’t too much longer after that until we eventually find an open area within the forest with a beautiful, crystal-clear spring before us.

“...?! It’s beautiful!”

Most places in the underworld have been creepy and dreadful, but the air here is crisp and clear. There’s a wooden hut near the spring, which I’m assuming must be where Slauri lives.

“Hmm. Someone’s over there.”

I follow Seiya’s gaze to find an old man sitting down by the spring while fishing. He has long, white hair, which covers half his face. He also has a matching white beard and wears a robe as if he were some sort of hermit. But even then, it’s still obvious he’s a dweller of the underworld, which is made clear by his black tail curled on the ground behind him. I timidly call out to him.

“Excuse me. We’re looking for a man named Slauri...”

“Heh-heh-heh! Slauri, ya say? If you’re lookin’ for him, you’ve found him. He’s already right next to ya.”

I-it looks like Seiya is right! He’s already invisible!

I frantically look behind me, but I don’t even sense another soul nearby. After a few more moments go by, the old man eventually puts down his fishing rod and turns his gaze at us.

“I am Slauri.”

Cerceus immediately replies:

“What the...?! I can clearly see you!”

“Of course ya can. I can’t live life invisible all the time.”

“S-Seiya! Does this mean that I carried all this paint over here for nothing?!”

“Not at all.”

Seiya drops a heavy bucket of paint in front of Slauri.

“I brought you a present. This paint is all yours. You can use it to paint that hut blue.”

“W-wow! There is meaning behind everything the Hero does!”

Rosalie’s eyes light up in admiration, but Slauri seems to be somewhat puzzled.

“Uh... I don’t need any paint... Why would I suddenly paint my home blue after all these years?”

So it was all for nothing! He just hates admitting when he’s wrong!

Seiya, however, seems to have already forgotten about the paint and Cerceus as he simply stares at Slauri with a dubious gaze.

“Are you really Slauri? Turn invisible and prove it.”

“Well, aren’t ya the skeptic. Okay, see for yourself.”

After taking in a deep breath, the old man slowly brings his wrinkled hands together before instantly vanishing into thin air!

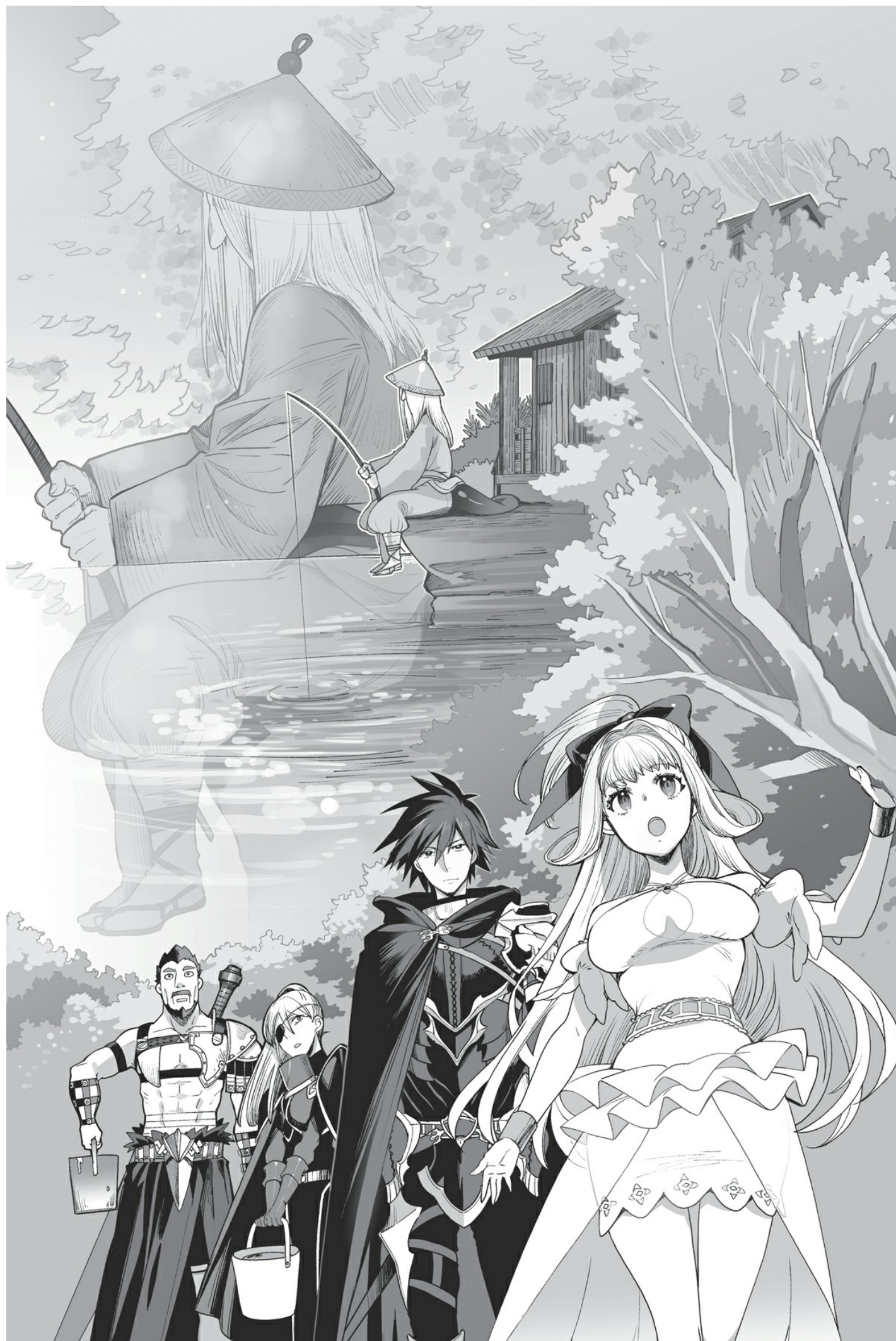
“H-he disappeared! He really did it!”

“Ya can still hear my voice, though, eh? This is my special move: Invisibility.”

I look in the direction of his voice, but he’s nowhere to be found. I can’t even sense his presence, despite having far better senses than any human. I wouldn’t have even known he was there if he didn’t say anything.

“Hmph. It’s as good as I imagined. I have to learn this move.”

“Heh. My move is flawless. I’m completely invisible to the naked eye. I’m sure it’ll come in handy on your adventure.”



“I see how useful it is. Become visible again.”

But Slauri doesn't show himself. He proudly boasts: “Heh-heh-heh. You all have absolutely no idea where I am right now, do ya? ...Ow, ow, ow! That's hot!”

The air suddenly begins to smoke, and Slauri appears! His robe is on fire with smoke rising from his chest!

“What the...?! Why are you on fire?!” I scream out in astonishment, but I almost immediately realize why...because a fiery salamander jumps out of his chest pocket, then climbs up Seiya's leg and sits on his shoulder.

“It's a fire salamander I made using fire magic. I had it slip itself into Slauri's breast pocket the moment we met.”

“Wh-why did you do that?”

“I didn't want him to say, ‘On second thought, I'm not teaching you anything,’ before fading into obscurity.”

“D-don't ya think that was a little excessive?! Our Lord told us we couldn't refuse your requests, but... Mn... That was really hot...”

He seems to be leading a secluded life in the forest, and yet he has apparently already heard about us. After brushing off his chest, he opens his eyes wide under his long, white hair.

“We're gonna have to make a deal, though!”

“Hmph. I already know what you underworld dwellers want. You want divine HP—Humiliation Points from a deity, right?”

“Hee-hee-hee. Now we're talkin'. But I'm not gonna take just any HP.”

Seiya then walks over to me and looks into my eyes with a serious gaze.

“Rista, this is where you come in.”

“Wh-what do you want me to do?!”

“I am going to give Slauri some of your HP.”

He places his hands on my shoulders and spins me around so that my back is

facing Cerceus and Slauri, then squats down and grabs the hem of my dress!

Eek?! D-don't tell me he's going to show them my underwear?!

And just as I feared, Seiya mercilessly lifts up my skirt!

"Ahn!"

I try to cutely squeal like they do in the rom-com comics I used to read to learn about Japan, but...

...*Slip!*

It's an odd feeling, almost as if I feel a draft down below.

"Huh...?"

I lower my gaze...only to realize that Seiya pulled my underpants all the way down to my ankles while still lifting up my dress!

"This isn't something I can just lightly blush at and play off like it's cute!! *What the hell do you think you're doing?!*" I scream while pulling up my panties. Cerceus whistles.

"I'm impressed, Seiya! You pulled down a goddess's underpants like it was nothing!"

"Yes, there was not even a hint of hesitation! What an extraordinary Hero!"

"An extraordinary *criminal* is more like it!!"

Even Slauri wears an astonished expression and mutters: "Th-that was... definitely unexpected. I thought ya were gonna show me a little boob, or her panties, but her bare ass? My, my, my..."

I—I—I honestly cannot believe him! Cerceus *and* Slauri saw my butt?!

"Apologize! Say you're sorry! Seiyaaaaaa!!"

I stomp over to Seiya like a volcano about to erupt, but he's completely unfazed. He then turns to Slauri and asks: "So? You got enough HP, right?"

"Hmm... I did receive a sudden rush of HP, but that was a little...lacking for an old man like me. It's not my kind of HP if ya know what I mean."

What?! Does that mean I showed him my divine bare ass for nothing?! I—I am

not going to let this slide! There's a lot that I'm not going to let slide!

"Sigh... Don't waste my time. Just tell me what kind of HP you want."

"Very well... How about something just enough to stir the imagination—something where ya think you're gonna see something but can't quite see it."

"Be more specific."

Slauri's lips vilely curl.

"Heh-heh-heh! I like it when their clothes get wet just enough so ya can kind of see their boobs through their shirt! Just imagining their embarrassment really gets me off! Just a little peek is what I like!"

"Y-you're a real creep, you wrinkly sack of bones!"

While I am completely disgusted and angry, Cerceus nods back at him.

"I know what you mean! I much prefer the excitement of catching a glimpse, rather than actually seeing anything!"

"...?! Are you seriously agreeing with him?!"

Unable to control my rage, I grab onto Cerceus's collar and violently shake him until I suddenly hear a splash nearby.

"...Huh?"

When I look over, Rosalie is completely soaked from having jumped into the spring and is walking this way! Her clothes are basically see-through, clearly defining her shapely breasts!

"Rosalie?! I can clearly see your boobs!"

"I'm doing this to save Gaeabrande! What's three or four breasts to save the world?!"

"...?! 'Three or four'?! Humans only have two!"

But Slauri shakes his head in disappointment.

"There isn't much HP when you're not embarrassed. Besides, young lady, you're a human, right? Your HP pales in comparison to what a deity emits."

Rosalie clenches her teeth out of frustration, not even caring that her breasts

are on full display. She then dashes over to me with an expression of pure insanity.

“Goddess! It has to be you! Hurry up and get that dress wet!”

“What?! N-no!”

“Hmph! What’s five or six breasts to save the world?! Why are you hesitating!”

“Why is the number of boobs suddenly increasing?! S-Seiya, say something!”

Seiya lets out a brief sigh.

“This is ridiculous, but...I must learn how to turn invisible to save these warped worlds. It’s essential.”

“B-but...!”

“Rosalie, do it.”

“As you wish, Hero!”

“W-wait! Wait! N-no...! Noooooo—*pfff*?!”

Following Seiya’s orders, Rosalie rushes me and knocks me into the spring.

A Borderline Invisible Goddess

“Pfffaaah!”

I crawl out of the spring in a stupor after Rosalie threw me in. My dress is soaking wet and ends up being far more see-through than I expected. On the bright side, I’m wearing underwear, unlike Rosalie. Nevertheless, my relief is short-lived, as Rosalie has been sneaking up on me from behind.

“Goddess! Let us remove your underwear to save the world!”

“Wh-what?! No! My clothes are already see-through enough!”

“It is still nowhere near enough!”

Rosalie fiercely grabs onto my undergarments and begins trying to peel them off. Naturally, she grabs onto my boobs like they’re stress balls.

“R-Rosalie, stop!”

“Hurry up and show him your sopping wet breasts!”

“No...!”

I plead with her, tears in my eyes, but Rosalie remains pressed up against me without even a hint of ever letting go. Her inhuman strength denies my body any resistance.

S-somebody...! Hellllllllp meeeeeeeeeee!

Meanwhile, both Cerceus and Slauri are depravedly grinning by the spring in spite of my distress.

“Hee-hee! Two women in wet tops wrestling? Now that’s more like it!”

“Ha-ha-ha! You have good taste, old man.”

“‘Good taste,’ my ass! Cerceus, when I get over there—!”

But the moment I begin to scream, I suddenly hear a snap...as Rosalie rips my

bra right off.

“Eek?!”

“Please, Goddess! Move those hands and show the world your glory!”

“I told you no!”

“Forgive me, Goddess...!”

Rosalie then mounts me while trying to peel my hands away from my chest until, all of a sudden, Seiya, who has been quiet this entire time, asks with his arms crossed: “Slauri. How’s the HP?”

“I have more than enough now.”

“Okay. Rosalie, down! Good girl. Come.”

“Yes, sir!”

Rosalie gets off me as ordered and dashes straight to Seiya’s side. What is she, his loyal dog?! At least it looks like I’m safe now, and Slauri seems to be satisfied after watching our half-naked wrestling match... What a pervert!

“All right, Slauri. It’s time you teach me your Invisibility move.”

“Very well. But before that...”

Slauri suddenly begins to approach me.

“What now?! You better not try anything weird!”

But his expression is that of a gentle sage, completely different from only a few moments ago, and he hands me some linen clothes.

“Put this on.”

“Huh?”

“Make haste. A young lady such as yourself shouldn’t be dressed obscenely like that.”

“...?! It’s entirely *your* fault I’m dressed like this!”

I’m about to punch him right in his stupid face when I notice a refreshing, sky-blue aura around him.

“Wh-what is that?”

“Your HP has transformed my heart into one that is clear and serene. I no longer have any interest in your alluring figure. If anything, it’s an eyesore.”

“I’m this close to knocking that head right off your shoulders, old man! Stop acting like you’ve changed just ‘cause you got your rocks off already!”

“R-Rista, relax. Don’t forget you’re a goddess, you know?”

“‘Relax’? After you guys saw my butt and I was molested?! Eat shit, Cerceus!” I scream. Slauri, however, shakes his head.

“Oh my. It appears you’re still far from learning Invisibility.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Invisibility is greatly affected by the user’s mental state. Losin’ your composure will negatively affect how transparent ya are.”

After taking in a deep breath, Slauri reaches out and places his palm before my face.

“Allow me to share my aura with you.”

“Y-your aura? You mean to turn invisible?”

“Yes. Only after receiving some of my aura will ya be able to turn invisible through extensive training.”

I can feel the refreshing light-blue aura flowing out of his hand and spreading throughout my body.

This is the aura of Invisibility?

Slauri then does the same thing to Seiya, Cerceus, and Rosalie.

“Now wish to become invisible while ridding yourselves of all worldly desires. It sounds easy, but actually doing so is not. Clearing your mind of distractions is surprisingly difficult.”

“Y-yeah, whatever! I can do that!”

“We have time, and perhaps this is fate. I shall teach ya in detail how to do it.”

And that’s how Slauri’s training begins...or so I thought.

“Am I doing it right?”

...Because Seiya has already disappeared before Slauri’s training has even begun.

Slauri is even more surprised than I am. Just when I’m enjoying the peace and quiet, he opens his eyes wide under his long hair and shouts: “What in the—?! All I did was give ya some of my aura! I still haven’t taught ya anything!”

“Yes. And yet, I did it.”

A-a-amazing! Seiya has always been a quick study, but he’s getting even quicker!

“W-well, that was unexpected. You’re even maintaining your invisibility...”

Seiya continues to go back and forth between being visible and invisible after that until he eventually stops as if he’s satisfied.

“You all give it a try as well. This is probably the easiest move to learn so far. Empty your mind while strongly wishing to become invisible. That’s all you need to do.”

After taking in a deep breath, I start to strongly wish to become invisible just like he told me, but nothing happens. Seiya’s face clouds over with obvious disappointment.

“That’s strange. Rista’s usually hard to notice most of the time, so I thought she would easily be able to turn invisible...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Cerceus, on the other hand, boastfully claims:

“I don’t know. I feel like I can do this.”

S-seriously?! But Cerceus is the God of Swords, so maybe things like this are easier for him to understand?! Mn... I don’t want to lose to *him*!

But after a few moments go by, the color of Cerceus’s arms and face fade as he gradually becomes transparent!

“I—I did it! I’m invisible!” shouts Cerceus in utter bliss.

His head and torso are, in fact, invisible, but I can clearly see the rest of him

from the waist down.

“Cerceus?! I can still see your lower body, and it’s freaking me out!”

“What?! Really?!”

“Tch. Stop fooling around, Cerceus.”

“I’m not! But why did my upper body disappear and not my lower body?”

“Hmm. It is probably because your lower body is packed with lust, divine one.”

“Could you please not make me sound like some sort of creep?!”

Heh! I was getting worried for a second there, but it looks like Cerceus is still having trouble mastering the move! Now’s your chance, Ristarte! Don’t worry. Even Cerceus was only able to make his upper body invisible! You can do it!

After firing myself up, I close my eyes while focusing on my sole desire to turn invisible. A few moments go by until I eventually open my eyes...and hold out my right hand.

“M-my right hand is gone! I did it!”

“No, ya didn’t. Only the right side of your body is invisible.”

“Huh?”

I rush over to the spring and look at my reflection in the water to discover that the left side of my body is completely visible. It’s as if I were sliced in half right down the middle. Cerceus walks over to me and shouts: “Ew?! Disgusting! I can see your organs if I look at you from your invisible side!”

“Cerceus?! Stop looking at me like I’m some sort of science project!”

“Stop messing around, Rista.”

“I’m not! I’m trying my best!”

Meanwhile, Rosalie is quietly muttering as if she’s chanting a spell, with an extremely serious expression.

“I want to be of help to the Hero. I want the Hero’s... Oh, Hero...!”

“You’re nothing more than a bundle of desire, human. Not even a single part

of ya has started to disappear.”

“That can’t be...!”

Seiya almost immediately mastered the move, but it looks like the rest of us are going to need some time. That’s when I suddenly realize that he’s talking to Slauri.

“...Is that possible?”

“Hmm... It would probably be difficult for anyone other than me.”

“I want to give it a try.”

“Ya have potential, seeing as ya mastered Invisibility so easily. Very well.”

I didn’t hear the first part of their conversation, but it sounds like Seiya wants to learn a move he can use while invisible.

Soon after that, Seiya—well, technically, the rest of *us*—officially begin training.

Day one.

Cerceus, Rosalie, and I are sitting in the lotus position while meditating by the spring under Slauri’s instruction. Seiya, on the other hand, is apparently inside Slauri’s hut. I wonder what kind of training he’s doing in there, since he already mastered Invisibility... Ack! Bad, Rista! I’m never going to be able to turn invisible if I don’t clear my mind! I have to focus!

“Hey, Rista! Check it out!”

I turn in the direction of Cerceus’s sudden voice, but he’s nowhere in sight.

“Ha-ha-ha! I really am the God of Swords, huh! These kinds of things just come naturally to me!”

I’m pretty shocked, to be honest, but after a closer look, I notice Cerceus isn’t completely invisible. Unlike last time, his lower body has disappeared for the most part, but...the part that men pride themselves the most on is still clearly visible.

“Apparently not naturally enough, Cerceus! I can clearly see your crotch!”

“What the...?! Why?!”

“Obviously because you can’t get your mind out of the gutter! It’s just like Slauri said! All of your desires are concentrated in your lower half! The only thing that comes naturally to you is being a creep!”

“Ack! Fine! How about *you* turn invisible then if you’re so much better than me!”

“Fine, I will! Pay close attention because you’re about to see the true power of a high-level goddess who has saved *two* parallel worlds of the highest ranks!”

I take in a deep breath then slowly exhale.

It’s time to completely sharpen your senses, Ristarte! Clear your mind... Yes... Imagine a slowly moving creek during spring!

I put all my focus into clearing my mind until I eventually cut out all the noise around me.

“Hmm...?!”

Cerceus is so surprised, he can’t even speak. I slowly open my eyes and look down. My upper body, my lower body—not a single part of me is visible.

“Heh. You like that, Cerceus? *This* is Invisibility.”

But he wildly shouts:

“Except for the fact that your face is still entirely visible!”

“What?! You’re joking, right?! Th-that can’t be right!”

“Your floating head is creeping me out! Cut it out already!”

“Oh, shut up, you crotch-flashing pervert! I feel like I’m talking to a crotch when I’m talking to you!”

It’s probably an extremely eerie sight seeing my floating head argue with Cerceus’s crotch, but before I even realize it, Slauri is standing by our side and nodding with evident satisfaction.

“Heh-heh-heh! I see y’all are improving. The rest of your bodies are completely invisible.”

“R-really?!?”

“You’ll be completely invisible by today or tomorrow at this rate. You two are naturals.”

“Did you hear that, Rista?! We’re naturals!”

“We are, aren’t we?!”

Slauri may be a pervy old man, but his praise makes us genuinely happy. Before long, though, Slauri’s grin slightly stiffens.

“Maintaining your invisibility is the hard part, though. Losing your composure will make ya visible again. But it doesn’t look like you’re gonna have to worry about your Hero in regard to that.”

“Yeah... Where is he, by the way?”

“He’s training hard, but I can’t tell ya exactly what kind of training that is. He told me to keep it a secret from ya.”

“A-again?! Why is he always so secretive?!”

“Heh-heh. But he’s doing it for all of your sakes as well. He is...quite the cautious Hero, isn’t he?”

Slauri leaves us with those words and heads back to the hut.

Day two.

“Rista! How’s my crotch?”

“There’s not even a hint of it left! What about my face, Cerceus?”

“It’s completely gone!”

...While our conversation may sound bizarre, Cerceus and I end up mastering Invisibility just like Slauri said we would. We can turn completely invisible after finally getting the hang of it.

I look into the spring water to see for myself, and I can’t see anything. But the moment I rejoice with a “Yes!” I become visible once more. Ack! He was right. I might finally be able to turn fully invisible, but maintaining it is way harder. Losing my concentration for even a second makes the spell wear off. It looks like I need to train a little longer. Regardless, *our* training is going well. However...

“Dammit!”

I hear someone with a frustrated voice stomping the ground at our side, so I look over to find Rosalie grimacing. Not even half her body is invisible yet.

“Getting frustrated is just going to make it harder, Rosalie.”

I’ve been keeping my distance from her ever since she tackled me, but I can’t help worrying.

“Goddess...”

She looks at me, then awkwardly lowers her head to me.

“I deeply apologize for the other day. I was so focused on my desire to save the world that—”

“Don’t worry. It’s all in the past now. Besides, Slauri wouldn’t have helped train us otherwise. Anyway, you should probably take a break, okay?”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right...”

Rosalie and I take a seat by the spring. We quietly gaze at the clear water while Rosalie calms down.

“Goddess, what was I doing in the world you came from?” Rosalie suddenly asks. She doesn’t seem to clearly understand the concept of warped worlds, but it seems she somewhat recognizes that Seiya and I are from a slightly different world than the one she knows. After giving it some thought, I decide to answer her truthfully.

“You were living with Mash and Elulu in Roseguard.”

“Th-the Dragon Lord and I...?! And Elulu...! The Seraph’s physical body is still alive?!”

“I’m guessing you don’t believe me, seeing as what happened in your world.”

“N-no, if the Goddess says so, then it must be true. Besides...yes... Perhaps things would have been different if Elulu were still alive.”

Rosalie seems to reflect for a few moments before asking: “Is my father still alive?”

“Huh?! O-oh. The emperor—”

“Be honest with me.”

B-but there’s no way I can tell her that he became a demon and Seiya killed him!

“H-he apparently passed away due to illness. But I hear his last moments were peaceful.”

His last moments were actually peaceful. After the emperor’s battle with Seiya, Rosalie watched over him until he peacefully took his last breath.

Rosalie adjusts her eyepatch as she nods with deep emotion.

“Fate truly is a mysterious thing. It sounds like a dream, but I am sure the me in that world is far happier than I am.”

“Rosalie...”

The quiet air fills the void between us until Rosalie suddenly stands back up and sends me a smile.

“I think I can turn invisible now.”

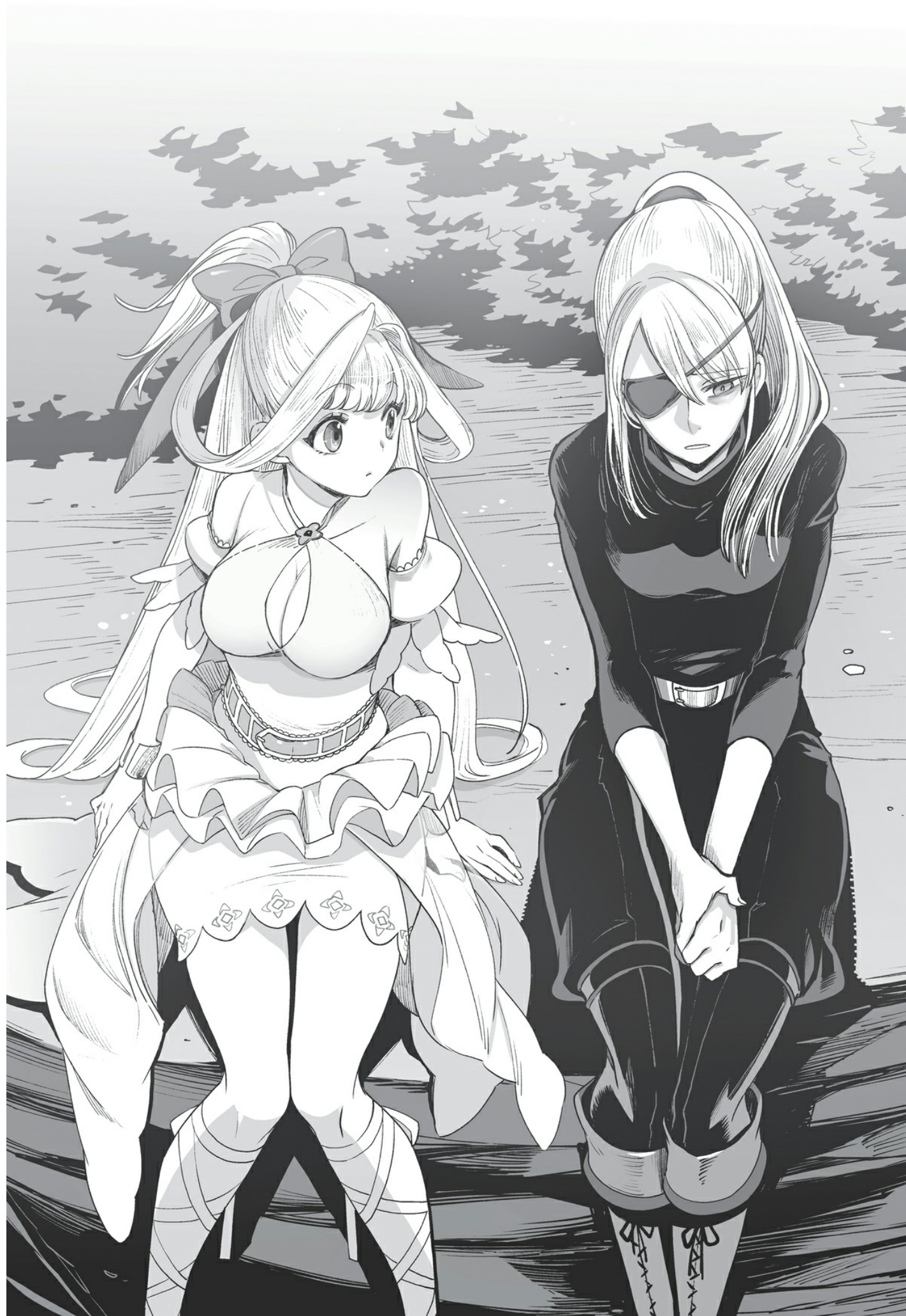
“Really? Give it a try!”

Some time goes by, but Rosalie is actually able to faintly turn transparent. Surely it’s only a matter of time before she is able to master Invisibility as well.

“Thank you, Goddess.”

She gently smiles.

We finally make up.



To the Nakashi Village Ruins

Day Three.

Cerceus and I are relaxing at Uno's place for the moment, since we can now maintain Invisibility for a decent amount of time. Rosalie also seems to have gotten the hang of it, so she's quietly mediating in her room under Slauri's supervision. Incidentally, Cerceus is baking a cake in the kitchen right now as if he's already completely comfortable with his progress.

"I'm impressed you were able to learn Invisibility in such a short period of time, Rista."

I bashfully smile while sipping the tea Uno poured for me in the living room.

"It wasn't easy, but I managed. Anyway, I really thought Slauri was just a pervy old man when we first met, but..."

"But he still shared some of his aura with you, yes?"

"Yeah."

Uno places her teacup on the table with a somewhat solemn gaze.

"There is a limit to how much aura we of the underworld can share. Slauri will probably never be able to grant his aura of Invisibility to anyone else ever again."

"Wait! Are you serious?!"

I am legitimately startled by what she said. I can't believe Slauri gave us something so valuable!

"Hmm? Rista? Where are you going?"

"To Slauri's place! I need to check on Seiya and see how his training's coming along, too!"

After trotting through the forest and arriving at the spring, I find Slauri quietly fishing by its edge just like when we first met. Noticing me, he turns his gaze in my direction and mentions: “The Hero isn’t here anymore. He said he was going to go back and Synthesize.”

“Oh. It looks like we just missed each other. Wait... Does that mean...?”

“Yes. He has already learned the advanced Invisibility technique that he asked me to teach him. He really is something, that Hero.”

Seiya already told Slauri not to tell me what the move was, and I’m sure he has his reasons, so I decide not to press Slauri for answers. Instead, I slowly approach him and take a seat by his side.

“Hey, um... Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For teaching us Invisibility. There’s only a finite number of people you can teach, right?”

“Unoporta must have told ya, huh?”

Slauri’s lips curl into a suggestive smile as he laughs with a “hee-hee.”

I don’t mind as long as I can help the Goddess and her Hero. The underworld and spirit world are built on supply and demand, after all.

I vaguely remember the Lord of the Underworld saying something similar. Now that I think about it, I haven’t visited the Shrine of the Six Realms at all lately. Well, it’s not like I have any reason to go, though.

I gaze over the still water and quietly say in almost a whisper: “The underworld’s a strange place, but there are a lot of good people here, surprisingly enough.”

“Uno and Due are both great people as well. I’m sure, deep down inside, most of us want to help y’all as well.”

If there is a limit to how much of their aura they can grant to others, then that means everyone who has taught a move to Seiya so far will never again be able to share that move with someone else. I have to eventually thank each and every one of them.

...While thinking that to myself, Slauri suddenly scratches his head with an apologetic expression.

“But it’s almost instinctual for us to fulfill our roles. This may seem ridiculous to deities and humans, but it is common sense to us. It’s like how night always comes after day. It is what we must do, for that is how we were made.”

“Uh-huh...”

Wh-what in the world is he talking about? It doesn’t make any sense to me, but the dwellers of the underworld always show their true colors if it means getting a taste of our HP. That must be what he’s talking about.

“Hmm. Got a nibble.”

Slauri stares into the spring water as something appears to be tugging on his fishing line.

“Looks like I found dinner.”

After a brief battle, he pulls a grotesque-looking underworld fish out of the water and flashes a bright smile.

He’s kind of cute when he’s like this.

“Well, Slauri, I should get going.”

“Okay. Take care... Oh, wait. I almost forgot.”

“What’s up?”

“D’you think you can wear a wet T-shirt next time ya come? I didn’t get a good look at your knockers last time, so I thought ya could—hey. Hey, wait.”

I decide to check up on Cerceus for some reason after returning to Uno’s place and find him happily stirring something in a bowl in the kitchen.

“Making another cake?”

“Yeah. I figured I’d use this time to do something worthwhile, since I can already turn invisible and all.”

“Why don’t you do some sword training, then? You are the God of Swords, after all.”

“Swords are so last year.”

He suddenly shows me his cake batter in the bowl.

“I have an idea, and this is probably gonna come in handy during our journey.”

“Like emergency rations? I don’t think cake has a long shelf life.”

“All I’m saying is that fighting isn’t everything.”

Cerceus fearlessly smirks.

“Besides, I’m guessing we still have a good while before we leave. It doesn’t matter if Seiya’s perfect, because if we mess up, he’s screwed as well, right? I’m sure he’s gonna make us do some extra training before we go, just in case. So I figured I could at least have a little fun while I can.”

Cerceus then begins to focus back on making his cake. Now that I think about it, Seiya did make me practice being a fish-person over and over again after he learned Transformation. So Cerceus is probably right. Seiya’s probably going to thoroughly check our progress before we leave again. I—I should probably go have some fun while I still can, too...! After that, we all get together in the living room and enjoy Cerceus’s cake while chatting until Seiya suddenly comes walking over.

“We’re leaving tomorrow. Be ready.”

““Huh?!”” Cerceus and I yelp.

“What are you so surprised about? You mastered Invisibility, didn’t you?”

“B-but you didn’t even watch us practice, Seiya! Are you sure you don’t even need to check if we’re any good?”

“Not this time. Even if you deities do mess up, your lives won’t be in much danger as long as the enemy doesn’t possess Chain Destruction. Besides, being strict with you two has never once worked out. I’m expecting you to fail, so don’t worry.”

“O-oh... Okay...”

He doesn’t trust me at all! I mean, that might be my fault, but still...!

“But what about Rosalie? Was she able to master Invisibility?”

“I only need you two to be halfway decent at it.”

“Huh...?”

“It doesn’t matter whether she lives or dies.”

“O-oh, come on, Seiya! Stop joking around like that! Don’t you think he needs to stop with the edgy jokes?”

“Y-yeah! Ha-ha-ha!”

Cerceus and I try to laugh it off, but Seiya turns his gaze to the second floor, where Rosalie is, and his eyes send a shiver down my spine. His expression is so icy that it makes the usual indifferent gaze he gives us seem almost loving. Seiya doesn’t see Rosalie from the warped world as a woman. He doesn’t even consider her human.

I have a bad feeling about all this! B-but we’re just going there to collect information this time. It’s not like we’re going to be invading the enemy’s base!

Even though I know that, I can’t help but be concerned, so I eventually decide to pay Rosalie a visit and head to her room.

“Hey, Rosalie? Can I come in?”

I knock.

“Come in,” she replies, so I open the door, but...

“Huh?”

Rosalie is nowhere in sight.

“It appears I was able to master it as well.”

I hear Rosalie’s voice right by my side, and she suddenly appears before me!

“You did it! I’m so happy for you, Rosalie!”

I cheerfully grab her hands and rejoice, causing her to smile somewhat bashfully.

“I hope I can be of some use now.”

“You’ll be more than that! You mastered Invisibility!”

“Do you think the Hero will be pleased?”

“He’ll be thrilled! I just know it!”

“R-really?! I was so worried I would simply get in his way! Thank goodness! Oh, thank goodness!”

Her cheeks light up with joy like a little girl, contrary to her usual tightly wound demeanor. But while one problem has been solved, a new concern flashes across my mind.

“H-hey, Rosalie. Don’t get too attached to Seiya, okay? I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“What?! I—I won’t! I—I don’t have any f-feelings for the Hero! At all! I simply respect him! That’s all!”

...?! She’s so obvious! I can read her like a book!

“O-oh, okay. Anyway, we leave tomorrow, so make sure you’re ready to go, okay?”

I leave the panicking princess with those words and retire from her room.

Sigh... Seiya and Rosalie... Their feelings for each other are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. I really hope this doesn’t cause problems down the road.

The next day.

We meet up in Uno’s garden, where Seiya is having Cerceus carry an obscene amount of equipment.

“So? Where are we going first, Seiya?”

“We’ll head back to Iglu first. After that, we’ll use Rosalie’s teleportation circle to travel to Nakashi Village, the Dragon Lord’s hometown.”

Rosalie then timidly mentions:

“Hero, Nakashi Village is in ruins. I don’t believe there is a single soul who lives there anymore.”

“I know. That’s where you come in, Rista.”

“Me?”

“Find one of Mash’s belongings and use psychometry on it.”

“So that’s how you were planning on using Rista’s powers!”

S-Seiya’s relying on me?!

“Actually, I could simply use my Appraise ability to get a decent amount of information myself, even if Rista didn’t have a power like that.”

“I—I do, though! I’ll try to get as much information as I can!”

But while I’m in high spirits, Uno suddenly approaches us with a solemn stare.

“Rista, there is something I want you to be careful about if you decide to transform into a demon god in the lower realm...”

“O-oh yeah. I vaguely remember you talking about that before... Wait! Will I die?!”

“No, it’s not that. It could, however, cause you to have an emotional spike, which could lead to an outburst.”

“An emotional outburst?!”

I am genuinely startled, but Cerceus, on the other hand, slaps his knee.

“Now that you mention it, I was trying to suck up to Lucifer in Iglu after turning into a demon god. No wonder I was suddenly filled with such negative emotions!”

“Except for the fact that you turned into a demon *after* sucking up to her!”

“Oh... Right... Sorry...”

“Just shut up! Anyway, there isn’t anything else we need to worry about, right, Uno?”

“You should be fine as long as you maintain emotional balance, Rista.”

“Okay! I’ll be careful!”

“...Rista, you sure you’ll be okay?”

“I learned how to control my emotions while training under Slauri! Have some faith in me, Seiya!”

I make a gate to take us to Iglu just like Seiya requested. It’s the first time

we've been back in days, but time in the underworld moves slowly just like in the spirit world, so only a few hours should have passed here.

"Oh, Hero! Surely, you must have wanted to go to Nakashi Village as quickly as possible, and yet you returned to this village first for my sake!" rejoices Rosalie as she thanks Seiya.

"Oh, hey! Rosalie's back!"

Before long, the villagers gather around Rosalie, where she gives them a rough idea of what happened, and I simply watch.

Hmm... Seiya probably only wanted to come here first because it's the safest place in Warped Gaeabrande that we know of. I'm sure of it.

It isn't long before I'm proved right. Seiya sternly barks: "Rosalie. We don't have time for that. Hurry up and prepare the teleportation circle."

"I—I am deeply sorry! I will get right on it!"

After briefly explaining to her people that she will be traveling with the Hero, Rosalie uses a staff to draw a magic circle on the ground. Seiya isn't even suspicious for a change and steps right on it. However...

"I am going to turn invisible before we go, just in case. Cerceus, Rista, you, too."

We turn invisible, making it impossible to see each other, but I can still hear Cerceus's worried voice.

"But Seiya, how are we going to know each other's location like this?"

"Yes, this is one drawback of the move. Therefore, Rosalie will remain visible and act as our guide."

"Yes, sir!"

Rosalie nods with a smile... Well, I guess she'll be fine since the village is supposed to be abandoned.

"All right, let's go."

A brilliant light radiates as we are drawn into the magic circle and disappear.

By the time the light dies down, all I can see are ruined buildings before me.

Each seems to be weathered as if they faded with time as weeds grow from between the cracks and rubble.

“It looks like the place was destroyed a while ago, huh?”

Only Cerceus’s voice fills the silence. Besides Rosalie, the rest of us are invisible. All I can assume is that Cerceus is standing in the direction I heard his voice coming from.

“This village was destroyed during the dragonewts’ invasion a few years ago.”

“But this is supposed to be Mash’s hometown, right?”

“I hear the Dragon Lord even slaughtered the humans who raised him.”

“What...?!”

“They call me the Hero Mash back at home in Nakashi Village, you know!”

I suddenly remember when Mash was merrily bragging to Seiya. I still can’t believe he would do something so vile. Someone must be controlling him...or maybe the Dragon Lord really isn’t even Mash. I can’t deny these thoughts.

“I want to see Mash’s old house.”

“I heard the Dragon Lord was raised by the village chief. I believe the remains of the biggest house lie somewhere in the center of the village.”

“Then go make sure and report back to me, Rosalie.”

“Yes, sir!”

After Rosalie cheerfully rushes off, Cerceus mutters:

“Rosalie’s a really big help, huh? Her teleportation magic’s even more useful than Rista’s gates.”

“I—I can open gates to anywhere, too, as long as I’ve been there once! It doesn’t take long to cast them, either, so I can get us places faster than she can!”

I try to defend myself, but I’m sure Seiya’s just going to tell me again how useless I am. And yet...

“Rista’s gates are superior overall. After all, she can freely go in and out of Iglu

without the townspeople's permission and while ignoring the barrier as well."

Seiya actually compliments me. Wh-why? What's going on?!

"At any rate, did you memorize this village's location so you can create a gate next time?"

"Yep! All done!"

"Make sure to keep it up, then. Otherwise, we will have a hard time getting around this planet if Rosalie dies."

"D-don't say something like that. It's—huh?!"

All of a sudden, countless salamanders emerge from the air where Seiya's voice was coming from! The dozens of fire salamanders then immediately scatter about in each and every direction of the village.

"What was that?!"

"These are far more convenient than Automatic Phoenixes if I'm going to search every house in the village."

Seiya seems to have started searching the village himself even after sending Rosalie out to find Mash's old house, but she comes running back to us before he can find anything. Rosalie looks around, unable to find us.

"Rosalie, we're over here."

"Oh! Goddess! I have returned with good news. The area around the village chief's house is safe! While the building is falling apart, there is still furniture and other belongings inside!"

"Then let's go. Lead the way, Rosalie."

"Yes, sir!"

But after Rosalie takes a few steps, Seiya mutters:

"Wait. One of my fire salamanders found a dragonewt at the Emperor Dragon ruins on the north side of town."

"A—a dragonewt?!"

"I'm going to observe it a little longer," echoes the empty space in Seiya's

voice. The salamanders he sent out must have their eyes linked with Seiya's.

"Hmm... It doesn't appear to be any different from your average lizard-person," mentions Seiya's voice after a few moments go by. Rosalie's face is suddenly overcome with surprise.

"There is a dragonewt?! In these ruins?! Allow me to go kill it! You all head to the village chief's manor!"

"Wait. Let's go watch this dragonewt first. I am sure after torturing it for information, we could use Rista's psychometry on one of its possessions for even more—perhaps conflicting—information."

"'T-torture'?! " echoes Cerceus's voice from behind me. Even I swallow my breath in shock. What kind of hero does that?! But...he's doing it to save the world, right?

I thought Nakashi Village wasn't going to be dangerous, since we only came to gather information and we're invisible. But the sudden appearance of a mysterious dragonewt gives me the feeling that there is more here than meets the eye.

Out of Control

We continue following Seiya's fire salamander while remaining invisible with the exception of Rosalie and head toward the chapel where a dragonewt supposedly is. We follow the gravel road north, avoiding the rubble along the way until the fire salamander suddenly stops in its tracks. From far away, we can see that the chapel's roof and walls are clearly destroyed, but even so, the statue of their god is still intact as the dragonewt kneels before it with his hands clasped together.

Th-there really is a dragonewt here!

While observing him from afar, Rosalie quietly whispers:

"It must be praying to the Seraph."

"You're talking about how they idolize Elulu as a deity, I assume?"

"Yes. The teachings of the Seraph claim that only dragonewts are the supreme beings of the world and both mankind and demonkind must be eliminated. The followers wouldn't even hesitate to throw their lives away for the Dragon Lord."

The dragonewt that Seiya defeated, Hydral, and the one that snuck into Iglu, Paradura, both kept chanting, "May the Seraph bless us all." Looking back, I was probably more terrified by how they strongly believed a false doctrine than by how high their stats were. They had a dull look in their eyes as if they couldn't fathom any other "truth."

"They somehow created followers that wouldn't even hesitate to die for the Dragon Lord... It's terrifying..."

"Hmm. That is a good idea."

"Huh?! Wh-what part of that sounds good to you?!"

“Don’t worry about it. I was just talking to myself.”

While I may be concerned by what Seiya meant, Rosalie seems to have something else on her mind...as she unsheathes her sword and charges straight for the dragonewt!

“R-Rosalie?!”

“Allow me to capture it! We can torture it after!”

“Rosalie, wait! There’s clearly something weird about that dragonewt!”

I grab Rosalie by the shoulder and stop her. A tear rolls down the cheek of the dragonewt kneeling at the idol in the distance.

“Goddess... I beg you... Please forgive Lord Mash... May true happiness return to both humankind and dragonkind alike.”

His sincere prayer catches my ear. This dragonewt is distinctly different from all the others in Warped Gaeabrande. It was clear to me that his prayer was genuine...and I felt as if his voice was familiar as well.

“Hey, Seiya. Have we met that dragonewt somewhere before?”

“All dragonewts look the same to me, but...its voice does sound familiar now that you mention it. I’ll use Scan on it.”

Using Scan would reveal his name almost instantaneously, so I decide to use Scan, too, until Seiya suddenly replies: “‘Lagos,’ huh? I believe that was the dragonewt who acted as our guide in their hidden Dragon Village.”

“O-oh yeah! Now I remember! It’s him! It really is Lagos!”

Lagos was the dragonewt who used the teleportation circle to send us to their secluded village in the original Gaeabrande. The dragonewts even then were devout followers of the Great Mother, but I remember Lagos being the only logical one.

“I bet Lagos can help us! Let’s go talk to him!”

But the instant I finish my sentence, Lagos violently coughs in the middle of his prayer before falling forward. A violet liquid then trickles out of his mouth, spilling onto the ground.

“What the...? Do you think he’s sick?”

“I used Appraise while checking his status, and he isn’t sick. He is physically decaying. Along with mental exhaustion, his life force is declining dramatically to the point that it’s a miracle he’s even still alive.”

“O-oh... So can I go talk to him, then?”

“...Go ahead.”

Seiya turns off his Invisibility, so Cerceus and I reveal ourselves as well. He then tells us to wait so he can create a few more fire salamanders, but...come on! How cautious can you be?!

I slowly approach Lagos. After wiping the blood off his mouth and somehow managing to stand, he notices me and begins to faintly tremble, so I make sure to sound as cheerful as I can.

“I’m the Goddess Ristarte! Don’t worry! I won’t hurt you! I promise!”

“G-Goddess...? Gwah?!”

“Huh...?”

All of a sudden, Seiya’s fire salamanders attack Lagos, pinning his arms and legs to the ground.

“...?! What the hell, Seiya?! I just told him we weren’t going to hurt him!”

“You can never be too careful.”

“But he can barely move on his own! Plus, you made me look like a liar!”

Lagos smiles while lying on the ground, his arms and legs spread out and held down.

“It is fine. It only makes sense for you to be cautious, considering what the dragonewts have done to humankind so far...”

He then turns his gaze at me.

“That divine aura... It is evident you were being truthful. To meet the Goddess before drawing my last breath... Fate is not without a sense of irony.”

Lagos coughs once more. It appears he knows he is not long for this world.

Seiya skeptically asks: “What are you doing here alone?”

“The Dragon Lord—no, Lord Mash—exiled me from Bahamutros...on suspicion of treason...”

“‘Treason’? What’d you do?”

“I told him we should strive for peace with humankind, not war against them. However, this angered the radicals.”

“Th-that’s all?”

“But it was Lord Mash’s kindness that kept me from being slaughtered on the spot. Yes... Lord Mash is truly a kind man.”

Lagos gazes off into the sky over the chapel with a distant look as the fire salamanders still hold him down.

“I wonder if the holy sword Igzasion was truly necessary to save the world. At the very least, Lord Mash should have never become its wielder...”

He closes his eyes as if he is deeply pained.

“But regrets will not change the past. I am powerless to change anything. All I can do now is simply pray for both humankind and dragonkind alike...” confesses Lagos while looking down at the green cloth wrapped around his arm. Seiya’s eyebrow twitches.

“Wait. Is that Mash’s...?”

“Oh, Seiya! That’s Mash’s bandanna! I remember because he was always wearing it when I was training him!”

“Give it to me.”

Seiya tears the bandanna off Lagos’s arm as he remains lying on the ground.

“We don’t need to go to the village chief’s house, now that we have this... Rista, can you use this to see what happened when Mash destroyed Nakashi Village?”

My ability doesn’t only allow me to read the memories of items when I touch them. It also gives me a vision of what happened as if I had a bird’s-eye view of the event. But to do that, I have to unseal every last bit of my demon god

power.

“I could do that, but I am going to need to concentrate extremely hard if you want to see a specific event.”

“We can return to the underworld first if you can’t handle it.”

“No, I can do it. Let me try...”

I could have an emotional outburst if I turn into a demon god in the lower realm, but...I’m a high-ranking goddess now! I’ll be fine as long as I remain focused! *Believe in yourself, Ristarte!*

I use Type: Opposite to transform into a demonic deity. My clothes shift into a black leather skirt and revealing top while giving me a more devilish appearance. I take in a deep breath.

“Um... You sure you’re okay, Rista?”

“I’m fine, Cerceus. I do feel pent-up emotions burning in the depths of my heart, but it’s essentially no different from turning invisible. I just need to remain calm and collected. That’s all.”

“Huh! I’m impressed, Rista!”

The time has come. I need to use psychometry on Mash’s bandanna and read its memories. Hee-hee! But wow, Seiya’s so handsome. Hmm? What’s going on? That’s weird. I need to look into Mash’s past, and yet I can’t help but... Ah, I want to make out with Seiya so bad!

I toss the bandanna onto the ground as if it were garbage. After all, why would I waste my time doing something tedious like psychometry when there’s this sexy piece of man-meat standing right in front of me?!

“Seiyaaaaaaaaa!”

I throw my arms around Seiya, but Rosalie seems to be even more flustered than he is.

“G-Goddess?! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“Hmph! Listen up, Rosalie! Seiya’s mine! Got it?!”

I tighten my arms around him and begin to squirm.

“After all, Seiya and I did have a child together in a past life! Hee-hee!”

“...Get off me.”

Seiya shoves me off with a stern thrust, but that isn't enough to make me quit. I grab my leather top and pull the lapels to the side, emphasizing my chest before running right back toward him.

“Seiyaaa! Let's fool arooound!”

Cerceus points at me and screams:

“Whatever happened to ‘self-control’?! Seiya, what are we gonna do?!”

“Don't worry. I had a feeling this might happen.”

Seiya then raises his arm into the air, but I'm not fazed in the slightest.

“Oh? Are you gonna bop me on the head? Hee-hee! Go ahead! It might even get me off! Or how about pressing down on my boobs with your sword's sheath like you used to? Come on, Seiya! I'm here for it! Hee-hee!”

“...Hellfire.”

A crimson flame instantly emerges from Seiya's hand like a rope and wraps around me!

“Gweeehhhhhh?!”

It's so hot that I scream in agony while reverting back to my original form. I immediately stop, drop, and roll on the ground like a burning marshmallow until I somehow manage to put the fire out.

“Pant... Pant... Cough...! Cough...!”

Although I made it out alive, my dress is scorched, and my hair is fried as well.

“How do you feel, Rista? Can you think clearly now?”

“How do you think I feel?! You just flame-grilled my whole body!!”

“That's entirely on you.”

“Did you seriously have to use Hellfire on a goddess, though?! Just look at me! My dress and hair are ruined!”

“Heal your frizzy hair yourself. I do have another dress you can wear, though.”

Seiya pulls a white dress out of his item pouch and passes it to me.

“Y-you even keep a spare dress for me, too?”

“Yes. I figured I’d be using Hellfire on you one of these days, so I prepared a spare.”

“You’ve been *planning* on burning me alive?!”

It was all my fault, though, so it’s not like I can argue with him. I decide to gratefully accept the spare dress.

“Anyway, I can’t believe someone as pure and innocent as me would do such a thing...”

“You reminded me of that pervy Goddess Mitis. You even showed off your boobs,” says Cerceus.

“Ugh! I hate myself! Today was supposed to be *my* day!”

“Meh. I respect the hustle.”

“That wasn’t what I was trying to do!”

During Cerceus’s and my exchange, Seiya picks up Mash’s bandanna and hands it to me.

“Try again. And don’t worry about entering horndog mode. I’ll set you on fire as many times as it takes,” says Seiya while conjuring a ball of fire in his right hand. Too bad that only makes me even more worried! Nevertheless, Rosalie stares at me as if she couldn’t be more jealous.

“I yearn to bathe in the Hero’s Hellfire as well...”

“Don’t even think about it! It’s hot as hell! Literally!”

“Enough. Hurry up and use your psychometry.”

After taking in a deep breath, I transform back into a demon god. This time, however, I am able to clearly focus because of my ardent desire not to be set on fire ever again. Soon, I can no longer hear their voices or any sound around me as a deep silence swallows the ruined village. A vision appears before my eyes.

Women and children are running around in terror. Buildings are burning to the ground. The agonizing cries of the villagers are followed by armed

dragonewts...and towering above them all is...

Mash...?

His reddish-brown hair is spiky, just how I remember it. But he's about as tall as Seiya now, and the crest of the dragon runs all the way down his arms and up his neck, revealing itself on the spots where he isn't wearing armor. It almost looks like a tattoo. His eyes are sharp but clouded over, like those of a monster. It's almost like he's a completely different person.

"D-don't let them scare you! Stand your ground!" shouts a human with a spear.

A group of villagers stands before the throng of dragonewts with every last ounce of courage they have. There appear to be people familiar with swordsmanship and magic in the village, but there's a key difference separating the two species. It isn't simply the fact that dragonewts are naturally stronger and better fighters than humans, though.

A human soldier catches a dragonewt off guard and slashes its back. It's a supposedly fatal blow, and blood is flying in all directions, yet the dragonewt casually bites off the soldier's head as if it didn't even feel a thing. Its eyes are vacant as if it didn't even notice the soldier's body collapse before it.

"May the Seraph bless us all..."

The cult tramples upon the humans until, eventually, not a single sound of war can be heard. Only the women, children, and elderly remain. Nevertheless, the dragonewts relentlessly slaughter every last one of them.

"This village is a stain on my name. Kill them all. Burn everything in sight," echo Mash's chilling orders from the head of the pack. Perhaps he wanted to erase every last memory he had of when he lived with these humans.

Out of nowhere, a young man, who was hiding behind a building, rushes out and kneels before Mash. He pleads: "Mash, it's me! Glenn! We used to play together all the time when we were kids! Remember...?"

"Can't say I do."

"P-please don't kill me, Mash. I don't want to die!"

“Hmm... Give me a second.”

He places a hand on his chin while staring at the empty space to his side.

“Oh... Yeah... Really? You’re right. Okay.”

Huh...? Wh-what was that? Was he talking to himself?

Mash then faces the young man once more with a smile.

“Glenn, you want to live a little longer, right?”

“Y-yes!”

“Then I’ll grant that wish.”

Mash extends his hand for a shake, and Glenn accepts it with a smile... But that smile soon contorts into a bloodcurdling scream. Blood is dripping from Glenn’s hand as his index finger rolls on the ground!

“What?! I thought you said you’d let me live!”

“I never said that. I said you could live *a little longer*.”

Mash puts Glenn in a full nelson, then cuts off his middle finger. He ignores his old friend’s cries as he moves on to his ring finger and pinky...

H-how horrible! Killing him outright would have been better than this!

Glenn has already fallen unconscious by the time his last finger is cut off, but Mash kicks him in the stomach while telling the surrounding dragonewts: “Humans are poorly built creatures. It only takes a small amount of pain to make them pass out... Wake up. There’s no point in beating you to death if you’re unconscious.”

“Gwah!”

Mash stuffs the severed fingers into Glenn’s mouth the moment he regains consciousness.

“Hyah-ha-ha-ha! Do your fingers taste good?”

“Eeeeeeeeeek! I can’t...! I can’t watch this anymore!” I scream before shutting off the vision of my own accord. My body is soaked in sweat.

“R-Rista?! Are you okay? What in the world did you see?”

“Something that went above and beyond anything I ever imagined!”

“Oh? Was Mashed Potatoes really that bad?”

“He was worse than that! He cut off a guy’s fingers, then stuffed them back in the guy’s—*blehhh!*”

Just thinking about it makes me dry heave. Rosalie softly rubs my back.

“Now do you understand just how terrifying the Dragon Lord is?”

“Y-yeah...”

“Rista, tell me exactly what you saw.”

I relay what I saw to Seiya and the others. Seiya is especially curious about Mash’s appearance, gestures, and the like, and I find that the more I talk, the better I feel.

“I still can’t believe that Mash would do something like that.”

“The Mash in this warped world is not Mash. It’s a twisted illusion.”

“But even then, that was originally Mash, right? Why would such a sweet, innocent boy do something like that?”

“Goddess, you know of Lord Mash’s true self, yes?”

Lagos turns his head in my direction as Seiya’s fire salamanders still pin him to the ground. His face is gaunt but placid.

“Dragonewts originally cooperated with humans to defeat the Demon Lord. However, everything changed the moment Lady Elulu died. Ever since that day...”

He has another violent coughing fit before he can finish his sentence.

“L-Lagos...! Seiya, let him go!”

“Do not worry about me...because either way, I am already...”

He coughs once more, spewing blood out of his mouth.

“Perhaps meeting you during my last moments was fate. Please, Goddess... Save the world... No... Save Lord Mash...”

Lagos then closes his eyes, never to open them again.

The Power of the Holy Sword

“R-Rista, is he dead?”

Lagos sheds one final tear as he passes. It probably wasn't because he was physically in pain. He continued to worry about the future between dragonewts and humans, despite being treated like a traitor. I suddenly get the urge to start crying as well. Even Rosalie seems to have been touched by Lagos's sincere feelings. She wears a pained expression and mutters: “I never knew such a dragonewt existed on Gaeabrande.”

We all lower our gazes amid the gloomy atmosphere—all of us but Seiya, who casually walks over to Lagos's body at a brisk pace.

“Its status confirms it's dead, but I should double-check just to make sure.”

“Seiya, no... Lagos wasn't even our enemy, so I don't think you need to check that carefully...”

Even after having said that, Seiya still crouches before Lagos and begins searching his entire body.

H-he's not going to use Hellfire on the body like he always does...right? Have some common sense, Seiya!

My heart nervously pounds as I watch Seiya until he suddenly stands back up.

“Everyone, start running. Now.”

Seiya vanishes into thin air in the blink of an eye.

“D-did you just turn invisible?! Why?!”

“Turn invisible and start running, too. We'll meet up at the chapel entrance.”

Seiya's voice slowly fades into the distance as if he is talking while running toward the entrance...but why?!

Regardless, I turn invisible and head for the entrance. After everyone else turns invisible, it's impossible to tell who is where. I timidly head toward shadows behind the debris near the entrance when I suddenly bump into something massive.

"Ouch!"

"That voice... Rista?! Watch where you're going!"

"I can't see things that are invisible! What the hell are you doing just standing there anyway?!"

"Cercean, Rista, shut up. Is Rosalie here, too?"

"Yes! I am right by your side!"

"Anyway, Seiya, what was the point of all this?"

"Another dragonewt might come to make sure Lagos is dead, too."

"What?! You think they would really do that? How would they even know Lagos d—"

But Rosalie cuts me off.

"Look! There's a bright light glowing by the body!"

The blinding light shoots out of the ground near Lagos's body, rich with mana.

"N-no way! Is that a teleportation circle?! Someone really is coming?!"

When the radiant light fades, I notice someone near Lagos's body and immediately shudder. My voice trembles: "M-M-Mash...!"

His overpowering ambition and intimidating aura fill the space between us. The Mash I saw in my vision is standing right before us. The invasion of Nakashi Village I saw probably happened a few years ago, and yet his appearance seems to have hardly changed, if at all. The only difference is that the crest of the dragon is even bigger than before, covering most of his arms and legs like a tattoo.

"What?! Rista, *that's* Mash?! I barely recognize him! He's covered in tattoos now, to boot!"

"That's the crest of the dragon. It does look like a tattoo, though."

While Cerceus is taken aback by Mash's complete transformation, there's something that surprises me even more.

"Hey, Seiya? How did you know Mash was coming?"

"I found this in Lagos's pocket."

A red jewel suddenly floats before my eyes. The invisible Hero is showing me a cracked red brooch.

"Use Appraise on it."

"O-okay."

The ability begins explaining the item to me.

"This is a *notification brooch*. They come as a pair: one blue and one red, but both are packed with mana. If you place a blue brooch on a map, it'll give you a rough idea where the holder of the red brooch is. Then..."

The explanation isn't over yet, but I suddenly hear Seiya's voice near my ear.

"Mash thought Lagos was trying to rebel against him, so he must have been keeping Lagos under surveillance even after exiling him from Bahamutros."

"It's like a GPS tracker!"

"It's even more complex than that. This notification brooch has another feature. When its owner dies, the blue brooch simultaneously cracks."

"So this brooch sensed Lagos's death and notified Mash?"

"Exactly. Of course, I didn't know exactly who would come...but I predicted it could be Mash himself, since generals and high-level monsters have suddenly appeared before in the other high-ranking parallel worlds."

Hmm...I guess that means Seiya's caution actually did save us from Mash finding us. We wouldn't have turned invisible and run away otherwise. Rosalie's right. Seiya's actions are usually correct.

After rethinking my feelings about Seiya's cautiousness once again, I suddenly hear a chilling voice in the distance. I promptly look in the direction of the voice—in Mash's direction—and watch.

"Lagos, come on. Did you really die?"

Mash hangs his head over Lagos's body. He seems to be mourning his death.

"Huh. I thought Mash turned into some evil monster, but he still has a heart," mutters Cerceus with relief.

H-he has a point! He has deep-seated hatred for humans and demons, but he still has love for his own kind! Maybe we can talk to him and work things out, after all!

But the moment that thought crosses my mind, Mash lifts his right foot high into the air and stomps. The chapel ground cracks with a roar as Lagos's skull shatters along with it.

"Hyah-ha-ha-ha! I guess this is what happens when you're a traitor! You should have died a long time ago!"

"Rista?! He just crushed that dragonewt's skull with his foot!"

"Y-yeah! And he even did a 'hyah-ha-ha' laugh, too!"

"Rista, Cerceus, calm down. Your invisibility is wearing off."

""What?!""

Cerceus and I glance at each other and jump...because we can now faintly see the outlines of each other's bodies, despite being completely invisible a second ago!

S-shit! Focus, Rista! Focus!

After Cerceus and I take in a deep breath and manage to clear our minds, we turn completely invisible once again.

"Don't watch if you have a faint heart," warns Seiya in almost a reprimanding manner.

"S-Seiya, did you not feel anything when you saw *that*?!" asks Cerceus.

"I thought, 'Hey, he's stepping on a head.' That's it."

"I see..."

How does nothing faze him?! I'm so envious of his personality!

"*That* is the cold-blooded tyrant—the Dragon Lord, Mash Dragonight,"

exclaims Rosalie's solemn voice by my side. I swallow my breath while watching Mash. He cackles as he continues to kick Lagos's body. His incredibly powerful blows squish it until it is nothing more than a pile of viscera. Each kick slightly alters the shape of the fleshy mound.

Eeeeeek! He's laughing while kicking a dead body!!

"Th-that is so messed up!"

"Hmm..."

The unbelievably cruel sight sends shivers down Cerceus's spine. Even Seiya appears to be disgusted.

"I can't see Mash's status screen. Maybe he's using Protect."

I guess not, then! Seiya was just trying to check out Mash's stats! I'm beginning to think there's something wrong with this Hero, too!

"Our mission was to gather information on Mash through your psychometry, but he seems to be absorbed in kicking that dead body... Which means..."

After a few moments of silence, Seiya issues a brief order: "Rosalie, slit Mash's throat."

Whaaaaaat?!

But Rosalie mirthfully replies:

"I get to avenge my father with my own two hands! Hero, you have my eternal gratitude!"

"Good. Now go."

"I will not fail you!"

Only silence reigns over the village. I can't see Rosalie due to her invisibility, but I'm guessing she's tiptoeing toward Mash. I whisper to Seiya: "Uh... Shouldn't you be the one doing this?"

"And what if Mash notices?"

"Y-your invisibility is perfect, though!"

"The faint sound of footsteps, the vibrations in the air—there are various

ways he could notice, despite not being able to see me with the naked eye. He might be able to see with the eyes of his mind, through some spell, or even with some sort of item. In the end, all I know is what some perverted old man in the underworld told me, and I don't trust him."

Slauri gave us some of his aura, and this is how he speaks of him?!

"In addition, there is no way to heal a wound made by Igzasion. Even if it isn't Chain Destruction, who knows what will happen if you or Cerceus are fatally stabbed? Therefore, it is only natural I sent Rosalie, since it doesn't matter if she dies."

Oh. I guess Seiya's just watching out for us. But I still can't help feeling bad for Rosalie...

I worry about her welfare, but Mash is still absorbed in stomping on Lagos's corpse. She has probably already unsheathed her sword and is closing in on Mash from behind.

Y-yeah! Who cares if it's cowardly if we end up fixing Gaeabrande's distortion! That's all that matters.

My heart hammers against my chest as I wait for Mash's assassination, but right as I focus my eyes on him, I see something that shouldn't even be possible.

Wh-what is that?!

Before I even realized it, there was a redheaded woman wearing a light-pink dress standing behind Mash.

"Mash, someone's coming."

I can hear her whisper into Mash's ear, despite being really far away. Mash immediately stops kicking the corpse, unsheathes his sword, and thrusts the rainbow-glittering blade into the ground.

"Igzasion! Deactivate the enemy's ability!"

The rainbow light emitting from the sword expands around him like a ripple in the water, instantly revealing Rosalie, who is almost right behind him!

"Hmph... If it isn't Rosalie Roseguard!"

Still holding Igzasion, Mash furiously glares at Rosalie. She promptly steps back and creates some distance between them after realizing she was both visible and not close enough to strike.

“Tsk.”

Seiya clicks his tongue. The mission failed, putting us in an extremely dangerous situation. Mash’s move exposed not only Rosalie but every one of us—even Seiya! Perhaps he noticed Rosalie glancing in Seiya’s direction for further instructions, because Mash turns his gaze to us as well.

“There’s more of ’em. Your bizarre move caught me off guard, but your tricks are meaningless before Igzasion.”

There is a decent amount of distance between us, and yet Cerceus keeps backpedaling as if he were being glared at by a snake.

“Er...! You’ve gotta be kidding me! Igzasion can even do that?!”

“Yes, I was slightly surprised as well. Not about our invisibility being removed but his timing of the move.”

“G-good point! How did he notice that Rosalie was behind him?!”

“Rosalie was being extremely careful while approaching him as well. Perhaps he has a sixth sense of some sort.”

“...Huh?”

Something isn’t right. Neither Cerceus nor Seiya has noticed the woman by Mash’s side.

“W-wait. Can you guys not see the—huh?!”

But Mash is the only one in the direction I’m pointing. D-did she disappear?!

“Mmm... I can’t use Invisibility. It appears Igzasion’s powers are still in effect.”

Seiya sounds like he didn’t even notice the woman, and he wouldn’t joke at a time like this. In other words, I’m the only one who saw her. Wh-what was she, then?! An illusion?! There’s no time to wonder about an illusion right now, though. Mash glares at Rosalie while emitting an overpowering aura.

“Long time no see, Rosalie Roseguard. I haven’t seen you since...that day,

huh?”

“Dragon Lord...Mash Dragonight...!”

Not to be outdone, Rosalie glares right back at him with hatred burning in her eye.

“You’re mad. I guess I don’t blame you, though. I did beat your dad to death, after all. But I’m angry, too, you know? I never thought humans and demons would survive this long when I let you escape,” groans Mash while crushing Lagos’s now-sludgy remains with his foot.

“It’s a bad habit of mine. Killing you on the spot that day instead of messing around would have saved me a lot of trouble. After all, there would have never been a town where both demons and humans live side by side inside some magic barrier, otherwise.”

He then leans Igzasion against his shoulder while slowly approaching Rosalie. She adjusts her stance and gets ready for battle, but...

“Rosalie, fall back. We’re retreating for now.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Seiya gave orders for her to retreat. Thank goodness! I totally thought he was going to make her fight!

“Rista, open a gate to Iglu. Make sure to put it somewhere in the rubble where Mash can’t see it.”

“Okay!”

Rosalie and Mash have enough distance between them, and Rosalie is no ordinary person. She should be able to make it back to us if she puts everything she has into escaping. Mash probably understands that as well because he doesn’t even move while he watches Rosalie turn her back to him and run.

But all of a sudden, Mash vanishes into thin air! And when he reappears, he is already right behind Rosalie with his sword raised!

“Rosalie, watch out!” I shout.

Rosalie swings her sword behind her back, which is immediately followed by

the sound of flesh being carved through. Rosalie's severed arm, still holding her sword, flies into the air.

"Eep?!" pathetically squeals Cerceus.

"Oops. Clumsy me. I was trying to cut off your head, but it looks like I got your arm instead... Hold on. Oh. You're right. I shouldn't have stabbed her in the eye. I should have cut off her limbs, then tortured her. All right. That's what I'm gonna do today."

"Gwah...!"

Rosalie's lips twist in agony as blood sprays from her severed arm. I shake Seiya by the shoulders.

"Seiya! This is bad!"

"Yes, he instantly closed the distance between them. I could barely even see him move. Not only can he neutralize abilities, but his extreme speed is a mystery to me as well. This *is* bad."

"No, not that! I'm talking about Rosalie! She needs help!"

"Rista, let's go."

"What?!"

"Mash's powers are still unknown. It's too dangerous to approach him."

Seiya then walks to the gate I made as if nothing were wrong. He places a hand on the door and begins to open it when...

"D-don't tell me you plan on abandoning Rosalie?!"

"I do."

"No! We can't do that!"

"Rista, wait. Where do you think you're going?"

The fact that she was an illusion completely slipped my mind the moment I saw her lose an arm and get in trouble. I desperately rush to help her, no longer listening to anything Seiya has to say.

"Rosalie, are you okay?!"

“Goddess...! Stop... You must go...!”

But Mash seems to be exercising caution after my sudden appearance, seeing as he doesn't even approach us, so I use this moment to cast Heal on her wound.

—I can stop the bleeding, but her cells aren't regenerating!

“You a healer? You're wasting your time. You can't regenerate anything cut by Igzasion, thanks to its ability, Crushing Wound. Not even the reaper Thanatos was a match for it.”

Mash begins walking toward me with his sword soaked in Rosalie's blood. I'm terrified, but a crimson trail of light suddenly slips in front of me. Now standing between Mash and me is Seiya, transformed into a berserker.

“Seiya!!”

“I honestly can't understand why you did that. Why would you put yourself in danger for an illusion?” grumbles Seiya while he gets into stance with his sword to protect Rosalie and me.

“Oh? Looks like there's still someone with some balls around here.”

Seiya and Mash stand face-to-face. I hide behind Seiya while asking Mash: “H-hey... Are you really Mash?”

“Huh? What the hell does that mean? You don't know me.”

“I'm the Goddess Ristarte, and I know you very well! You and I went on an adventure with this Hero when you were younger! We were friends!”

“‘Hero’?”

He glares at Seiya with a piercing gaze and almost immediately frowns.

“Shut your mouth, you lunatic!”

“Wh-who are you calling a lunatic?!”

“You. Regardless of who he is, how could we be friends if we just met today?”

“We didn't just meet today, though! We were friends in another world!”

Seiya chimes in:

“Technically, you just carried my stuff.”

“...?! Bag carriers aren’t friends, dammit!” shouts Mash before striking the ground with Igzasion. H-huh? The way he reacted kind of reminded me of Mash...but that feeling is short-lived. Mash’s eyes are already dark pools of emptiness once again.

“What the hell...? Talking to you two is throwing me off. Killing you should solve that problem, though.”

“Rista, stand back.”

Just when Seiya and Mash are about to clash...

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaait!!”

A deep voice echoes from the half-destroyed chapel. But when I look over, I gasp.

Because it’s Cerceus in an apron with his arms crossed while standing in front of a table covered with a white cloth.

Wraith

Cerceus wears an ethereal expression as he gazes at Mash before the table hidden under a white cloth.

“Conflict... War... It’s absurd. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Tsk. What the hell do you want?”

“Throw down your sword, Mash. That thing’s dangerous. The tip is pointy, and it hurts when you touch it.”

I’m shocked by the words that come out of the mouth of the God of *Swords*. Mash stares at him in mute amazement as if he felt the same.

“Why is this geezer spouting the obvious to me? You better not say you know me, too, because I’ve heard enough bullshit for one day.”

“You’ve gone astray. Nothing I say now can change that. Which is why I have this.”

Cerceus vigorously pulls the white cloth, revealing a large, glorious chocolate cake sitting on the table.

Wh-what an amazing cake! Cerceus really put a lot of work into it!

“I put everything I had into this chocolate gâteau. Sweets have the power to heal even a heart of stone... Mash, you’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?”

Cerceus smiles while placing a knife and fork on the table.

“Come! Have a slice of cake with me!”

Th-this must be Cerceus’s way of trying to save Mash! He really put a lot of thought into this! But I wonder if this really would be enough to change him!

My concern is well founded, it seems. Mash glares at the cake as if it were garbage.

“What’s that? A pile of shit?”

“...?! No! It’s chocolate gâteau!”

“Tch. I wonder if you’ll still think you’re so funny when I smash it!”

“Wh-what?! No, don’t! I worked really hard to make this for you! At least have one bite!”

“Silence!”

Cerceus screams as Mash raises Igzasion into the air, but there is someone who moves even quicker than Mash.

“Atomic Split Slash!”

A thunderous roar follows after the sudden impact. Seiya has swung his sword once vertically, destroying not only the cake and table but pulverizing the ground into dust as well! As Cerceus and I are being blown away by the shockwave, we shout:

“““Why’d you smash it?!”””

“It was an eyesore and would only get in the way during battle.”

Mash’s nose twitches.

“I—I’ve had enough of your stupid games! I’m gonna slice each and every one of you into tiny pieces!”

Eek! Things are just getting worse!

A black aura rises from Mash’s body as he brandishes his sword, and the crest of the dragon begins to give off a sinister glow.

“Heh-heh-heh. Let me show you the ability I gain by equipping the holy sword Igzasion: Full Haste.”

By the time I hear a thud from Mash kicking off the ground, he’s already right in front of Seiya, who has been cautiously keeping his distance.

“Seiya!” I scream in a panic, but Seiya, already a berserker, blocks Igzasion with two swords. Their blades screech as they lock, but Seiya is being pushed back. And yet, his expression hardly changes, despite the fact that wounds caused by Igzasion can’t be healed.

“I see. So that speed is the result of Igzasion’s power as well.”

“It’s an ability given only to the wielder of Igzasion, just like the one I used to neutralize your move. It increases my legs’ strength several times over the moment I activate it.”

“Oh? You can specifically increase your leg strength, huh? I will keep that in mind.”

“You’ll ‘keep that in mind’? That won’t be necessary...because you’re about to die!”

Mash swings Igzasion at Seiya so quickly that I can’t even see it. It’s a furious blow utilizing little more than brute strength, but Seiya blocks the attack with both swords, then repels Mash’s blade. It’s a strange sight to see. Mash, whose adventure with us came to an end before he ever got the chance to prove himself in battle, is having no problem keeping up with the Hero who even defeated the Demon Lord, Ultimaheus of Ixphoria.

Rosalie clenches her teeth and says:

“Igzasion is most likely increasing the Dragon Lord’s power severalfold as well.”

“It can deactivate his opponents’ abilities, increase his stats—what *can’t* that sword do?!” whines Cerceus.

The violent sounds of swords clashing fill the air. Each one of Mash’s attacks slowly pushes Seiya back.

S-so this is the holy sword Igzasion that Elulu gave her life for! You wouldn’t even need to use Gate of Valhalla to defeat Thanatos or the Demon Lord with that!

Mash swiftly swings the rainbow-glittering blade. Seiya blocks it with his swords, but one of his blades suddenly begins to crack!

“Th-the Hero’s sword...!”

“Whoa! That sword was a really high-quality weapon from the underworld, though! This is not looking good!”

Rosalie and Cerceus are panicking...

“Don’t worry. He has a spare.”

I’m totally calm. Seiya throws his broken sword at Mash while simultaneously unleashing Hellfire. He then creates a safe amount of distance between them before throwing his other damaged sword to the ground and reaching behind his back. By the time Seiya brings his hands back around, he is holding two new swords.

“Double Wind Blade!”

He immediately unleashes two blades of air, but Mash notices the distortion, casually turns his body, and dodges them. The only reason the move almost hit him was probably because Mash was hardly concerned. His smug grin is more than proof of that.

“It looks like you weren’t lying about being a Hero. I’ve never seen a human move like this before.”

Seiya uses this moment to move away from Mash once again. Mash seems amused as he watches the Hero cautiously strike before immediately jumping back.

“Heh-heh-heh. It’s been a while since I’ve had such a formidable opponent. Elulu’s going to be thrilled.”

“E-Elulu?! What are you talking about?!”

A white hand suddenly appears behind Mash, and before I even realize it, the redheaded woman in the light pink dress is standing behind him.

I-it can’t be...!

She draws her lips toward Mash’s ear and whispers:

“Kill them, Mash. The human, the gods, the Hero—all of them.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll make sure they suffer as much as possible while I’m at it.”

So...*that’s* Elulu?!

For some reason, Mash and I seem to be the only ones who can see her. I didn’t even realize that was Elulu, though, and it’s not only because she’s an adult now like Mash. It’s because her eyes are empty cavities and her cheeks

are sunken in like a wraith's.

Mash's eyes are filled with hatred as he glares at Seiya.

"Elulu's suffering won't end until every last demon and human are dead."

"Hmm... It sounds as if you regret turning Elulu into the holy sword, so you're taking your anger out on humans and demons. You're a fool."

"What did you just call me?!"

"‘Until every last human is dead,’ was it? A shame that isn't going to happen, since I'm going to kill you first."

"I'd like to see you try, Hero."

"Of course. That is my job, after all."

Seiya changes his stance, and Mash tilts Igzasion in front of himself to act as a shield.

"Automatic Phoenix Infinity."

A flame-like aura suddenly bursts out of Seiya's body. Countless fiery birds instantly materialize and take shape until hundreds, if not thousands, are circling the sky over the dilapidated chapel.

H-h-h-how many of them are there?!

Seiya uses Automatic Phoenix quite frequently to clean up leftover enemies or to scout, but I've never seen him create this many before.

"What power... I haven't been this excited in a long time."

Mash sounds like he really loves to fight. His lips curl in anticipation as he watches the throng of Phoenixes roam the sky. But the countless firebird suddenly scatter in all directions! They fly away from us, heading to who knows where.

"Wh-what the hell...?"

Mash is left in openmouthed astonishment...but seriously! What was that?! Where did they all go?! What was even the point of making all those?!

"I'm going to kill you. But now is not that time."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I have a good idea of what you’re capable of. That is all I need for today. The next time we meet will be the day you die.”

Seiya reaches into his pocket and pulls something out. The moment he throws it on the ground, a thick cloud of smoke emerges with a *pop*!

A—a smoke screen?!

Someone sternly grabs me by the wrist within the smoke, and I suddenly hear Seiya’s voice by my side:

“We’re retreating, and you’re turning invisible as well. Igzasion’s effects have worn off already.”

O-oh... We can use Invisibility again... Wait. Why did Seiya have a smoke bomb when he can turn invisible?! How cautious can you be?!

“B-but Seiya, there’s no way we can clear our minds like this!”

“You don’t need to do anything.”

“Huh?”

“Invisible Round.”

In the blink of an eye, Cerceus and Rosalie vanish into thin air! And when I hold out my hand, I can’t see it, either!

“What the...?! Why am I invisible without even doing anything?”

“It’s one of my moves. I turned all three of you invisible.”

A move that can turn other people invisible?! O-ohhh! So that’s why Seiya didn’t double-check our Invisibility before we left! It’s because he could turn us invisible whenever he wanted! How little does he trust us?!

“Rista, get rid of the gate you just made. We’re going to head back to where Rosalie’s teleportation circle is.”

“O-okay!”

I—I have to hurry, or... Wait... Why isn’t Mash coming after us?

“I—I’m gonna kill every one of you little shits!! Graaaaaahhhhhh!!” Mash

suddenly yells from beyond the smoke, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“I took advantage of the smoke and had my Phoenixes come back to distract him.”

“So that’s why you made them...!”

“Come on. Let’s get out of here before our invisibility is removed again.”

Seiya, while invisible, pulls me along by the hand. I can hear Mash furiously shout in the background as we jog ahead.

“All right, if that’s how you want to play, little Hero! Demons are already on the verge of extinction! The world will soon be ruled by dragonewts once I destroy that annoying barrier around Iglu! The next time we meet, I’m gonna rip out that Goddess’s eyes and shove them down your throat!”

“...?! Um... Seiya?! Mash is saying some pretty scary stuff!”

“He’s just mumbling to himself. Don’t worry about it.”

I’m pretty sure that was more than just talk, but the farther we run, the more distant his voice becomes. After returning to where we first appeared in Nakashi Village, I immediately open a gate, then call out to Cerceus and Rosalie to make sure they’re there before returning to the underworld.

Seiya removes our invisibility when we reach Uno’s house. Cerceus and I head straight to the living room and immediately drop to the floor from exhaustion. Seiya, on the other hand, sits Rosalie down on the sofa and begins examining her wounds. At first, I thought he might be worried about her...

“Interesting. It was only a few moments ago, yet the wounds appear as if they were several years old. The bleeding has stopped, but the arm can’t be regenerated. Crushing Wound... It’s probably similar to a curse.”

But he is just calmly analyzing Igzasion’s ability. Seiya ordered Rosalie to attack, and it cost her an arm... It wouldn’t be unreasonable to be furious in the least, and yet she seems apologetic.

“Please allow me to apologize for my blunder! I was unable to kill the Dragon Lord!”

“Can you materialize your demon arm like this?”

“I will give it a try!”

As Rosalie unleashes her demonic powers, a reddish-black arm appears from what is left of her severed arm. But when she seals away her demonic powers, the arm disappears as well.

“Good. It appears you won’t have any problems in battle.”

“Yes, sir!”

“I’m glad you’re alive.”

“H-Hero...!”

A dash of crimson spreads across her cheeks. D-does he really feel that way? There’s something fishy going on!

Cerceus, who was idly watching the exchange, suddenly chimes in as if he has realized something.

“By the way, Seiya, why did you not tell us you could turn everyone invisible like that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have taken your training seriously otherwise. After all, there could be a time when you need to turn invisible and I’m not around.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Anyway, the move surprisingly isn’t that useful. Igzasion’s ability immediately blew our cover.”

“Even if I can’t use it against Mash, the move was worth learning for hiding from ordinary people or weak enemies.”

Hearing Mash’s name seems to make Cerceus think back to the fight as he looks up at the ceiling.

“Mash... He used to follow you around like a puppy, calling you Master Seiya. It’s hard to believe that’s the same guy.”

“Mash was my pupil in the original world. That thing we saw was nothing more than a twisted illusion, and I won’t hesitate to kill it.”

Seiya stands up from the sofa and glances at me.

“I used up a large amount of mana when I created those Automatic Phoenixes, so I’m going to take a nap.”

Seiya’s definition of “large amount” usually means “a little” to most people, but I’m feeling mentally exhausted as well, so I’m extremely grateful for the break. After leaving the living room, I head to my room when...

“Rista.”

Seiya suddenly calls out to me from behind. Nobody but Seiya and I are here in the hallway, but it isn’t romantic at all. He’s frowning.

“Never risk your life for an illusion again.”

“So you really aren’t worried about Rosalie, huh?”

“I’m glad that she ended up surviving. I can still use her, and if possible, I want her to sacrifice herself during the final battle against Mash.”

“Th-that’s not something a Hero says!”

“Hmph,” grunts Seiya as he heads to his room. I’m the one who stops him this time, though.

“Wait! I saw Elulu standing behind Mash during battle! She was an adult!”

“I didn’t see a thing. Are you sure you weren’t imagining things?”

“M-Mash was talking to her in the middle of battle. Remember? That must have been her spirit! I was probably able to see her because my Appraise ability was powered up! Anyway, Elulu told him to ‘kill the human, the gods, and the Hero!’”

“So Igzasion harbors Elulu’s spirit, which is haunting Mash like a ghost? It’s questionable, but I will keep that in mind as a possibility.”

“I wonder what made Elulu like that...”

“She was sacrificed for Igzasion. The unimaginable pain she suffered was probably enough to twist even Elulu’s personality. Regardless, it’s nothing to concern yourself over. Everyone in that world is an illusion. That’s all a warped world is.”

“Seiya...”

“Don’t feel anything for them. Got it?”

After parting ways with Seiya, I head to my room alone and lie down on the bed.

It’s all...just an illusion, huh?

I think back to Mash stomping on Lagos’s corpse while spewing hatred, and Elulu’s lifeless face, sending a chill down my spine. I can’t comment on Rosalie, but...those two are definitely not Mash and Elulu. Seiya’s right. What I need to do is fix this distorted world as quickly as possible for the real Mash and Elulu’s sake as well!

Finally understanding that makes me feel a little better, and in the midst of my thoughts, I fall asleep.

...I suddenly hear someone calling my name in the darkness.

“Ristie.”

It’s an extremely familiar voice.

“Elulu...?”

But it isn’t Elulu, the wraith. It’s the innocent voice of the adorable little girl who I went on an adventure with.

“Rista, come on. Save us. Please.”

Another familiar voice. It’s Mash’s sobbing voice in need of my help.

“It hurts, Rista. Help. Please. I beg of you.”

But when I look around, all I can see is darkness. They are nowhere in sight.

“...Ha?!”

I fling my body up in bed and open my eyes. It’s still dark outside the window. I’m guessing not even an hour has passed.

Wh-what the hell? Why did I have a dream like that? Just when I had finally sorted out my feelings and made up my mind...

“...Ristie.”

I hear a sudden voice, and my heart leaps out of my chest. Elulu, still a child, is

crouched over in the corner of my room and crying!

“Wh-what?! This is a dream! No, this is an illusion!”

“Ristie, listen. Seiya’s right. But...”

Elulu looks up at me with tear-stained cheeks and sobs:

“The world isn’t going to be saved if you continue down this path.”

Mash's Weakness

"This isn't...a dream...?" I mutter in blank amazement, alone in my room. I immediately decide to tell Seiya, so I head to the living room, but Uno is the only one sitting on the sofa.

"Hey, Uno. Where's Seiya?"

"He hasn't come downstairs since he went to take a nap, so I am guessing he is still asleep."

"Well, that's strange."

Seiya said he was only going to take a nap, but it's been hours since he went inside his room. Worried, I knock on his door, but he doesn't reply, so I slowly open the door to his room and find him sound asleep. *Oh, how cute*, I think to myself as I walk over to his bed...when suddenly a fire salamander rushes out from under it, bites my finger, and burns me! I take back what I said about him being cute!

When I head back to the living room in a bad mood, I see Rosalie sitting on the sofa. It's hard to look at her arm with the bandages wrapped around what's left of it, but she doesn't seem to care all that much. I begin to chat with her while we enjoy the snacks Uno brought us.

"Anyway, I get that he was trying to cause a distraction, but making that many Automatic Phoenixes exhausted him. It was like watching a giant flock of birds migrating."

"But we were able to safely escape, thanks to that. The power to turn invisible saved us as well. We probably would have been killed when the Dragon Lord suddenly appeared if we hadn't mastered that move. I honestly didn't believe training would be necessary since we were simply gathering information, but everything turned out just like the Hero predicted it would."

“Yeah, I guess...”

Rosalie shows an ecstatic expression.

“Every move the Hero makes is the right one.”

I start to worry, so I decide to ask her about what is bothering me.

“Rosalie, I want you to be honest with me. How do you feel about Seiya?”

“I—I...!”

“Tell me the truth.”

After a few moments of silence, Rosalie’s face turns bright red as she shouts:

“I love him!”

“I—I knew it! But you mean you love him like a brother in arms and you respect him, right?”

“No! I want to be naked in bed with him while he ravishes me over and over again!”

“You don’t *love* him! You just want to *make* love to him! And what the hell?! That was so graphic!”

After letting out her pent-up feelings, Rosalie continues:

“I know a woman like me doesn’t even have a chance with him, but simply training and traveling together is enough for me.”

It almost sounds as if she is trying to persuade herself of that. Not only does Seiya not see her as a romantic prospect, but he doesn’t even consider her human. Whatever ends up happening, the only thing that’s certain is that her love story won’t have a happy ending. I need to make sure she doesn’t get her hopes up.

“At any rate, Seiya has absolutely no interest in relationships or love. All that Hero is thinking about is saving the world.”

“Is that so... Ugh...! I figured as much... *Sigh*... That’s too bad. Tsk!”

“Rosalie?!”

“O-oh, nothing! Of course, it is only natural for the Hero to be that way! What

has gotten into me! I am ashamed of myself!”

Rosalie slaps her cheeks a few times to knock some sense into herself.

“The Dragon Lord said something that caught my attention, though! He said that the demons were already on the verge of extinction! It appears the dragonewts’ invasion is gaining momentum! We have to stop them before it’s too late!”

“Y-yes, let’s ask Seiya tomorrow what we should do.”

After that, I leave Rosalie in the living room and head back to my room for the night.

Early morning the next day, I am suddenly awakened by a stern knocking at the door.

“Rista, how long do you plan on sleeping? Get up and meet us in the living room.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry. I’ll be right there.”

Rubbing my sleepy eyes, I begin to head over to the living room while slowly waking up along the way.

Wh-what’s his problem?! He’s the one who said he was taking a nap and ended up sleeping all night! How selfish can you be?!

Rosalie and Cerceus are already sitting on the sofa in the living room, but Cerceus is simply relaxing without any of his belongings ready to go. Seiya urges me to take a seat.

“Hey, um...? Are we not going back to Gaeabrande?”

“Not yet. We will be staying in the underworld for a while longer.”

“But Seiya, Mash said that the demons were on the verge of extinction. Doesn’t that concern you?”

“I already knew they were. If Paradura was supposed to break Iglu’s barrier, then one should assume that the dragonewts were already surrounding the town so they could invade at any moment. Chaos Machina and Eraser were probably killed by them after we kicked them out.”

So he knew that, and yet he still kicked the demons out of town?! H-how cruel!

“What’s wrong, Rista? Don’t tell me you’re even concerned about the lives of imaginary demons, too.”

“N-no, I’m not. But I wonder if the people of Iglu are okay.”

“Sigh...”

I know. I get it. The townspeople are illusions as well!

“They have survived many years thanks to the barrier, despite the dragonewts knowing where they are. There is no reason to start worrying now.”

I glance at Rosalie, and she nods as if to confirm what he said.

“At any rate, Rosalie, do you have any idea who is in command over the troops around Iglu?”

“Yes, I believe it is the Dragon Lord’s right-hand woman—the Great Mother of Dragons.”

“Th-the Great Mother of Dragons?!”

That’s the queen of the dragonewts whom Seiya ended up killing in the original Gaeabrande because she was trying to turn Elulu into the holy sword. Not only is she alive in this world, but she is serving Mash as well!

“Mash perhaps purposely made sure we could hear the demons were on the verge of extinction because he is planning on attacking us on both sides with the Great Mother and her forces,” mentions Seiya while he turns to me with a piercing gaze.

“Rista, do you know what Mash’s most terrifying ability is?”

“I-Igzasion, of course.”

“No. His teleportation magic.”

“...?”

“He could suddenly appear anywhere in Gaeabrande just like he did in Nakashi Village. We would be at a disadvantage if he appeared while we were fighting the dragonewts near Iglu, and we would be in trouble if one of the

high-level dragonewts suddenly showed up while we were fighting Mash as well. The only relatively safe place in Warped Gaeabrande is in Iglu, since it's protected by the barrier."

Good point... His teleportation magic could cause trouble for us now that he mentions it... Wait!

"But we can use Rosalie's teleportation magic to go after Mash in Bahamutros as well!"

"I already know the location of the Dragon Lord's lair! While I cannot teleport us inside, I believe I can get us nearby!"

"No. The enemy is obviously going to be expecting that, and I want to avoid danger, even if only by a little. Besides, I have already decided on the location for our final battle."

"What?! You have?!"

"For now, we are going to continue gathering information."

Where in the world does he want to have the final battle? I wonder until Seiya suddenly hands me Mash's bandanna.

"Read this bandanna's memories again and get me more information on Mash. In short, I want to know his weakness."

"Um...I don't know if my vision is going to be able to reveal information as convenient as that."

I was successfully able to read the bandanna and see a vision of when Nakashi Village was attacked, but would I be able to pinpoint a specific piece of information like Seiya wants me to? Does Mash even have a weakness?

"Regardless, turn into a demon god. Don't worry. I'll light you on fire and bring you back to your senses if you try to make a move on me again."

"...?! How can I not be worried when I might get lit on fire?! ...Hold on! Why is your hand already on fire?! We're in the underworld, so nothing's going to happen!"

After forcing Seiya to put out the flame, I transform into a demonic goddess and pick the bandanna back up. But when I sit down on the sofa and try to

concentrate, Seiya places a hand on my shoulder.

“There’s something I want to try. Stand in front of the wall.”

Seiya forces me to stand in front of the big white wall in the living room while I’m still in my devilish form.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I am going to display the images in your head on the wall.”

“What the...?! How?!”

“Essentially the same way I projected what the mud serpents saw on the water in the buckets. I think it should work.”

When we were saving Ixphoria, Seiya used that move like a surveillance camera during his battles against Ozerio and Celemonic.

“Just focus on reading the item like you always do.”

“O-okay.”

I close my eyes and quietly concentrate. Before long, I can vaguely see an image of what appears to be Mash in my mind. Then, out of nowhere, I hear Seiya’s voice echo.

“Share Info.”

Whack!

Ooooo?!

My head takes a powerful blow! The pain is so bad that I can’t help but open my eyes! But when I do, I make a strange beeping sound with my mouth! And before I even realize it, the image I see in my mind is being projected onto the wall. Wait, wait, wait.

I stop reading the bandanna for a moment and shout:

“What am I, a projector?!”

“What are you angry about? This way, you can share that information with everyone. This will also help prevent spreading misinformation due to your biased interpretations. I can’t think of one thing negative about it.”

“Except when you smacked my head really hard!”

“I had to use some force to turn it on... Now let’s continue.”

Whack!

Owwwwww?! Mn... He hit me again because I stopped the video! Dammit! I would have never stopped in the first place if I knew that would happen!

Despite my bitterness, my eyes automatically display the vision on the white wall... It’s Mash wearing the bandanna around his forehead. It isn’t the Mash we were just in battle with, though. He looks relatively young, similar to the Mash we went on an adventure with. He’s slightly taller than when we said good-bye to him, so he must be a few years older.

“Hff...! Hff...!”

Mash, riddled with wounds, is breathing heavily within the darkness, and next to him is a giant dragon severely injured as well.

“Mash, victory is right there in front of you.”

When I hear the ocher-scaled dragon using human speech, I suddenly remember where I saw her.

Th-that’s the Great Mother of Dragons in her dragon form!

And the instant I see the other person before them, my heart wildly skips a beat.

“Never did I expect to be pushed this far by a young dragonewt who isn’t even the Hero!” spews the giant monster with great venom. It’s none other than Gaeabrande’s Demon Lord, Xenosload. He is no longer in his human form. He’s transformed into his second form—a monster with six arms—and he’s covered with wounds like Mash and the Great Mother.

“Allow me to show you my ultimate move.”

A black, mysterious light begins to hover over the Demon Lord’s hand! The air vibrates as powerful mana coalesces!

“Judgment Zero!”

Just when the thunderous pitch-black waves are about to burst out of the

light, Mash raises Igzasion high into the air.

“Elulu! Give me strength!”

The rainbow holy sword emits a blinding light as well, swallowing the Demon Lord’s sphere of light as if it were purifying the darkness.

Wh-what power!

The Demon Lord’s face is racked with disbelief as his ultimate move, which is powerful enough to destroy the world, is sealed. Mash lowers his sword, gets into a back stance, then closes the distance between him and the Demon Lord in the blink of an eye before swinging overhead with a powerful roar. Mash’s blade cleanly runs through his enemy, slicing him in half from the crown to the groin. The Demon Lord has a terrifyingly strong vitality. Even after being swallowed by Valhalla’s Gate, he came crawling out, despite being nothing but bones... Nevertheless, Igzasion’s unhealable wound reduces him to ash, and he crumbles into dust, never to be seen again.

After the Demon Lord’s mana disperses and the darkness is lifted from the area, the Great Mother cackles in her human form.

“What a marvelous day it is! A dragonewt has defeated the king of the demons!” gloats the Great Mother. Mash, on the other hand, is staring blankly into space. Curious as to what he’s looking at, I focus hard until I am eventually able to faintly see someone appear.

It’s a cute, redheaded girl crouching on the ground. She looks similar to the Elulu I know, but her face is twisted in agony.

“It hurts. It hurts, Mash.”

“What...?”

Mash scowls as he presses the Great Mother for answers:

“I thought Elulu’s pain was supposed to go away once I defeated the Demon Lord, dammit!”

“There are still countless monsters in Gaeabrande that the Demon Lord did not create. Perhaps you have to dispose of them as well.”

“Dammit! Hold on, Elulu! I’m gonna kill every last demon and set you free!”

“Mash, no... You...”

Elulu, who has been speaking with pained breaths, suddenly opens her eyes wide.

“You can’t just stop at demons! Dragonewts are the only life-forms that deserve to live! Kill them! Kill them all, Mash! Kill every last living creature on this planet!” shrieks Elulu before dropping straight to the ground. A large pool of blood slowly expands from under her body.

Without even noticing it, Elulu has her arms and legs bent in unbelievable directions. And yet, she still crawls over to Mash, latches onto his legs, and looks up at him with bloodshot eyes.

“Mash, it hurts. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!! I can still feel the impact from when I fell into the Abyss!”

“Elulu...!”

“Mash! The humans...! Kill the humans as well!”

Mash places a hand over his face while staggering as if he’s dizzy. After the Great Mother places a hand on his shoulder, I notice that Elulu is no longer anywhere in sight.

“Do not push yourself too hard. You are still wounded from your battle with the Demon Lord, and the recoil from Igzasion has taken a toll on your body as well. I am afraid a single day of rest isn’t going to cut it this time.”

“Elu...lu...”

Mash thereupon passes out, and my vision being displayed on the wall disappears along with it.

Cerceus wears a solemn expression in the living room as he mutters to himself:

“Mash really did defeat the Demon Lord, huh? I guess that just shows how powerful Igzasion is.”

“It isn’t simply the power of the holy sword. The cause of the distortion, Mash, most likely received the Demon’s Blessing after Mersais created the

warped world, similar to how the Demon Lord Ultimaesus in Ixphoria received his divine power.”

“Ohhh! That explains how Mash was able to defeat the Demon Lord! He had Igzasion and the Demon’s Blessing!”

“There is still another reason. I never told you this, but... Mash was already strong before all this.”

“He was?!”

“His stats when we first met and then after we started traveling together are exponentially different. His stats would probably have been higher than mine if he ever reached max level.”

Th-then why would you make him carry your stuff?! We could have used him in battle! ...But, well, I’m sure Seiya just didn’t want him to get hurt, but still...!

Rosalie nods in agreement with Seiya and adds:

“I hear the Great Mother possesses a holy power as well. And after they defeated the Demon Lord, she and the Dragon Lord created the religion around the Seraph, found many followers, and destroyed all of our villages.”

“Hmm...”

Seiya and the others discuss the vision, but there is something else that concerns me.

“Elulu looked like she was in a lot of pain...”

The other three immediately turn to me with puzzled gazes.

“What are you talking about?”

“H-huh? Elulu, in the vision. You know, when her body was painfully twisted and—”

“The Dragon Lord did deliriously mumble that name, but...”

“Yeah, it was like Mash was having a bad dream and talking in his sleep.”

Wh-what?! Was I the only one who could see her, even though everyone was watching the same vision?!

By the time I come back to my senses, Seiya is glaring at me with a distant gaze.

“I am becoming more and more sure that what you said yesterday was nothing more than your imagination.”

“N-no, I...!”

“We can discuss later whether or not that really happened. More importantly, that vision provided some rather meaningful information... Rista, can you show us what Mash is doing right now?”

“That should be easier than this was, at the very least...”

Right as I begin reading the memories of the bandanna before the white wall...

Whack!

Seiya smacks me on the head yet again... Tsk! That hurts, you know! Isn't there a better way to do this?!

...Mash is inside a room with a powerful-looking dragonewt guard standing outside the door. He struggles to stand, using his sheath as a cane for support while heavily breathing. The Mash we can see right now is an adult with his body covered in the crest of the dragon. There is no doubt this is the Mash we ran into in Warped Gaeabrande.

Mash manages to stand up, then staggers a few steps forward before loudly collapsing onto the ground. A redheaded woman in a dress appears behind him. I wonder if ghosts age as she wraps her delicate, blood-soaked arms around Mash's shoulders.

“It hurts, Mash. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. My body feels like it's being torn apart. Please hurry up and kill the Hero along with the rest of the humans.”

“I will. But give me a day. My body isn't doing what I want it to right now.”

Elulu's appearance is eerie, but she sweetly kisses Mash's sunken cheek.

“I'll do anything for you. Demons, humans—I'd even kill a god for you.”

A Goddess of Character

“Okay, that’s enough. You can stop now, Rista.”

I promptly stop using my ability the moment Seiya gives the word, then I stand in a daze before the white wall. I feel as if I have a weight on my chest.

Does this mean that Mash is killing both humans and demons to save Elulu from her suffering? Because that would be so cruel...

“All right. This proves that Mash cannot move for at least a day after using Igzasion.”

“I never expected the Dragon Lord to have such a weakness! That must be the recoil from using the holy sword while not being the Hero!”

“Looks like you can win if you capitalize on this!”

Seiya was calmly analyzing Mash just like he always does. Both Rosalie and Cerceus seem thrilled that he discovered the enemy’s weakness, but I guess that’s because they can’t see Elulu the way I can. Rosalie suddenly grabs my hand in joyful exuberance.

“Goddess! You are amazing! We would have never known any of this if it were not for you!”

“O-oh, you really think so? Ha-ha-ha...”

Being complimented isn’t all that bad. Cerceus and Seiya seem to be impressed as well for a change.

“For a crystal ball with a pulse, you managed to be slightly useful today for a change.”

“Good job, Crystal Ball!”

“Heh! ...Hey, wait! Don’t call me that!”

“Hero! Shall we start preparing to invade Bahamutros?”

“I told you that was too dangerous. The Dragon Lord understands his weakness, which means he is either surrounding himself with powerful guards... or he is using a magic barrier to protect himself.”

“Y-yes, I completely agree!”

“Currently, our best bet would be to reduce his forces as much as possible while he is resting. Namely, we must dispose of the Great Mother. At first, I thought it could have been a trap, but Mash is temporarily incapacitated. Therefore, we should be able to dispose of the Great Mother without having to worry about him suddenly teleporting behind us.”

“I see!”

The cautious plan sounds exactly like something Seiya would do. Even after learning Mash’s weakness, Seiya wants to avoid heading straight into the enemy’s base for battle. Nevertheless, Seiya places a hand on his chin and begins to ponder as if he suddenly realized something.

“Hold on. On second thought, let’s head to Bahamutros to scout, first.”

“What?! But that’s where Mash is!”

“Turn invisible—all of you. Rosalie, link your teleportation circle to the farthest place away from Mash’s castle as you can.”

I stand on Rosalie’s teleportation circle after turning invisible, but I start to feel butterflies in my stomach as she chants.

“Th-this was all so sudden. This isn’t going to lead to the final battle against Mash...right?”

“Mmm... I’m still not mentally prepared... Urgh. My stomach hurts... I don’t wanna go.”

“I’ve finished the spell! Bahamutros, here we come!”

Rosalie’s voice reverberates as the magic circle illuminates. When the blinding light eventually fades, we find ourselves in a dense forest.

This is Bahamutros...?

This is Mash's base. In other words, this is what we called Dragon Village in the original world. Dragonewts are not demons, and yet a provoking, ominous aura fills the area. I swallow my breath, worried that there could be armed dragonewts close by.

"S-so we're going to Mash's castle now, right?"

But right as I am about to step foot outside the magic circle, Seiya says: "Rista, open a gate to the underworld. We're heading back."

"Huh? Did you forget something?"

"Hurry."

"O-okay."

I create a gate, and just like that, we return to the Uno residence's living room after being in Bahamutros for only a few seconds.

"Perfect. Mission complete."

While Seiya seems as content as could be, I shout:

"That's it?! Don't you think that was a little too quick?! I got all worked up for nothing!"

"A-are you sure that was enough, Hero?"

"Yes. Good work, Rosalie."

"Ah...! Thank you...!"

Rosalie looks thrilled, but seriously...what the hell was that?! What was the point of scouting for only a few seconds?!

I have no idea what's going on, but Seiya collapses into the sofa like someone who just got home from a long day at work.

"We can afford to take our time here, since time flows differently in the underworld. Rista, I want to watch that scene from a few moments ago one more time."

"You mean...Mash's current state?"

"No. When he was fighting the Demon Lord. While the footage may be old, I

want to see Mash's skills and abilities he used to defeat the Demon Lord. I need to confirm the Great Mother's powers as well."

"That was already the climax, though. If we're gonna watch it, let's watch it from the beginning. Rista, rewind it for us, will ya?"

"What do I look like, a VCR?!"

Nevertheless, they stand me in front of the wall again. After doing it so many times, I can now simply snap my fingers to change my magic type like Seiya. I turn into a demonic goddess, then begin to focus so I can show them the vision they want to see...until Seiya suddenly hits me.

Whack!

Bwah?! Arghhhhhh! This is the one thing I just can't get used to!

And with the pain, a vision is suddenly projected onto the wall from my eyes. It's a vision of a kind-looking old woman who is knitting with great enthusiasm.

"Phew. What a wonderful bandanna this turned out to be."

She mirthfully holds the green bandanna.

"Rista, turn it off."

I hear Seiya's voice and turn off the footage, then turn around to find Seiya grouchily glaring at me.

"Who asked you to show us how his bandanna was made?"

"That's weird. I..."

"Focus, okay?"

Whack!

Gwah! M-my head...!

The next vision appears to be of Nakashi Village. Mash, even younger than when we first met him, is standing on the footpath between two rice fields while surrounded by kids his age.

"That bandanna is so cool, Mash!"

"It's amazing!"

“Heh! Right? My grandma made it for me!”

I decide to shut off the video myself, but Cerceus shouts by my side: “Enough already! We don’t care about the bandanna!”

“I—I know! But this is the only vision that’s appearing!”

That’s when I notice Seiya is glaring at me.

“This is starting to get on my nerves. Stop messing around.”

“I’m not! But I can’t do it anymore! My head hurts way too much!”

“Oh, come on. So that was just a fluke earlier when we saw the final battle?”

Seiya and Cerceus stare at me with a distant gaze until Seiya mutters: “I take back what I said earlier about you being useful. Piece of junk off-brand crystal ball...”

“What the hell?! I take all those hits to the head, and now I have to be insulted?!”

“We will continue gathering information later. For now, we will move on to our next task.”

“Really?! Because my head was about to split open if we kept this up!”

“H-Hero, may I ask what this task is?”

“I need to finish training while Mash is incapacitated and prepare for the battle against the Great Mother.”

“Y-you’re going to train?! Again?! You’ve been training nonstop since you wanted to learn Invisibility! I mean, we’ve barely made any progress in Gaeabrande!”

“Hmph. This will be my last training session in the underworld for Warped Gaeabrande. The only thing left after this is defeating Mash with certainty and perfection.”

“What...?!”

Does that mean we won’t be returning to the underworld after defeating the Great Mother? Seiya always goes back to our base to train after defeating each enemy, but now he wants to go straight to the final battle with Mash after

defeating his right-hand woman?! I have no idea what he's thinking! Then again, I've never understood him, but he's being even more confusing this time!

Despite my bewilderment, Seiya leaves the living room and briskly walks away.

"Hey, wait! What kind of training are you going to do?"

"Since Mash has probably gained divine power due to the Demon's Blessing, I'm going to obtain the opposite power to counter it and the Great Mother."

"Y-you mean like a dark power?!"

"Precisely. I figured something like this would happen, so I already found someone."

Oh yeah... I remember seeing something like "a move that curses the enemy without their knowing" on his move list. He must have been talking about dark-type spells, but...

"The power of darkness, huh? I'm starting to feel like you're slowly distancing yourself from the average hero."

"The magic type doesn't matter as long as I can safely win."

"But Seiya, can humans even learn such magic?" asks Cerceus.

"This is the underworld. What may be common sense in the spirit world doesn't apply here. Besides, even if I can't learn it, one of you could learn a dark-type move in my place. You and Rista can already turn into a demonic deity while Rosalie harnesses the power of the demon, so it might even be easier for you all to learn it."

"Ew. I dunno. That doesn't sound safe."

I'm worried, too, but I end up following Seiya because I don't have any other choice. We walk for a bit before eventually reaching the heart of the underworld. I can see the ruler of the underworld's home, the Shrine of the Six Realms, up ahead.

"...? Is this...?"

A dweller of the underworld, whose entire crystalline body is pointy, holds a

spear before the entrance of the shrine. He speaks in a robotic monotone voice when he notices Seiya.

“You must make a request in advance if you wish to speak with our lord.”

“I didn’t come to speak with Hathies. It’s the basement I’m interested in.”

“The Infinite Corridor? You need permission to enter there as well.”

“I only want to talk with the watchman Natosus. I have no interest in the Infinite Corridor itself.”

Seiya speaks fluently about things I’ve never even heard of. I-Infinite Corridor? Watchman? This is starting to sound really fishy!

After thinking for a few moments, the guard gently taps the spear’s shaft on the ground.

“Very well. You may enter.”

After walking inside, Seiya immediately heads in the opposite direction of Hathies’s throne room. He trots down the unfamiliar hallway as if he had been there before, then begins walking down the staircase at the end of the path until we arrive at a dark, damp place illuminated only by a few candles.

Only the place we’re standing is faintly lit, and I can’t see anything up ahead. However, when I use my divine vision and strain my eyes, I notice that the long hallway only continues from here. I-is this the “Infinite Corridor”? I look hard until a light suddenly appears within the darkness. Something small has emerged with a lantern, and I can slowly see its face under the hood the closer it gets.

“Eep!” cries Cerceus softly.

But I probably would have been the one who screamed if Cerceus hadn’t been here...because hidden under the hood is a skull.

“You—you two must be the Hero and Goddess.”

I feel slightly relieved after hearing their voice as they look back and forth between Seiya and me, because their voice sounds pure and innocent, unlike their appearance. If I had to describe them, I would say they were like a mini, childlike grim reaper. Seiya asks: “Are you Natosus, the watchman of the Infinite

Corridor?”

“Yep. Need something?”

Natosus holds their lantern out at the darkness, and I hear a growl coming from the depths of the long, dark path.

“H-hey, just what is the Infinite Corridor anyway? Is this like an underworld prison or something?”

“Hmm... It’s more like an exit. An exit after the entrance.”

“...Huh?”

“My friend was sucked in as well. The world isn’t stable right now, so I’m not even sure about that reality, though. Besides, I could meet him if I wanted to. Somewhere other than here, at the very least.”

When I glance at Cerceus, he shrugs as if he’s just as confused as I am. Sometimes, I have absolutely no idea what these underworld dwellers are talking about. Seiya doesn’t appear to seriously understand, either, and he presses them for answers.

“More importantly, is your dark spell effective against angels and deities?”

“Dark is the opposite of holy, after all. It should be able to damage an opponent who is guarded by a divine aura as well.”

“In other words, it is equivalent to Chain Destruction. Does using the power of darkness affect the human body in any way?”

“It’s dangerous, since humans have a lower resistance to dark-type moves compared to other races. It could even shorten their lifespan. But you should be fine if I shared some of my aura with you. It would protect you from the negative effects.”

For the most part, humans can’t use dark-type weapons and moves like Chain Destruction. They’ll either be cursed or it will affect them physically if they try, but it looks like Seiya will be okay if Natosus shares some of their aura with him. Hmm... He’s going to be able to use both holy and dark magic now... I’m starting to feel like the underworld is kind of cheap!

“Will I share some of my aura with you, though? That’s the question.”

“Of course, I am prepared to offer something of equal value.”

Ack! He’s talking about my HP, isn’t he?!

I’m trembling, worrying that he is going to make me do something weird again, but Natosus starts pacing back and forth. It looks like he’s hesitant. No matter how much HP the underworld dwellers receive, it won’t change the fact that there is only a limited number of times they can share their aura with someone. It’s only natural he’d hesitate.

“Eh, whatever. Sure. After all, yesterday’s enemies could be today’s friends, as they say.”

“Huh?! We’re not your enemies, you know?”

“Yeah, and our lord did tell us to help you, so sure. Let’s do it.”

“Then let’s do this. Slauri said everyone has their own kind of HP that they like. Tell me yours.”

“Hmm... I’ll go with that goddess.”

“M-me?! Again?!”

“Yes!!” cheers Cerceus with his arms in the air. Dammit! Why is it always me?!

“Could you show me the dirtiest, most embarrassing thing you can do?”

“A-are you asking me to do something lewd?!”

I shiver at the thought and step back. Natosus then tries to hand me a thick, long purple object! I-is this...?! You’ve got to be kidding me!

“It’s an underworld potato. Eat it.”

O-ohhh... That’s it? Don’t scare me like that! I totally thought he was going to ask me to do something weird with it. A-anyway, I guess just eating it wouldn’t be too bad... Hold up! I don’t want to eat this weird “potato” if that’s what it really even is! Oh yeah! Why don’t I use Appraise on it first?

“Rista, eat it.”

But Seiya stuffs the underworld potato into my mouth before I can even try!

“Bfff?!”

I—I can't believe him! He'd at least check it for poison first if he had to eat it!

I have no choice but to chew it, since he's stuffing it into my mouth. An indescribable sweetness and richness slide down my tongue after my first bite. What the...?! This is delicious! It takes only a few moments for me to devour the entire potato. Wow. That was good! I could probably go for seconds, even!

That's when all of a sudden...

"Burp!"

Air escapes my stomach.

"...Huh?"

I'm surprised. I can usually tell when a burp is coming, but that powerful gust of wind came out of nowhere, escaping my stomach with a vengeance. Even after that...

"Burp! Burp! Burrrrrrp!"

I continue to burp, one after another like some sort of drunk at the pub. Wh-what's going on?! A goddess such as I shouldn't be burping so vulgarly!

"Underworld potatoes are extremely gaseous. Once you finish eating them, the gas immediately tries to expel itself from the body."

I am so embarrassed that I can feel my face burning. The belching has stopped, but the true disaster is right around the corner.

"...Bfft."

Air suddenly escapes my rear to my disbelief. I can usually feel when a fart is coming, but this one just came out of nowhere, esca—(omitted for brevity).

U-u-unbelievable! I am a goddess! And yet... And yet...!

"Pfft. Prrrt... Pweeeet. Brbrbrbrbr... Badoom!"

The choir ends with a bang, and I sink to my knees.

"Ew... Gross..."

Cerceus furrows his brow, Rosalie looks away, and Seiya pinches his nose.

"Ugh, just kill me now!"

I have never been so disgusted that goddesses couldn't die until today. I can't believe a goddess just ate a potato and farted up a storm.

I'm in hell.

Despite my depression being deeper than the sea, Seiya ignores me and asks Natosus: "So? Was that enough HP?"

"Yep. I'm completely full now."

"Then please give us some of your aura. Start with Rosalie."

"My pleasure!"

Natosus holds out his hand, which is nothing more than bones, in front of Rosalie. A black aura wraps around her before slowly being absorbed into her body.

"Hmm? This one already has the Blessing of Darkness."

"I signed a pact with a demon long ago."

"How do you feel, Rosalie? Is Natosus's aura affecting your body in any way?"

"I—I don't really feel any different."

"All right. Then give me some of your aura as well."

I have been watching with my head hung low for the past few minutes, but I just can't take it anymore. I yell: "Did you just use Rosalie as your guinea pig to make sure you'd be okay?! You're the worst!"

"Shut up, Stink Bug."

"Excuse me?!"

I fall into an even deeper state of depression. Please stop bringing up the farting!!

After Seiya is granted the dark aura, he unsheathes his sword and begins staring at it until a black mist eventually swallows the blade. Maybe he turned his sword into one that harnesses dark power. He should be able to damage the Great Mother or Mash now, even if they have obtained divine power. But even then, Seiya doesn't stop there.

“How about teaching me a dark move as well, since I’m here?”

And just like that, Seiya’s training for darkness officially begins in the midst of my depression.

Into the Darkness

The first day of training.

Seiya and Natosus are facing each other while talking in the dim basement in the Shrine of the Six Realms. I rub my sleep-deprived eyes while watching them. I didn't get much sleep last night because I was thrashing around in bed all night. Cerceus leans in to get a better look at me.

"Don't let it get you down, Rista. Everyone farts. I rip out around fifty a day."

Cerceus may be trying to make me feel better, but I just wanted to hurry up and forget about it... Hold up! Fifty times a day? What kind of fart machine is this guy?!

"Anyway, I'm glad Seiya's going to be able to learn the move himself. It would have been way too much for us to handle."

"You can say that again."

A few eerie hands grow from the stone floor slightly away from us and wriggle. The watchman Natosus moves his bony jaw and explains: "These are Phantom Hands."

"Hmm... I could use them to seal the enemy's movement."

"Simply touching a deity or angel with these hands will damage them."

The writhing hands remind me of Celemonic from Ixphoria. She used a similar move, now that I think about it. Hmm... This isn't really a heroic move if you ask me. Contrary to my skepticism, Rosalie's eyes are glittering with life.



“Amazing! We should be able to break through the Dragon Lord’s and the Great Mother’s defense with this move!”

...Natosus ends up only granting Rosalie and Seiya with dark aura. After all, Seiya only brought Cerceus and me as insurance just in case he couldn’t learn the move, so in his words: “You two are absolutely useless to me now.” There are more polite ways he could have said it, though! After chanting and getting rid of the hands of darkness, Natosus positions himself in his ominous chair made of bone.

“I have a move even more terrifying than this, though. Want me to teach you?”

“Definitely. It doesn’t have any harmful effects depending on how you use it, though, right?”

“I told you. My dark aura will protect you.”

I start to feel a little worried, so I cut into their conversation.

“H-hey, Seiya. Regardless of how safe it might be, maybe you shouldn’t be using dark skills. Don’t you think? I mean, you are the Hero, after all...”

I try to approach Seiya while talking when, all of a sudden, a pitch-black hand looms out of the darkness between us.

“Ack?! Natosus, come on! You startled me!”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Huh?”

I can’t believe it, but when I look over in Seiya’s direction, his index finger is standing straight up. Each time he wiggles it, the hand below me moves in unison. Natosus gives a dry clap with his bony hands.

“Wow! You mastered it just by watching me do it?”

“I wouldn’t call this mastering it. I need to train until I can create thousands of these jet-black hands like grass growing on a field.”

“Wh-what are you going to do with an extra thousand hands?!”

“Can you shut up already?”

Seiya turns a distant eye to Cerceus and me.

“Only Rosalie and I need to train. Go back to Uno’s place.”

“Okay! See you later!”

“Cerceus?! Why are you acting like this has nothing to do with you?!”

“I just think it would be in our best interest to go back, since Seiya told us to.”

“No. You just want to bake!”

Cerceus and I waffle over Seiya’s decision until two shadowy hands sprout from the floor around us.

““Eek?!””

“If you are not going back, then I am going to test how much damage these hands do when they touch a deity.”

“R-Rista, let’s go! We shouldn’t get in the way of his training!”

After Cerceus sprints up the stairs as if he were running away, the shadowy hand shoos me away as well. H-he really knows how to piss me off!

“You better come back to Uno’s place with good news!”

I reluctantly turn on my heel, leaving him with that pathetic parting shot.

The second day of training. Noon.

When I head to the living room, Rosalie is already sitting on the sofa. She’s hanging her head low, and it’s obvious she’s not feeling well.

“Um... Rosalie? What happened to training?”

“...He told me I didn’t need to come anymore.”

“What? Really?”

“While Natosus was teaching me how to create the Phantom Hands yesterday, the Hero appeared to be practicing a different move in the distance. After a while, though, he walked over and told me I could leave.”

Rosalie lets out a deep sigh filled with sorrow.

“He must have gotten sick of waiting for me, since I am a slow learner. To tell

the truth, I wasn't even able to manifest a single hand of darkness in the end."

"Hmm... I don't think you should let it bother you. You know how he is. He's unpredictable—impulsive, even."

Just when I finally got over the fart crisis, now I learn that Rosalie is depressed. Not too long after that, Cerceus comes in with some coffee for us. I decide to kill some time in the living room while trying to cheer Rosalie up, but no matter how much time goes by, Seiya doesn't return to Uno's place.

I told him he better come back with good news, but all he did was send Rosalie home. What the hell is Seiya doing?

After making some sandwiches, I head over to the Shrine of the Six Realms alone to see how Seiya is doing. I greet the guard, then head toward the staircase leading to the Infinite Corridor when...

"Guh?!" I instinctively scream...because countless pitch-black hands are growing out of the stairs! The hundred or more hands then shoo me away! Seriously?! How dare he make a fool of me like this!

But in a way, the hands growing like grass are proof that Seiya's training is going well. While it's extremely frustrating, I guess this is Seiya's way of telling me that he's improving.

"H-hey, um...I brought you some sandwiches..."

After I timidly hand the wrapped basket to one of the hands, it immediately passes it to another one, then another one until it is all the way at the bottom of the staircase. It's like a bucket brigade! After watching the surreal scene, I decide to head back home in disappointment.

The third day of training.

Seiya hasn't returned to Uno's place once since he started training. I've been trying not to think about him lately while he's training so I can focus, but this dark move he's learning has far too many unknowns to it. I can't help but be concerned. Although I expect that the hands will shoo me away again, I decide to make him some rice balls and head back to the basement staircase. However, when I get there, there isn't even a single shadowy hand waiting for me on the staircase.

This is Seiya we're talking about, so I have to wonder if there aren't any other traps...

I quietly descend the stairs without making a sound, but there is nothing out of the ordinary. It looks like I overthought the situation. However, I can hear Seiya and Natosus talking in the distance.

"You mastered it. All you need to do now is get creative and apply it to your needs."

"Yeah."

"But are you sure having me teach you this was the right call? Do you really think you'll ever need to use a forbidden skill like this?"

A forbidden skill?! What the...?!

I hide in the shadows while trying to eavesdrop when...

"Hold on, Natosus. Someone's here... Rista, it's you, isn't it?"

...?! How did he know?!

I feel as if my hammering heart were going to leap out of my throat, but I suddenly remember why I came. I have rice balls for Seiya, so I approach him as if nothing were wrong and hold out the lunch bag with a cheerful note in my voice.

"Hey, Seiya! How's the training coming along?"

"I already mastered the dark skill I wanted to learn, so my training here is done for now."

...And yet, he still doesn't say his signature phrase, which makes me think that there is still something he wants to do. Seiya starts walking up the staircase without even looking back at Natosus.

"S-Seiya, wait! ...Thanks, Natosus!"

"Yep. See you around."

I lightly wave good-bye to Natosus on Seiya's behalf, then rush up the stairs after him.

After returning to Uno's house and preparing a change of clothes along with a

few other items, Seiya gathers us all in the living room. He then looks at me the moment I take a seat on the sofa around the table.

“Rista, I want to watch Mash’s past one more time before we head back to Gaeabrande.”

“What?! Again?!”

...I’m forced to stand in front of the wall just like last time before I’m smacked on the head over and over again. However, we don’t gain any valuable information no matter how many visions I have. I see Mash as a child bathing, Mash sleeping like a baby, and even a repeat of when his grandmother was making his bandanna.

“Who asked to watch this garbage?!” complains Cerceus. I immediately cover my head and shout:

“I’ve had enough! My head is going to explode if we do this anymore!”

“Just one more time, and we can call it a day.”

But the last vision I have is of an adult Mash destroying a human city. He holds Igzasion covered in blood as a woman begs for her life while holding a baby.

“Please! I don’t care what happens to me! Just spare my child!”

“Hmm... Let me think about that.”

Mash immediately thrusts his sword into the woman’s chest. She falls to the ground as her baby cries. Mash frowns as if the noise is bothering him, then swings his blade without even a moment of hesitation. He laughs as if he just realized something.

“Yeah, I should have killed the baby first. The woman would’ve suffered way more. I’m such an idiot. I got the order all wrong.”

Mash continues to slaughter the humans while laughing just like he did in Nakashi Village. Even those who beg for their lives are relentlessly chopped into pieces.

H-how cruel!

“Rista, don’t stop the vision no matter what.”

I want to cover my eyes, but I have no choice except to project this vision onto the wall until Mash leaves the village.

“Hff...”

My heart sinks before the barbaric footage, and Cerceus speaks up in disgust:

“That isn’t Mash. That’s a monster. I regret ever making a cake for him.”

“Exactly, Cerceus. The Dragon Lord is an illusion of a warped world that doesn’t even deserve to exist. Disposing of it is a nonissue.”

“Let’s defeat the root of all evil together!” says Rosalie.

All three of them share the same sentiment after watching Mash’s violent actions. All of a sudden, I am reminded of something and timidly tell Seiya:

“O-oh, hey. I forgot to tell you, but I had a dream about Mash and Elulu the other day.”

“I’m not interested in your dreams.”

“Come on, don’t say that! Just listen! Because...I think the Mash in this world might be suffering, too!”

Cerceus’s jaw drops while Rosalie knits her brow.

“Huh? Did you not see what he just did? He didn’t look like he was suffering at all. If anything, he looked like he was enjoying the slaughter.”

“You are truly a kind goddess, but you do not need to feel any empathy toward the Dragon Lord.”

“They’re right, Rista. Letting your guard down could cost you your life.”

“I’m not letting my guard down! In my dream, Mash told me to save him! Elulu also said that you won’t be able to save the world if you continue down this path!”

“I ‘won’t be able to save the world’?”

After Seiya’s eyebrow twitches, he gives me a chilling glare.

“Are you sure that isn’t simply how *you* feel?”

“N-no...! I don’t think so...!”

I can’t say with certainty that this isn’t all in my head. I honestly have no idea what that was. Seiya stares at me as I am at a loss for words and lets out a “hmph.”

“Y-you don’t have to look at me like that.”

“I’ve seen enough. While this ended up being a waste of time again, I was still able to learn a dark skill after learning Mash’s weakness by chance last time. Defeating the Great Mother shouldn’t be a problem after a day’s rest to replenish my mana.”

“Really?! So that means you’re finally prepared to go?!”

I stare hard at Seiya, waiting for him to say the line in great anticipation, but he turns his head away from me and softly mutters:

“I’m PP.”

Did he just abbreviate his catchphrase out of spite?! What’s his problem?! More important, “PP”?!

The next morning, I open a gate to Iglu, and we follow after Seiya while making our way to the end of the town.

“Now that I think about it, this is going to be the first time we’ve seen the barrier around Iglu.”

Seiya doesn’t even look back when I talk to him, though. He is quieter than usual, as if he’s angry. We continue to head toward the outskirts of town as an awkward silence hangs over the air. We were always in the heart of the town when we first came, but the closer we head to the outskirts, the clearer the barrier becomes. It’s as if the entire town were surrounded by polished plate glass. I glance at Rosalie, who is walking by my side.

“So this is Iglu’s barrier, huh? It’s a little hazy so I can’t tell what’s happening on the other side.”

“That was done by design. This makes it impossible to see what is happening inside the town from the outside. Iglu’s barrier only allows natural materials and sunlight through for the sake of our survival, but it blocks all life-forms from

entering.”

“Damn. They must have put a lot of thought into making it,” utters Cerceus with admiration in his voice. Rosalie places a hand on the barrier wall and nods.

“Even though we are about to go outside, I will not be removing the barrier itself. I will simply be using a spell on us that allows us to walk through it.”

I guess that means the barrier hasn’t been lowered once, then. Hmm... It’s a really tight security system. No wonder they were able to keep the dragonewts out all these years.

Rosalie holds out her hand and chants. I don’t really feel any different, but I can apparently walk through the barrier now. All of a sudden, Seiya finally speaks up.

“Rosalie, is there anyone else who can operate the barrier?”

“Yes, the old village chief of Edona, Graham, can as well.”

“I see.”

My curiosity gets the better of me.

“Hey, Seiya. Can I ask why you wanted to know?”

“It has nothing to do with you,” replies Seiya without even looking at me. It looks like he really has been in a bad mood since yesterday. He’s probably thinking about how much of an idiot I am for worrying about illusions in a warped world, no matter how many times he tells me not to. But I can still hear Elulu’s voice from that dream in my head. That doesn’t mean I know what I should do, though. After all, we have to kill—not save—Mash in order to restore Gaeabrande to its original state. That’s the hard truth of the matter.

While I’m worrying to myself, Seiya begins giving us orders in a matter-of-fact kind of way.

“Everyone needs to turn invisible with the exception of Rosalie, who will take the lead.”

“What?! Are you okay with that, Rosalie?”

I worry about her, since she’s going to be the only one visible, but she gently

smiles back at me.

“There needs to be someone who takes the lead, or we’ll all get separated.”

“Y-yeah, but...”

I can feel Seiya’s eyes burning a hole into my back, so I decide to stop asking questions and keep quiet.

Cerceus and I turn invisible after Seiya, then begin to follow Rosalie’s lead. As we pass through the barrier, it makes a dull sound as if we are going through a portal. But the outside world is terrifying. Everywhere I look, I see countless lifeless bodies of demons and dragonewts...smoldering fires...the smell of blood. There was only one barrier separating Iglu from hell.

Ack! I had no idea the outside world is in such a miserable state!

I stand in mute amazement. Cerceus seems to be at a loss for words as well, but after a few moments, Seiya calmly comments:

“Rosalie, there are demons and dragonewts doing battle approximately three hundred meters northeast from here. Start heading in that direction. Slowly.”

“Yes, sir!”

I might be startled by the sight of so much death, but I’m sure Seiya has already sent out Automatic Phoenixes and fire salamanders to scout the area. Rosalie begins to walk slowly ahead just like Seiya ordered.

There are far more demon corpses here than dragonewts. It looks like the dragonewts are close to exterminating them just like Mash said. There must have been a fierce battle here. There doesn’t even seem to be a single survivor. There are only bodies. I make sure not to step on any of them as I walk.

“Hofff?!”

I jump, startled by Cerceus’s sudden ridiculous scream, but Seiya reprimands him before I even can.

“Cerceus, keep your voice down. Screaming defeats the entire point of being invisible.”

“S-sorry! But Seiya, look!”

I'm sure Cerceus is pointing at something, forgetting we can't see him... Regardless, Rosalie surveys the area until she seems to notice that something is well.

"This body...!"

A demon's corpse lies on the ground up ahead. It's one we know all too well. It's the severed upper half of the six-armed demon, General Eraser Kaiser.

"Even a demon of Eraser's level was... The Great Mother must have done this to him."

"I'm going to examine the body. Don't move until I say to."

Seiya begins examining Eraser's body while still invisible. He must be touching Eraser's body because his arms suddenly begin to move and float in the air. It's a creepy sight. After a few moments go by, Cerceus asks:

"Seiya, did you find anything out?"

"Yes. He's always dead when I find him, just like when he fought the emperor."

"That's seriously all you figured out after examining his body?!" is what I want to say, but I decide to keep quiet, since Seiya is already in a bad mood. Perhaps he realized it himself due to the moments of awkward silence, and he adds:

"Of course, that's not the only thing I discovered. His wounds are extremely swollen. These are different from burns caused by fire magic. It appears he was hit by a holy skill. We need to be even more careful from here on out. Do not let your guard down just because you're invisible."

Rosalie begins to walk once more under Seiya's orders. It isn't long before we can hear the sounds of battle and see a group of dragonewts along with flickering light from magic.

"Stop here. Rosalie, you turn invisible, too."

"But how am I going to lead if—"

"Your job is done. I found the target."

When I strain my eyes at the group of dragonewts, I notice two individuals in

the middle: Chaos Machina with a restless expression and the Great Mother wearing priestess attire.

The Emperor Dragon

We head closer to the battle between Chaos Machina and the Great Mother while still invisible. When we arrive at the safe spot Seiya previously specified, we watch over the battle with bated breath.

The Great Mother points her staff forward, creating a magic that shoots a sphere of light at Chaos Machina. Holy-type skills and magic are extremely effective against demons, but Chaos Machina knocks it away with her claymore, avoiding a fatal wound. But the Great Mother continues to unleash spheres of light until one of them hits Chaos Machina's leg. She groans in pain, dropping to one knee. That's when Seiya suddenly asks:

"Rosalie, you around?"

"Y-yes, sir! I am right here!"

They seem to be whispering to each other while still invisible until I can hear Seiya clearly state:

"Go slash the Great Mother's throat."

I am taken aback! A-another assassination attempt?! He already tried that with Rosalie, and it failed!

"They are currently in the middle of battle and focused solely on their opponent. It would be difficult for her to notice a third party, especially one that is invisible, approaching from behind."

"Hero... What is this sword?"

Seiya apparently handed Rosalie a sword, but since we're all invisible, it's impossible to know exactly what it is.

"A Dragon Killer. After unleashing your demon arm, buff the blade with some of the dark aura you received from Natosus."

“The Dragon Killer...! But when did you make such a weapon?”

“I made it in the underworld. I combined a platinum sword with a few strands of Mash’s hair and a few hundred strands of Rista’s to make it.”

He used some of Mash’s hair...! He must have gotten some when we first ran into him in Nakashi Village! He’s always one step ahead of everyone else, huh? ...Hold up! A few hundred strands of *my* hair?! How long has he been secretly plucking my hair out again?!

After rubbing my head to make sure I’m not bald, I decide to give Seiya a piece of my mind, but before I can, he gives Rosalie orders in an extremely serious tone.

“Rosalie, you’ve already failed once. This is your last chance.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“You have a much higher chance to succeed this time compared to last, since she doesn’t have Igzasion to remove your invisibility. In addition, I do not care if the wound isn’t fatal. As long as you are able to somewhat hurt the enemy, I will deliver the final blow.”

“I will not let you down!”

Rosalie lost an arm last time, thanks to Seiya, and yet she doesn’t even complain. If anything, her reply was brimming with determination.

...Rosalie, still invisible, is most likely sneaking up on the Great Mother with the Dragon Killer right now. Staggering before the dragonewt is Chaos Machina, her breath ragged. The difference in power is as clear as day. The Great Mother keeps her soldiers on standby around them as her long tongue slithers out of her mouth.

“The Human-Demon Alliance was abandoned, and you demons were kicked out of town. Heh-heh-heh. It appears the humans were cleverer than you, after all.”

“We would have gained the upper haaand if it weren’t for a sudden irregularityyy.”

“What do you mean, ‘irregularity’?”

“Heh-heh... You’ll sooooooon find out when he kills you, too.”

“I have had enough of your nonsense.”

The Great Mother kicks Chaos Machina straight into the air with a thud, causing her to crumple.

“How do you remove the barrier around Iglu? I will make your death quick and painless if you tell me.”

“O-only the huumans inside can operate the barrier. There’s nothing you can do to get inside.”

Although coughing up blood, Chaos Machina smirks.

“Hmph.” The Great Mother briefly exhales before continuing:

“Fine. The Dragon Lord will surely be thrilled either way once I tell him I killed both Chaos Machina and Eraser, two former generals of the Demon Lord’s army.”

“You shouldn’t...underestimate me...”

Chaos Machina uses this brief opening to point her claymore at her own stomach. It’s as if I were having déjà vu. When she fought Seiya in the original Gaeabrande, she unleashed her true form, Greater Demon, from within her stomach. While she lost to him, Chaos Machina’s stats in this world are far greater than when we fought her. In other words, Greater Demon’s stats are most likely freakishly high as well.

Which means Chaos Machina could actually win!

However, Chaos Machina’s claymore is sent flying in the distance with a high-pitched *clink*. Her expression is overcome with astonishment. The Great Mother posing with her staff fully swung cackles!

“You were trying to break some sort of seal, correct? A powerful, ominous aura is overflowing out of your stomach. Did you truly believe I would not notice?”

“Tsk!”

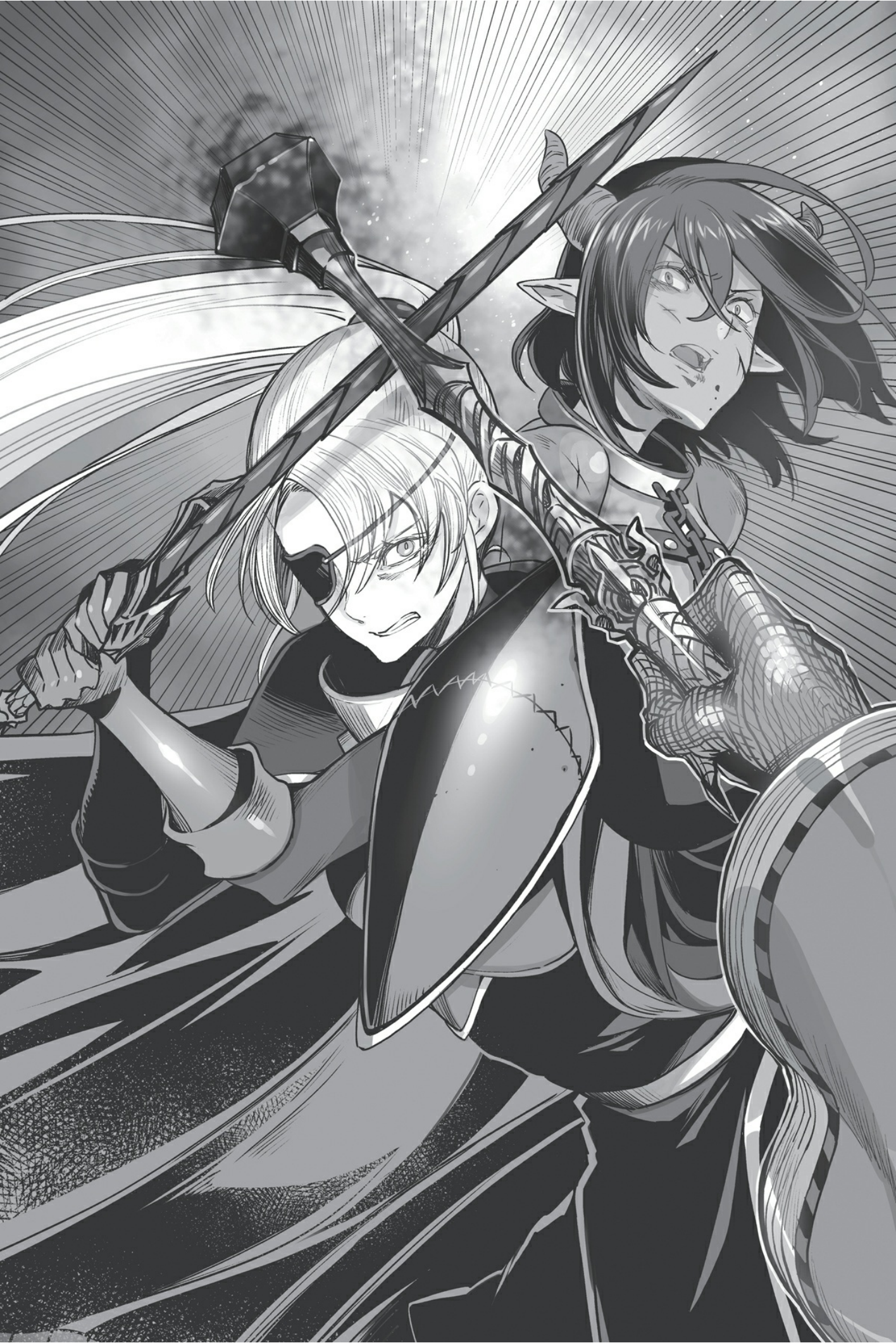
Chaos Machina’s normally easygoing expression tenses.

“Die!”

The Great Mother swings her staff infused with a holy power...but Chaos Machina’s head is still attached to her body. The Great Mother wears a staggered expression and shouts:

“Wh-where did you come from?!”

Huh?!



I can't believe what I am seeing, either. Rosalie has suddenly appeared before Chaos Machina and is blocking the Great Mother's staff with the Dragon Killer!

"R-Rosalie?! Why?!" I instinctively shout. I can hear Seiya click his tongue by my side as well.

"Unbelievable. What is she doing?"

Seiya sounds as if he honestly can't comprehend it. Cerceus, however, mutters as if he has just realized something after seeing Rosalie push away the Great Mother's staff:

"Maybe she did that...because Chaos Machina was about to be killed?"

"So she removed her invisibility and saved her?! Does that mean..."

Rosalie?! You still consider Chaos Machina to be your friend?!

"It makes absolutely no sense. The demons were only pretending to cooperate with the humans, and Rosalie knows that."

And yet, she put herself into a dangerous situation because she changed the enemy's target from Chaos Machina to her. Rosalie somehow deflects the Great Mother's club-like attacks while slowly stepping back.

"Princess...?"

We aren't the only ones surprised. Chaos Machina stares at Rosalie in clear disbelief. The Great Mother, realizing what the demon meant, licks her lips.

"Oh! So you are the emperor's daughter!"

Rosalie creates some distance between them before getting back into stance with the Dragon Killer. Chaos Machina also stands back up and regains her footing.

"Do you truly believe that you can beat me if you fight together? It appears I am bringing more gifts back to the Dragon Lord than planned. Prepare to die!"

The Great Mother immediately tears off her clothes, then her body swells in the blink of an eye! She is no longer a humanoid lizard-person but a colossal, ochre-colored dragon with an overpowering aura!

"S-Seiya! Rosalie's going to die if we don't do something! We have to disable

our invisibility and go help her!”

“Not my problem. She did this to herself.”

“Come on, don’t say that! Summon those Phantom Hands or something! Please!”

But in the midst of my pleas, the dragon opens its mouth wide before Rosalie and...

“Holy Breath!”

...a blinding beam of light shoots out of her mouth, far different from the flames she showed us in the original Gaeabrande. While holy attacks are usually only extremely effective against demons, a powerful blast like that would fatally wound anyone from such close range.

“Rosalie!” I scream.

But right before the beam of light can hit Rosalie, Chaos Machina leaps out in front of her and spreads out her arms. She’s completely vulnerable, having lost her sword. The violent noise of electricity discharging echoes until Chaos Machina’s entire body is fried. She lifelessly drops to the ground. I’m taken aback—confused—and Rosalie seems to be no different.

“Why?! Why would you protect me like that?!”

Rosalie holds Chaos Machina’s body in her arms. Despite suffering a mortal wound, she smiles just like she always does.

“It’s funny, isn’t it? It seems some habits can’t be broken... *Hee-hee...* After pretending to protect you for the past ten years...I just naturally thought, ‘I have to save her...’”

The dragon opens its mouth once more, as if preparing to unleash Holy Breath a second time.

“Seiya, hurry!” I yell, and the Great Mother immediately growls deeply.

“Mmm?!”

When I look over, countless spectral hands are growing out of the ground and grabbing onto the dragon’s legs.

“Th-thanks, Seiya!”

I can't see Seiya's expression, since he's invisible, and while he probably feels indifferent, there were now dozens—hundreds—of shadowy hands completely covering the entire area around the Great Mother. She's fully incapacitated.

I turn my gaze back to Rosalie and Chaos Machina. As Rosalie holds Chaos Machina in her arms, the demon falters:

“If you were a demon... No... If I were a human like you... Maybe we really could have become friends...”

“Chaos Machina...!”

Chaos Machina gently smiles one last time, then her head limply tilts to the side.

I-is she dead?! I can't believe a demon really helped a human!

I suddenly hear Cerceus's voice by my side.

“She said ten years wasn't long for a demon, but even then...maybe living together all that time softened her heart of stone.”

“Yeah, it's strange, but...that must have been what happened...”

Cerceus and I grow sentimental together, despite being in the middle of battle. Seiya suddenly removes his invisibility, so Cerceus and I do as well. Seiya scowls, perhaps also having been moved a little. But...

“What are they rambling on about over there? It doesn't make any sense.”

“Seiya...?! How can you seriously be colder than a demon?!”

After making sure the Great Mother can't break free from the shadowy hands, the robotic, emotionally challenged Hero beckons to Rosalie. She holds Chaos Machina's lifeless hand with a complex expression, then rushes over to Seiya as if she has come to her senses and bows.

“Y-you have my deepest apologies! I failed to assassinate the—”

“It's fine. What's done is done.”

H-huh? I thought Seiya was pissed? Then again, this is Seiya we're talking about. He's really good at putting things behind him. But to my surprise, Seiya

wears a somewhat kind expression as he approaches Rosalie until they are so close, they can feel each other breathe.

“H-Hero?”

Rosalie is struck with astonishment by how close he is. Seiya places a hand on Rosalie’s chin, then leans in even closer until their lips touch and—whaaaaaaaat?!

“You’re the one who doesn’t make any sense, Seiyaaaaaa!!”

I scream while witnessing the sudden kissing.

“H-huh?! H-H-H-Hero...?!”

Rosalie’s face turns bright red as if she has no idea what’s going on, either. Seiya then sweetly says to her:

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Th-thank you...very much...?”

“You must still be shaken up because of Chaos Machina’s death. You need to focus, though. We’re in the middle of battle.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“I’ll back you up with magic from the rear.”

Seiya places a friendly hand on her shoulder.

“I’m counting on you, Rosalie.”

“I won’t let you down!”

Her eyes twinkle as she grips the Dragon Killer. It looks like she has been able to shift emotional gears for battle.

So he only kissed her to get her to focus on battle...? I—I still can’t believe Seiya would do such a thing!

I’m extremely flustered, still unable to believe what I saw. But the tides of battle are not concerned with my dismay...because before I even realized it, the Great Mother used Holy Breath to destroy every last hand of darkness and is now staring right at us.

“So you all are the ‘irregularity’ that Chaos Machina spoke of?”

She extends her long neck and looks around.

“It appears all of my men have been disposed of.”

That’s when I first realize it as well. All of her subordinates, who were waiting around her, are lying on the ground, and beside them are shadowy hands and fire salamanders! While we were distracted by the battle between Chaos Machina and the Great Mother, Seiya was apparently disposing of her men. And yet, the Great Mother roars with laughter as if she’s impressed.

“Heh-heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-haaa! I can tell! I can feel the divine presence and the aura of the chosen one! The Goddess and Hero have arrived from another dimension!”

The earth roars as the colossal body walks heavily toward us.

“What business could have possibly brought you here now?!”

“W-we came to correct your mistakes!”

“Gaeabrande no longer needs anyone other than us! If you plan on getting in the way of our prosperity, then I shall dispose of you both!”

She raises her head high, but Seiya points calmly at Rosalie.

“Great Mother, she will be your opponent.”

Rosalie lightly nods, then charges at the dragon. Seiya simultaneously moves his index finger, creating countless Phantom Hands under the Great Mother once more. She clicks her tongue. She is aggravated by the fact that they continue to grow no matter how many she stomps or burns with her light beam. The Great Mother may be powerful as a dragon, but she’s also slow. Rosalie, on the other hand, is clearly quicker after gaining her demonic powers. She waits for an opening, then swings the Dragon Killer at the Great Mother, who is distracted by the shadowy hands, and carves into her epidermis.

“Oh, my. This is not good at all. It appears I must actually take this battle seriously.”

The Great Mother confidently sticks out her long tongue, despite being unable to move and under attack.

“Ultimate Wall!”

Her body immediately glows gold as her scales sharpen like blades! Th-that’s the Great Mother’s secret weapon! Her Ultimate Wall defends against both physical and magical attacks!

“Seiya! Rosalie won’t be able to break through her defense! You need to help her!”

Technically, Seiya didn’t even break through the Great Mother’s Ultimate Wall the last time they fought. He used Eternal Sword with two blades to gradually push her back until he knocked her into the Abyss, winning a narrow victory. Unfortunately, there isn’t an abyss to push her into this time. Nevertheless, Seiya calmly claims:

“Rosalie can handle this. The Great Mother has sacrificed mobility for Ultimate Wall, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Despite being pretty far away from them, the Great Mother apparently heard Seiya. She looks our way.

“I am impressed, Hero. You have already unraveled Ultimate Wall’s attributes, so allow me to show you its next form.”

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me! Don’t tell me she’s gonna get even bigger!” shouts Cerceus with clear panic in his voice. I swallow my breath as well as the giant dragon gazes into the sky and prays:

“May the Seraph bless us all!”

The massive Great Mother’s body instantly contracts as she returns to her former self...or so I thought. She has long, black hair, piercing eyes, and a well-defined chest. She has transformed into a human!

“This is the power of the Seraph! A transformation that surpasses even Dragon God Metamorphosis! Emperor Dragon Metamorphosis!”

“E-Emperor Dragon?! What the hell is that?!”

She swings her arm to the side, unleashing a wave of holy aura that instantly vanquishes each and every hand of darkness.

“I have reached even greater heights after defeating the Demon Lord! This is

the ultimate evolved form of the dragonewts!”

Cerceus and I shudder, but Seiya observes the Great Mother with great curiosity.

“Does that mean Mash can do that, too?”

“But of course, for no dragonewt is greater than he. The Dragon Lord has grown so powerful that he could crush the Demon Lord with a single hand.”

“Oh? Interesting.”

He can transform into an Emperor Dragon *and* wield Igzasion?! Mash’s immeasurable power robs me of all words. Nevertheless, Seiya calmly pats Rosalie on the shoulder.

“Don’t be scared. You can do this, Rosalie.”

“Yes, sir!”

Rosalie charges forward once more and swings her sword into the Great Mother’s exposed soft, fair skin. She doesn’t even attempt to dodge. However, the Dragon Killer bounces right off her body as if it had just hit hard metal. The Great Mother then raises her delicate arm and reaches for Rosalie.

“Gwah?!”

Rosalie is knocked backward, despite the Great Mother barely even touching her with the tip of her finger. She bounces on the ground a few times before managing to regain her footing.

“Ha-ha-ha! Now I can have the power of Dragon God Metamorphosis with the defense of Ultimate Wall! Furthermore...”

The radiant light appears before the Great Mother’s hand as she holds it straight forward.

“W-wait...! Is that Holy Breath?!”

“It appears she can move swiftly even with Ultimate Wall activated and can shoot holy-type beams from her hand as well.”

“She’s basically invincible now!”

The Great Mother wears a triumphant expression as she raises her arms high

into the air while facing Rosalie.

“Return to ash!”

But before she can unleash Holy Breath, shards of ice rain down from the sky and knock the dragon off balance. Only then do I notice the cool mist rising from Seiya’s body as he aims his hand at the Great Mother.

“Fenrir Shot.”

He apparently changed magic types when I wasn’t paying attention. The out-of-control ice magic, Fenrir Shot, prevents the Great Mother from pursuing Rosalie.

“Keep calm and continue attacking. I will cover you.”

“Much appreciated, Hero!”

Rosalie takes the front while Seiya handles the rear. Each one of the Great Mother’s beams is being blocked by either a hand of darkness or Fenrir Shot. Nevertheless, every one of Rosalie’s attacks bounces off the dragon’s body with a high-pitched *clink*.

“S-Seiya! I don’t think Rosalie’s attacks are working!”

“That’s fine. My plan to perfectly defeat the Great Mother is already in motion. All Rosalie needs to do is buy me time.”

I have absolutely no idea how we’re going to defeat her, but Seiya seems to already have a plan.

B-but...

Even though Seiya said the plan was already in motion, he doesn’t look like he’s doing any more than quietly watching them fight.

A Hopeless Love

Rosalie swings the Dragon Killer at the Great Mother, but the Emperor Dragon moves her upper body slightly and evades each attack. The difference in power is obvious even to me. However, when the Great Mother tries to attack, a barrage of ice shards rain down on her. Seiya is using his magic to knock her off balance. Rosalie uses this opening to swing the Dragon Killer at the enemy once more, and the sounds of something shattering echo in the air. Using her demonic powers, Rosalie swung with all her might and cleanly hit the Great Mother's head.

"She did it!"

...But after having a closer look, I realize that I was wrong. The Great Mother blocked the blade with her arm, and a piece of the sword's blade is spinning in the air.

"Wh-what?! That sound was the sound of the sword breaking?"

"Not even the Dragon Killer works on her?!" groans Cerceus. But it's not like it wasn't effective at all. The Great Mother's arm is slightly red where she blocked the attack. Nevertheless, the damage was most likely minimal, since she's using Ultimate Wall.

"Heh-heh-heh. It appears you lost your trusty anti-dragon sword. Is that all you had left?"

"Tch...!"

Rosalie clenches her teeth, but...

"Here, Rosalie. Use these."

Seiya's voice echoes as sword after sword rains from the sky before piercing the ground between Rosalie and the Great Mother.

“H-Hero...! Are these...?!”

“Spare Dragon Killers. I made seven for you.”

S-seven?! As always, he came perfectly prepared! But how did he drop them from the sky? When I look up, I notice a few Automatic Phoenixes circling overhead. Ohhh! The Phoenixes are carrying the swords in their mouths!

“Thank you!” exclaims Rosalie as she rushes over and grabs two swords from the line. She then charges at the Great Mother in a dual-wielding stance. The sword in her left hand is easily repelled when she swings, but the sword in her right hand, which she technically lost, closes in on the Emperor Dragon with its demonic power while huskily roaring in the wind. And yet...the Great Mother is even able to react to that. She crosses her arms and blocks the blade, and the shattering sound is once again the Dragon Killer breaking.

“Seiya, her sword...!”

“It’s okay. She still has a few spares. I can buy her some time with my magic as she goes to get them.”

Seiya slows the Great Mother down with Fenrir Shot while Rosalie rushes back and grabs another Dragon Killer. However, nothing about the situation is improving. Rosalie’s swords shatter once again before Ultimate Wall. Rosalie hasn’t suffered any damage, thanks to Seiya’s magic, but she hasn’t really done much damage to her opponent, either. It’s a never-ending deadlock. The Dragon Killers are gradually worn down before breaking. It isn’t long until I hear a high-pitched metallic sound—the sound of the last Dragon Killer breaking.

“S-Seiya! She’s really in trouble this time!”

While I’m panicking, Seiya is just quietly watching the fight until suddenly saying: “Rosalie. Right there.”

Rosalie doesn’t have anything in her hand. Instead, she throws a karate chop at the Great Mother. I hear the sound of flesh being ripped apart, and the Great Mother suddenly collapses to her knees!

“What the...?!”

I have absolutely no idea what happened, so I stare at Rosalie until I notice

something bizarre: She's holding a Dragon Killer in her right hand!

No way! Where did that come from?!

Rosalie gets into stance with the Dragon Killer before the Great Mother, then adjusts her lopsided eyepatch with her free hand.

"The Hero said he prepared seven Dragon Killers, but only six fell from the sky. There was no way someone so cautious would make such a mistake, and just as I expected, my hand brushed against an invisible sword right next to the sixth one."

"Perfect. You understand my message."

O-ohhh! Seiya's ability can turn not only people but objects invisible as well, so he turned one of the Dragon Killers invisible!

"That isn't any ordinary Dragon Killer, either. I infused the blade with some of my dark aura and raised its attack power as high as it could go."

"That's Seiya for you! I'm impressed that Rosalie noticed the invisible sword, too! I never would have found it! Heh!"

"Is that really something you should be bragging about, Cerceus?!"

I may be scolding the God of Swords, but I can't help smiling. A Dragon Killer with Seiya's dark aura combined with Rosalie's demonic power to cut through the Great Mother... Deep down inside, Cerceus and I are certain of our victory, and yet...

"I am impressed. That attack would have been fatal if I hadn't hardened my body with Ultimate Wall."

The Great Mother stands right back up while rubbing her neck! Despite the mark on her neck, her lips confidently curl.

"N-no way! It barely even hurt her!"

That was probably Rosalie's most powerful attack, and yet it hardly even damaged the Great Mother?!

"Seiya! We really have to help Rosalie this time!" I turn around and shout, but Seiya appears indifferent.

“Relax. My plan to defeat the Great Mother is still coming along smoothly.”

“What?! The invisible Dragon Killer wasn’t your ace in the hole?!”

“I merely did that to buy more time.”

Seiya slightly moves back some more from Rosalie and the Great Mother, then continues to watch over the battle. Even though he was backing Rosalie up earlier with magic, he crosses his arms as if the thought hasn’t even occurred to him. Rosalie, without Seiya’s support, is slowly being pushed back. Unable to take it anymore, I grab Seiya’s shoulders and shake him.

“Rosalie can’t take any more of this! It’s about time you go help her!”

“Yes, it is *about time*.”

The instant those words leave Seiya’s mouth, Rosalie powerlessly drops to her knees and coughs up blood!

“R-Rosalie?!”

The Great Mother got her...or so I thought, but Cerceus appears bewildered and asks: “Did the Great Mother *actually* attack her?”

“I didn’t see what she did, but it’s clear she hit Rosalie with something!”

But even the Great Mother appears to be puzzled as she looks down at Rosalie.

“What is wrong with this woman? She suddenly began coughing up blood. Perhaps an old wound reopened during our battle?”

The Emperor Dragon curiously tilts her head to the side, then smirks.

“Oh, well! I suppose I shall put you out of your misery!”

But right as she is about to unleash Holy Breath from her hand...

“Gwah!” she groans before immediately covering her mouth.

“Th-this is...! Gfff!”

The Great Mother vomits violet blood as well before dropping to the ground just like Rosalie!

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! Now they’re both down!”

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

Cerceus and I are utterly clueless. All I know is that the Great Mother is trembling while glaring at Seiya.

“Don’t tell me...this is...your doing...!”

“Seiya?! Did you do this?!” I shout. But when I look back at him, I shudder. His distant eyes are as cold as ice as he watches over the battle.

“No attacks work against Ultimate Wall. It is an impregnable defense that even has a resistance to dark-type weapons. Therefore, I have to dispose of her with a completely different kind of attack.”

“L-like what?!”

“The move is already in effect. Infect Lover—a dark spell that infects the enemy through contact with a disease-causing agent.”

I can’t process the words coming out of Seiya’s mouth. In fact, it sounds as if the Great Mother understands what’s going on better than I do.

“You sacrificed...this woman...to...!”

H-he infected Rosalie?! There’s no way! Seiya would never do such a thing! When would he even have a chance to— I suddenly have a flashback to when Rosalie and Seiya kissed!

“Wait! Was that kiss...?!”

“Yes. Infect Lover only activates when the caster’s lips make contact with the target,” calmly explains Seiya as if he doesn’t even feel guilty.

“Of course, being a powerful dark spell, stringent conditions are necessary to cast it. The target must physically attack the enemy sixty-six times in a row to infect them. Therefore, I allowed Rosalie to continue attacking with the Dragon Killer even if she wasn’t doing any damage. All I needed was her to make contact.”

As I stand in a daze at a loss for words, the Great Mother moans in pain: “I—I cannot believe...my Ultimate Wall was defeated...by such a...!”

Her body goes into convulsions as blood foams from her mouth. The magic-

derived disease appears to be rapidly eating away her body. Rosalie is no different. She continues to vomit blood on the ground as her body trembles and twitches.

B-but this isn't a real disease! It's probably more closely related to a curse! So...

"Seiya! Stop the spell! Hurry!"

"No. Not until the Great Mother is dead."

"Rosalie's going to die if you wait any longer! Just finish the Great Mother with your own two hands! Hurry!"

"Hmm..."

Seiya, still in a battle stance with his sword, approaches the Great Mother. She glares at him with a fierce scowl, covered in blood.

"And you call yourself a Hero...! Your actions are even more vile than a demon's...!"

"Interesting. It appears Ultimate Wall is no longer active. I could kill her now."

I can't help but rush over to Rosalie's side. I hear a dull sound, similar to a slash, in the background. Seiya must have delivered the final blow. While holding Rosalie in my arms, I yell: "Seiya!!"

"...I already lifted the spell."

"Rosalie, hold on! I'm going to heal you!"

I immediately use my healing magic on her, but she violently coughs and vomits more blood, staining my dress crimson.

N-no! I won't be able to heal her in time! Her body is weakening too quickly!

But nevertheless, I desperately try to heal her. Before I even realize it, Seiya is standing next to me as well.

"You are wasting your time. It was a dark spell powerful enough to kill even the Great Mother. Needless to say, Rosalie has no chance of survival."

"Seiya... Were you planning on killing Rosalie from the very start?"

“I decided that it was time to give up on her after her repeatedly failed assassination attempts.”

“...?!”

“But, well, I think it is a little unfortunate as well. I wanted to use Rosalie during the battle against the Dragon Lord, but she went out on a high note, at least. I should just be thankful I finished the battle unscathed.”

I can’t even remember the last time I was this furious at Seiya, but before I explode, Rosalie places her trembling hand on my chest.

“R-Rosalie?”

“It’s...okay... I’m truly happy...because I was finally able to help the Hero. Besides...”

Rosalie places a hand on her bloodstained lips—the lips that Seiya kissed—with a content gaze.

“Hee-hee... This was my first...and last...”

I can see the light in her eye grow dim. I probably would have been able to save her if I used Order, but that’s no longer possible now that the spirit world is gone. I have no way of healing a fatal wound like this. Tears roll down my cheeks. I’m frustrated at how powerless I am, and I’m incredibly upset with Seiya.

“Rosalie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you crying... Goddess...?”

“Because...!”

Although struggling to breathe, she looks up at me with her crystal-clear eye and expresses her gratitude in a hoarse voice.

“Thank you... The Hero may underestimate you, but...”

Rosalie gently smiles.

“You are still a goddess. Nothing can change that.”

Her head then limply tilts to the side in my arms.

“D-did she really die?”

I don't reply to Cerceus as I slowly place Rosalie's lifeless body on the ground and grab Seiya's lapels.

“What is *wrong* with you?! I can't believe you would do something so cruel!”

“Don't make me repeat myself. This Worn-Out Rosalie is a fake. Once we save this warped world, it'll be like nothing here ever happened. In other words, Rosalie will return to normal as well.”

“Who are you calling a fake?! The Rosalie of this world doesn't deserve to be called that!”

“B-besides, Seiya, isn't losing her going to make things inconvenient for us?”

“Don't worry. We should be able to sneak into Bahamutros with Rista's gate.”

“So, that's why... That's why we went there and immediately came back! So that no matter when Rosalie died, it wouldn't inconvenience you!”

The tears continue to endlessly slide down my cheeks.

“Rosalie did everything she could to please you! She trained so hard! She loved you, Seiya! And yet...! You...! You...!”

“I'm going to save every warped world safely and in peak physical condition before I defeat the Divine Hero and Mersais. If it takes sacrificing an illusion, so be it. What part of my strategy is wrong?”

“That doesn't mean you had to do something like this! The darkness is going to swallow you if you keep this up!” I shout, followed by a brief moment of silence until Seiya eventually lets out a “hmph.”

““The darkness is going to swallow me'? Did you forget what happened in Hulwahna? The Death Keeper said if you truly believe the warped world is real, then it will become the true world. Therefore, I am treating every single detail of this world as an illusion. Are you sure you aren't the one being swallowed by the illusion?”

“I don't believe this world is real, and I don't plan on it, either! But that still doesn't mean you should make light of the people who live here!”

I'm furious, but Seiya is staring at me with a stern gaze as well.

"Talking to you is a waste of my time. I thought you learned something during the battle against Grandleon. How many times do you plan to make the same mistake?"

My heart skips a beat. M-mistake...? Am I the one who's wrong? Is Seiya right again? But...but...!

"Th-this is going to become the real Gaeabrande if we don't save it, though. You considered what would happen if you died in Ixphoria and left instructions based on that, right? Well, why not consider that something might happen and —"

"Everything I did, including leaving those instructions, was to save the world if something happened to me. However, I have never once thought, 'What if I didn't save the world?' I plan everything I do with the belief that I will succeed no matter what. Are you saying you don't?"

"I—I..."

"Besides, if I did what you wanted me to do, I wouldn't even be able to kill Mash, despite it being mandatory that we kill him if we want to save this warped world."

"The results may be the same, but the way we go about it is important, too! Even if we have to kill him, we can still save the world with love! We can save Mash...and you...!"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Even if she was an illusion, you hurt Rosalie's spirit!"

I honestly don't know what I'm saying anymore, either. I'm just so frustrated and sad after Rosalie's death that I'm letting my emotions do the talking.

"Even if there are countless worlds, maybe there is only one true soul—one divine soul. Maybe Rosalie's soul in this world is the same one as her soul in the original Gaeabrande..."

Seiya suddenly stares at me with a serious expression.

"Show me evidence to back up that claim."

“I mean...I don’t have any evidence, but...!”

“Cercean, did Ishtar ever mention anything about that in the spirit world?”

“Huh? No, never to me personally, at least.”

“Which means Rista is talking out of her ass.”

He glares at me with a distant gaze, so I argue:



“Just because this is a warped world, your heart is going to be swallowed by darkness if you keep disregarding people’s lives like that! I want you to save them, even if they are illusions! Because that’s what a Hero would do!”

Seiya deeply sighs, then turns to me with clear contempt in his eyes.

“You’re always like this. You let your emotions get the better of you, and you behave irrationally. And it always ends with you putting everyone else in danger.”

“I—I’ve become more cautious, too, you know!”

“Did Kiriko die for nothing?”

“...?! Why are you bringing her up at a time like this?!”

I’m already crying so much that I can’t see through the tears anymore, yet Seiya decided to pour salt in my wounds.

“You’ve gone beyond mere uselessness. You’re a plague that’s getting in the way of me saving parallel worlds. You’re the *Goddess of Plagues*.”

His venomous remarks sound like something you would say to your enemy. Streams of tears drip onto the ground after slipping alongside my runny nose and who knows what else. I shout at the top of my lungs: “Wahhhhhhhhh!”

“Yo, you’re crying like a...”

Cerceus seems to be taken aback, but I continue to wail like a small child. Seiya clicks his tongue.

“Tch. Shut up, already. Stop crying and open a gate to Iglu.”

“...?! This is all your fault, you know! Wahhhhhh! How can you tell someone to stop crying when *you’re* the one who made them cry?!”

“Hurry up and open a gate.”

“Shut up!! I’m making a grave for Rosalie before we goooooo!!”

“Then be quick about it. You have five minutes.”

He then briskly walks away.

“What’s his problem?! Who’s he calling the ‘Goddess of Plagues’?! Does he

seriously think I'm going to finish making a grave in five minutes after all that?!
Ahhhhhh!!"

"R-Rista, relax. I'll help, okay?"

"Stupid, Seiya! Stupid, stupid, stupid—ahhhhhhhhh!! *Sniffle! Hic!*"

"Whoa... I've never seen a runny nose like that before."

Cerceus sounds grossed out, but I don't let that stop me from crying.

Propaganda

Through my tears, I can see Seiya in the distance writing something down on a piece of coarse paper. No matter the situation, he always seems like he doesn't have a care in the world, so I'm sure he's coming up with some sort of strategy. I cry while making a grave for Rosalie with Cerceus, if you could call it that. After he runs a claymore into the ground, we neatly bury the body. It's a simple process.

"Let's make a grave for Chaos Machina next to her... *Sniffle!*"

"Good idea. I'm sure Rosalie would like that."

Cerceus surprisingly doesn't even complain. It's times like this when I find him to be far kinder than Seiya. Although my tears eventually dry up, I was crying for so long that the hiccups won't stop. When was the last time I cried this much? Was it when Kiriko died? No, it was when Seiya sacrificed himself and used Gate of Valhalla... All I do is cry, now that I think about it. I vaguely remember being a crybaby, too, when I was a kid.

While I smooth out the top layer of soil with my hands, I think back to my life when I was first born into the unified spirit world. I was so much more timid when I was young, and the other deities my age bullied me because of it.

"Wahhhhhhhhh!"

When I went back to the sanctuary while bawling my eyes out, Aria came rushing out to my aid.

"Rista, what's wrong?!"

"*Sniffle!* Everyone said my healing magic is worthless! *Hic!* They said I couldn't even heal a scratch! And they said my nose was runnier than a waterfall! *Snifffffff!*"

"L-let me help you with that..."

She got on one knee and gently wiped my face with a handkerchief.

“It’s going to be okay. Your divine healing will get better as you get older. Besides, if Ishtar lets you use Order—”

“But everyone said I’m not even a goddess!”

Right after Aria cleaned me up, I started to cry again. I bawled for a while after that, then rubbed my eyes and looked back up to find Aria smiling right at me.

“Rista, do you know what’s the most important quality for a goddess to have?”

“Strong divine powers that are better than everyone else’s...right?”

“No, Rista. What’s most important is—”

“Rista. Your five minutes are up.”

Seiya’s voice drags my consciousness back to reality.

“G-give me one more second, okay?!”

“Hurry. We need to go before the enemy comes.”

“But Mash still can’t move because of Igzasion’s recoil, right? We’ll be fine.”

“He still has subordinates. At any rate, there is no telling what may happen, so hurry.”

It’s hard work, but Cerceus and I manage to finish burying them. Right as I’m trying to catch my breath, Seiya unenthusiastically remarks: “You could have simply brought her to Iglu and had the townspeople bury her.”

“Well, I didn’t! I wanted to bury her with Chaos Machina anyway!”

Seiya sighs. He doesn’t say another word after that.

“Ugh! I just need to open a gate to Iglu, right? Are you sure you don’t want to go back to the underworld first?”

“There’s no need to go back to train this time. I already know how to defeat the Dragon Lord safely and with absolute certainty.”

It isn’t like Seiya to throw himself into the next battle without training. He

seems to be confident he can defeat Mash, but... I have a bad feeling about this, especially after what happened with Rosalie.

After returning to the town square, Seiya stares hard at me with a serious expression.

“Rista, I understand that we feel differently about warped worlds, but do not interfere with my decisions. This is the quickest and most efficient way to save this twisted world.”

His voice is kinder than usual as he gazes into my eyes, swollen after weeping for so long.

“...O-okay.”

After I nod back, Seiya gives Cerceus orders, and he begins gathering the townspeople, including some high-ranking officials from the Human-Demon Alliance, in the town square.

“What’s going on?”

“I heard the Hero has an announcement to make.”

“Hmm? Lady Rosalie doesn’t seem to be with him.”

A few hundred people, including women and children, noisily chatter at the crowded plaza. Nevertheless, all it takes is Seiya clearing his throat for the entire audience to immediately go silent. He then speaks with a rare, emotionally driven voice.

“Rosalie...died an honorable death during the battle against the Great Mother.”

A moment of silence follows until...

“Wh-what?!”

“L-Lady Rosalie...!”

“Lies!”

The townspeople cry out in pain. Even Seiya is pinching the bridge of his nose. What the...?! Is Seiya actually regretting that he sacrificed Rosalie?!

“She bravely fought the Great Mother and sacrificed herself for the world. It was a fitting end for the daughter of the emperor.”

Seiya wears a pained expression as he clenches his teeth.

“But Rosalie is no more. There is no escaping that.”

There are townspeople who even collapse to the ground in tears. As the awkward silence grows, Seiya softly pleads: “The Dragon Lord, Mash Dragonight, is powerful. I will not be able to defeat him alone now that Rosalie is gone. Your help is essential.”

What...?! Seiya’s begging the townspeople for help?!

Cerceus and I exchange glances, unable to hide our surprise. After that, Seiya clearly states: “Are there any brave souls here who wish to pick up her torch and save the world with me?”

Seiya’s speech stirs up the crowd’s youth.

“I—I will save the world!”

“Allow us to help!”

All of a sudden, countless young townspeople crowd before Seiya.

“Use me! I’m not afraid to die!”

“I will avenge Lady Rosalie!”

“I see. Hmm...”

Seiya nods with clear satisfaction. He faces the crowd and speaks up with dignity in his voice.

“Townspeople, I am not the only Hero. Everyone who bravely stands against the Dragon Lord is a hero.”

“W-we’re...!”

“Heroes...!”

The men cheer. But I am trembling in the depths of my heart as I stand before the weeping mourners. I—I was wrong...! He isn’t regretting a single thing he did! He is just telling them what they want to hear to inspire them!

Unable to stand back and watch any longer, I run over to Seiya and whisper: “Don’t tell me you’re trying to get the townspeople to fight Mash?!”

“I want to avoid fighting him directly as much as I can, since he has Igzasion.”

“What...? How are you going to defeat him if you avoid fighting him directly?”

“First, I will lower the barrier around Iglu and lure Mash inside. After that, I will reactivate the barrier, separating him from his subordinates.”

“Y-you’d be sacrificing everyone in Iglu if you did that!”

He glares at me as if to say, “So what?”

“I need someone to act as my shield in Rosalie’s place to defeat Mash. In other words, I need a few dozen people to act as my meat-shields.”

“...?! That’s what a villain would do, not a Hero!”

“They’re imaginary people from an imaginary world. There is no need to care about them. Besides, Rista, I thought I told you not to interfere with my decisions.”

“B-but...!”

Seiya ignores me and surveys the townspeople once more. The younger ones’ emotions are still running high as they excitedly chat.

“We’re going to be heroes...!”

“We can help save the world!”

“I’m going to kill those dragonewts and avenge my father with my own two hands!”

Seiya’s powerful words put many of them in a state of exaltation. There are, of course, some who are hesitant as well.

“Me? A hero? There’s no way an ordinary person can beat a dragonewt...”

Seiya faces the somewhat familiar, timid young man and kindly asks: “What’s your name?”

“Jaimie. I used to run a fruit shop in Edona.”

“Very well, Jaimie. You’re Hero Number One, then.”

“...?! I—I’m the first hero in town?!”

“Yes.”

“Yeahhh!” cheers the crowd. Everyone turns to Jaimie with their passionate gazes, and the cheeks of the once seemingly timid man turn red as he breathes heavily.

“I—I’ve never been happier in my life!”

“Perfect. Hero Jaimie, I am counting on you to defeat the Dragon Lord.”

“I will do everything I can, even if it costs me my life!”

Seiya continues to speak to even more townspeople nearby.

“What’s your name?”

“Melvin.”

“Okay. You’re Hero Number Two.”

“Wh-what an honor!”

“I—I’m Tonio!”

“I’m Joe!”

“Yes, you’re a hero, and you’re a hero...”

“Yessssss!”

Seiya continues making heroes out of the townspeople one after the other until he reaches a few dozen and quietly mutters: “This is getting annoying.”

He thereupon points at the long line of people.

“Everyone from this end of the line to that end is a hero.”

...?! He’s turning the village into a hero bargain bin! How lazy can you get?!

I’m more fed up than surprised. That’s when a certain someone cuts through the crowd of young men and suddenly appears before Seiya. The young girl with her hair in pigtails, Nina, looks up at him with tears welling in her eyes.

“I-is there anything I can do for Rosalie, too?!”

“I admire your courage. Of course, there are roles for women as well.”

“I will do anything! Just give me the order!”

“Nina, allow me to grant you the power of a hero.”

Seiya tightly embraces Nina and places his lips over—whaaaat theeeeeee helllllllll?!

I’m shocked. And Nina is overcome with surprise.

“H-H-Hero...?”

“You have gained a new power making you as strong as the strongest men.”

Nina places a hand on her lips, seeming entranced, and then she suddenly speaks up as if she just realized something.

“Y-you’re right! I feel a mysterious power inside me!”

The men, who are watching, exchange glances and converse.

“I-it looked like he kissed her, but...I guess not.”

“What are you, stupid?! The Hero would never do something so promiscuous! He was granting her his divine power!”

It’s only a matter of seconds before a crowd of women rush to Seiya’s side.

“Hero! Please grant me your power, too!”

“Me too!”

“Kiss meeeeeeeeeee!”

From youthful women to the middle-aged, a long line forms before the Hero. It’s like watching a celebrity do an autograph signing. Both Cerceus and I can’t help but tremble.

“C-Cerceus, do you think that kiss was...?!”

“There’s no doubt about it! Infect Lover!”

“S-Seiya, wait! Get over here!”

We pull Seiya away from his fangirls and demand answers.

“That was the kiss of death that you used on Rosalie, wasn’t it?!”

“Yes, and...? Oh, don’t worry. I’m only preparing for the final battle. The spell

won't activate until I give the signal."

"That's not what I'm worried about! I—"

"Then you must be worried about the spell's strict conditions. Relax. I made sure that all the infected individuals' efforts combined would activate Infect Lover. In other words, the spell will activate if all of them combined can hit Mash a total of sixty-six times."

"Seiya! For the last time, that's not what I'm worried about!"

"Oh, are you thinking that no ordinary person could ever get close enough to hit Mash? I have that covered as well. While it would be possible for me to do it to all of them, I can make a few of them invisible. Over half of them will surely die before they reach Mash, but it isn't entirely impossible to hit him sixty-six times and infect him."

Cerceus and I are at a loss for words. Th-this Hero is hopeless. I mean... He's even planning on using young girls as his "meat-shield"! He's awful!

After that, I continue to watch Seiya kiss so many women that I start to feel sick for more than one reason. Each woman blushes with sparkling, dewy eyes after their kiss, never to know that they were just infected.

"Wow! I really do feel some sort of power swelling inside of me!"

"Me too! There's something inside of me that I can't explain!"

Yeah! What you're feeling is the pathogens from the curse!

But it's not like I can yell that out to them. Seiya faces the crowd once more after using Infect Lover on the rest of the women.

"People, listen carefully. The Dragon Lord is unbelievably strong, and many of you are going to die."

A deep silence calms the townspeople, who were excited to become heroes. Then, out of nowhere, Seiya smacks me on the back.

"Huh?!"

Everyone's eyes turn to me as I stagger. Wh-what the...?! What's going on?!

"But we have the Goddess of Salvation on our side. We have the Goddess's

protection.”

The crowd cheers wildly as Seiya flatters me. He points at me and continues: “Behold. The false idol, the Seraph, cannot even compare to her divine form.”

“Sh-she is beautiful, now that he mentions it!”

“Her celestial beauty cannot be ignored!”

Ngh...!

In the midst of my confusion, Seiya furthermore points to Cerceus.

“The God of Swords here is included as well.”

“What am I, a cheap complimentary gift?!” shouts Cerceus, but the townspeople’s excitement doesn’t dwindle. Seiya continues: “There is nothing for us to fear, for we have the protection of two deities on our side. Even if we die in battle, we will surely be reunited in heaven. In fact, only after your deaths will your true lives begin.”

“O-our lives will start after we die...? I don’t know what that means, but I’m starting to feel like he’s right!”

“Me too! I’m not afraid of death anymore!”

Growing more uncomfortable, I whisper into Cerceus’s ear.

“I-is it just me, or is this starting to turn into a scary cult?”

“I know what you mean! This must be his way of dealing with the Seraph’s teachings!”

Seiya stands before the brainwashed townspeople and sternly declares: “Our holy battle against the Dragon Lord begins tomorrow.”

Whaaaaaat?! T-tomorrow?!

Even Cerceus appears to be surprised as he approaches Seiya and whispers: “H-hey, um... Seiya? Don’t you think tomorrow’s a little too soon? Are you not going to train the townspeople?”

“Normally, that is what I would want to do, but this is a mob of amateurs with absolutely zero potential. All they need to do is act as a meat-shield for me when I fight Mash. After all, the main objective is to assassinate Mash amid the

confusion due to the sheer number of people. Worst-case scenario, I use Meteor Strike and take out the entire town along with Mash.”

Seiya coldly glares at the townspeople after easily saying something wicked as if it were nothing.

“All I need are puppets that follow orders, so I need to make sure they understand how to form lines in battle.”

Seiya trains the townspeople by teaching them how to walk and form lines. After that, he stands before the people once more, and he says to the crowd who learned how to form well-ordered lines: “Good. On my signal, men. Ready...and...!”

The instant Seiya gives the signal as their leader, the entire crowd simultaneously shouts: ““““““I’m perfectly prepared!!””””””

“...?! He made them say his catchphrase!! Ahhhhhh!”

But even my screaming is drowned out by the heated vortex of excitement created by the townspeople.

Divinity

After arriving at the town's inn, Seiya has a room prepared for Cerceus and me as if it were the most natural thing in the world, then he immediately walks briskly to his own room. I try to go after him, but Cerceus tightly grabs my shoulder.

"Rista, let him go."

"I've already let him go enough, and he's gone too far! I can't take this any longer! It's insane!"

I unload my pent-up anger on Cerceus, but he gazes right back at me with a serious expression for a change.

"Even Uno and Due said Seiya was right."

"'Right'?! He sacrificed our friend to win a fight. He's using the townspeople as meat-shields. What kind of hero does that?!"

Cerceus stares into the distance and says:

"When Rosalie was killed, I thought to myself, 'I would never be able to do what he's doing.'"

"Nobody would! He's a cold-blooded hero!"

"That's not what I mean. I was genuinely amazed by him. I mean, who could do something like that? It takes a special kind of determination to do what he did, even knowing that these are nothing more than illusions."

"'Determination'?"

"He's determined to restore this world back to its former state. While he may look cold-blooded at first glance, I think he actually understands what's most important right now."

"Y-you too, Cerceus? Do you seriously think that?"

“Even if I didn’t, that doesn’t change the fact that we need to kill Mash if we ever want to save this world. All we need to do is keep our mouths shut, sit back, and watch. Even you want to save the spirit world as quickly as possible so you can be reunited with Aria and Ishtar, right?”

In the back of my mind, I suddenly imagine Ishtar gently smiling. I then think about Aria, Adenela—each and every deity I was close to—and my anger toward Seiya gradually dwindles away, instead turning into sadness and emptiness.

“Yeah...”

I plod wearily to my room alone, listlessly open the door, then take a seat at the table in the corner.

I don’t know what to do. Should I really just keep quiet and do as I’m told?

Cerceus was right about Seiya, though. He is determined to save the world. Even though his actions seem cruel, he is doing this to defeat Mersais and the Divine Hero. I get that, but...

I take Mash’s bandanna out of my item pouch. I don’t like using psychometry in the human realm because entering Demon Mode is not only mentally exhausting but also embarrassing when I lose all self-control...

But I’m all alone right now, so it should be okay...right?

After taking in a deep breath and steeling myself, I turn into a demonic deity. I feel more or less okay mentally, perhaps because I’m the only one here. I then tightly squeeze the bandanna in my hand and focus in order to read the memories of Mash sealed inside.

...I can see what appears to be a burned field. Dragonewts are running about, trying to escape. Covering the sky like clouds are giant monsters that look like flies. Dragonewt after dragonewt is picked up and carried high into the sky before being dropped.

“Is my Dragon God Metamorphosis really not enough?”

I suddenly hear Mash’s voice from when I knew him. The youthful Mash looks up at the sky from the cliff while clenching his teeth. Elulu, young as well, is by

his side along with the Great Mother.

Elulu's still okay! W-wait! This place... Is this...?!

"Mastering Dragon God Metamorphosis in such a short period of time is an impressive feat. However, the flies have already infiltrated Dragon Village. You wouldn't be able to defeat them all."

Elulu is trembling with a downcast gaze, but she soon lifts her head back up as if she had made up her mind. She smiles.

"I—I'll do it! I'll become Igzasion! So, Mash...please save the world!"

"Elulu...!"

The Great Mother accompanies Elulu to the edge of the cliff. One look over the edge reveals only darkness. It looks like they're about to push Elulu off and start the holy sword ritual to turn her into Igzasion.

"Go, Elulu! Die and be born anew!"

"W-wait! This isn't right! I don't want to do this!"

Mash shakes his head with a pained expression, but Elulu gently holds his hand.

"The Hero may have never come to save Gaeabrande, but you know what? You're my hero, Mash."

She lets go of Mash's hand and steps back.

"Save the world, Mash..."

Although she can't hold back her tears, she still forces herself to smile, and then...she throws herself into the Abyss.

"Elulu!" screams Mash.

The Great Mother places a hand on his shoulder as he breaks down crying, but her eyebrow curiously curls after a few moments go by.

"Why is Igzasion not appearing? No... It couldn't be..."

Mash and the Great Mother climb down the cliff until they are eventually able to see the glowing magic circle at the bottom of the Abyss. Next to it, however...

is Elulu's body. She lies in a pool of blood with her limbs twisted in unbelievable directions.

N-no...! Is Elulu still alive?!

"Ahng...mn..."

Her bloodied body violently convulses as she wheezes, struggling to breathe.

"Oh, my! Elulu still isn't dead yet!"

"E-Elulu...?!"

"Mash, hurry! Deliver the final blow and kill her!"

"Th-there's no way I can do that! We have to help her!"

"Don't be foolish! There's no saving her now! If you love her, then cut off her head and put her out of her misery!"

"B-but...!"

"Look at her, Mash! She's suffering! She called you a hero!"

"Mn...ngh..."

Although trembling, Mash takes the sword the Great Mother hands him. Then...

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

He swings the blade down, along with a scream full of despair. Elulu's delicate neck is separated from her body. Not long after that, a mysterious power slowly absorbs her separated torso and head into the magic circle. The moment her body completely vanishes, the magic circle glows even brighter, and a holy sword sparkling with a sacred aura emerges.

"Marvelous! That is Igzasion! That is the ultimate weapon that can defeat the Demon Lord! Now, Mash! Take the sword!"

Mash takes the floating sword, his arm limp with despair. His face is pale as snow, contrary to the Great Mother, whose expression is full of life.

"What... What have I done...?!"

His unfocused eyes shoot open wide all of a sudden, and a small arm wraps

around him from behind.

“Mash... I’m right here...”

“E-Elulu...? Is that you?!”

I can clearly see her as well. Elulu, still young, is standing right by Mash’s side while innocently smiling like she always does.

“Can you hear Elulu’s voice? Yes! Igzasion is a living sword! Elulu is not dead!”

“O-oh...! She’s still alive even after becoming a sword...!”

Mash’s eyes well with tears. He must feel slightly relieved. However, Elulu’s phantom suddenly begins to groan as she curls into a ball.

“Ah...ng...!”

“Elulu?!”

“I-it hurts! Mash, it hurts! My body feels like it’s being torn apart!”

Blood begins to drip down her face, and before long, even her hands and feet are covered in blood as she crouches on the ground. And in the blink of an eye, her body horrifically twists until it resembles the way it looked when she first fell into the Abyss.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Mash! Please...! Please...! Kill the demons...! Kill them all!”

“Is something the matter, Mash? What is Elulu saying?”

“Sh-she told me she was in pain! And to kill the demons!”

“I see. Then we must allow Igzasion to drink the blood of the demons. Until we slake its thirst, her pain will not subside.”

Just then, a fly monster suddenly appears from above, but it’s humanoid, unlike the countless other giant flies. It’s Beel Bub, the monster that Seiya killed with the archery move he learned from Goddess Mitis. The fly monster stares at the rainbow-hued sword in Mash’s hand.

“I was wondering what that light was... *Bzzz...!* Interesting! So that’s the holy sword Igzasion!”

“...You came at the perfect time,” comments Mash as he gets into a battle stance with Igzasion, but white smoke rises from the hilt in his hand. The demon notices the anguish on Mash’s face and laughs.

“You fool! The power of the holy sword is too much for you! There’s no way a child, who’s not even the Hero, can use it!”

“...Gaeabrande doesn’t need a hero.”

“Oh? Then are you ready to die?”

Out of nowhere, the crest of the dragon on the back of Mash’s hand illuminates as it grows up his arm like a tattoo.

“Because I’m gonna kill every last demon myself!”

He wildly charges Beel Bub and swings, but the flying demon easily dodges. It flies a few dozen meters into the sky, then mockingly laughs.

“*Bzz, bzz, bzz!* Too slow, too slow! I’m the fastest general in the Demon Lord’s army! You’re not even going to be able to scratch me like that!”

Even Seiya felt that Beel Bub’s speed was a threat, so he practiced archery in the spirit world in order to avoid close combat. However...

“Full Haste.”

Mash vanishes the instant he mutters those words! He jumps into the air at lightning speed before reappearing right before the demon’s eyes.

“What...?!”

Mash freely swings his sword as Beel Bub’s face is overcome with astonishment. There is something about the move that resembles Seiya’s Phoenix Drive, and in the blink of an eye, the demon’s body is reduced to fragments of meat dispersing in the air. The Great Mother lets out a cry of admiration.

“Incredible! Mash, you are the pride of our people!”

While the Great Mother showers him with praise, the blood-covered phantom of Elulu cackles with joy.

“Elulu! Is the pain gone?”

“Thanks, Mash! I feel good! Really good! Hey, keep feeding Igzasion blood, okay? Keep making the demons suffer! Break their arms and legs like mine! Crush their lungs! Kill them, kill them, kill every last one of them! Ha-ha-ha... Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“...!”

I can't take the laughter anymore and promptly end the vision. The past I saw was so frightening that my body is still violently trembling.

...This is when Mash changed. Elulu's ghost must be with him day and night, whispering into his ear. He exterminated the demons to free Elulu from her pain, but her pain didn't go away even after he defeated the Demon Lord. She will be saved only when all races other than the dragonewts have been destroyed. That includes...humans as well.

Mash, you must be in pain. It must hurt. Yes...I have to save him from this hell as soon as possible, no matter what it takes. Seiya's right.

“...Ristie.”

A familiar voice suddenly calls my name. A young Elulu is standing next to me, but I'm not so surprised this time...*because I now understand she is nothing more than a figment of my imagination. I created her.*

“Go away. You're not real.”

“Ristie, listen... Ristie...”

“The real Elulu is already a ghost who lost her mind after suffering for so long. I only created you because I couldn't accept that.”

“No, Ristie. You're wrong.”

Elulu's illusion begins to rub her eyes while bitterly weeping.

“Seiya isn't going to be able to save Gaeabrande like this. He isn't going to be able to save any of the other worlds, either.”

I glare at Elulu's illusion.

“Go away!”

“Ristie, please... Save Mash...!”

“I—I told you to go away!”

I take a pillow off the bed and throw it at her, but it goes right through the illusion and hits the wall. I blink, and now only the pillow remains. Elulu is nowhere to be found.

The next day.

Seiya gathers the townspeople in the town square that morning and makes the final adjustments. By the time the sun is right above us, he calls everyone, regardless of their age, to the outskirts of town and neatly lines them up before looking at them with a piercing gaze.

“Our holy war against the Dragon Lord, Mash Dragonight, begins now. Do not fear death. Victory is ours.”

The men cheer while raising their arms into the air. Even the women and children have stars in their eyes as if they are no longer afraid to die as well.

“Hmm... Is this what they call mind control?” Cerceus mutters quietly by my side. After an entire day of brainwashing, the townspeople seem to be nothing more than puppets controlled by Seiya.

“Now get into position.”

Each one of them scatters off in a random direction and hides behind a different building. The once noisy Iglu now looks like a ghost town. Cerceus approaches Seiya and timidly asks:

“So, Seiya, how are you going to lure Mash to Iglu?”

“That’ll be easy. After all, he’s already nearby, since he came to check up on the Great Mother and her forces.”

“Hmm? How do you know that?”

“My Automatic Phoenixes have been patrolling the skies over the entire continent. They have been keeping their eyes on Mash from high above.”

Seiya created an unbelievable number of Automatic Phoenixes when we first ran into Mash. It looks like the main reason he did that was to watch him. I’m sure he has them spread out throughout all of Gaeabrande, telling him where Mash is.

“I was expecting him to lead thousands of soldiers and generals at the Great Mother’s level out of Bahamutros and into battle, but no matter how many times I check, he’s always alone. What a shortsighted idiot he turned out to be. He increased our chance of winning exponentially,” comments Seiya with a confident expression after learning that Mash didn’t even bring any guards with him.

“I will now be removing the barrier around Iglu.”

Seiya places his hands together and begins chanting. I’m shocked.

“S-Seiya, you can remove the barrier?!”

“Yes. I already asked the village chief how to and mastered the spell.”

When in the world did he do that? The earth begins to roar as cracks run through the barrier around Iglu! The indestructible wall, which had protected the townspeople from the dragonewts for years, easily shatters like glass. The outside world is finally visible from within the village, but all I can see are the pitiful bodies of the dragonewts and demons after their battle.

“Dragon Lord! The barrier around Iglu has been removed!”

Seiya raises his voice for a change, and a shadowy figure suddenly appears before his gaze.

“You again...!”

M-Mash?!

Seiya must have known he was coming, since he was watching him with his Automatic Phoenix, but Cerceus and I are stunned.

M-Mash is just outside of town! He stands only a dozen or so meters away as he glares at Seiya with lifeless eyes.

“Those annoying firebirds must have let you know where I am. You’re really starting to piss me off.”

“I will neither run nor hide this time. Let’s finish this.”

“Let’s!”

Mash draws Igzasion from the sheath at his waist, then begins to walk this

way with heavy footsteps. Seiya, as if he were talking to himself, explains:

“He’s impulsive. He must be mad that I got away last time, so luring him here was easy.”

The barrier around Iglu finally being lowered... The man he despises standing before him... His right-hand general already being killed and unable to stop him...

Mash probably understands that this is a trap, but everything is working in Seiya’s favor.

“Come, Mash. This town will be your grave.”

His confidence is impressive, to say the least. After all, he does have townspeople who will act like meat-shields and pathogens for him. But, well, this is Seiya we’re talking about. He probably has something else up his sleeve that he’s hiding from Cerceus and me. The town of Iglu has probably been turned into the perfect trap.

I-it’s fine! Once Mash dies, this twisted world will disappear along with him. So it’s all going to be...okay...

I try to convince myself of that while I watch Mash approaching with bloodlust in his eyes. However, I suddenly see someone behind him: the ghost of Elulu. She wraps her twisted, broken, and bloodied arms around Mash’s shoulders.

“Mash... Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill... It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...”

Her voice is probably endlessly echoing in his head. There’s no way an ordinary person can listen to that all day and maintain their sanity. Mash’s mind must have started to deteriorate toward destruction over the years.

—Mash... The whispers of Elulu’s twisted delusions must have been too much for him. The guilt must have mentally destroyed him, leading him to kill humans...

He has transformed into a mere monster. But even then, I can’t help seeing the young, innocent Mash I once knew when I look at him.

Rista, come on. Save us. Please.

The Mash I knew was crying. I feel my chest tighten, reviving memories of my own childhood.

While rubbing my head as I cried after being bullied by other deities, Aria said to me:

“Rista, do you know what the most important quality for a goddess to have is?”

“...?”

“It’s something you had when you were born. No, it’s something you had before you were even born as a goddess.”

Aria sweetly smiles at me.

“Never forget the kindness in your heart.”

Townpeople hide behind Seiya. There are already countless traps in the town. Our victory is assured as long as Mash steps foot inside. And yet, I scream:

“Mash, stop! It’s a trap!”

Memories of the Soul

"I can't believe it," mutters Seiya in clear astonishment.

"R-Rista?! Whose side are you on?!" shouts Cerceus.

Nevertheless, I keep my eyes fixed on Mash, who is still a few meters away. He stops in his tracks and curiously stares at me.

"A 'trap,' huh? Obviously. And I don't care. I'm going to cut every one of you into tiny pieces before I have to worry about any traps."

"Do not underestimate Seiya! He has ten times—no, a hundred times—more traps than you're expecting! The moment you step foot into the town, he will kill you!"

"And why would you tell your enemy that?"

"I—I..."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Because...because I feel bad for you!"

The moment I scream those words, I fly back with incredible force. Seiya had thrown me back.

"That's enough. Shut up," he coldly demands without even glancing at me. My back hits the ground so hard that it knocks the wind out of me. Cerceus runs over to Seiya.

"S-Seiya! What are you going to do now?"

"Mash is apprehensive. He isn't going to enter the town anymore."

Seiya finally turns around and looks at me, full of contempt.

"I knew you were going to get in the way somehow, but I never expected you to be *this* stupid."

“...!”

“I don’t need you to save warped worlds anymore. From now on, you’re going to wait in your room after opening gates for me.”

His voice is as calm as ever, but I can feel the full extent of his rage. Keeping his composure, he assures Cerceus:

“But this won’t be a problem. I prepared a backup plan just in case I couldn’t lure Mash into town.”

Seiya snaps his fingers, and immediately the bushes on each side begin to rustle as townspeople from Iglu pop out.

What the...?! D-does this mean that he already sent townspeople outside for an ambush before even removing the barrier?!

Some of the leaders in the Human-Demon Alliance were mages, so he probably had them use teleportation magic to hide them outside. I don’t know the details, but Seiya’s extreme caution sends a chill down my spine. He imagines several different situations in detail in order to make sure he wins. It probably doesn’t matter how much of a threat Mash or Igzasion are. They’re still no match for him.

“Cerceus, gather everyone waiting in town here. I have to tell them that the battleground has changed to the fields outside of town.”

“O-okay!”

Cerceus rushes off like a loyal servant. While he’s gone, the six townspeople who were hiding in the bushes surround Seiya to protect him. Mash looks at the militia only wearing chain mail and laughs.

“You plan on using those humans as shields? And you call yourself a hero? The only reason you showed up now and not when Gaeabrande was on the verge of destruction is because you didn’t think you could defeat the Demon Lord. Am I wrong?”

“I came to Gaeabrande, and I saved it.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“You never even bothered to show up.”

“I did.”

“You’re really starting to piss me off!”

“I came to Gaeabrande, and I saved it, but it was the *real* Gaeabrande, not this farce. This world is a mirage, and you’re nothing more than a twisted illusion that shouldn’t even exist.”

“Enough with your bullshit!”

Cerceus comes back leading a few dozen people while they argue. There are men fully armed along with Nina and other women cursed with Infect Lover as well. Seiya looks at the militia as they gather and quietly nods.

“Tch! You were talking out of your ass just so you could buy time, huh? But it doesn’t matter how many weaklings you get together. Nothing will change. Looks like that stupid woman messed up your whole strategy. Do you really think you can beat Igzasion and me just like that?”

Seiya turns a piercing gaze at Mash in spite of his smug smirk.

“I’m perfectly prepared.”

“...I’m seriously gonna tear you into pieces.”

Mash spits on the ground, then delicate, blood-soaked arms suddenly appear around his shoulders and latch onto him.

“Kill them, Mash...! The humans, the gods...and even the Hero...!”

“I will.”

“Hee-hee-hee.” Elulu’s ghost laughs before melting into the background. Mash begins to walk toward Seiya as an overpowering aura radiates from his body.

“Just you wait. Your little tricks aren’t going to work when facing true power. Emperor Dragon Metamorphosis.”

H-he can use it, too?! B-but what exactly is going to change?!

Seiya, however, doesn’t even flinch. He keeps his eyes on Mash while firing up his men.

“It’s time to give up your lives to save the world.”

“““Yes, sir!”””

The townspeople’s faces grow tense. It’s as if a violent whirlpool of hatred swallows the space between Mash and Seiya as they face each other. I can’t take it any longer, so I grab Cerceus’s shoulders and shake him.

“This isn’t right! This just isn’t right! Mash and Seiya can’t hate each other!”

“Rista, stay put! Please!”

As I try to rush over, Cerceus grabs me by the arm, but I shake him off. Elulu’s voice echoes inside my head.

“Seiya isn’t going to be able to save Gaeabrande like this.”

This might just be all in my head! But...even then, I don’t think what Seiya’s doing is right! I don’t know what he’s wrong about, but I want to know the truth! I want Seiya to know the truth! But how...?!

As I’m running toward them, I suddenly hear Rosalie’s last words in the back of my head.

“You are still a goddess. Nothing can change that.”

Rosalie...!

I stop slightly away from where Seiya and Mash are standing, and I clench my fist tightly as I think back to Rosalie’s smile before she died.

If I... If I have the power of a goddess...! Then please...! Just this once...!”

“Conversion!” I shout almost involuntarily. After transforming into a demon god, I close my eyes and clasp my hands together to pray.

Aria... Ishtar...! Please save Seiya... Please save Mash!

...The noise around me suddenly fades into the distance. A gentle breeze swallows the tense, bloodthirsty air. I can hear birds merrily chirping in the background, and I slowly open my eyes.

“What the...?!”

Seiya and I are alone together in a cramped room. No longer are we facing

Mash over that vast plain. Next to us are a cheap-looking bed and a simple table, which seem somewhat familiar for some reason.

Is this...an inn...?

“Impossible...”

Seiya restlessly looks around. He’s clearly flustered, despite usually letting nothing surprise him.

“Rista. What is the meaning of this?”

He looks at me, then immediately grabs my arm.

“Did you do this? What did you do? Where are we?”

Seiya’s grabbing my lapel...or at least I think that’s what he’s trying to do, but he is so worked up that he’s actually crushing one of my boobs!

“Eep?! Y-you’re...! You’re touching my boob, you knowwwwww!”

“Enough fooling around! Send me back! Now!”

“Fooooooooooo! I’m not fooling around, and you’re honestly hurting me! You’re gonna tear it off! Ahhhhhh!”

Seiya’s scaring me because he’s expressing his raw emotions, and he’s hurting me because he won’t let go of my boob. But as I cry and scream...

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

I hear someone’s amused laughter. I turn in the direction of the familiar voice to find a small, redheaded girl sitting on the bed in the corner of the room. Elulu looks at Seiya and me and smiles.

“Don’t worry, Seiya. We aren’t in Gaeabrande.”

“...Elulu?”

“It’s okay. Time is frozen over there.”

Seiya’s grip around my chest loosens. After quietly staring at Elulu for a few moments, he asks:

“Are you—no... What is this place?”

“Hmm... I’m not that smart, so I don’t really know how to explain, but...I guess

you could say we're deep, deep down in Mash's heart."

Seiya knits his brow in silence as if he's thinking, so I ask Elulu:

"Do you mean we're deep inside his subconscious mind?"

"Yep. And it's your power that brought you both here, Ristie."

"I...did this...?"

"It's because you're trying to save Mash."

Elulu points at a shadowy figure that appeared out of nowhere. It's Mash, just as we knew him, sitting on the chair in front of the table. He stands up while crying and approaches us.

"I'm sorry, Master Seiya. I'm sorry, Rista. Everyone, I'm so sorry. I can't believe what I've done..."

Seiya cautiously observes Mash, then suddenly turns back and glares at me.

"Hold on. Rista, this is all merely an illusion that you created to show me, isn't —"

"N-no! It's not!"

Seiya approaches Mash with a quizzical stare.

"Mash, let's check, then. Let me ask you something that only we would know."

"M-Master Seiya...?"

"I taught you how to mentally prepare yourself for battle once before. 'Doubt everything you see. Everyone is the enemy, even your family. I don't even trust you, Mash.' Do you remember?"

"Y-yeah, of course I do!"

"Then what did I say after that?"

What?! There's more?! What else did Seiya tell him?!

Mash hesitates for a few moments, then replies:

"'And of course, don't trust Rista, either'!"

“What the hell are you teaching him?! I’m a goddess, you know!”

But Seiya nods with a serious expression as if he’s satisfied with Mash’s answer.

“Hmm... It appears this isn’t simply a figment of Rista’s imagination.”

Just then, bloodstained hands appear around Mash’s shoulders from behind, and young Elulu’s face is overcome with despair.

“What...?! She even appeared in here?! But how...?!”

Darkness spreads behind Mash’s back as an adult version of Elulu leans over his shoulder while clinging onto him.

There are two Elulus?!

“Mash... Kill them... Kill the humans, the gods, and even the Hero...!”

“N-no, no, no, no! Stop it! Leave me alone!” cries Mash while covering his ears. Seiya quietly watches.

“Rista, is that the spirit of Elulu you were telling me about?”

“You can see her, too?!”

“Yes.”

It appears that Seiya can see Elulu’s ghost in this dimension as well. The wraithlike Elulu tries to pull Mash into the darkness she crawled out of.

“Maaassshhhhhh! Hurry! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!”

“R-Rista, help! Master Seiya, save me...!”

Mash reaches out for our hands, but over half of his body has already become one with the darkness. The young Elulu lowers her sorrowful gaze.

“There’s nothing I can do once that thing shows up... That’s from a different world than the one we reside in. We wouldn’t even be able to touch it...”

“B-but...!”

“There’s nothing anyone can do to save you...”

Mash is slowly dragged into the darkness. All I can do is helplessly watch until... I suddenly hear the sound of metal sliding through a sheath, and Seiya’s

brilliantly glittering blade slices through the darkness. I blink in utter confusion when all of a sudden, the darkness splits open, releasing Mash.

“S-Seiya?! What was that?”

“Dimension Blade: a blade of photons that can cut through space itself.”

I can hear Elulu’s resentful shrieking echoing from the darkness deep within the crack Seiya is staring at.

“Dieeeeeeeeeee... Die, die, die, die, die, die!”

An earsplitting scream echoes, but before long, it fades into nothingness alongside the darkness.

“Mash!”

The young Elulu rushes over to Mash. He seems to be okay, although he’s breathing extremely heavily. Tears pour down Elulu’s cheeks as she looks up at Seiya.

“Seiya... You saved Mash again just like when he was captured by Deathmagla...and you saved me again as well.”

“You have memories of that?”

“I remember our journey together. I remember Mash, too, of course. I’ll forget everything once I return to the real world, though.”

“I can’t believe this is...” mutters Seiya in a daze until Mash leaps into his arms with tears in his eyes.

“Master Seiya! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t want this to happen! The past ten years have been nothing but pain and suffering!”

Mash...!

Mash’s subconsciousness—his soul—must have been screaming the entire time he was haunted by that twisted version of Elulu’s ghost. Elulu wipes the tears from her eyes with her hand and smiles.

“But Seiya always saves us when we’re in trouble.”

“Thank you, Master Seiya! Thank you so much!”

“...No. Don’t thank me.”

Seiya quietly shakes his head before our sobbing friends, then glances at me.

“She’s the one who said she wanted me to save you, regardless of if you were illusions or not.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Ristie has always had a kind heart.”

Seiya looks away from me and lets out a deep sigh. After a few moments of silence go by, he softly mutters:

“I almost mistook the true source of evil lurking in Warped Gaeabrande for something else. And...”

“Seiya?”

“‘The soul can transcend space-time and simultaneously know all, even in an infinite number of worlds...’ I should have considered that possibility before taking action.”

Seiya approaches Elulu and Mash, and then...he does something I never even imagined he would do! He lowers his head to them!

“I’m sorry.”

“...?! S-S-S-S-Seiya apologized!!” I instinctively shout, since it’s the first time I’ve ever seen him do this, and Elulu shouts in pure astonishment as well.

“What?! It isn’t like you to apologize, Seiya!”

“I did something unforgivable to Rosalie as well. I wonder if I hurt her soul...”

Elulu smiles at the unusually meek Hero.

“You didn’t do anything wrong! You were just taking every possible precaution to save Gaeabrande, right?”

“Yes. But—”

“There’s nothing you need to apologize for. But...”

Elulu quietly looks at Mash, who apologetically lowers his head.

“Please save this warped world...”

The corners of Elulu’s mouth curl upward.

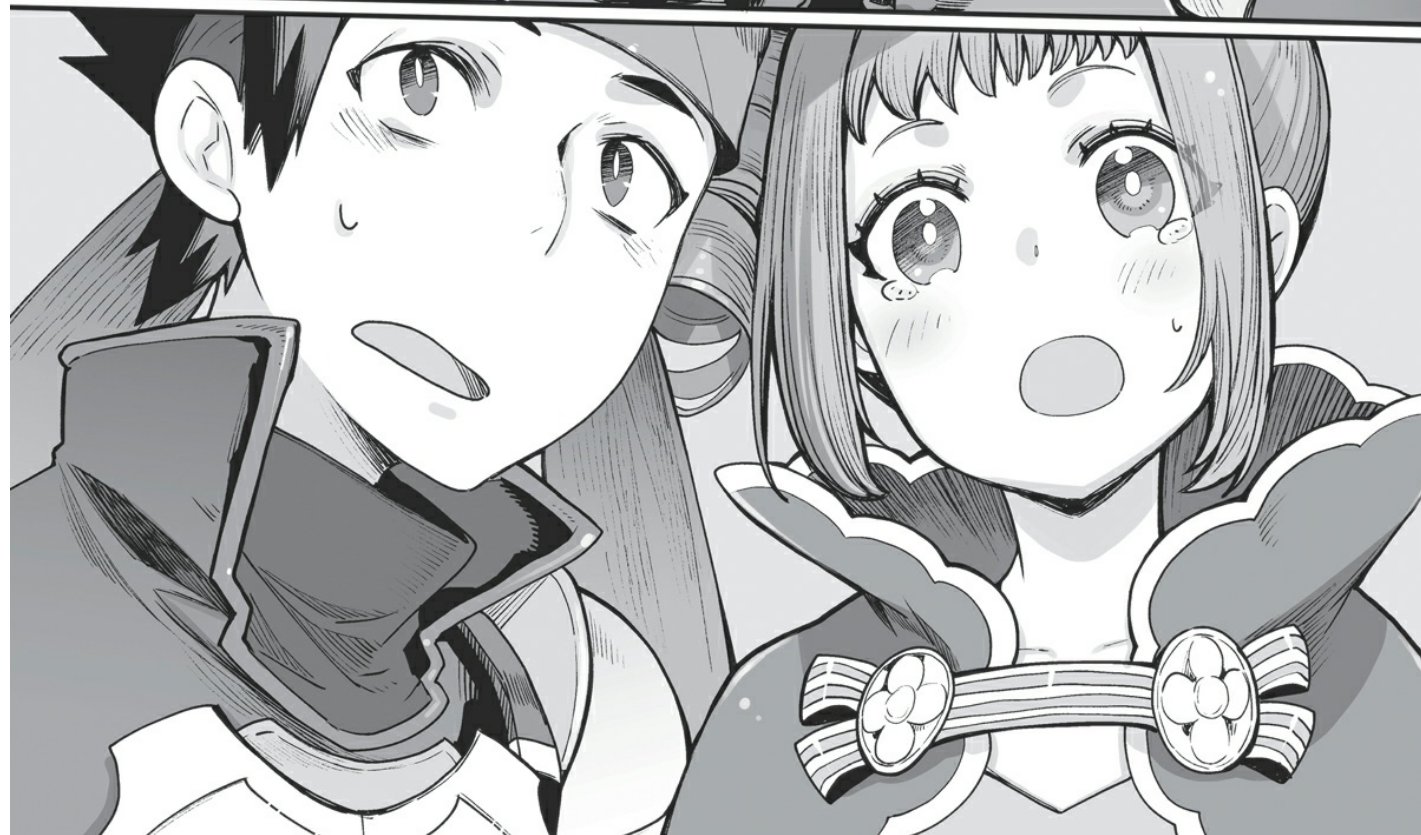
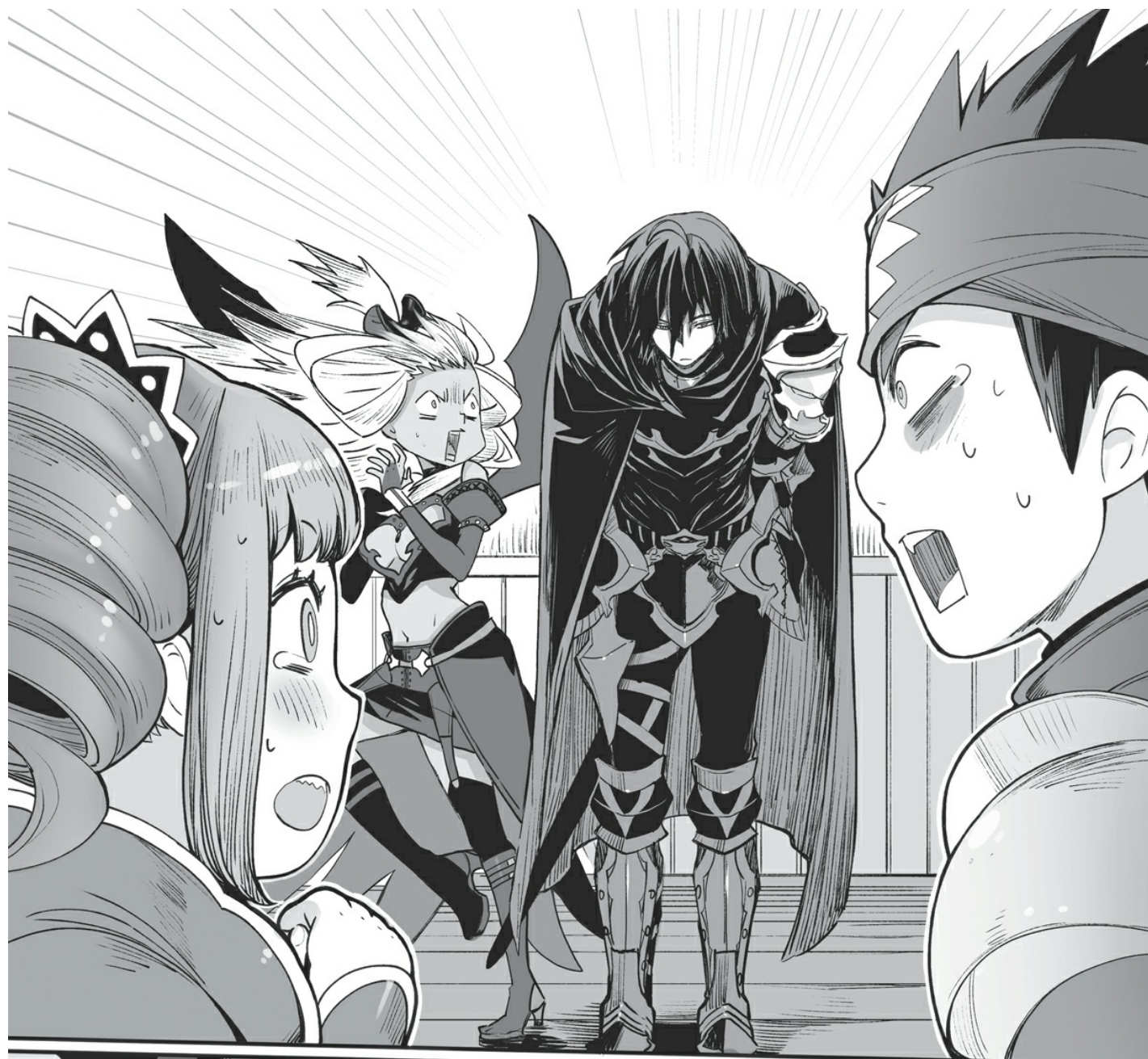
“Please take good care of Mash for me, okay?”

A heavy gust of wind suddenly blows by, and my hair flutters. When I open my eyes, I’m standing back on the field, and Seiya is facing Mash slightly up ahead.

“Heh-heh-heh! Time to unleash Igzasion’s true power!”

The unbelievably powerful aura overflowing from Mash’s body shatters his armor as his body transforms. Fangs grow from his mouth, and his entire body is covered with the tattoo-like dragon crest. He grows wings from his back and looks no different from a demon now. There isn’t even a trace of the young boy in his subconscious left. I shudder before his evil aura and even more battle-specialized appearance.

So this is Mash’s Emperor Dragon form! It’s nothing like the Great Mother’s!



“This is the most powerful force in all of Gaeabrande! Even my aura is the divine aura of a god! The recoil’s insane, but hey...I don’t care about what happens to me tomorrow as long as I get to kill you today.”

The Emperor Dragon—even more powerful than when he turns into a Dragon God. Not only have his attack power and defense increased exponentially, but he also has Igzasion’s Blessing, which adds to his overwhelming aura. Mash cackles: “Hyah-ha-ha-ha! Remember what I said? I always keep my word! I’m gonna tear out your friends’ eyes and stuff them in your mouth!”

The townspeople around Seiya panic at the sight of Mash’s transformation.

“H-how evil...!”

“D-don’t worry! We have the Goddess on our side!”

“Yeah! Do not fear death!”

The militia gather around us to protect Seiya and me, but Seiya raises a hand into the air.

“Stand back.”

“H-Hero...?”

“Go back to town. I can take care of this by myself.”

Seiya leaves the bewildered amateur soldiers and approaches Mash. Cerceus asks curiously: “Hmm? Is it just me, or is there something different about Seiya?”

Seiya keeps some distance between them, then faces Mash one-on-one. Mash glares back.

“You’re getting rid of your guards now? What the hell are you planning?”

“Dragon Lord, Mash Dragonight...I’m going to kill you with my own two hands.”

“...?! I guess it was just my imagination!” shouts Cerceus. W-we still need to kill Mash if we want to return the warped world back to normal, but...!

Seiya raises his sword and cautiously watches Mash, but for a split second, he wears a gentle expression as one would when talking to their friends.

“Mash.”

“Yeah?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Master and Pupil

He probably used Full Haste because, before I even realized it, Mash had transformed into an Emperor Dragon and was standing right in front of Seiya while holding Igzasion high in the air.

“Interesting. Your speed and power have increased even more than last time. I expected as much, though. I should be able to easily keep up if I raise my Berserk level.”

And yet, he uses two swords to block Igzasion like last time. He calmly fixes his eyes on Mash while being gradually pushed back.

“Let me ask you one thing before we begin. How, exactly, did you prepare for our battle since we last met in Nakashi Village?”

“‘Prepare’? What the hell does that mean?”

“You had plenty of time to come up with a strategy based on my size, move type, and countless other factors.”

“Coming up with strategies is pointless when you have the ultimate power of Igzasion!”

Grass suddenly rustles faintly in all directions. While Mash smugly continues to swing his sword, a few fire salamanders creep up on him. Mash clicks his tongue, then leaps away from Seiya before running Igzasion through the attacking fire salamanders’ bodies.

“I may have sent the townspeople away, but that doesn’t mean I’m your only enemy. You have to always watch out for monsters when you’re outside of town.”

“Stop running your mouth and fight me!”

Mash charges at Seiya once more while swinging Igzasion with incredible

force. The air roars with each swing, but it's obvious even to me that his attacks are lacking in precision, as if his rage is getting the better of him. Seiya continues to dodge each wild swing as he says to Mash:

"You were bragging about Igzasion's abilities when we first met, too. That was a bad move. You should always keep your best cards a secret until the moment you use them."

Seiya ducks while evading Igzasion, then sweeps Mash's legs and drops him on his rear.

"Y-you little...!"

"If you had suddenly used Full Haste in the middle of close combat, even I would have had a difficult time dodging. You might have even left a scratch on me."

"Are you stupid or something?! I showed you because it doesn't matter! This isn't everything, you know!"

Mash then leaps back and audaciously smirks as if he's had a surge of confidence. I get a knot in my stomach and a chill down my spine.

Wh-why is Mash so confident?!

"I like to slowly drive my prey into a corner before torturing them to death, but if you're gonna keep running your mouth like that, then I guess I'll just show you the true power of Igzasion—no, of Elulu."

The tattoo-like dragon crest covering his body glows, and an oppressive aura bursts out from Mash's body and Igzasion!

"Combining the powers of Igzasion and the Emperor Dragon's Full Haste creates...Giga Haste. In another second, your head's gonna be flying through the air."

"Oh? You're even going to tell me where you're aiming? How kind of you."

"Die!"

"S-Seiya!"

An even better version of Full Haste?! So Mash really was hiding an ace up his

sleeve!

I turn completely pale before Igzasion's true power and Mash's ever-growing battle aura. But that's when I realize something: The area is filled with a pitch-black aura that's the exact opposite of Igzasion's holy aura! The instant Mash casts Giga Haste, countless hands of darkness audibly sprout from the ground and grab his legs!

"D-dammit!"

Mash begins cutting away at the hands after realizing he can't move, but there are simply too many of them. The hands of darkness continue growing from the ground and reaching for his legs faster than he can cut. It isn't long before the entire field is overrun with them. Cerceus shrieks:

"How terrifying! That move is pure evil!"

H-he's right! There are hundreds—no, thousands—of them! It's like something you'd expect to see in hell!

Seiya, who unleashed the nonheroic move, calmly observes Mash desperately struggling to remove the hands of darkness.

"Of course, I expected Giga Haste to have these sorts of changes, but it doesn't matter what move you use if you cannot move your legs."

Seiya nonchalantly continues while sealing Mash's movement, and thus his ultimate move as well.

"Showing me Full Haste when we first met naturally allowed me to guess at what kinds of ability could be derived from it, which is why showing me the move was the worst thing you could have done. That's why I said you should have kept your best cards a secret."

"Don't you dare underestimate me! Igzasion, deactivate the enemy's ability!"

Mash thrusts his sword into the ground, creating a circular rainbow around it, which instantly reduces the thousands of Phantom Hands into dust!

Igzasion's deactivation ability! I completely forgot Mash could do that!

"What'd ya think of that?" asks Mash with a smirk. However... Seiya is already right in front of him with his arm fully swung back.

“Gwah?!”

Seiya’s fist furiously buries itself in Mash’s cheek before sending him flying back.

“There’s around a two-second delay after you deactivate your opponent’s abilities before you can move again. If I hadn’t used my fist, it would have been your head flying through the air.”

H-he figured that much out during our last scouting mission?!

Blood drips out of Mash’s mouth after taking a fist to the cheek, and his devilish expression makes his uncontrollable rage no secret.

“You may think you have the advantage, but this ends now. The ability deactivator’s effects haven’t gone away! Your dark magic is sealed!”

“And...? I was simply laying the groundwork for our battle with that.”

Both Mash and I look around suspiciously...then shudder. The Phantom Hands are nowhere to be found, but in their place are terrifying plants wiggling around in each and every direction.

“Seiya?! What are those?!”

“The field’s weeds absorbed the Phantom Hands’ nutrients and grew.”

“Do you mean you gave dark mana to the plants?!”

“Precisely. This isn’t magic or a move. These are new life-forms, which is why Igzasion can’t deactivate them.”

Vines from plants with faces coil around Mash’s legs. He swings his sword, but no matter how many disgusting, otherworldly plants he cuts, they immediately grow back.

“Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit, damn it all!”

Seiya’s plants curl around Mash’s body like snakes. I look at Seiya, who completely sealed Mash’s Giga Haste, and gasp.

I-it’s like an adult playing with a kid! Despite the Emperor Dragon’s and Igzasion’s powerful moves, the difference in skill between Mash and Seiya is just too much!

“You’re dead! I’m gonna kill you no matter what!”

Seiya glares at his bloodthirsty opponent with a stern eye.

“You need to be far more cautious.”

Huh...? Seiya...?

This is a battle to the death. They’re trying to kill each other. And yet, Seiya is talking as if he’s trying to teach Mash how to fight. Mash angrily swings Igzasion, but the plants still continue to regrow no matter how many times he tries. It isn’t long before he bellows in rage:

“You cheap piece of shit! I’d kill you in the blink of an eye if you didn’t have these!”

“Oh? You would, would you?”

Crimson flames shoot out of Seiya’s hand, engulfing Mash. I figure he’s adding insult to injury, but after a few seconds go by...I can’t believe my eyes.

“Then let’s see you do it.”

Seiya isn’t using fire magic to attack Mash! He’s using it to burn all the plants around him!

“S-S-Seiya?! Are you sure you should be doing that?!”

Cerceus is panicking, and of course, I’m no different. Because Mash is going to be able to use Giga Haste if Seiya gets rid of all the plants! Eventually, every last plant is destroyed, leaving only a burned field and nothing left to stop Mash.

“Heh-heh-heh... You’re fooling yourself. This time, you’re dead.”

Mash gets into a forward-bent posture with Igzasion.

“Giga Haste!”

And he vanishes into thin air! My heart begins to race!

S-Seiya let his guard down?! Is he really going to be okay?!

...Sparks fly in empty space, and the high-pitched sound of metal clashing against metal echoes around the area. Mash and Seiya are now in opposite positions from where they were a second ago, and in the blink of an eye, they

disappear once more. Countless sparks shoot wildly into the air. They must be moving so quickly that I can't even see them, but at the very next moment I see them, Mash swings Igzasion, then stands in utter astonishment.

"Th-this can't be happening! There's no way anyone can keep up with Giga Haste's speed!"

But I have already figured out the trick. Seiya's aura isn't a dark red even though he's in Berserk Mode. It's every color of the rainbow.

"That's the Joker's mimic ability! He's mimicking Mash's Giga Haste!"

"Ha-ha! He didn't lower his guard at all! Seiya just knew he had a hundred-percent chance of winning in close combat!"

Cerceus smiles in relief, but...something isn't right! Normally, Seiya would have fought without burning those plants to make certain of his victory! He must be trying to...!

Seiya charges at his irritated opponent and swings both of his blades. Mash uses Igzasion as a shield but isn't able to defend all the attacks, and his body is slowly cut, albeit shallowly, all over.

"I can't see your sword! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Eternal Sword. It's a move I learned from some creepy goddess in the spirit world."

That's Adenela's ultimate move! ...Wait. Was it really necessary to call her creepy?!

Mash promptly creates some distance between them to escape the endless tornado of blades.

"Igzasion's power is unrivaled, but you've relied too much on its attack power, causing you to neglect perfecting your swordsmanship and skills."

"Shut up!"

Mash's expression is overcome with rage until he notices the cracks in Seiya's swords as he gets back into stance. He smirks.

"It looks like your swords can't keep up with your skills and speed."

“Yes. And I already know that from past experience.”

“Yeah? So what? Knowing that’s not gonna help you when you can’t block Igzasion’s attacks any longer! It’s over!”

Mash lifts his sword high into the air, then lunges at Seiya. However, I don’t hear the sound of a sword slashing. Instead, I hear the dull sound of something breaking. Igzasion drops out of Mash’s hand and hits the ground with a *clank*, for Seiya’s fist has pierced his armor and is lodged deep inside his torso.

“The First Valkyrja: Shattered Break.”

“Gwah...!”

Spare swords suddenly fall from the sky before piercing the ground. Automatic Phoenixes must have been carrying them in their mouths just like when Seiya fought the Great Mother. Mash painfully glares at Seiya slowly drawing a sword.

“A punch...? Tsk... Are you not a swordsman...?” says Mash, withdrawing a pace.

“All you have are your fists once you lose your sword, so obviously, I’ve learned unarmed abilities as well.”

I suddenly think back to the battle against Deathmagla when I hear Seiya’s words. Mash feared Dark Firus’s overwhelming power and lost the will to fight. It was only because of Seiya’s cautiousness that he got it back. And right now...



“Wh-what the hell...are you...?!”

Mash appears to fear Seiya, but that’s when the blood-soaked arms appear around his shoulders from behind.

“Mash, pick up Igzasion and kill the Hero.”

The wraith latches onto his body and repeats:

“Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!”

“...Shut up.”

Mash ignores Elulu’s ghost and walks over to Seiya while leaving Igzasion behind, and her expression seems to resemble sorrow.

“Mash...”

“Just slicing you in half isn’t gonna cut it anymore! I’m gonna beat you to death with my own two hands!”

Seiya seems to be the only thing Mash can see anymore. Mash lunges toward Seiya and throws a punch so quickly that it looks like he teleported.

“H-he’s fast!” mutters Cerceus after seeing him punch. Seiya is dodging the flurry of punches with his upper body, but I continue to grow nervous every second that goes by. Because even a single punch that powerful would be fatal.

He doesn’t even have Igzasion’s Blessing anymore! And yet, his power and speed are...!

Seiya just barely dodges a roundhouse aimed for his head. Mash clicks his tongue in frustration, but Seiya actually seems somewhat surprised.

“Oh? So you can use unarmed skills as well? I’m impressed.”

Seiya backsteps until he creates some distance between them, sheathes his sword, then begins shaking his arms and legs.

“I guess I can spare a few minutes to humor you.”

“Tch...!”

Seiya beckons to Mash, and the taunt only makes him even more furious. He throws multiple punches to Seiya’s upper body, and he’s not punching

randomly. Mash focuses on the upper body before suddenly throwing a low kick to Seiya's leg. His combos are varied. Nevertheless, the berserker Hero dodges each and every attack as if he could see them coming from a mile away. Mash grows impatient and throws a haymaker, so Seiya uses this opening to throw a punch of his own. Mash's fist grazes Seiya's shoulder while Seiya's left fist finds its way to Mash's nose.

"Whoaaa! Did you see that counter?!" shouts Cerceus in excitement.

Mash staggers, but he grabs onto his knee and manages to stay standing.

"I have transformed into an Emperor Dragon... I'm far stronger than when I defeated the Demon Lord...so why...? What in the world is he...?"

Mash seems to be more mentally damaged than he even is physically.

"I am the King of Gaeabrande! No one can defeat me!" screams Mash as if to fire himself up, and a brilliantly shining aura wraps around his fist, which is pulled far back. My heart jumps in fright at the sight of the dense aura. It's as if every last bit of his life energy is condensed inside it.

"Cuélebre Roar!"

Mash steps forward while simultaneously throwing a palm strike. The movement is so powerful that the ground cracks under him, creating a cloud of dust and making them invisible.

"S-Seiya?!"

...They're having a bare-knuckle brawl, which isn't something Seiya normally does. I have no idea how the battle is going to end, so all I can do is swallow my breath and wait for the cloud of dust to settle.

"I-impossible...!"

When the dust settles, Mash is clearly crestfallen. Seiya blocked the palm strike with his right arm, which is covered with the same dragon crest as that of his opponent. Mash's expression is stricken with fear or something like it.

"He used Mimic to copy Mash's aura and cancel out the blow!"

"I-it's not over yet!"

I didn't realize it until Cerceus said that, but the crest of the dragon is coiled around Seiya's left arm with a brilliant light as well!

"Cuélebre Roar!"

Seiya throws a palm strike into Mash's solar plexus, folding his body and causing him to drop to his knees like a marionette whose strings have been cut.

"He canceled out the attack with his right arm, then struck with his left! He used Mimic to combo!"

"Damn! That was insane! I had no idea he could do that!"

Mash spits up gastric juices mixed with blood onto the ground with a self-deprecating smile.

"You're strong... Is this really the power of an inferior race—of a human...?"

He tries to stand, but he staggers once more and collapses. The match is clearly over...but out of nowhere, the wraith appears behind Mash once more.

"Mash, go pick up Igzasion and kill him! Now! Go, go, go!"

"Shut up, Elulu. You're pissing me off."

"You can't beat him without Igzasion! Hurry!"

"I told you. I'm gonna kill him with my own two hands. Don't get in my way."

Mash is covered in cuts and bruises after a barrage of attacks. He was absolutely no match for Seiya, and yet it's as if the life in his eyes has finally returned.

"Mash, why...? Why, Mash...?"

Meanwhile, Elulu's ghost sorrowfully lowers her gaze, but when she lifts her head back up, her face is menacingly twisting.

"Well then, it looks like I have no use for you anymore."

She opens her mouth widely, split from ear to ear, revealing countless needlelike teeth, and bites Mash's neck.

Rightfully Yours

What...?! Did Elulu just...?!

Copious amounts of blood trickle down Mash's neck as he collapses. *Crack. Crack.* Elulu, covered in blood, moves away from him, then begins to move her arm and leg joints back in place. She stands.

"Wh-what is going on?! That woman just came out of nowhere!"

"Cercean?! You can see her, too?!"

Elulu slowly licks her bloodstained lips with her long tongue, then turns her gaze at Mash as if she were looking at garbage.

"He was nothing more than a fake hero, after all. And yet, I am still shocked by the difference in power..."

She redirects her piercing gaze at Seiya.

"Your attack surprised me in his subconsciousness. I suppose I shouldn't have expected any less from the true Hero. I can see why Lady Mersais considers you a threat."

"...?! H-how do you know Mersais?!"

An ominous aura hidden inside Elulu's body erupts. She opens her mouth, split from ear to ear, and cackles. It's a shrill, eerie laugh.

"Space-time has been distorted, Goddess Ristarte. I was sent around a decade back in time to Gaeabrande when the Goddess of Atrocity destroyed the spirit world. Why? To reinforce the distortion of the S-ranked world, which is essential for all warped worlds, and to kill you all when you finally made it here."

"Just who are you?!"

"I am the Devil of Enchantment, Marionelda."

Th-the Devil of Enchantment?! So Mash wasn't the only cause of Gaeabrande's distortion?! H-hold on...!

"If you're not the real Elulu, then where is she?!"

"She fell into the Abyss and transformed into Igzasion. That's when I switched places with her. I pretended to be suffering as Elulu, forcing Mash to kill while emotionally scarring him as well. I did it all to control his spirit."

"I-it was you all along...?!"

"So she's the real last boss?!"

Cerceus uncharacteristically unsheathes his sword with a serious expression. The devil reacts and faces him.

"I have the Blessing of Atrocity, which transcends the laws of physics, along with my own powers of Enchantment. The Hero, Goddess of Healing, and God of Swords are nothing to fear."

A sinister aura explodes from Elulu's body, and her body rapidly begins to decompose, unable to withstand its own evil aura. Her flesh rots off while dropping to the ground, and centipede-like insects start to crawl out of her eye sockets. Countless maggots emerge from the rotting flesh and fall to the ground.

"Eeeeeek!"

Cerceus throws his sword to the ground and swiftly hides behind me, startling me.

"...?! Tch! You really are nothing to fear!"

I turn my gaze from the undependable God of Swords to the dependable Hero, but looking at him only brings me despair. I didn't notice this during his fight against Mash, but sweat is running down his forehead! And he looks discouraged! He's breathing heavily, and he looks like he's in pain!

"S-Seiya!!"

In addition to being in Berserk Mode for a long period of time, he has continued to use Mimic, which requires a massive amount of mana! Seiya used as much mana and stamina as he could to save Mash's soul!

Seiya sometimes pretends to be weakened or tired to deceive the enemy, but my gut is telling me that this time is different! This isn't part of any strategy! Seiya is legitimately exhausted!

"Seiya's in trouble, Cerceus! We have to do something!"

"You're right! Let's start off by turning invisible!"

"...?! Are you always thinking about ways to run away?!"

"O-of course not...?" Cerceus stutters while already halfway invisible. Seiya, out of breath, then exclaims:

"You two...don't need to do...a thing..."

"B-but...!"

"I already know that Mimic exhausts a large amount of mana...and I have already overcome that weakness."

"Huh...?"

It suddenly gets dark, so I look up...and jump. Countless firebirds are gathered over Seiya's head like clouds, completely covering the entire sky. Seiya raises a hand into the air, and the firebirds immediately return to him as if they're being absorbed into his body!

"I am reducing these Automatic Phoenixes to aura in order to replenish my exhausted mana. Through absorbing them, I have already replenished around seventy percent of my mana. This is the true power of Automatic Phoenix Infinity."

"You're replenishing your MP through absorbing them?! I had no idea that was even possible!"

"...Heh-heh."

I suddenly hear a muffled laugh. Although lying on the ground with a severe injury, Mash is looking up at us.

"He's been preparing for this moment...ever since the day we met... This idiot isn't normal..."

After absorbing enough mana, Seiya calmly cracks his knuckles, then turns to

the devil with a fixed gaze.

“While this may be a warped world, you are going to pay for torturing my bag carrier.”

And yet, even after knowing that Seiya is healed, the Devil Marionelda eerily curls her lips into a smile. I scream to Seiya:

“Seiya! Holy magic’s effective against devils!”

Mash and the Great Mother were holy-type, so Seiya’s dark skills were effective against them, but devils are the complete opposite. Dark spells would hardly do any damage. Instead, their opposite type, which is holy, would be their weakness.

“Rista! Can Seiya even use holy magic?”

Seiya can use Dimension Blade, which is a holy sword skill. He even learned Shining Arrow from Mitis in the past. However, he wasn’t able to learn how to seal curses during the battle against Celemonic. In other words, he isn’t bad at it, but he wasn’t able to master all the high-level holy spells, unlike fire magic, which is Seiya’s specialty.

“Don’t worry! I’ll back you up!”

I rush out in front of Seiya. Yes! Now’s my time to use the curse-sealing ability I learned from the Goddess of Wealth, Baldr...after paying her a hefty fee! It should be extremely effective against devils!

“Yeahhhhhh! Ye-yeahhh! Let’s do this! Yea—”

“Shut up.”

“Bfff?!”

Seiya kicks me on the butt, sending me rolling on the field with my underpants clearly exposed.

“What the hell’s your problem?!”

“I don’t need your help, since I already mastered dark magic in the underworld.”

“But you won’t be able to hurt devils with—”

“Conversion.”

The instant Seiya snaps his fingers, a holy aura suddenly radiates from his body! O-oh yeah! If he reverses his magic type, it'll be just like he mastered holy magic! Damn! How convenient!

“H-hold on! Are you sure that's a good idea?! I thought using Type: Opposite in the human realm would make you lose control!”

Seiya's holy aura is immense, but with that great power comes instability. His aura is all over the place like an electric discharge.

“Yes, and that's precisely what's happening. That damage would have been enormous if this were fire or dark magic, but holy magic isn't much of a problem...unless you are a devil, that is.”

A ray of light shoots out from the aura and grazes the devil's side. But even after looking at her smoldering arm, Marionelda laughs shrilly once more.



“What amazing power. But it means nothing if you can’t get near me. While you may be the Hero, you are still human. You would be a fool to think you could defeat the embodiment of darkness.”

Marionelda emits a pitch-black aura from her rotting corpse, which transforms into a giant human skull floating in the air.

“Endless Dreamer!”

The skull of dark aura filling the air suddenly vanishes. The bad feeling in my gut swells into my throat until I suddenly feel something on my cheek. But when I touch it, countless squirming maggot-like insects stick to my hand.

“Eeeeeeeeeek!!”

I try to fling them off, but my arm is already decaying like an undead, and maggots are crawling out from the tears in my flesh!

Wh-wh-wh-what’s going on?! Was I hit with an attack?! But when?!

“Gahhhhhhhhhh!”

There is a man by my side screaming as well. It’s Cerceus...and he’s holding one of his arms!

“My arm fell off! It fell offffffff! And bugs are crawling out of my bodyyyyyyy!”

“M-me too! What is going on?!”

We are freaking out until Seiya calmly calls out to us from behind.

“Don’t be scared. This is just an illusion created by the enemy. Your bodies are completely fine.”

She caught us in an illusion! That makes sense! She did say she’s the Devil of Enchantment, after all!

Seiya helps me regain some of my sanity, but when I turn around...

“Huh?!”

One of his arms has fallen off as well! And his body is way more undead-looking and decayed than mine!

“S-Seiya, you’re not looking so good, you know! Are you okay?!”

“I don’t feel any different at all.”

The devil watches us in amusement.

“The Devil of Enchantment, Marionelda... Using illusions to control people’s minds through fear so she can use them as her puppets... What a cowardly, despicable creature.”

...?! I—I’m pretty sure I remember Seiya brainwashing the townspeople so he could use them, too?! Twenty-four hours haven’t even gone by!

Seiya notices my reproachful gaze and frowns.

“What?”

“N-nothing. Anyway, be careful! Your opponent’s a devil! She’s far more powerful than any demon lord you’ve fought so far!”

The fact that the enemy’s illusion spell is working despite Seiya’s holy aura is proof of that. Her dark magic isn’t normal.

“I have already simulated a battle against a devil, since I am going to have to defeat their leader, Mersais, eventually. This should be good practice for that.”

Seiya then begins walking toward Marionelda, and she laughs with amusement once more.

“Hyah-ha-ha-ha! What a brave Hero you are! But the closer you get to me, the stronger the illusions become!”

Thud.

It’s a dull sound—the sound of Seiya’s left arm rotting off and hitting the ground! He continues to bob toward the enemy, despite not even having anything below the knees.

“Wow! Impressive! I can’t believe you made it this close to me without even batting an eye! But you are about to step into new territory! Behold the power to awaken even your sense of pain!”

“Our sense of pain, too?!”

Right now, we just look like creepy undead, but we’ve taken absolutely no damage.

But if she's able to replicate the pain from having our arms and legs torn off, then...!

"Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hero! The pain you now feel is no different from reality! Your arms and legs will rot off as your organs decay until the pain causes you to go insane!"

"S-Seiya!"

One of Seiya's eyes pops out and drops to the ground the moment I scream.

"Ack?! He lost one of his eyes!" shrieks Cerceus. Seiya, however, continues to trudge toward Marionelda as if he couldn't care less.

"It's just an illusion."

"B-but Seiya...! Your eye...!"

"It didn't actually fall out."

But before Seiya even finishes his sentence, his nose rots off and falls to the ground.

""His nose fell off!""

"It didn't fall off."

His other eye falls out and rolls on the ground during the exchange.

"Seiya?! Every part of your face is falling off!"

"I can still see her, despite losing my eyes, and I can still walk even though my legs are gone. That alone is proof that this is simply an illusion."

Seiya continues to walk. Marionelda suddenly notices that Seiya's holy aura is burning her body, and her expression grows tense.

"Wh-why?! The pain should be too much to bear! You should be writhing on the floor and passing out! How are you still walking?!"

"So this is your ability? What a worthless power."

Before I even realize it, Seiya is already right in front of the devil. Marionelda's face is stricken with fear as if she has never seen such a monster. Th-then again, Seiya does actually look like a monster right now! Regardless, she shouldn't

have underestimated the Hero's conviction and stubbornness! Illusions aren't going to work on Seiya!

But that's when I notice something: A trickle of blood has escaped Seiya's tightly pressed lips and is running down his chin!

Th-that isn't an illusion! Maybe Seiya really is in extreme pain, and he's just acting tough?!

"S-Seiya!"

"I'm fine. It isn't a big deal. Besides..."

Seiya glances at Mash, who is lying on the ground while holding his neck after being bitten by Marionelda.

"There's someone who has been through much more excruciating pain for the past ten years."

After deeply exhaling, he unleashes a blinding aura from his body. While Seiya usually doesn't express his emotions, it feels almost as if his incredible aura is the embodiment of his rage.

"Ooo! My body's healing!"

Bathing in the powerful light, our decaying bodies slowly regain flesh and return to normal! Meanwhile...

"Gwah...!"

Marionelda's smoldering body is completely engulfed in flames until Elulu's body is scorched black and crumbles away...revealing the shadow of an even larger monster inside!

So that's the Devil Marionelda's true form!

"Never did I expect to meet someone who could resist my power!"

The shadow monster is floating up toward the sky as she gradually fades, melting into the background.

"S-Seiya! I think she's trying to get away!" shouts Cerceus.

"Don't worry. I already have her surrounded."

“You already have her... Ah?!”

The out-of-control aura radiating from Seiya’s body has already expanded toward the sky like mist. It gathers around Marionelda’s body before promptly materializing into a giant sphere of light, trapping her inside.

“Purge Cage. Furthermore...”

Laser-like beams shoot out of Seiya’s palm like Fenrir Shot, piercing the sphere of light.

“Gwahhh!” screams Marionelda like a wild animal. The rays bounce off the walls inside the sphere like a mirror, relentlessly skewering her body over and over again.

“Everlasting Ray. While not powerful, the rays can essentially continue reflecting indefinitely inside Purge Cage.”

Marionelda’s shadow is relentlessly hit until it’s full of holes. Nevertheless, Seiya continues to shoot Everlasting Ray. A lot of his shots miss because his holy aura is out of control, but each beam that makes it inside the light sphere endlessly joins the others reflecting off the walls, piercing Marionelda’s body. Thousands—tens of thousands—of light rays shower her body until she lets out one last death wail and vanishes.

“Y-you did it!”

“Did that really just happen?! That was a *devil*! And you crushed her!”

Cercean and I join hands and rejoice, but...

“Die.”

Purge Cage compresses as Seiya closes his fist until it produces a radiant light and explodes without even leaving a speck. All that’s left is the wild blue yonder. Cercean creases his eyes and asks: “Hey, Rista. What was the point of that explosion?”

“Yeah, Marionelda was already dead before he even said, ‘Die’... A-anyway, we won!”

But Seiya’s stern expression doesn’t change. I follow his gaze...to find Mash standing upright. Despite being fatally wounded, he somehow managed to rise

to his feet as his legs tremble. He then drags himself over to Igzasion, picks it up, and points it at Seiya. The Hero gets into battle stance as well.

“Wh-what’s going on? The devil’s already dead, right? Wasn’t Mash just being controlled by her?”

“That still doesn’t change the fact that he’s one of the reasons why this world was warped...”

Mash flashes a grin, then throws Igzasion to Seiya.

“Use it. It’s rightfully yours.”

Seiya quietly grabs its hilt and then gets into a middle guard stance. Despite copious amounts of blood pouring out of Mash’s neck and dripping down his legs, he smirks.

“So ‘this world is a mirage,’ and ‘I’m a twisted illusion,’ huh? Heh...I’m starting to think there might be some truth to your bullshit story, after all.”

Mash then throws his head back as if he’s gazing at the heavens and spreads his arms out wide.

“Then send me back. Make me the real me again. Put an end to this shitty decade.”

Seiya silently nods, then vanishes into thin air.

...Everything happens in the blink of an eye. I don’t even hear the sound of his sword. It’s so quick that pain must be a foreign concept. Mash’s head has been removed from his body, and Cerceus looks away as it hits the ground.

“This is...too cruel... It all feels...so hopeless...”

“No, Cerceus. You’re wrong.”

Because at the very last moment, I heard the voice of Mash’s soul.

“Thank you, Master Seiya.”

The tears well up in my eyes, and before long, even Seiya holding Igzasion becomes nothing but a twisting blur. Wait. The world is actually twisting. I begin to stagger as the world shakes and ripples just like when Mersais twisted the spirit world.

...I suddenly realize that Mash's body is nowhere in sight. Not only that, but the horrifying battlefield has been replaced by a pure-white snowfield. There are no townspeople when I look back. The town of Iglu itself doesn't even exist. There is only gentle snow falling upon the vast field of Alphoreiz.

"Mash! Rosalie's calling for you! Hurry, wake up!"

"Mn... Yeah, yeah..."

"Hurry! Come on!"

Elulu is wildly shaking Mash, who has been taking a nap under a large tree.

...Seiya, Cerceus, and I headed over to the Roseguard Empire because we wanted to make sure the warped world had really returned to normal. Since the distortion's gone, I was able to open a gate straight there. After that, we turned invisible under Seiya's orders, snuck into the castle town, and searched around until we found Elulu and Mash in a spacious garden.

"Quit it, Elulu! I'm already awake!"

"Massshhhhhh! Wake uuuuuup!"

"...?! For the last time, I'm already awake!"

Mash gets frustrated with Elulu, who's still shaking his body. Seiya, watching their exchange, quietly says: "They're cuter when they're like this. I hope they never change."

"...Hmm? Seiya, did you just smile?"

But when I turn around to check, Seiya is already back to his usual emotionless expression. He then turns on his heel.

"Are you sure you don't want to at least say hello?"

"They probably think I died during the battle against the Demon Lord, and I don't have the patience to explain what happened."

"Oh, come on. Just say hello."

"I still have work to do. There's still something that concerns me as well."

Seiya glances at Igzasion, and a chill runs down my spine.

Wh-why does Igzasion still exist, even though we already fixed Gaeabrande?

Right as Seiya starts walking away, Elulu speaks up with clear surprise in her voice.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Mash?”

“I don’t know... The tears just... That’s strange.”

“Did you have a sad dream?”

“Yeah, that must be it.”

“I actually had a dream this morning, too. I can’t remember exactly what happened, but I remember being in pain and being scared. It was a really sad dream. But...”

Elulu gently smiles.

“It had a happy ending!”

“Guys!” echoes a voice coming from the castle. Rosalie, with azure hair, walks over to them.

“I was looking for you everywhere, Mash. The bronze statue is finally complete.”

“Y-you mean the statue of Master Seiya?!”

“It’s all thanks to Rosalie for working so hard supervising the project!”

“It took a really long time, huh?”

It sounds like they made a statue to honor Seiya for saving the world. Both Mash and Elulu seem thrilled, but Rosalie is frowning.

“I... I want to destroy that statue!”

“Rosalie?!”

“Why?! You’re the one who said you wanted to make it!”

“Y-yeah, I did, didn’t I? That’s strange... I’m extremely grateful to him for saving the world, and yet lately, I get so frustrated every time I think about him...”

I-is this an effect from what happened in the warped world?! Does her soul

still remember her being sacrificed?!

“Sigh.”

Seiya softly exhales.

“I need to go apologize to Rosalie eventually. But only after I fix all the warped worlds.”

“Y-yeah...”

I follow Seiya as he gallantly walks ahead when I randomly remember him squishing my boob in that subconscious world. Hold on! Seiya still hasn't apologized for that! He even told Elulu and Mash he was sorry but hasn't shown any remorse for what he did to me!

“Seiya! Don't you have something you want to say to me?! Like about how you grabbed—”

“There are still many things I don't understand about the warped worlds. I need to learn more.”

“Don't ignore me! Hey!”

But the Hero's piercing gaze is fixed only on what's ahead.

“Rista, we're heading back to the underworld. I'm going to talk to Hathies and get to the bottom of this.”



AFTERWORD

First, I would like to thank everyone who picked up a copy of *The Hero Is Overpowered but Overly Cautious*, Volume 7. While I am extremely grateful that Volume 7 got published almost immediately after Volume 6, I have to admit it was a lot of hard work (lol). I had so many other things to do in addition to writing: checking the anime and comics, creating preorder bonuses, etc. However, I like to believe that something worthwhile was created.

Volumes 6 and 7 were Warped Gaeabrande's Arc, which was split into two parts. In other words, this is the end of the Warped Gaeabrande Arc.

Seiya continued to make light of the lives of the illusions in the warped world just like he did in Volume 6. He tried to avoid as many battles as he could while still defeating the enemy. Though his actions may have seemed cruel, he was doing this only because he wanted to make sure he could save the world with caution and certainty. Rista, on the other hand, is a goddess (by definition, at least), so she is extremely compassionate and felt incredibly uncomfortable watching those around her die, even though they were illusions in a warped world, which ended up causing friction between her and Seiya. When I wrote this volume, I wanted readers to wonder who was right between Rista and Seiya, and I wanted them to imagine how things might end between Seiya and Mash as well.

At any rate, Saori Toyota once again drew extremely lively characters for me for the warped world, so I would like to thank Toyota from the bottom of my heart along with everyone else who came together to publish this book.

When I was working with various people from various fields with the anime and comics, I thought to myself, *Creations like this can only come together because there are countless people who are supporting them from the shadows.* If you don't have people drawing the key frames, you won't have an anime, and

if you don't have editors, publishers, and book starts, you won't have any books. Of course, I am extremely grateful to all those who are helping me directly, but I also realized just how grateful I am to the people I don't see who are working hard to make this a reality. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude one last time to everyone who came together to make the anime, comics, and this book series a reality. Thank you so much.

Currently, I am working on the Warped Ixphoria Arc, which is being posted on the novel website Kakuyomu. And just to give a little hint of what it's about, the setting is shifting from a medieval European fantasy world to something closer to present day. I can't really say much more than that without spoiling it, so I will stop there, but I have a lot of ideas I want to put on paper, so please look forward to it.

Until then, I am looking forward to seeing you all when Volume 8 comes out.

Light Tuchihi

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