




The **FRUIT** of **EVOLUTION**

7

Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

美紅
MIKU
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U35
illustrator



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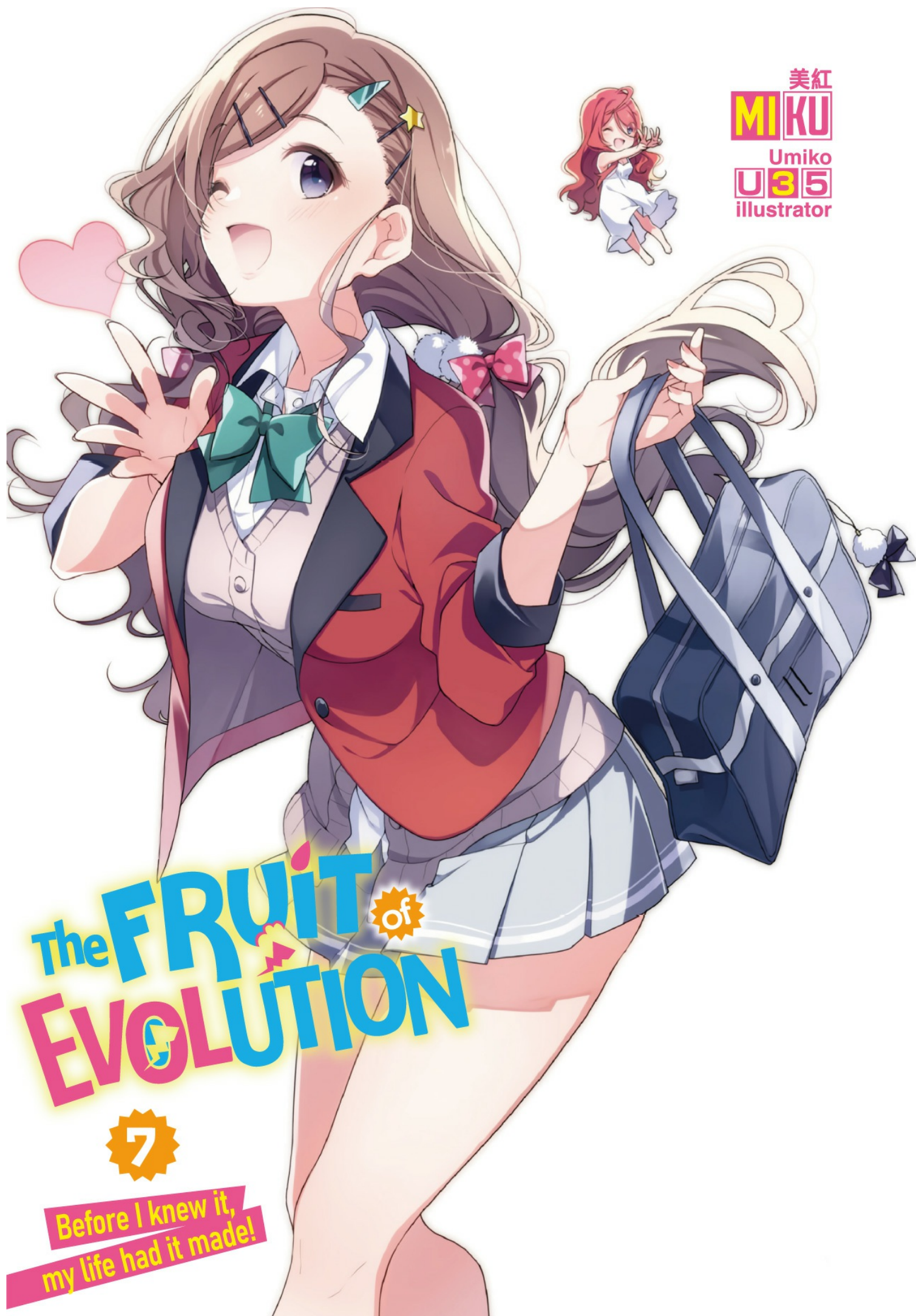
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Makoto
Hiiragi

Dead

Ichimi
Hiiragi

Dead

Seichi

Former
Bullied Kid

"Sure is!
Never thought
I'd see one in a
place like this!"

"Let's take
a picture
with it!
Can we?"

"What do
you think you are,
tourists?!"

"Makoto-san,
Makoto-san!
It's a real
Buddhist
statue!"



"M-My name is Saria!
I'm...um...
Seiichi's wife!"

Saria
Kaiser Kong



Landzelf
ford
Windberg
.....
King

“Landze-dono!
As soon as I heard
your call, I bunny
hopped right to
your door!”

Gustle
Clout
.....
Guildmaster

“F-Fine! Fine,
I’ll tell you
everything!”

Airi
Seto
Gal

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A grayscale illustration of a young woman with long, wavy, light-colored hair. She has large, expressive eyes and a gentle smile. She is wearing a dark-colored dress with a large, light-colored bow at the collar. The background is a soft, out-of-focus version of her hair and dress.

THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION 7

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

Miku 美紅


Hanashi
MEDIA

Chapter 1: The Phantom King

“Excellent work, Seiichi-dono! You’re a regular Life Energy Master now!”

“I’m a what?!”

Between Zeanos and the Heroes’ instructions, I was able to obliterate every Phantom that crossed our path. I’d gotten to the point where instead of just imbuing my physical attacks with Life Energy, I could lace my spells with it or even fire it off in waves of pure force.

I still don’t get the whole life-wave thing, though. I think about it and Phantoms just die? Do I really have that much Life Energy in me?

My thoughts were interrupted by a familiar mechanical voice in my head.

>You acquired Title: Life Energy Master

That’s the actual name of the Title?! I knew it was going to pan out like that!

Still feeling cheated, I used Analysis on the new title.

>LIFE ENERGY MASTER: A Title for those who have perfected the use of Life Energy. You have officially beaten G.

Again with the robot anime comparisons! And I’m better than G?! Holy shit!

As I was still reeling, however, the First Demon King, Lucius-san, grinned at me.

“Congrats! Who’d have thought you’d get the hang of it so soon? You’re really knocking my socks off.”

“I knew it. This isn’t normal, is it?”

He scratched his head thoughtfully. “Let’s see... It took me about a week, give or take.”

One of the Hero’s companions, Gars, shook his head. “Nah, that’s still crazy. It took most of us half a year to get it down.”

Zeanos nodded sagely. “Hmm... I likewise mastered it within a week, but I doubt Seiichi-dono even took a full hour.”

I knew it, I'm crazy! How am I faster than the First Demon King, let alone the Hero's Party and their mentor?! I've been wondering what the hell my body's been evolving toward for a while now, but if I've already beaten out a Demon King, what am I supposed to be? A god?!

Dad, however, only smirked. “Can’t say I understand, but that sounds like some mighty high praise.”

Mom nodded happily. “I’m so happy our boy’s making friends!”

“Course he is. He’s our son!”

God, that's so embarrassing! I'm glad to hear they're proud of me, but still!

“I’d expect no less from a man who’s eaten the Fruit of Evolution,” Zeanos said with a smile.

“Oh, right!” His words rang a bell, and I remembered something I’d heard back at the Barbodel Magic Academy. “You’re the guy who found it in the first place!”

He raised a curious eyebrow. “You’ve learned that much now, have you?”

“Yeah, but it was pretty much an accident. Since we’re here, though, it might be nice if you could tell me everything you know about the fruit?”

His smile thinned. “Unfortunately, I don’t know much. If not even the gods know of their growth, then what could I know?”

“Well, uh... I guess that answers that...”

“I was able to glean a few basic facts, of course, but nothing you haven’t experienced yourself. I’m afraid there’s nothing more I can tell you.”

“Oh...”

And here I was getting my hopes up...

“Not that it matters now,” he continued with a small sigh. “You and your companion have eaten the last of the Fruit of Evolution in existence.”

“I—what?” I blinked vacantly. “I’m, uh, growing more.”

“You’re *growing* it?!” His eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Haven’t you heard a thing I said? The Fruit of Evolution possess powers beyond any god’s understanding, and you’re cultivating it?!”

“It was the reward for perfectly clearing the Forest of Endless Heartbreak,” I replied sheepishly. “I got a few more then, and I thought it might be nice to have some more, so I made a new kind of magic to—”

“Of course you did! Why wouldn’t you?!” He let out a heavy sigh. “No human should be able to grow the Fruit. That was why they could only be found in that dungeon. Even then, the Fruit that you and that gorilla—er, Saria-dono ate should have been the last.”

“Damn...”

It’d never occurred to me that Saria and I were the only ones to have ever eaten the Fruit of Evolution—though Lulune *did* eat one much later.

Still, who the hell is Sheep-san for giving away such an insane prize for clearing the Forest?! Don’t tell me he’s more important than I thought? N-Nah, no way! Please say it isn’t so! If he’s that crazy powerful with a rotten personality like that, then we’re all doomed!

I sighed heavily at the thought. “Hahh... Well, whatever. This means I can take on the Phantom King now, right?”

“Exactly.” Zeanos nodded. “Now we need only find it.”

Right, we don’t know where it is.

At that moment, however, a low, rumbling voice seemed to reverberate from the very ground beneath our feet.

“Are you the wretches so intent on halting my revival?”

“Huh?! Wh-Who’s that?”

Zeanos’s face grew grave. “It seems it has found us.”

I had no idea what was going on, but I could feel a deep-set, tingling unease on the back of my neck. Slowly, I turned around to find a grotesque, bloated creature floating there. It had countless face like patterns on its murky skin that each looked kind of like Munch’s famous painting *The Scream*.

Eww! What the hell?!

“Uh... Who are you?” I asked.

“I am the Phantom King. I have no name.”

“Uh... Good for you, I guess?”

That’s a surprise. It saves us the pain of hunting it down, but why doesn’t the King, of all Phantoms, have a name? Or are all Phantoms like that? Not that it really matters either way, I guess.

I noticed that Abel and the other former Heroes were sweating bullets.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” Abel muttered.

“How is it this strong?!” Anna fretted.

Liliana nodded slowly. “Yes... I never expected the scent of death would be so strong on it.”

“Just standin’ close to that thing gives me the chills.” Gars shuddered emphatically.

I can second the whole chills thing. I mean, it’s just gross.

Zeanos shot me a sidelong look. “To be clear, they’re stunned at the strength of its negative energy, not its appearance alone.”

“Huh?”

“You can say that again.” Lucius-san grimaced. “I never thought it’d be *this* strong.”

“Makoto-san?” came Mom’s voice from behind me. “Doesn’t that look like modern art?”

“Yeah,” Dad echoed. “Those faces, the weird body... I know I’ve seen it in a museum or something!”

My parents seemed unfazed by its appearance, somehow, and I even found myself agreeing with Dad’s observation.

“Seiichi.” Abel shot me a hard look, as if to admonish me for being so lax. “Don’t let down your guard for a second. That thing’s stronger than we could’ve

imagined.”

“Is it, though?”

I really doubt that. I was average—actually, way below average—back on Earth, so I’m used to literally everything being stronger than me. I don’t think that’s news.

It didn’t matter how strong it was, though. I had to beat it one way or another, so I just had to throw my full power at it and hope it’d be enough.

Abel seemed to notice I still wasn’t worried, but before he could open his mouth again, the Phantom King began to change. Its skin-like surface began to ripple, then burst, as something disturbingly humanlike emerged from within—
“What?!”

“You’re kidding!”

Forget the Heroes, even Lucius was struck speechless. I didn’t recognize it, however, and neither did my parents or the Treasure Chest, so none of us were too bothered.

It had split into four humanoid shapes now. The first was a noblewoman with striking eyes in a fine dress, followed by a fussy-looking elderly man in slightly less opulent clothes. Third was a middle-aged priest with a craven smile, and last of all was a young man with a confident grin in finely-ornamented armor.

Uh... Who are these guys supposed to be?

Zeanos, on the other hand, was trembling in horror as he stared at the noblewoman.

“E-Elizabeth...?” he muttered weakly.

Wait, where have I heard that name?

Behind me, I could hear Zeanos’s maid-turned-lover, Mary, shout in surprise.
“M-Madam?!”

Madam? So she’s Zeanos’s ex-wife, then... WHY?!

As I was panicking, though, the woman sneered, “It’s been quite some time, Zeanos. I haven’t seen you since you ruined my life.”

The elderly man beside her looked down at Zeanos and scoffed, “You can say that again. Zeanos... Abel and your rabble, too. Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused Us? We would have you put to death again if We could.”

Zeanos paled. “Y-Your Excellency...”

Finally, it all clicked. All the shapes the Phantom King took were people who’d had a hand in their fates. Elizabeth was obvious, and the old guy was probably the Emperor of the Harmarl Empire that showed up in *The Tale of the Dark Noble, Zeanos*—Erushtat the Third or whatever. From the sounds of it, he was also responsible for driving Abel and his party to death. That made it clear who the other two were, then.

“Pierre...” Abel muttered.

The priest sneered, “Don’t even utter my name. You’re making me sick.”

It was the former healer of the Hero’s party and the man who had betrayed them, Pierre.

Lucius-san grimaced at the sight of the man in armor. “Never thought we’d meet again.”

“Hah!” he scoffed. “Stop acting so high and mighty. I fucking *killed you*, worm. You rotten demonkin should just suck it up and admit you’re nothing more than lowly cattle.”

Sounds like he’s the “Hero” who killed Lucius-san, then. Since I ran into Zeanos and the others, maybe you’re supposed to meet people tied to your fate... but again, why?! This place doesn’t make any sense!

As if sensing my confusion, Erushtat the Third began to explain. “As We had such a crucial hand in your fates, We awakened when you did. We must commend you for being useful for once in your miserably short lives.”

Okay, so he’s a condescending prick. Got it.

Elizabeth nodded haughtily at Zeanos. “I never wanted to see you again, of course. If you hadn’t been so utterly inane, my life would never have fallen apart. I couldn’t enjoy my wealth at all when you went and made yourself a criminal. Everything is *your* fault!”

She's got one hell of a victim complex...

"I... I was jealous," Pierre muttered darkly at Abel. "You heard me! I was jealous that you got all the girls! That's why I sold you out! Haha, serves you right! Anyone with a girlfriend deserves to die!"

Jeez, Pierre, what made you such an incel?! That's why you killed your friends?! I was joking when I said you were only jealous back in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak. I never thought you were actually that petty!

"You and your asshole demonkin buddies should all be long dead by now," the "Hero" scoffed at Lucius-san. "But no, you couldn't just suck it up and be a good little slave. Looks like I'll have to kill your friends in front of you all over again. Ahh, I can't wait to see that stupid face of yours scrunch up in despair again!"

God, this guy's balls-to-the-walls insane! How is he any kind of hero?!

They all seemed bad enough to be part of the Phantom King, but the others were all shaken, and none of them looked ready to fight.

"You have some nerve interfering with Our rebirth." Erushtat the Third frowned. "Your sins can warrant no forgiveness. As such, We shall bestow upon you the most gruesome and final death We are capa—GWEIGH?!"

His smug monologue was cut off as I grinned and slugged him square in his cocky face. The force of my Life Energy-infused fist was enough to vaporize his head clean off his shoulders, his headless body slumping weakly to the ground and rapidly fading into motes of light.

"What?!"

Everyone, enemy and ally alike, stared at me in shock.

Huh. That sure didn't feel like punching a ghost.

Still trying to wrap my head around the sensation, I turned back to Zeanos and the others.

"These guys are all part of the Phantom King, right? Can I just beat them all and call it a day?"

"Why are you asking now?!"

For some reason, they seemed just a little bit shocked.

Chapter 2: Resolution

After completely blowing Erushtat the Third away, our remaining three opponents were deeply shaken.

Elizabeth jabbed an accusatory finger at me, her voice trembling. “Y-Y-You! How dare you? Have you no mercy?!”

“E-Exactly!” Pierre stammered. “His Excellency was still talking, even!”

“How thoughtless! And you call yourself a human!” the “Hero” spat.

Hey! I am human, at least technically!

I wasn’t expecting three of the worst people I knew to call me thoughtless, though.

“But you still want us dead, right?” I asked them. “Who cares if we fight sooner rather than later?”

Elizabeth scoffed. “Even so, there’s a proper order for this kind of thing! Honestly, you commoners are so—”

I ignored her, this time driving my fist clean through Pierre’s chest.

“H-Huh?”

He didn’t even have time to scream before disappearing into motes of light.

I cracked my knuckles as I looked around. “Two left, then.”

“Shit!” the enemy Hero cursed, eyes widening in horror. “You’re insane!”

I don’t know why he’s so scared of me.

“I-Impossible... This can’t be!” Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief. “We’d only just woken up from within the Phantom King and clawed our way out, all because of Zeanos and his rabble! Without him, we may be lost inside the King still! But now that we’ve finally regained our freedom, you have to... This isn’t fair!”

“Uh. Thanks for the exposition, I guess?”

That at least explained why Elizabeth and our other foes were conscious now. Zeanos and the others awakening had triggered them. If it wasn't for them—if I'd made it here alone—I'd be fighting the Phantom King in its full, blobby form now. It didn't seem related to my arrival, after all, and I didn't know if this whole turn of events was good luck for them or bad.

No, of course this is good. I got to see Mom and Dad again.

Behind me, I could hear my parents talking with Naturliana-san.

“Hey,” Dad said. “Who were those four weirdos? And why's there only two left already?”

“I'm afraid I haven't been following any of this,” she confessed. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Seiichi?” Mom called to me. “Are you fighting those poor people?”

“Yeah, stop picking on them!” Dad echoed.

“I-I don't think that's quite it,” Naturliana-san explained awkwardly. “But... Um... Oh, how should I put this?”

And Dad, I'm not picking on them! They literally started it! I'm not the bad guy here, honest!

Fortunately, the noncombatants' chatter seemed to bring Zeanos and the others to their senses.

“I was admittedly taken aback at their appearance, but I suppose Elizabeth and His Excellency had as much of a role in my fate as anyone else here,” Zeanos reasoned.

Abel seemed to be in agreement. “Too bad the emperor and Pierre are dead already.”

“How about this, then?” Lucius-san suggested. “Zeanos and I can take out the last two—that'll give us some nice closure.”

“I like that.” Zeanos turned to me. “Could you leave them to us, Seiichi-dono?”

I shrugged. “Sure, but are you sure you’re up to it? You’re not as strong as you were when you were alive, right?”

“Maybe so, but that’s our problem, not yours.”

Judging from the determination in his eyes, nothing I could say would get him to back down from this. I obediently stepped back, letting the pair take the frontline. As soon as they stepped forward, Elizabeth and the so-called Hero grinned.

“You’re really dumb enough to fight me yourself, slave?” the Hero sneered at Lucius-san. “You’ve got some real nerve!”

“Are you sure you want to do this dance, Zeanos? Very well! I’ll unleash decades of stress and hatred on you here and now!”

Oddly enough, though, Zeanos and Lucius-san looked at the pair with only pity in their eyes.

“Elizabeth... If only I was stronger, this might never have happened.”

“Maybe it wasn’t you,” Lucius-san mused. “Maybe we were both victims of the times.”

Elizabeth blushed a violent shade of red. “What?! How dare you look at me like that! Of course this is all your fault!”

The Hero shuddered. “Gods, that’s just nasty! I can’t believe a *demonkin* is trying to sympathize with me! I’m gonna be sick!”

Elizabeth and the Hero conjured clouds of black spheres of energy in the air around themselves and launched them at their opponents in a single, concentrated volley. It looked like pure negative energy—if even one of those projectiles connected, it’d be bad news.

“Consider this my repentance,” he told her softly. “Rest in peace, free from your pain.”

He drew an ebony rapier at his belt that looked just like my Rapier of Festering Hatred, and in a single blindingly fast step, he closed the distance between himself and Elizabeth and plunged his sword deep into her heart.

“I’m a Demon King, and you’re a Hero,” Lucius-san muttered aloud. “But if we met under different circumstances, maybe this could’ve ended differently.”

Lucius conjured a dozen-odd black spears with a sweep of his hand. They soared through the air with startling speed, dashing apart the Hero’s attack before embedding themselves in his chest.

“N-No...” Elizabeth whimpered.

“You’re kidding...” The Hero wheezed.

Just like that, it was all over. Zeanos and Lucius-san seemed as shocked to see the pair fade into light as everyone else.

“...”

“That was... unfulfilling,” Lucius-san muttered sadly.

Zeanos turned back toward me. “Perhaps being so close to you strengthened our own life energy, Seiichi-dono. I have you to thank, then, for letting me grant Elizabeth such a quick and painless end.”

“Zeanos-sama...” Mary weakly called out to him from behind.

Before I could tell the Dark Nobleman to stop apologizing, though, a deep voice interrupted us.

“No... Not yet... I will not be defeated so easily!” A dark, writhing mist was building where Elizabeth had been standing, slowly taking shape. A pair of gleaming crimson eyes flashed from within the shadows. *“I am the Phantom King! I cannot be destroyed by mere humans so—”*

“Jeez, stop ruining the mood!”

Just when Zeanos was hitting an emotional turning point, that ass-fog had to come back!

I punched it square between the eyes out of frustration, and just like that, it was wiped clean out of existence, leaving not even dust.

“You could’ve at least waited until he was done talking,” I grumbled before turning back to Zeanos. “Okay, you can get back to being emotional again.”

“That’s... an awfully big ask.”

Yeah, I knew that.

It was a frustrating way to cap things off, but at least the Phantom King was out of the picture—and without even putting up much of a fight.

>You have leveled up.

Great, and I got a level. What a way to cap off a lame fight!

Chapter 3: A Step Toward Happiness

After getting the level-up from killing the Phantom King, I decided to check my Status. Everything was the same as the last time I looked, except for the Skills section.

“Huh...?”

There was a new Unique Skill listed there—Tuning.

Great. Another weird, inexplicable Skill for my collection.

I used Analysis on it, eager to solve the mystery.

>TUNING: Allows tuning with your surroundings.

What does that MEAN, though?! Can't they just explain it?! Is that really the best they can do?!

With no other way of figuring out what the Skill did, though, I was forced to give up on it. I was still brooding over it when Mom, Dad, and the Treasure Chest came up to see me.

“How ruthless...” the chest droned. “I pity them...”

“Yeah, sorry about the excessive use of force there,” I apologized earnestly. The words were especially biting since the Treasure Chest itself had died a very similar death.

Sorry, little guy...

“You’ve sure grown up since last I saw you,” Dad said, ruffling my hair. “You’ve made your old man proud.”

“I can’t wait to see what you’ll do next!” Mom said with a smile.

It was a little embarrassing to be treated like a kid at my age, but I was too happy to protest.

It didn't last long, however, as a strange voice began to howl from all around us.

"Seiichi-sama... Seiichi-sama..."

"Huh?"

"That voice..."

"What in the world is that?!"

My companions all braced themselves for a new, unseen foe, but I recognized the voice.

"Oh, hi, Underworld-san."

"The Underworld?!" Abel's huntress companion, Anna, looked around us in shock. "You're saying the Underworld itself is talking to you?!"

"Uh. Yeah?"

"How can you be so calm...?"

I didn't know how to reply. It felt pretty normal at this point, but panicking seemed like a normal-enough response.

I-I'm not saying I'm not normal, though!

"Everything okay?" I called out to it.

"Yes... I was able to safely birth a new gatekeeper... You have my thanks..."

"You're welcome."

Lucius-san shook his head, a thin smile creeping across his face. "Having a whole world talk to you is weird, but you take everything in stride, don't you? I think you're even stranger for that."

I didn't know how to answer that. He was right, of course.

I turned back into the wind. "That means my job's done here, right? You can send me back to the world I was in before, right?"

"Yes... As promised, I shall return you to the realm of the living..."

"Hell yeah!"

Great! It'll be like I didn't die at all!

My excitement was short-lived, however, as I realized a potential problem.

"Wait... Does time in the living world pass the same as time here?" I wondered aloud.

There were tales like Urashima Tarou, about a guy who'd made it back to his world safely, but centuries had passed by the time he was back. That seemed like a pretty awful way to part with Saria and the others. The Underworld sky didn't seem any different, either, so I couldn't tell how much time had passed.

"No need to worry," the Underworld whispered to me. "Time here passes at the same rate it does in the living world... You have only lost a day here at most..."

"Really? That's a relief."

No Urashima Tarou for me, then. It'd suck to have everyone I know die of old age like that, and I don't want to suddenly turn super old, either... Though knowing my crazy body, I'd probably evolve out of it somehow.

"I'd like to go straight home, then," I announced. "Mom and Dad and everyone else can come back with me, right?"

As I turned to look at my companions, though, they all seemed deeply uncomfortable.

"Uh... Anything wrong?" I asked nervously.

"Sorry, Seiichi," Dad replied sadly. "We can't come with you."

"You... You what?" It didn't make any sense. I had no idea what he was trying to tell me. "That's crazy talk. Let's just go. Everyone else is coming, too, right? Zeanos?"

The Dark Nobleman slowly shook his head.



“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“But why?!”

“Because we’re dead,” Lucius-san replied bluntly.

“What...?”

“This is goodbye,” Zeanos asserted.

“Why? We beat the Phantom King, so you can come back with me, right?” I was sweating now. “Wh-What do you mean, you’re dead? Look, you’re just as alive as I am!”

“We already told you,” Lucius-san insisted. “We may look like this, but we’re just as dead as we were before you came.”

“That doesn’t make sense!” I pressed, taking an aggravated step closer to him.

“Once you’re dead, there’s no way to return to life. Resurrection Magic only works right after someone dies. That’s the way the world works, and nothing you say now can change that.”

“U-Underworld-san!” I called frantically. “You can do something, right?! I needed them to beat the Phantom King! It’s only right they come back with me!”

“Seiichi-sama... I cannot. I am the Underworld itself... I am bound to its laws more strongly than any other.”

I didn’t reply to it. All I could do was clench my fists and stare down at my feet.

Mom lovingly embraced me. “It’s okay, Seiichi. You’ll be fine without us, I know it. You’re our son after all. You have people waiting for you in your new world, don’t you? You can’t make them cry now.” She was smiling, but tears were spilling down her face. “Go on, now. I know they must be waiting for you. Even though we can’t go with you, you’ll have a fun and wonderful life. Stay positive, now.”

That was the last straw.

“I don’t care!” I screamed.

The Underworld itself seemed to waver in surprise.

“That’s just how it is? Have a wonderful life? Save your bullshit!”

Dad’s expression hardened. “Seiichi, we’re trying to have a serious—”

“I don’t care how serious you are! Fuck off!”

His jaw dropped. “Fu... What?!”

Every word out of their mouths just made me angrier. Sure, there were countless stories out there where the protagonist met their dead friends and went on to live a happy life without them.

But how can I have a happy ending if they’re dead?!

“If you really want me to have a happy life, then live! How am I supposed to go on if half the people I love are dead?!”

“This isn’t a fairytale,” Dad scolded me.

“No, it’s not!” I screamed back.

Stories could be cruel. Any time the protagonist had to walk a road paved with his friends’ corpses was proof of that.

“This isn’t a story, so I’m gonna do whatever makes me happy! I’m bringing each and every one of you back to life with me!”

It sounded stupid, like I was mocking life itself, but I couldn’t just put a lid on my emotions. I had to be true to myself, even if it was selfish of me. I didn’t care how many laws of nature I had to break or what anyone else said. My mind was made up. I was going to be happy.

Dad finally recomposed himself enough to frown sternly at me. “Go on, say what you want. That doesn’t make reality any less cruel. Give it up.”

Even with everything and everyone around me fighting against my will, however, I had one surprising ally—my body.

>Skill: Tuning has been activated. Now tuning your environs.

My jaw dropped.

Huh? Tuning? What's that even supposed to do now?

The next second, my companions began to glow.

"Huh?!"

"What on...?"

Everyone looked down at their shining bodies in shock as the voice rang out in my head once more.

>Tuning complete. Change Log: Seiichi-sama's "Living" property has been applied to surrounding individuals. All instances of the "Dead" property have been replaced.

I didn't know how to reply to that—looking around, nobody did.

Lucius-san composed himself just a little more quickly than the rest of us, a smile playing on his lips. "Well, I'll be... Who knew you could break the rules?"

Dad's eyes went wide as saucers. "You're kidding!"

The Demon King nodded. "It looks like Seiichi-kun just brought us back to life."

A ripple of shock spread through the group. Even the Underworld seemed stunned, but from the quiver in its voice, there was no mistaking it.

"I cannot believe it... You have all returned to life, as Seiichi... You may return to the world of the living now... I have no idea how this is possible..."

For a long moment, nobody said anything. Then, Mom and Dad descended on me, hugging me tight.

"Seiichi!" Dad cried. "Y-You mean I can really watch you grow up again? That's what you're telling me, right?!"

"Seiichi," Mom muttered happily. "Seiichi...!"

I didn't mind that they were squishing me—I just hugged them back, grinning.

"That's right," I told them. "Just promise me you'll keep on living even after I'm an adult, okay?"

"Yeah... Yeah!" Dad nodded fervently.

“Of course!” Mom wept. “I can’t die again before I see my grandkids grow up big and strong! You should get married as soon as possible!”

“Isn’t that a little too much, too fast?!”

I’m still a high schooler! Er... I’m a teacher now, but I’m still too young for that!

Zeanos and the others were all celebrating their literal new lives in their own ways. Some people said they wanted to die in a way that mattered, but I didn’t want that—I couldn’t let anyone I loved die. Now that everyone was alive and safe, I was truly happy.

Chapter 4: Returning

“Seiichi.”

“Yeah?”

Once we knew we’d all be returning to the realm of living together, Dad looked into my eyes seriously.

“I want to make one thing perfectly clear. Don’t *ever* do something like this again.”

“Huh?”

I had no idea what he was getting at.

“Let’s say someone had a long, happy life and passed away of old age. Do you think it’d be okay to bring them back?”

“Well, that’s... uh...”

I didn’t know how to reply, and Dad gently tousled my hair.

“Do you know what ‘defiling the dead’ means? That’s what you’re doing here, in a way. I want to make it clear that I’m grateful for your gift of life, and I’ll put my time to good use. But life is *supposed* to end in death, and you can never truly bring back the dead. Don’t forget that.”

I had no idea how to reply, and he took my silence as encouragement to continue.

“Some people don’t live long lives. Sometimes you can cure an illness, sometimes you can’t. That’s fate, in a way. Aside from that... well, what do you think you should do if someone close to you dies in an accident? Think carefully about what I told you before you reply.”

Dad always used to scold me just like that. He never got angry. He made me think about what I’d done. He was clearly looking for an answer aside from raising the dead, and I came up with a decent guess.

“I should try to be careful myself? That way, I won’t die the same way.”

“Good answer. Prevention is the best cure, after all. But how should you ‘be careful,’ exactly? How do you avoid an accident?”

“Uh...”

I had no idea. You could run yourself ragged worrying and preparing for the worst, but no matter what you did, bad stuff would still inevitably happen. I didn’t know how to even approach something that abstract.

“It’s simple,” Dad told me. “You just have to protect us yourself.”

“I—what?”

“I know I failed, but you weren’t born a man for nothing. You need to be strong enough to protect what you love.”

“I... I’m not sure that’s a real solution.”

Really, Dad? I guess some things never change...

It was because he was always there to gently guide me, though, that I’d made it so far through so much hardship.

“I know I rambled a little,” he continued, “but all your old man’s trying to say is that death isn’t always a bad thing. Don’t just take things at face value or go off what others say. You need to be able to think about these things for yourself.”

I nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

Zeanos seemed to overhear us, and he approached us.

“I doubt this can ever happen again, Makoto-dono.”

“Zeanos-san? What do you mean?”

“This is only what I can glean from what I felt, but Seiichi-dono’s power changed our dead bodies into living bodies to match his own. Such a thing is only possible here in the Underworld, the sole place where the dead can interact with the living as equals. Should someone die in the living world, he would be unable to revive them in the same way. Once one dies, after all, their

soul departs for the Underworld, and I doubt the circumstances would be so perfectly coordinated ever again.”

“Yes...” came the Underworld’s wisping voice in agreement. *“I’ve made it far harder to enter the Underworld now... I must have been affected by Seiichi-sama’s power as well... I can do things now that were impossible before... Tightening the entry restrictions is one such thing... The living will no longer be able to teleport here, nor can they pass through the gate at the western edge of the living world...”*

Wait, I had an effect on an entire world? This is just getting ridiculous...

Either way, it was clear this was a one-time-only stunt, as it probably should be. I knew from the beginning that they were all dead, and I was asking far too much by insisting they all go back with me. At the time, though, I couldn’t bring myself to accept it was goodbye forever.

I really went and screwed things up this time, didn’t I?

Still, getting to see my parents and everyone else again, knowing they were doing well, feeling their warmth again after being so sure I’d never do so again—it was too much to bear. I couldn’t say goodbye to them again so easily.

My body’s evolving and changing all the time, whether I like it or not, but I’m still every bit as childish as I’ve always been... God, how embarrassing.

“But to be honest,” Zeanos admitted, “I’m elated to be returning to life as well.”

“You are?” I echoed dumbly.

“Some may consider your actions here a defilement of the natural order, but I wanted to live. To be alive—with Mary.”

“Z-Zeanos-sama.” The maid blushed.

“I’m every bit as selfish as you, Seiichi-dono. As selfish as it is to revive the dead, however, it is every bit as self-centered to speak on their behalf... though that is nothing more than my own opinion. Don’t mind my rambling.”

“Uh... Okay.”

I honestly didn’t know what the two of them were talking about.

Can't they say it any simpler? Er, wait, that's right. I'm stupid.

"Enough of that!" Lucius-san announced with a raucous laugh. "Don't you see poor Seiichi-kun's frozen up?"

"W-Was I that obvious?"

"It was all over your face."

Yep, that sure sounds like me.

I laughed it off, but as I did so, I remembered something I'd been meaning to ask the Underworld.

"Come to think of it, you said you gave birth to a new gatekeeper already, right? Are they already on the job?"

"Not yet... I have only just created them... I believe they are still close to you..."

"Close to me?" I echoed blankly.

I turned around to find a massive statue there—a big Nio statue, like the kind they had in pairs outside temples, as if it had popped off a textbook page. The only odd thing about it was that it was striking a bodybuilder's lat spread pose.

When the hell did that get there?! And why is its face so scary in a pose like that?! We don't even need another musclehead around—Gustle's more than enough!

My parents, however, seemed to be of a different mind, and they looked up at the statue in awe.

"Makoto-san, Makoto-san! It's a real Buddhist statue!"

"Sure is! Never thought I'd see one in a place like this!"

"Let's take a picture with it! Can we?"

"Of course!" Dad started to root about in his pockets. "Wait, I think I left my phone back in our Underworld..."

"Oh, no!" Mom turned to me pleadingly. "Do you have your phone with you, Seiichi?"

“What do you think you are, tourists?!” I snapped. “I mean, I *do* have a phone, but...”

I was struck again by how insane it was to have a smartphone in a literal fantasy world, but I’d literally made it myself, so I couldn’t complain. The only thing was that it was for my Instant Farm spell, and I doubted it had...

“Wait. It *does* have a camera?”

Jeez, I guess I came prepared!

That only made Mom more excited.

“Come on, Makoto-san, let’s take one together!”

“Sure. You should come in, too, Seiichi.”

“Uh, okay.”

I doubted for a second that Zeanos and the others would want to stand around and wait for us, but they were all smiling fondly at us.

Damn, this is embarrassing...

I could feel my cheeks go a little red as my parents each grabbed one of my arms, positioning me squarely between themselves.

“You’ve grown so much,” Mom cooed cheerily at me.

Dad nodded approvingly. “You’re even bigger than me now!”

“S-Stop it!” I protested to hide my bashfulness, a little louder than I’d intended. “We’re making everyone wait for us, so let’s just take the picture and get out of here!”

“I guess you’re right.” Dad nodded.

They leaned in a little closer to me as I got my phone ready. I’d never taken a selfie before, but I somehow managed to get my ‘phone’ in the right mode for it.

“Big smiles, everyone!” Mom encouraged us.

“You’re stiff as a board,” Dad chided me.

With that, I finally snapped the picture.

“Cheese!”



Just as I snapped the picture, the statue behind us grinned and made peace signs with both hands.

Wait, what?! I thought it was supposed to be a threatening guardian!

The second the picture was taken, though, it returned to its prior macho pose.

“Did you get that?” Dad asked.

“Uh, I—”

Before I could even reply, Dad snatched the phone out of my hands, and he and Mom looked at it together.

Jeez, they’re going to freak out when they see the statue moved...

“Now that’s a picture!” Dad laughed.

“Yes, even the Nio statue looks so happy!”

“How are you not surprised?!”

They just took it in stride! That’s just like them, but I’ll never understand how they do it! I should’ve expected as much when they literally asked to take a photo with me in Hell!

“Are you finished...?” came the low wail of the Underworld.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry,” I apologized.

“No... Don’t worry... Though I must admit, this has never happened before...”

That wasn’t surprising. Most tourist destinations didn’t require you to die to reach them, and most people who made it here would likely be too focused on their deaths to relax.

“Let us prepare for your trip to the living world, then... I shall return you to the same place you came here from...”

We’d be returned to Barbodel Magic Academy’s arena then. I doubted that anybody would be hanging around there after the absolute chaos that went down there the other day, so we wouldn’t run the risk of startling anyone too badly with our return.

“Sounds good.” I nodded.

“Allow me to do the honors, then... and allow me to thank you for your aid once again, Seiichi-sama...”

“No, the pleasure was mine.”

A glowing sigil of Teleportation Magic appeared at my feet.

“May your future be filled with bliss... Come visit sometime...”

“I’d rather not come back to the literal Underworld on a whim, thanks!”

With that final, unsettling invitation still fresh in my ears, we all disappeared from the face of the Underworld.

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“A-Are we back?”

After the flash of magic, I found the familiar sights of Barbodel’s arena all around me.

“I actually made it back,” I muttered in disbelief.

Sure enough, there was nobody else to be seen. I heard Zeanos mutter, “Part of me doubted we would truly be returned to life, but I suppose we really are alive once more.”

My companions seemed just as doubtful as I was. Naturliana-san even broke out crying.

“W-Waaaaah... Ugh... H-Hic... Waaaaaahh!!”

We all hurried to her side.

“Naturliana-san? Are you okay?” The sage, Liliana, stroked her back reassuringly between large, shuddering sobs.

“I-I was so upset,” she mumbled.

“Huh?”

“I left behind someone I loved... They even killed me right before his eyes...!”

I had no idea who she was in life, let alone how or why she died. Her presence among Zeanos’s group meant that our fates had to be connected somehow, but

she was the only person I couldn't figure out my connection with.

"I'd given up on ever seeing him again," she continued as tears spilled down her cheeks. "B-But now there's at least a chance, a-and I..."

"Oh, I see," Lilitana muttered sympathetically.

Anna smiled at her reassuringly. "I know we're not even from this era, but you can trust us. I promise we'll help you find whoever you lost. Okay?"

"Of course!" Abel echoed. "Anything that might help you."

"That's right!" Gars nodded confidently. "We didn't crawl out of the Underworld together for nothing! We've got your back!"

Right... I almost forgot Abel and the others are from the same time as Zeanos. They've been dead for ages at this point—and Mom and Dad don't even belong in this world, let alone this era.

Dad gave me a serious look. "Seiichi."

"Y-Yeah?"

"We'll be fine, I promise. Don't worry about your mom or me."

"Huh?"

I had no idea what to say to that, but he ignored me as he continued, "We won't interfere with your life, so do whatever you feel is right."

"Whatever I—? What are you two going to do, then?"

I wanted nothing more than for them to stay with me, but Mom smiled at me, as if to reassure me.

"We'll live long, peaceful lives someplace nice and quiet. I've always wanted to have a vegetable garden."

"Yeah, but where?" I protested. "You don't know anything about this world."

"Not a thing," Dad agreed. "Got anyplace in mind?"

"And now you want my help again! I'm sure Zeanos would know better than I would."

I cast the Dark Nobleman a sidelong look, but he firmly shook his head. “The world has changed greatly since I was alive. Besides, I didn’t see many decent places to live even back in my day.”

That made a lot of sense and quickly shut me up.

Still, how am I supposed to know where they can stay? I’ve barely been anywhere— It struck me. “Actually, I know a place.”

“Oh?” Mom asked. “And where would that be?”

“It’s a city called Terbelle—the capital city of the Kingdom of Windberg. Back when I was still new to this world, they welcomed me with open arms.”

It was like a second hometown to me. It’d have been absolutely perfect, if not for all the superpowered perverts running amok.

“Really?” Her eyes lit up. “In that case, we’d best thank them for treating you so well!”

“We sure should!” Dad agreed.

“S-Still, this world can be pretty dangerous,” I told them. “You’ll both be a lot safer if you stay with me.”

That was the main reason I didn’t want them to leave me. Japan wasn’t perfectly safe either, of course, but the fear weighed heavily on my shoulders.

“In that case,” Zeanos interjected, “would you be willing to let me take care of them?”

“Huh?”

“That’s a great idea!” Lucius-san added. “I can watch them, too. Nothing can hurt them that way!”

The Treasure Chest rattled its lid. “Me, too... I can guard your family...”

Uh, that’d be a little too much protection. It’s not like they’ll have entire armies breathing down their necks...

Noticing my confusion, Zeanos continued, “None of us are from this time, remember? We all need to work somehow.”

“Work?” I repeated dumbly.

“Of course.” He nodded solemnly. “We are, all of us, unemployed.”

“Oh.”

Yeah, of course they are. Zeanos might have been a duke in his time, but not only was he banished, the country itself doesn't exist anymore. He doesn't have anyone to rely on for support now.

“I've got nowhere to go,” Lucius-san agreed.

“Same,” Abel echoed.

“Yep.” Anna nodded.

“Exactly!” Gars agreed.

“What should we do?” Liliana wondered aloud.

Right, nobody has anything to do! What does it mean for the global economy if even the Hero and Demon King are jobless?!

The Treasure Chest puffed itself up proudly. “I am a chest... I have a job... Only you are unemployed.”

“Gack!?”

All the recently revived residents of this world except Naturliana-san clutched their chests in pain.

Oof, critical hits on everyone.

Once Zeanos had recomposed himself, he turned to the others. “Y-Yes, well... Why don't we all try living in this Terbelle place?”

Lucius-san's face lit up. “I like the sound of that! We can even use that as a base to look for whoever Naturliana-san's trying to find.”

Abel nodded. “If Naturliana's fine with it, I see nothing wrong with that.”

“They probably have a Guild,” Gars guessed. “We can make a living there.”

“Sounds like the fastest way,” Anna agreed.

Liliana smiled. “I'm sure we'll have no trouble making it as adventurers.”

Sorry, Landze-san, but it looks like you'll be having some interesting new residents join you soon. I know it's my fault, but good luck.

Mom smiled at me, snapping me out of my thoughts. “See, Seiichi? We’ll be just fine. We’ll have all the help we could need.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“You can just focus on the people you’ve found to love.”

“... Huh?”

Did I mention Saria or anyone to them?

“Seiichi!!”

At that moment, a familiar voice reached my ears.

“What?!” I recoiled in surprise, but I could feel my lips part in a smile.

I turned to find Saria standing there, tears in her eyes and a relieved grin on her face. I had no idea what to say, but I didn’t have time to react as she leapt into my arms.

“Welcome home, Seiichi!!”

“Whoa?!”

I yelped a little, but I managed to safely catch her, holding her tight against my chest.



“Saria?”

She looked up into my face, beaming. “I always knew you’d be okay, but I’m super glad you’re back!”

I tightened my arms around her a little more. “I’m home, Saria.”

“Welcome home!”

We embraced each other for a good, long time.

“Oh, my! When will the wedding be, I wonder?”

“That’s my boy! Our Seiichi’s become a man!”

Shit. I forgot about my parents.

Chapter 5: An Invitation to the Summit

“Good, good.”

“Oh, my!”

I could feel my face getting redder and redder as Mom and Dad watched Saria and I hug.

Great, now I’ve done it! Mom and Dad must be so confused right now!

I was lonely without Saria, of course, despite only being away from her for a short while. I didn’t even have time to make up an excuse, though—Mom and Dad were shooting me lukewarm looks, as if assuring me they understood exactly what I was doing.

Noooooooooo! God, I’m gonna die of embarrassment! I’ve never felt so awkward in my life! Does everyone with a girlfriend feel this awkward?! I’m not ready for this!

While I panicked, however, Saria finally noticed my parents.

“Oh? Who are those people?”

“Huh? O-Oh, them. These people’s fates are tied to mine... I guess?”

“Why do you sound so unsure?”

I mean... How do you tell if someone’s fate is tied to yours, really?

Zeanos approached us. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Gorilla-dono... I mean Saria-dono.”

“Huh?” She looked at him blankly for a long moment before her eyes lit up. “Oh! Zeanos-san?!”

Wait, how did he know she’s the gorilla who was with me back then?! I thought he died before he ever saw her human form! She seems to recognize him, too... Maybe I’m the weird one for not recognizing him right off the bat?

Saria's brow furrowed in confusion. "But I thought you were—"

"I was indeed slain in my battle with Seiichi-dono," Zeanos confirmed. "However, in a stroke of luck, I encountered him again in the Underworld, along with my true love—my Marie."

She turned to the maid at Zeanos's side. "So you're Marie, then?"

Marie bowed reverently. "Yes. I am a maid in service of Zeanos-sama, Marie. It's a pleasure to meet you."

At that, Saria beamed and glomped onto her. "Yay! I just knew you'd get to see him again!"

Marie's eyes grew wide with shock, but after glancing at Zeanos, she blushed a little and nodded. "Eh?! U-Um... Yes."

Saria and I had read all about Zeanos's life, so we knew both his fate and Marie's. She seemed genuinely happy that the pair were reunited in the end.

Lucius-san approached Saria next. "Hey there. Do you know who I am? Nah, you probably don't—"

"Are you the First Demon King?"

"How did you know?!"

I was every bit as shocked as Lucius-san.

Seriously, how'd she pull that off?

Abel smirked at her. "Can you guess who we are?"

Ana rolled her eyes. "Of course she can't. Don't be ridiculous."

Saria only smiled, facing each of the Hero's party in turn. "You're the Hero, Abel-san, and you're Gars-san the Warrior. You two are Anna-san the Hunter and Liliana-san the Sage."

"You're kidding!" Abel shrieked.

"She got it at a glance," Gars muttered.

Liliana gave her a baffled look. "U-Um... Do you mind if I ask how you know us?"

Saria thought for a moment. “My animal instincts!”

I don't even know how to reply to that anymore. Animals are crazy...

Her instincts hadn't been wrong even once, to the point that it felt like she was seeing the future. Just as I expected, Abel and his companions were unconvinced.

Wait, she learned to speak by reading Abel's journal. Of course she knows who they are... but I guess she still wouldn't know them as Abel's party, specifically. She doesn't have an Analysis Skill or anything, does she?

Come to think of it, though, we'd both read Abel's journal, which was generally personal. I decided not to bring it up. There wasn't anything weird inside it, but that didn't mean he'd be happy to hear we'd read it.

Fortunately, the conversation was proceeding just fine without me, and nobody noticed my fretting.

“Do you... remember me...?” the Treasure Chest rattled.

“Oh, Treasure Chest-san! Of course I remember you!”

Yeah, that was hard to forget. Meeting the Treasure Chest—and almost immediately afterward, parting ways with it—really did a number on me. I really didn't mean to kill it! My magic was a little stronger than I thought, that's all!

At the sight of Naturliana-san, however, Saria only tilted her head to the side in confusion.

Naturliana-san began to fidget. “U-Um... My name is Naturliana. Do you know me from anywhere?”

“Hm... No, I don't. Sorry.”

She grew visibly more uncomfortable. “Oh... All right.”

No wonder she feels weird. We don't know each other at all, but she was brought all this way because of our “connection.” I still have no idea what's up with that.

While I was still wondering about Naturliana-san's fate, however, Mom and Dad approached Saria.

“Excuse me, Saria-san?” Mom ventured. “Can I call you that?”

Saria looked at them in confusion. “Huh?”

“It looks like you’re, uh, *close* with Seiichi,” Dad added.

“We have so much to thank you for!” Mom continued enthusiastically. “I could tell just at a glance how much our little Seiichi means to you. And, I might add, he feels the same about you.”

They’re both right, b-but I hate hearing them talk about it so openly like this!

The confusion in Saria’s eyes was quickly replaced with excitement. “Are you Seiichi’s parents?!”

Dad nodded firmly. “That’s right.”

At that, Saria hurriedly recomposed herself and straightened her posture. Her face was now bright red.

“M-My name is Saria! I’m... um... Seiichi’s wife!”

Zeanos and Lucius-san watched the exchange as if they’d suspected as much, and Abel’s party smiled at us knowingly. Mom and Dad, however— Mom was bubbling over. “Did you hear that, Makoto-san?!”

Dad nodded, grinning. “Every word of it!”

“I never thought our little boy would grow up to have such a cute wife... We’ll have to celebrate tonight!”

“You’ve sure been busy while we were gone, eh, son?”

“STOP IT!” I screamed. “YOU’RE KILLING ME!”

Yeah, she’s basically my wife at this point and I love her to pieces, but I do NOT want to hear this shit from my parents! How embarrassing is this?! And why is everyone looking at us like that?!

Just as I was convinced I’d die of embarrassment, I picked up on a group of people heading toward us. I turned to find— “Hey, Saria! What’d you go running o—wait, Seiichi?!”

“Master!”

“S-Seiichi-oniichan?!”

It was the trio of Al, Lulune, and Origa-chan. I was too busy before to think about it, but it didn’t make much sense for Saria to be there alone.

But how’d they know we’d be showing up here at all?

The girls rushed over to me and wrapped their arms tightly around me.

“Seiichi! Damn, am I glad to see you!”

“I always believed in you, Master! I knew you would bend the Underworld to your will and emerge victorious!”

“W-Welcome home, Seiichi-oniichan.”

Despite feeling a little lightheaded from all that had happened, I met the three of them with open arms.

“I’m back.”

They were really worried about me, huh... I don’t deserve them. But was Lulune really expecting all that from me this whole time? I mean, that’s basically what happened, but still!

Saria watched us with an angelic smile, and everything seemed perfect—for a moment, at least.

“M-Makoto-san?” came Mom’s shaky voice. “Our little boy has changed a lot, hasn’t he...?”

“Y-Yeah... Can’t say I was expecting this.”

My parents were watching me with profound confusion in their eyes.

Right. I forgot all about them... again.

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Terbelle, Capital of the Kingdom of Windberg.

“Hrm...”

Landze, King of Windberg, was sitting in his room, pondering the contents of the letter in his hands.

“What in the world could this mean?”

“Landze-dono!” Gustle roughed the door open without even stopping to knock. He was wearing nothing but a speedo, as always. “As soon as I heard your call, I bunny hopped right to your door!”

“I really didn’t need to know that...” Landze sighed with irritation. Barging in on a royal unannounced was incredibly rude, but he didn’t bother protesting it. “Sorry for summoning you on such short notice.”

“Oh, I don’t mind! The guild can run itself perfectly fine without me.”

“Why do they need you at all, then?”

“How cruel!” His grin only widened, evidently unbothered by the insult. “So? What can I help you with?”

“Well... I suppose you can consider this a formal request from Windberg to your guild.”

“Oh?” Gustle’s expression turned somber. “I see how it is... You need me to give a lecture on the best way to gain muscle, don’t you?”

“Like hell I do!” Landze snapped. “You must have muscles in your brain!”

“Oh, shucks, I’m flattered.”

“That’s not a compliment!”

Clearly, the guildmaster still wasn’t taking the situation seriously.

“So?” Gustle pressed. “What could you possibly want from us?”

“What could...?! There’s any number of things I could want you for, like all the monster-hunting requests I put out!”

“Right... I almost forgot we did that.”

“Somebody, anybody, replace this idiot!”

“What is it, then? Just to be clear, we aren’t interested in any wars.”

“Of course not. I need you to gather the S-Rank adventurers.”

“What?!” Gustle’s eyes flew open, all humor instantly gone from his face. “Do you want real S-Rankers, or are guys about that strong good enough?”

“Obviously, I want the real thing! The hell would I want that mob of overpowered perverts you call adventurers?!”

“Ah, of course... but I’m afraid even the full-fledged S-Rankers are quite the unique bunch.”

“Oh, gods, I’m beginning to regret bringing this up at all.”

“Don’t be like that! They’re good and strong, I promise! But I have to ask: What do you need them for?”

As he said that, Landze held out a letter in his hands with an air of finality.

“The Demon King wants to hold a summit.”

Chapter 6: The Plan

I, Reiya Farzer, was returning to my personal palace. I needed to inform my underlings—Bel and his squad—of the upcoming meeting with the Kingdom of Windberg. As soon as I arrived, I made for the room I'd be most likely to find them in and threw open the door without hesitation.

Bel stretched out behind him. "M-My right leg... It's on red now, right?"

"Wait, Bel-san!" Terry complained. "I can't put my hand on green with your arm in the way!"

"Oh, shut up! You can figure it out! Besides, your fat ass is taking up half the damn mat! Why do you have to eat so much?! You better lose that weight right now!"

"H-How?!"

"Okay, Terry's turn again!" Bosco flicked some kind of spinner. "Next is left foot blue!"

"Left foot blue?!" Bel paled.

"I-I can't reach...!" Terry moaned.

"Next!" Bosco reached for the spinner again but paused. "You sure this is a game for guys-only? I'm getting a little weirded out watching you two..."

"You don't have to tell US that!" Bel and Terry shouted in unison.

I closed the door as swiftly as I opened it.

What in the world was that?

Bel and Terry were... grappling... on a mat covered in equally spaced colored circles. The spinner-like thing in his hands had many of the same colors and resembled a crude roulette wheel. He seemed to have gleaned instructions for the others from it.

Has their relationship somehow evolved since the last time I saw them? And here I am, unable to get a boyfriend to save my life... Wait, don't they both have wives and kids? What are they thinking?!

I took a deep breath. I must've misunderstood the situation somehow. I eased the door open this time and peered inside.

"GAAAAAHH!!" Bel hollered through gritted teeth, his body almost totally covering Terry's.

"Too close, too close, too close!" Terry whimpered, back arched in a bridge pose but trying hard to lean away nonetheless.

"Uegh..." Bosco watched the pair in disgust.

I closed the door again.

Well, um... I definitely wasn't imagining things. They're clearly managing just fine. But, honestly, what happened between them? Did I leave them to their own devices too much? Is this somehow my fault? No, of course not. They're the ones cheating on their wives. I suppose I should bring their partners the bad news...

With my mind made up, I opened the door for the third and final time.

"You've quite literally done it now."

"Huh?!" Bel looked at me in horror. "Reiya-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

Terry yelped. "B-Bel-san! Don't lose focus or you'll—"

"Huh?!"

No sooner than Terry warned him, Bel collapsed on his apparent lover. I watched every detail of what happened next— "BLEEEEEEEEEEEEEGH!!"

"Ewewewewewewewewewwww...!"

"I-I'm gonna be sick..."

Bel's lips fell square onto Terry's. By this point, however, I was beyond surprised.

"I had no idea you felt that way about each other," I muttered apologetically. "I-I'm sorry I never realized..."

“True.” Bosco nodded. “No other way you can look at it.”

“BOSCO!” Bel howled. “Help us explain this mess!”

Terry groaned, hands on his lips. “Oh... I really did it... I’m sorry I couldn’t protect myself, honey...”

“You too, Terry?! What the hell is wrong with you guys?!”

It took some time for Bel to explain himself. Apparently, it was just a game—a toy from the Heroes’ world.

A game, is it?

“So you three were playing on the job, were you?”

“Oh, shit,” Bel cursed.

“NOOO! BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEL!!” his lackeys cried in despair.

I ignored them, of course, treating all three to a full course of torture. I stopped just short of killing them, of course, and left them lying powerlessly on the floor like three little piles of trash.

“Th-This is... I’m gonna die...”

“Not the pole... N-Not the pole again...”

“The balls... The balls are coming...!”

I ignored their delirious muttering and got right to business.

“Pull yourselves together, now.”

“Huh?” They weakly looked up.

“It was decided at the Demon Army’s last meeting that we will be holding diplomatic talks with the Kingdom of Windberg.”

They were all as surprised as I’d expected. “What?!”

“Wh-Why now?”

“That was Routier-sama’s decision. She purposely visited Windberg due to it being one of the few countries out there that doesn’t despise us demonkin. You’ll be accompanying the delegation as guards, so don’t forget it.”

“Roger tha...” Bel began to reply, but he cut himself off, a look of guilt coming over his face. “R-R-Reiya-sama?”

“What is it?”

“Um... I-Isn’t Windberg that same country we... w-we spread teleportation traps all over?”

“Ah.”

Come to think of it, he was right. I’d considered punishing them proper for that at the time, but now...

I wordlessly pulled out a whip and began taking out the torture tools I’d just put away.

“H-Huh?” The color drained from Bel’s face. “R-Reiya-sama? I thought you were done torturing us?”

“...”

“Y-You’re even scarier when you’re quiet!” Terry stammered.

“Do something!” Terry begged their leader.

“Calm down!” he barked. “She wouldn’t torture us aga—”

“Let’s get started, shall we? I suggest you brace yourselves.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

Their screams were so earsplittingly loud that they were rumored to echo for days.

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“So, yeah. I’m back and everything’s fine now.”

“How?!”

After returning from the Underworld and reuniting with Saria and the others, I headed right for Classroom F, where I let my students know the good news. I was sure they would’ve gone back home after such a fiasco, but they all stayed at the Academy, and I was looking at a full class of astonished faces now.

“Oh, let me introduce the folks I brought back from the Underworld.” I gestured to each of my companions in turn. “Those are my parents, a Hero’s party, their mentor, and the First Demon King... Oh, and a florist.”

“Hey there. We’re Seiichi’s parents.”

“I’m a Hero.”

“We three are his companions.”

“I am their mentor.”

“Yo, Demon King here.”

“I-I’m, um, a florist?”

I nodded in satisfaction. “Great, that wraps up the introductions.”

“That’s it?!” Agnos shouted.

I was hoping to get all that introductory stuff out of the way quickly and efficiently, but evidently it was a little too brief. Even I had to agree.

“This is ridiculous!” Helen scoffed. “You’re saying you really did die, but you just... hopped out of the Underworld with a bunch of weirdos in tow? And apparently, you even collected a Hero and a Demon King there?! How do you expect us to keep up?!”

I laughed awkwardly. “Hahaha... I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You could at least not laugh about it!”

She has a point. I mean, what the hell, me?

While I was chuckling, Beatrice approached me on shaky feet, as though she couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Are you... Are you really Seiichi-sensei...?”

“Yep, I’m back?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Really, really?”

“Uh... Yes.”

“Are you really, really, really—”

“Why don’t you believe me?!”

I probably wouldn’t believe me if I were in her shoes, but still!

Fortunately, that seemed to be enough. She smiled warmly, tears brimming in her eyes.

“I’m... I’m so glad to see you!”

“Sorry for making you worry so much.”

Not just her, either—Saria and the others were worried sick as well. I owed them all an apology, and I had to be a lot more careful in the future.

I keep saying that, don’t I? It’s a hard thing to put into practice. I wish I could just grow up already. My body’s real hot stuff, but my mind is nowhere close. Actually, it’d be nice if I could stop evolving and catch up a little...

“I never doubted you, Aniki!” Agnos shouted. “I knew you’d make it back!”

Blud nodded. “Your power is the real thing, as nonsensical as it is.”

I winced. “I never thought being trusted could be so uncomfortable...”

Nobody has ever spoken so highly of my “nonsensical” anything before...

More importantly, I was glad to see they were both the same as they’d always been. I had barely been gone a day, but still.

With that, I turned to Berard and Leon next.

“So? How are you two doing?”

Leon jumped, staring at me like a deer in headlights. “I-I-I-I-I’m good! N-Never been better!”

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked.

“O-Of course I am! I mean... after fighting for everyone, even just that once, I feel just a little more confident.”

“Really? Great! I’ll be counting on you to fight alongside Agnos if anything else happens.”

“Whaaaaat?! I-I can’t! How could a weak little maggot like me ever stand alongside Agnos-kun?! I’d die from humiliation! O-Oh, no, did I just talk back to you?! Sorrysorrysorrysorry—”

“You haven’t changed a bit!”

Even if he was a little more optimistic than before, it’d take a good deal of time and effort to reach a new normal.

As I smiled a little to myself, Berard approached me with a serious look.

“Seiichi-sensei?”

This was the first time I’d heard him talk, instead of using his sketchbook to write out what he wanted to say. He’d been too badly burned to speak before.

“Oh, Berard. How is it? Er, sorry, first I should ask if it was okay for me to heal you like I did... I never did get your permission.”

“Don’t worry.” He bowed his head deeply. “Thank you very much. I’d always scared those around me with my burns, and I wore that bear mask in an effort to seem more amicable. But that woman—the woman who’d attacked us—was the daughter of the lord of land I was born in. I never met her myself, but I think that she was able to regain some part of herself through your kindness. I can only thank you for all you’ve done. I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused you, but... thank you.”

His voice was a little hoarse, as though he still wasn’t used to using it yet.

“Nah, it’s no big deal... er... I guess it kind of was. You’re welcome.”

“Thank you,” he muttered, bowing again.

Then, with all the greetings done and over with, I turned to Beatrice.

“So what’s going to happen to the Academy next?”

“Headmaster is dealing with the situation as best he can, but we still don’t know what will come of the situation. All he could promise was that we’d be reopening again at some point.”

I nodded. “Okay... but what does that mean for the exams coming up?”

“They’ll have to be postponed.”

“YEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!” Agnos roared, punching the air. “WE JUST KEEP WINNING!!”

It seemed like every class had a few students that would explode with enthusiasm whenever a test was cancelled. I knew that partially from experience—if I were in Agnos’s shoes, I’d be just as excited.

“Quiet down, you idiot,” Blud chided him.

Agnos thrust out his chest with pride. “Hahaha! Normally I’d be pretty pissed at you, but I’m in a good mood, so I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that!”

Beatrice didn’t so much as blink. “Of course, we will continue exam preparation so that we can be ready at any time.”

Agnos froze and didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then he whipped about to glare at Blud. “Who the hell’re you callin’ stupid?!”

“Weren’t you going to ignore me?” he muttered exasperatedly.

They were all here of their own free will, but that didn’t mean class was cancelled altogether. Studying couldn’t hurt, and even if there was no exam on the horizon, it never hurt to review.

With that, Class F began reviewing their material for a test that could come at any time.

Chapter 7: Invasion of the Student Council President

Once everything had settled down and we were preparing to discuss our plans, the door flew open with a violent crash, and I heard a familiar voice.

“I smell Seiichi-kun!!”

I jumped. “Seriously, just how good is your nose?!”

Standing there in the doorway was one of the Heroes and a girl I’d known since I was a kid in Japan, Karen Kannazuki. She stormed right up to me, nostrils working as she followed my scent, and began examining me with unsettling vigor.

“Are you okay?! Are you hurt?! Tell me if you’re in pain!”

“I-I’m okay, I promise! Relax a little, will you?!”

None of the students knew what to make of her sudden arrival, of course. They could only watch in confusion as tears began to well in her eyes.

“I... I was so worried. I haven’t been able to do a thing since I was summoned here, but you—”

“Everything’s fine,” I reassured her. “Don’t worry.”

“No, I know that.” She straightened herself out a little. “But when that horrid man made you vanish, I was beside myself with worry. I put Shouta and the others through hell... No matter. As long as you’re all right, I’ll be fine.”

“Kannazuki-senpai, I...”

I felt awful for making her worry so much. She’d saved my hide more times than I could count, and I could never thank her enough.

She narrowed her eyes into a needle-like glare. “I’m afraid I can’t confirm you’re unharmed here, however. I’ll need to examine every inch of your body, so you must come to my room and remove your clothes. Yes, you *must* be naked.”

“Uh... What?”

I can never thank her enough, but I really wish she'd fix this perverted streak of hers!

“Why, if it isn't Karen!” Mom exclaimed. “It's been so long! You're even more beautiful than the last time we met!”

Dad nodded. “She sure is.”

Karen seemed to notice them for the first time, and she readily bowed.

“Ah... Mother, Father, it's a pleasure to see you aga... Hmm?!”

She seemed to realize how impossible it was for either of them to be there.

And wait, why did she call my parents that? Either I'm hearing things or she was getting at something there...

“Y-You're alive again?!” Kannazuki-senpai exclaimed in shock.

They both nodded and smiled warmly.

“We have Seiichi to thank for that!”

“Seiichi-kun did that?!” She whipped back to face me, but realization dawned on her a moment later, and she calmly turned back to them. “I'd love to hear how he managed that, but I'm glad to see you both again. Can I have your son?”

Calm, my ass!

I was too stunned to respond—and instead, Al stepped between them in irritation.

“The hell are you saying, bitch?!”

“Bitch'...? I think it's perfectly clear what I'm saying.”

“That's even worse!”

I knew I should do something to break up their argument, but Rachel—one of my students—beat me to the punch.

“Um... That lady's one of the summoned Heroes, right~? How does she know you, Seiichi-sensei~?”

“O-Oh, right. I guess I never mentioned it.” I nodded. “I’m from the same world as her.”

“HUH?!” Everyone recoiled in surprise.

“So you’re a Hero?!” Agnos shouted.

“Well... not exactly. It’d take a little too long to explain it properly, so let’s just say that I’m *like* a Hero, but I’m not one.”

Helen snorted derisively and glared at Kannazuki-senpai. “Good thing, too. If you were like our high-and-mighty Hero friend there, the creep who attacked us at the arena would’ve killed us all.”

Karen’s brow furrowed uncomfortably. “I didn’t... No, I won’t make excuses. We may call ourselves Heroes, but we couldn’t do a thing in the face of such an adversary.”

Well, that sure killed the mood...

I had to change the topic, and luckily, I remembered something I’d been meaning to ask her.

“So, Kannazuki-senpai... What are the Heroes planning on doing next?”

“Hmm?” She shot me a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“Like, even though the Kaizell Empire’s been treating you guys pretty poorly, you’re still basically their weapons, right? If that attacker creep poses any kind of threat to the Empire, I bet they’d do something to stop him.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Ah... I was so worried about you that I failed to even consider such a thing...”

“No, uh, please worry about that kind of thing more than me.”

I was glad she cared, but she should really focus more on her own life.

“I’ve yet to hear anything from the Kaizell Empire,” she told me.

“I’d put some more serious thought into it,” Blud advised her. “Worst-case scenario, they might call you back to the Empire.”

He was the Second Prince of the Kaizell Empire, so he probably knew how they operated.

“He knows a lot about Kaizell,” I explained to her. “You should probably listen to him.”

She nodded readily. “I know. I was listening to the commentary during the Clash of Classes, so I’m aware of who he is. I’ll take his warning to heart.”

Blud scowled a little and turned away. “Hmph... I’m nothing more than a bastard prince, so I wouldn’t take my title too seriously.”

I smirked a little at his reaction. Sometimes he tried a little too hard to be cool.

Kannazuki-senpai nodded to herself. “Well, then... As much as I would love to stay and fraternize with you, Seiichi-kun, I’d best be going. I did leave in the middle of class, after all.”

“What are you doing here, then?!”

Knowing her, I was convinced that she’d told Shouta and the others something at the very least, but apparently I was off the mark.

Is it just me, or has she gotten more airheaded since coming here? She still has it together, though...

“No need to yell,” she chided me. “I was beside myself with worry for you.” With that, she turned to the rest of the class. “My apologies for the intrusion, everyone. Mother, Father, it was a pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it!” Mom reassured her. “I’m glad I got to see you again!”

Dad nodded in agreement. “You’re welcome to marry our son whenever you like.”

Her eyes widened with excitement. “Really?! I’ll take him back with me now, then! Don’t worry, I’ll keep him somewhere safe where nobody except me will ever see him again!”

“You’ll *what?!?*” I cried. I hurriedly pushed her from behind out the classroom door, determined to make her leave before she said anything else. “Go on, now! Shouta and the others are probably worried sick!”

She frowned. “Fine... but I have your parents’ blessing now! We’ll hold the ceremony the next time we meet!”

“Wait, you guys weren’t joking?!”

Why does it feel like the sane, sensible Kannazuki-senpai I once knew is showing up less and less?

“Don’t worry, I’ll go now,” she promised. “But... I’m rather glad you’re okay.”

“Kannazuki-senpai...”

“You’d be safer under my control, you know.”

“Why?!”

Fortunately, she got the message and headed down the hallway, grinning. I watched her until she was out of sight before returning to my class. Once I was in front of them again, however, I realized there was an odd weight in the air.

“Seiichi-sensei?” Blud gave me a grave look.

“Yeah?”

“Are all the Heroes so... chaotic?”

“They’re not, I swear!”

It looks like it’ll be a while until I can convince them... That’s a project for another day, though.

Chapter 8: The Heroes' Take on the Clash of Classes

I, Takamiya Shouta, arrived at Barbodel Academy's training grounds to watch the Clash of Classes. The Heroes were not allowed to participate, but since we helped Class S train, we were all but forced to watch their fights. One of their students was even the First Prince of the Kaizell Empire and the son of the guy who had summoned us, so we couldn't refuse even if we wanted to.

To be honest, though, I didn't like Class S. Some of them were nice and treated us normally—like the First Prince of Windberg, Theobolt—but most of them were self-righteous pricks.

Not that my fellow Heroes are any better, I guess... More than a few of us have been letting our new power go to our heads.

"So why are you in such a good mood?"

"Hmm?" The girl sitting beside me, Kannazuki-senpai, was grinning like a fool. "You want to know, do you? HmMMM?"

"I don't remember the last time I've been this pissed...!" She was normally forthcoming and friendly, though, so I decided to swallow my anger. "Yeah, I want to know. Can you tell me?"

"Nope!"

God, she's annoying!

Something about her was off. Her usual cool demeanor was nowhere to be seen, and she seemed almost carefree now. It was strange—*too* strange. There had to be a reason for it.

Come to think of it, she's been going off on her own a lot lately... Does that have something to do with it?

I could only guess, however, and resigned myself to watching the Clash in the arena before us.

The first round was Class A versus Class S. I thought it was an interesting set of fights, but judging from the other Heroes' reactions, they didn't agree.

"Hah! I could cast that with my eyes closed!"

"Is everyone in this world that much weaker than us?"

"Looks like we'll be the best in the school before we know it!"

I had no idea where their arrogance came from or how they could be so condescending to their peers.

Power really can change a person...

I shuddered at the thought.

Before long, one particular Class A student emerged who elicited some very different reactions, especially from the girls in my class. Gionis, the Second Prince of Windberg, had taken the field.

"Ohmygaw, it's Gionis-kun!"

"I love how *rugged* he looks!"

"You think I should hit on him later? He wouldn't just brush off a Hero, right?"

The boys couldn't care less, but I wasn't focused on them. No, there was a certain group of Heroes who even now seemed threatening—three boys, to be specific.

Masaya Kisaragi sighed. "Damn, that's so boring!"

Tsuyoshi Ooyama grinned down at the match. "He should've just killed the other guy, right?"

Rento Tougou nodded. "Oh, totally. This is a display of strength, right? Why not show how much stronger he *really* is?"

Those three made me sick. I'd heard they were even using their powers to corner some of the Academy's female students.

"How troublesome," Kannazuki-senpai mused. She'd noticed the same three I had.

The two of us had managed to reign the boys in so far, but it was only a matter of time before they tore loose.

The round progressed smoothly all the same, and before long, it was time for our “friends” in Class S to take the stage against Class F.

“Finally!”

“Jeez, this’ll be a snooze...”

“Those Class F-ers won’t last two seconds!”

“This’ll be funny!”

“I almost feel bad for them!”

“I heard those rejects can’t even use magic. How’re they even supposed to fight?”

Jeering and insults rang out from the Heroes around me. I didn’t join in, but even I knew Class F was in trouble. Class S were extremely talented with magic before, but after our mentoring, their skills had improved even further.

Roberto in particular—Windberg’s First Prince—was overwhelmingly strong. He had most of us Heroes beat from the beginning, and he was even stronger now. Even Kannazuki-senpai, the strongest of all of us, would struggle to beat him.

That was exactly it. We weren’t stronger than everyone else, but none of my classmates seemed to understand, let alone care.

Though I’m every bit as much at fault... I can’t bring myself to tell the others how stupid they’re being.

I tried to suppress my rising discomfort as Class F took the field. The guys in my class started smirking.

“Class F’s got some hot girls, huh?”

“You got that right. We may as well hit ‘em up after this. They can’t do better than us!”

“Oh, good idea! None of them have a future anyway, so I bet they’d love to spend some quality time with some real, successful men!”

“And hey, it’s not like they could turn us down if they tried!”

Kenji moved to stand up, bristling with rage, but Kannazuki-senpai stopped him.

“Those assholes...!”

“Calm yourself, Kenji.”

“Why the hell are you stopping me?!”

“There’s too many of them—and can you imagine what might happen if the more evil Heroes had a reason to let loose?”

“Gh...”

“Nonetheless, I agree that we need to watch some of them more closely from now on—especially where Class F is involved.”

With that, the first match began. Class F’s first combatant was a boy with a teddy bear mask.

“The hell’s that?”

“Hahaha! What, does he think he’s cool or something?!”

“That’s so lame!”

“What, does he not want us to see him cry?”

My classmates were unsurprisingly vulgar.

Opposing the bear-headed student was a Class S boy who admittedly didn’t stand out much. All I could remember about him was how he clung to Theobolt. He was still from Class S, though, and had the strength to prove it.

This’ll be a tough fight for the bear guy.

As the fight unfolded, however, I could only stare in shock.

“Wh-What the hell...?”

“You’re kidding!”

“How is he doing that?!”

The Class S student—Goon, I think his name was—fired off one mighty spell after another, each with power comparable to any Hero's. Berard avoided his attacks somehow—no, he *punched them out of the air*. I couldn't believe my eyes. Sure, he was wearing brass knuckles, but he was knocking the spells away with brute force alone.

What, is this a manga now?

Berard slowly approached Goon, walking straight toward him. Not even a Hero would be so reckless, but he was making it work. Goon fired spell after spell in a blind panic, but not a single one hit its target. Finally, Berard did a heel drop on the Class S boy, of all things, instantly knocking him out cold.

“...”

Silence enveloped the Heroes—no, the entire arena. Nobody could believe their eyes, not in the face of such absurdity. Only Berard's classmates in Class F seemed unaffected.

So that's somehow normal for them? You're kidding.

Still, nobody spoke as the contestants advanced to the next round. It was Theobolt against his younger brother Blud next, both princes of the Kaizell Empire. I'd never met Blud in the Empire, though, and I hadn't even heard his name before I arrived at the Academy. There was a story behind it, I was sure, but all I knew for certain was that the brothers were anything but familial.

Theobolt was one of the stronger members of Class S, though he of course wasn't at Roberto's level. Only Kannazuki-senpai would be guaranteed to beat him in a fight, though Kisaragi-senpai would have a chance. My classmates hurriedly forgot about the previous match and focused on what would clearly be a blowout.

“Th-That last match was a fluke!”

“Yeah, had to be!”

“Theobolt-kun's up next.”

“Hah, serves those rejects right! He's gonna slaughter them!”

As the fight started, Blud began to fire off energy slashes in seemingly random directions.

“Idiot! The hell does he think he’s aiming?!”

“What, is he blind or something?!”

“Maybe he should try magic? Oh, that’s right—he can’t!”

The Heroes’ heckling continued, but Blud continued his nonsensical flurry of attacks. I could hear Theobolt’s taunting cries as he fired spell after spell at his brother, though his target smoothly dodged every one.

Their meaningless back-and-forth continued until Theobolt lost his patience and went in for the win. He fired off powerful homing magic to track him down... but Blud had been waiting for that. Blud used his opponent’s spell as a launchpad, of all things, to close in on his opponent in an instant. Theobolt tried to dodge, but he tripped and fell on one of the grooves in the ground Blud’s earlier attacks had left. Then, Blud only had to grab him by the collar and force him *into the path of his own spell!*

The whole battlefield went up in smoke from the force of the blast, and when the air finally cleared, Blud was unscathed and Theobolt was a charred mess. He threw his older brother aside like an old rag, and just like that, he strode off the field.

“...”

Again, everyone was shocked speechless.

What the heck? I thought Class F was supposed to be the worst in the school?

Again, Class F treated the outcome like the most natural thing in the world.

Something’s not right here...

One win could be a fluke, but two? It was getting harder to deny.

Kisaragi-senpai was the first to regain his composure, and he snorted at Theobolt. “He’s so damn weak! I guess you can only go so far if you’re not a Hero!”

My classmates hurriedly agreed with him. It sounded like nothing more than an excuse, but everyone eagerly echoed Kisaragi-senpai's words.

"Y-Yeah! I thought he wasn't half bad, but I guess not!"

"Look at how he lost! He's pathetic!"

"Yeah! Look at him!"

"Class S must be super weak to lose to Class F like that! That just proves we must be the best!"

"Oh, look! Roberto's next!"

"Really? He might have a chance."

Roberto was the strongest student in the school, after all. Opposite him, a lanky, rough-looking guy came out—Agnos.

A classmate pointed and laughed. "He looks so stupid!"

"This won't take long."

I knew it... The more you say he's going to lose, the more likely he is to win.

With that, the battle began.

"Wait, what?"

"Huh?"

"How on...?"

I still had no idea what was happening, but in a very different way this time. Berard's and Blud's fights were full of sudden twists that I couldn't read. This fight, however, was too fast and furious for me to follow at all.

Roberto fired off spell after spell, all of them mighty powerful, and Agnos met every one of them head-on with his metal baseball bat. Agnos had a slight edge in a physical fight, but even Roberto's swordplay was beyond any of us. Their fight grew more intense with every passing second, until finally it came to a head. They each pulled out their biggest and best attacks, and when the smoke cleared, it was a draw. Neither of them won.

I could tell my classmates didn't want to accept it. They'd made fun of Class F for far too long to believe they were so monstrously strong. Even Kisaragi-senpai was at a loss for words this time.

Yet again, as the Heroes—no, everyone in the audience—struggled to understand what happened, Class F was operating as usual.

Who the hell is their teacher? How is any of this normal for their class?!

I had to know who was responsible. I craned my head to see Class F's seating area and spotted three people there who weren't students. The first was a normal-looking teacher—I couldn't believe it was her doing. The second was a little girl, far too young to be a student, let alone a teacher. That only left the last one—someone in a dark, hooded robe.

It's gotta be them. They're way too weird. What'd they do, though? Pump them full of steroids? No, that doesn't feel right... I can't accuse them of drugging kids without some kind of proof. And how did they get so strong without using any magic at all? Seriously, what's going on here?

As everyone tried to puzzle it out, one of the Class S boys parted from their group and began insulting the Class F kids. His name was Freid, if I remembered correctly, and like Goon, I only knew him as a member of Theobolt's clique. From the sound of it, he was opposed to the round being called a draw already, since one of Class F's boys hadn't fought yet.

That's just stupid of him. Class S has two losses and a draw already, so if Freid loses his match, his class will lose the round instead of drawing even.

Sure enough, the last Class F boy emerged to accept the challenge. He looked nervous and scrawny, and from the sound of it, his opponent's cowardice only upset Freid more. I let out a heavy sigh. It was clear how this would end.

The match was a swift and brutal slaughter, with Class F claiming a near-effortless win. My classmates tried hard not to watch the fight at all, given that their pride was already in tatters.

I watched as the Class S teacher emerged, furious at his opponent's win streak. The Class F combatant had apparently fainted, and the weird guy with the robe was trying to take him to the infirmary. The Class S teacher wouldn't

have it, though, and started accusing Class F of cheating. There was no proof of that whatsoever, but the Heroes around me readily took up the call.

“Y-Yeah! There’s no way in hell Class F should beat Class S!”

“Those lame-ass cheaters! I knew it all along!”

“You failures should be down in the dirt where you belong!”

The Class F teacher ignored the accusations and turned to carry their pupil away—but as soon as his back was turned, the Class S teacher fired a spell at him.

“Look out!” Kannazuki-senpai cried.

I nearly jumped out of my seat to intercede, but what happened next left me speechless. The Class F teacher *grabbed* the spell out of the air with his bare hands. Berard’s forceful deflection made some sense, but this was sheer insanity. The Class S teacher seemed every bit as shocked. He was stronger than any of us, obviously, and continued casting wave after wave of powerful spells, but the Class F teacher was a true monster. They continued catching the spells, finally throwing one of them back with horrifying speed. It was clearly many times more powerful on the return, and the sight was enough for the Class S teacher’s legs to give out from beneath him.

The Class F teacher again turned to carry their student to safety, but the Class S teacher somehow decided he should continue attacking, as if he held his own life in no regard. He launched another volley of spells, and it seemed they would hit their mark this time—except they didn’t.

“Huh?” All the Heroes gasped at once.

The Class S teacher’s spells froze just before their mark and whipped about, as if of their own volition, and assailed the Class S teacher with even greater force.

Um... what? Did he mean to hit himself?

Nobody could believe their eyes. It took a while for the spell-induced violence to end, and the smoke cleared to reveal the Class S teacher without so much as a shred of dignity remaining.

The silence remained for a good minute. The Class F teacher, as if unable to bear it, swiftly turned and left. I'd thought that Class F was ridiculously strong, but their teacher was on a whole other level.

“...”

Nobody wanted to believe their eyes. Class F had been the butt of their jokes for so long that it felt almost wrong to think of them as being so markedly strong.

Sure enough, Kisaragi-senpai was the first to curse.

“Fuck that... Fuck them all! We're the only power this world needs!”

It was a ridiculous claim, but the Heroes blindly clung to his assertion.

“Yeah! How's a bunch of nobodies supposed to be stronger than us anyway?!”

“They should be worshipping the very ground we walk on! We're the goddamned Heroes!”

“That's right!”

It was more than mere envy—there was genuine hatred in their words.

It's too late for them, isn't it?

I was hoping they would return to their senses sooner or later, but there was no recovering from the darkness they took on now.

I could only look at my classmates with dread... when I realized one of them was still frozen in shock. It was Airi Seto, the girl who'd never stopped searching for her friend since coming to this world. I could only faintly make out her mutter from the movement of her lips.

“Seii-chan...?”

Chapter 9: The S-Rank Heroes and the Agents of Darkness

Guild HQ, Terbelle, Kingdom of Windberg.

The constant bustling of the guild's pervers and their illegal antics had been all but silenced, and even the main hall's clamoring chaos was nowhere to be found. Every regular adventurer in attendance had their gaze fixed on the group huddled around one of the tables.

"So? Why are we all here, then?"

The speaker was a young woman with a quiet voice in a blood-red dress, her manner completely unsuited for the filth and clutter of the guild. The ornate fan in her hands covered her mouth, and her facial features were sharp and regal.

"Yeah, what gives? Why'd you have to go harshin' my mellow, havin' me teleported to a pad like this? I want deets, bro. Gimme a reason."

He was a dark-skinned man in his early thirties with a massive afro and reflective sunglasses. He was clad in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. He would've looked more at home on a tropical beach in the Heroes' world.

The woman beside him nodded gravely. "Thou hast ruined my leisure time, and I shan't hesitate to cleave thee in twain should this gathering prove dull—or rather, I would say as much if not for the gorgeous flowers thou hast gathered. Wouldst thou care to spend a night of fiery passion with me, miladies?"

She had platinum blonde hair and hawk-like golden eyes that gave off a swordswoman's grim aura. The sword at her hip was wreathed in a strange energy. She was likely in her twenties and had a noble firmness that would undoubtedly attract women like butterflies to nectar.

"Are you sure I should even be here?" a middle-aged demonkin asked nervously. "You know how hard it can be for me. There isn't much

discrimination in this country, sure, but there's no telling what other countries might think..."

His violet hair was swept back over his head, accentuating his blood-red eyes. He had a pair of distinctive, curling horns, but he otherwise resembled a standard adventurer.

"Hahh... I'm soooo tiiiiired... Can I sleep now...?"

The youngest of them—a girl who had to be in her early teens—yawned, her large, pointed hat drooping over her face. From the way her mage robes swaddled her up, she seemed ready to fall asleep on the spot.

"Does it matter why we're here? Anything to punch people legally!"

The man in full-body silver spandex with a massive red scarf—so-called "Absolute Victory" Gargarand—grinned amusedly.

"Let's all take a deep breath, now."

The last adventurer at the table was a plain-looking young man, who eyed his colleagues levelly. He had brown hair and green eyes, and his smile was tinged with stress.

Standing before them all—a motley bunch by any measure—was the guildmaster, Gustle Clout.

"Hahahahaha! I see you're as true to yourselves as always!"

Beside him, the receptionist, Eris Maclaine, rolled her eyes. "This is not something to laugh about, you muscle brain."

"Oh, thank you!"

"That wasn't a compliment."



With the “formalities” out of the way, Gustle cleared his throat. “Well, then, let’s get right to business. I’ve called you all here today for a request.”

“A request?”

The assembled adventurers returned curious looks.

The afro man shook his head. “Man, all of us for one quest? You gotta be kidding.”

“Indeed.” The noblewoman’s brow furrowed. “And why is *she*, of all people, absent from our little gathering?”

“That’s a good point,” the demonkin agreed. “What’re we all doing here without her?”

“She’ll arrive later,” Gustle promised them. “She was the first to know, actually, but she’s still dealing with other business.”

“I guess that’s just like her,” the demonkin admitted.

“Prithee, what is this request thou hast summoned us for?” the lady knight asked. “I must admit, I do not wish to leave the country.”

“Yeah!” Gargarand echoed. “What’s this all about? Do you want us to go punch some folks?”

The calm youth rolled his eyes. “Of course they don’t.” He paused, then shot Gustle a worried look. “You don’t, right?”

Gustle shook his head at the self-proclaimed champion. “I’m afraid there won’t be any punching this time, Gargarand-kun.”

“Oh. Later, then.” He stood up, stretched, and started walking toward the door.

“You’re leaving?!” The youth stood and grabbed him by the arm. “You can’t just go!”

“There’s nothing here for me now. Release me at once!”

The witch girl yawned lazily. “You’re leaving, Gargarand? Bye-bye...”

The youth swore, “Gods, it’s like herding cats!”

“Gahahahaha!” Gustle guffawed. “Isn’t that the truth!”

“Please stop laughing and make Gargarand-san stay!”

“Good luck!”

“See, this is why I hate this place!”

His words were hard to deny, and Gustle sobered up a little. “Jokes aside, I *do* need to tell you all about the request. Could you stay a minute, Gargarand-kun?”

“Damn. Make it quick.”

“Thanks!” Gustle grinned. “Now, getting right to business—you’ve been summoned here because the king of this Kingdom of Windberg, King Ladnzelf, will be meeting with the Demon King soon... or rather, the Demon King’s daughter Routier-sama. They intend to formally open relations.”

A ripple of shock ran through the group—the demonkin was more shocked than any of them.

“I’m sure you can guess now,” the guildmaster continued, “but we need you to provide security at the summit.”

The noblewoman let out a heavy sigh. “Well... That *is* quite the task.”

Gustle nodded seriously. “As you all know, most countries’ relationships with the demonkin are shaky at best. Without mentioning any specific countries, many humans, elves, and other races have seen the demonkin as threats. Though the Kingdom of Windberg has attempted to mend this rift, many other lands haven’t followed suit, and relations are shaky at best.”

The demonkin adventurer nodded, conflict playing across his face. “No matter how hard we try to put the past behind us, a lot of the larger political powers insist we’re evil and keep on gobbling up the smaller, more neutral countries. At this rate, the whole world might hate us.” He met Gustle square in the eye. “That’s why we try so hard to avoid bothering this country. Even coming and going from Windberg could attract unwelcome attention, but... I never thought they would...”

“Oh, lighten up!” Gustle grinned. “We can cover our own asses, so come and go as you please! Petty things like borders and people matter nothing to muscles! Why don’t we bond over some heavy lifting?!”

“Uh... I’ll pass.” Nonetheless, he smiled bashfully at the offer.

“How heartless!” Gustle declared, beaming and flexing his bulging muscles. His expression sobered considerably as he returned to business. “So? What do you all think? Will any of you be accepting this quest?”

A long moment of silence passed. All of a sudden—

Clack!

The noblewoman snapped her fan shut. “Very well! I, Cornelia Arnauldi, shall accept.”

Gustle beamed. “Cornelia-kun...!”

“Ah, and might I ask if Homon-sama will be participating as well? I’m rather a fan of his party, the Buddy Lovers... I can feel my passion bursting out of my nose at the thought!”

“Er... I can arrange a meeting after this.”

“Really?! Hehe... Gehehehehehe...”

“C-Cornelia-kun? That’s not very ladylike of you...”

In the end, she failed to compose herself.

“Me, I don’t mind.” The afro guy nodded. “I’ve got a demonkin friend or two, and I’ll do what I can to keep ‘em happy and healthy. You can count Afross DeNoire in.”

“Oh, Afross-kun! I really appreciate it!”

The lady knight nodded gravely. “Truly a task worthy of my skills—and I am no friend of the empire in question, much less their feelings toward demonkin. How could they risk the lives of such beautiful, horned women? I, Yurine Lesby, shall lend thee my blade. Indeed, demonkin women are truly fine. The very thought of them is... A-Ah, my nobe id bleeing...”

“Wonderful, Yurine-kun! I’m glad to have your support, but try not to be too horny on the job!”

Gargarand scoffed, “Countries? People? I couldn’t care less... but as the Champion of Justice, my hands are tied. Consider Gargarand Routix at your service!”

“I couldn’t be happier to hear that, Gargarand-kun! You’re a true hero, through and through!”

“Plus, I’ll get to punch a *lot* of bad guys if anything goes wrong.”

“I take it all back!”

The sleepy little witch yawned again. “I’m too tired to work... but if everyone stops fighting, I’ll get to sleep better. Okay... Nemu Dormir’s got your back~”

“You too, Nemu-kun? Wonderful!”

“Zzz...”

“You’re asleep already?!”

The youth looked at her and chuckled awkwardly. “Haha... What a character.” He turned to face Gustle. “Well, consider me—Euste Horace, that is—on the team. I want nothing more than to get along better with the demonkin.”

“Oh, Euste-kun! With your help, we’ve good as succeeded!”

“I really wouldn’t go *that* far.”

With that, Gustle turned to the last adventurer. “So, Orvall-kun? How do you feel about it?”

He shook his head and smiled. “I can’t be the only one left out, now, can I? Orvall Demira has your backs!”

With that, every adventurer at the table had taken up the quest. Gustle passed his gaze over each of them in turn.

“Thank you for the assistance, S-Rank adventurers! Let’s see this through together!”

“Yeah!”

For the sake of humanity's and demonkin's futures alike, the adventurers swore then and there to fight.

"So?" Cornelia prodded. "Can you call Homon-sama now?"

"Fine."

... They swore to fight.

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In a dark room, a solitary man—Kreiss, aide to the Demon King—sat hunched over a crystal ball.

"Heeheehee! So? Have you gathered them?"

"Yes," replied the elderly voice from beyond the crystal. "But you should know it wasn't easy assembling so many."

"Hee... This is all because of that last disaster. All those precious monsters we'd gathered, gone in an instant right outside Terbelle's front gates."

"I know you feel irritated at our last failure, but not even I could've anticipated such a failure. Who would have thought that both Ironhide and the Winter Wizard would be there, let alone the Great Sage himself?"

Kreiss's last plan involved teleporting a massive horde of monsters right in front of Terbelle. Seiichi's intervention ended the invasion before it could even begin, but even Barnabus's power would not have been enough to prevent damage to the city altogether. Everything was Seiichi's fault.

"I had thought we'd have to go back to the drawing board," Kreiss mused, "but the stars have truly aligned for our means."

"You mean the summit between the Demon King's daughter and the King of Windberg?"

"Heehee! Precisely!" He grinned.

"But what good will more monsters do?" the elderly voice sneered. "You want to send them back to Terbelle's gates? It'll be far harder now. I've heard the King of Windberg has gathered S-Rank adventurers from across the land to

ensure nothing goes amiss. No number of monsters could help against such odds. What, then, is your plan?”

“Well... I *am* planning on teleporting the monsters in,” Kreiss admitted. “But this time, they won’t be alone. I’ll be sending Edmund with them.”

“Edmund?” The elderly voice paused in thought. “Ah... I see now.”

“There are plenty of ways to harvest despair, and not all of them require slaughtering commoners.”

“You’re after the daughter, then?”

“Heehee! Exactly!” He grinned maliciously. “Just imagine—on the brink of an alliance, the Demon King’s beloved daughter is slain by humans!”

“The demonkin would be driven mad with hatred, and nothing could repair their relationship with the humans. Better yet, with the monsters—”

“They’ll be forced to deal with both the demonkin *and* the monster threats at once!” Kreiss snickered. “One death will birth rivers of blood! Heeheeheeheeheeeee! Splendid... Utterly splendid!”

“Hence, Edmund,” the elder mused. “He can do it, surely—even if the Great Sage appears again. Why don’t I add a little support from my end as well?”

“Hee, excellent! We can’t afford another failure. Soon, the Cult of the Wicked One will be unable to hide any longer...”

“Let’s ensure we succeed, then.”

“Exactly—

“—All for the Wicked One.”

Chapter 10: Sei-chan Meets Airin

“It’s totally Sei-chan, honest!”

“Again, who the hell is ‘Sei-chan’?”

Airi Seto pouted her lips. Across from her were her friends, one of the most infamous groups of Heroes, even among those summoned—the ladies’ gang leader Yuuka Nojima, the world-famous model Noa Shimizu, and the modern gal Rumi Amakawa.

“God, why don’t you get it?!” Airi protested. “How could you forget Sei-chan?!”

“I don’t even know who the fuck that is!” Nojima snapped back.

“Do we maybe know him from somewhere?” Shimizu asked.

“No, not really.”

Nojima rolled her eyes. “The hell do you expect us to know, then?”

“So, what’s up with this guy?” Amakawa shot Airi a curious look. “How do you even know him? Is he your boyfriend or something?”

Airi immediately blushed and began idly twirling her hair. “O-Of course we aren’t going out, jeez! I’m going all red... but no, he’s not my guy.”

“He’s not?!”

Shimizu sighed. “We’re really going nowhere fast... So what’d it mean to you if Sei-chan was here?”

“Well, I kinda wanna save him, y’know?”

Nojima’s eyes widened. “Wait, is he in trouble or something?! Seriously, what the hell is this guy? And if we don’t even know who he is, what the hell do you want *us* to do?”

“Oh, don’t be like that! You’re being such a meanie~”

“That’s common sense, goddamn it!”

If they didn’t even know who he was, they couldn’t do anything even if they wanted to. Besides, Airi herself hadn’t considered what she’d do if they did manage to meet.

Shimizu rubbed her temples and let out another sigh. “So you’re saying this Sei-chan guy you’re looking for is in Class F, right?”

“Yep!”

“Just go see him, then!” Nojima snapped. “Stop waffling around and figure it out as you go. You can’t expect us to read your mind.”

“M-Meet him? I dunno, isn’t that too forward? What if he hates me?”

“God, how’d you get so fucking annoying?!”

As Shimizu tried to calm Nojima down, Amakawa gave Airi a teasing smile.

“I think I know that smile. You’ve got the hots for this Sei-chan guy, right?”

Nojima’s eyes widened. “No shit! Really?”

Shimizu nodded. “I thought as much.”

Airi pointedly looked away. “N-N-No, of course, um, not. I-I mean, no!”



“Liar,” all three replied in unison.

“You’re way too easy to read.” Nojima snorted.

Shimizu sighed. “You didn’t even get her at first, Yuuka.”

“I’m not too easy to read!” Airi protested. “No way!”

“No need to get defensive,” Amakawa assured her. “We all know you like this Sei-chan guy.”

Despite their earlier complaints, all three of Airi’s friends were chomping at the bit to get as many details as possible from her now. Feeling consternation, Airi frowned.

“I-I really don’t—”

“Cough it up already!” Nojima yelled.

“Wah?!”

The three of them pounced on Airi like a pack of teenaged hyenas, tickling her into submission.

“Hahaha, f-fine! Fine, I’ll tell you everything!”

“Good.”

“That’s the spirit. Just give in.”

“Well? Spill already!”

Airi shot her friends one last reproachful look before coming clean.

“Sei-chan and I met back in middle school. I have you girls now, but I was a major loner back then.”

Nojima’s eyes widened. “No shit!”

Shimizu’s brow furrowed. “You, a loner? I don’t believe that.”

“That’s a real shock!” Amakawa trilled.

They’d only known her since starting high school and never talked much about their pasts.

“I only figured it out halfway through middle school,” Airi explained. “Before then, I was totally alone. I might not even be here today without Sei-chan.”

“Huh?”

That was certainly news to them.

“I said I was a loner, right? I always ate on the stairs leading up to the roof, where nobody’d find me. God, that was forever ago...”

And with that, she let herself drift into her memories.

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“Hahh...”

I let out a big sigh and tried not to feel too lonely as I ate my lunch. I was there because I didn’t have a single friend to my name. I was, like, a shut-in, at least in how I acted. Anyhow, I figured out pretty quick that the stairs to the roof were the best place to have lunch alone, and I ate there every day since I found it. Most middle schools were pretty much the same, so I bet you can figure out that the door to the roof was off-limits. That meant nobody used the stairs... unless there was an evacuation or something, maybe. Well, it was my spot, and I was pretty okay with that.

On that day, though, just as I was finishing eating, he—Sei-chan—came up the stairs.

“Huh? Who’s there?!”

I froze up on the spot. I never guessed anyone else would have the guts to totally cut themselves off from everyone else.

My first impression of him was, well, the stereotypical bullied kid. He was really chubby, and I hate to say it, but he wouldn’t be winning any beauty pageants. He gave off a weird smell, too. I didn’t mind it much, but apparently all kinds of folk hated it. Because of all that, he was bullied like crazy. I was way luckier than him—I had no friends, sure, but at least nobody bullied me over it.

Anyhow, we were both quiet for a long time, since neither of us was expecting to meet anyone here. He was the first to finally break it.

“Uh... Are you a loner?”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

He only laughed. “Hahaha, you got me there! No way I can point fingers! Man, I wanna cry now!”

“Um... Sorry?”

“It’s even worse when you apologize as a question!”

He was a little hyper back then, and it took me a while to keep up with him.

“So?” he asked. “What’re you doing eating lunch up here?”

“I mean, probably the same as you, right?”

“Huh? So you’re a real loner?! You’re kidding!”

“Why would I? You’re the same.”

“Oh, right.” He cleared his throat a little. “But I’m here because I get bullied. You don’t seem that way, though, which is why I still don’t get why you’re up here.”

I looked away awkwardly. “None of your business.”

“Guess you got me there. Still, that means I’ve gotta find some other place to have lunch, and I don’t know anywhere else...”

Sei-chan seemed really upset, so I swallowed hard and opened my mouth.

“Wanna eat with me, then?”

“Huh?”

“You get bullied, right? You wanna at least relax at lunch, right?”

“Well, yeah... But are you sure?”

“Sorry, I don’t have the guts to say no.”

“Okay... I guess I’ll take you up on your offer, then.”

That was the start of our weird little friendship. We’d meet on the stairs every lunch and eat alone, together. It turned out that Sei-chan was a really high-energy guy, and while I couldn’t keep up with him sometimes, I could tell he

was nice. We didn't have much in common, but he was a really good listener, so it was fun talking to him. Before long, he was the first person I got along with—er, the first friend I really made—so I decided to take the next step.

“S-S-Sei-chan?”

He gave me a blank stare. “Huh? Sei... what?”

“Yeah! Your name's Seiichi Hiiragi, right? So Seiichi into Sei-chan!”

Right, that was his real name—Seiichi Hiiragi. I'd almost forgotten because I just used his nickname all the time. Not only that, I was the only one who called him that, so it was like a special little secret we shared. I liked that.

Anyhow, not long after I first gave him that name, he blushed a little and laughed.

“Yeah, uh... Nobody's ever called me something like that before. It's kinda embarrassing.”

He was so cute. I didn't know what everyone else thought about him, but to me, his smile was the cutest thing in the world—and for a young gal, cuteness was everything. That was just how it worked, both in that world and this one.

That wasn't my only demand, though.

“Oh, and you have to call me Airin from now on, okay?”

“Airin?! I-I think we're both a little too unused to people for that. You're kinda pushing it.”

“Pushing...?! That's rude!”

“Kidding, kidding! Still, uh...”

He clamped his mouth shut, and it was clear he didn't want to say it. I ended up pouting a little, and the sight shook him pretty bad.

“A-Airin!” he finally said.

I covered my face with my hands. “Hehe, I'm blushing~!”

“*You're* blushing?! I'm dying of embarrassment here!”

I teased him for a little while longer, but after that, we were even closer than ever. Looking back, that was the first time I really got interested in Sei-chan as a guy. I couldn't make anything of it since I didn't even have any experience with friends, but I could still dream.

The only thing was that I only ever got to see him at lunch. I'd go and try to say hi to him, but he'd always ignore me. It was a bit of a shock, and I had a real hard time accepting it, but I knew he just didn't want me to get bullied for hanging out with him. That didn't make it any easier, though.

Then, one day, as we were having lunch, he asked me something.

"By the way, why are you a loner?"

"That's an awful way to ask!"

"U-Uh, sorry. I didn't mean anything bad by it. But nobody's picking on you, right? I don't really get it."

"I'm not a loner because I wanna be," I retorted. "I just suck at talking to people."

"Really? You talk just fine to me."

"Well, that's because you're easy to talk to. I don't have any confidence, though."

"C'mon, you gotta give yourself some more credit! You're pretty, so if you can dress up nicely and talk to others like you talk to me, you'll have a hundred friends in no time!"

"P-Pretty?!"

That came out of nowhere, and I suddenly felt dizzy.

"Hm? Did I say something weird?"

"N-No, but... me? Pretty?"

"Well, uh... It's kinda embarrassing to say, but I try to be honest about the positive stuff. If you don't say it, nobody will know, right? I meant what I said."

"I-I... Um..."

That only made me feel more lightheaded. I couldn't even think clearly, but I tried hard to figure out what I was supposed to say next. My mouth wound up moving before my mind could catch up.

"Um, Sei-chan? Do you wanna see me dress up?"

He nodded without skipping a beat. "Yeah."

That was when I started getting into fashion. I didn't know anything at first, so I went through a million different fashion and makeup magazines to try and learn all I could. There was a real limit to what I could do alone, though, so I screwed up my courage and talked to one of the girls in my class for the first time. It was terrifying, but I wanted Sei-chan to see me all dressed-up and cute too badly to chicken out.

Once that first hurdle was cleared, it was kinda crazy just how quickly the girls welcomed me into their group. I could even talk to them as easily as I could with Sei-chan, and I started getting more into gal-style fashion. My entire social life was turned on its head.

Soon, I could talk to other guys, not just girls. It was kinda scary at first, but the more I got used to it, the less of a problem it became. A few boys even asked me out, which I still couldn't really believe. I was sorta friends with some, others were the more playboy types—I got all kinds of guys asking me out. None of them could steal my heart, though. None of them were Sei-chan.

With that, I went from being a total loner to enjoying my school life to the fullest, but I'd soon learn the price I paid for it.

Sei-chan stopped coming to the stairs at lunch. I kept on going to our spot long after that, but I never really saw him there again. Not only that, all my new friends meant I had less and less time to look for him. Eventually, I even started eating lunch with them instead. That was the first time I was ever glad to have been a loner. In the end, I graduated middle school before getting to see him again.

When I started high school, I was happy to hear that he was there, too—but since rumors were that he was still being bullied, I couldn't be all happy. Still, I couldn't reunite with him. Even when I tracked down his classroom or ran

everywhere through the school looking, I couldn't find any sign of him. It was like he was purposefully trying to avoid me or something.

Later, I learned he'd become a real shut-in for a while. I couldn't believe such a happy, bubbly guy was getting that depressed. He must've gone through a lot since we had lost touch, and it really pained me that I wasn't able to support him more.

Sei-chan had given me the push I needed, and I was determined to make the best of it. I never forgot the huge debt I owed him, and I lived my life to the fullest.

It was at that point that we were all taken to this world. I was super confused at first, but I knew this was when I needed to help him. This time, for sure, I would finally protect him.

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"So that's it, more or less."

"God, you're down *bad*."

"I thought I was gonna puke raw sugar."

Rumi and Noa both looked at me with tired little shakes of their heads. Yuuka, on the other hand, was *crying*.

"Damn, you and this Sei-chan guy have both been through so much!"

"That's kinda mean, you two... and Yuuka, it's nothing to cry over!"

I guess that's just how Yuuka is, though.

"Anyhow, I owe Sei-chan a lot," I summarized. "I gotta track him down and thank him for everything, and then help *him* this time."

My three friends exchanged glances.

"Shit, you're stubborn!" Yuuka cursed. "The hell're we supposed to *not* help after that sob story?"

Noa nodded. "You're kind of a pain, but I guess we can do you one."

“Yep. Count us in.”

I blinked in surprise at them. “Really? You guys don’t even know Sei-chan.”

Yuuka scoffed. “So? He saved your little ass, and it’s about damn time we thanked him for it.”

“Um... Why’re you making it sound like you own me?”

“God, who said anything about that?! Way to go off on a tangent!”

I couldn’t help but giggle at Yuuka’s reply.

Look at me now, Sei-chan. You gave me courage, and now I’ve got friends I can trust with anything.

“All right, ‘nuff sittin’ around! Let’s go kick down Class F’s door!”

“B-But we can’t just go! What if he doesn’t want me to show up out of nowhere after all this time?”

“God, you are SUCH a pain!”

Yuuka wound up yelling at me again, and I could tell we wouldn’t be getting anywhere for a while yet.

Chapter 11: Terbelle in Chaos and Yet Another Plot

“Gods... Why’re we meeting here, of all places?”

“Gyahahaha! Don’t be like that! If we succeed, we’ll be one step closer to the Wicked One’s resurrection!”

“Exactly. If anything, the diminutive size of this country will make this that much easier.”

Three figures were whispering to each other in the depths of the woods closest to Terbelle.

“Yeah, but why’re you two here at all? This’s my job, right?”

“You must know the importance of this task. Failure will not be tolerated.”

“Yeah! Even if we all die, we gotta get this done!”

The first man snorted derisively. “Fine, as long as we make it out. That makes three Servants between us, and that creep Kreiss even sent us some monsters. We can’t fail at this rate.”

The third shook his head solemnly. “Regrettably, we cannot be sure.”

“Yeah? Why not?”

“They vanquished Demioros.”

The other two flinched in shock.

“You’re kidding!” the second crowed. “Liar!”

The first nodded, shaken. “Yeah. He was no combat specialist, sure, but he was still a Servant. How could anyone defeat him?”

“I was surprised as well,” the third said, “but there’s no doubt. He was defeated at Barbodel Magic Academy, no less.”

“Wait, you’re saying a buncha snot-nosed brats got him?!”

The third shook his head. “That, I do not know. But Angreia fell with him.”

“Angreia?” The first tried to remember her. “Oh, yeah, that sob story. I don’t give a damn what happened to her, but Demioros going down is bad news.”

“Regardless, we must prepare ourselves for the worst. Do not relax your guards.”

The second cackled. “Gyahahahaaa! Leave it to me!”

The first shook his head and sighed. “You’re the only one of us I *am* worried about.”

With their meeting complete, the three figures disappeared into the shadows once more.

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“Long time no see, dear.”

“Eremina...”

In the depths of Terbelle’s palace, in his royal chambers, Landze was meeting with a very familiar face. Her golden hair fell about her shoulders in loose, flowing waves, and she was wearing an armor-plated dress with an opulent cape. She was none other than his wife and S-Rank adventurer, the woman known as the Lightning Emperess, Eremina Kisa Windberg.

“I never thought you’d have the chance to meet the Demon King,” she confessed.

“Yeah... There’s no telling how this’ll pan out, but I’m sick of being so scared of that gods-damned empire. The demonkin aren’t any more evil than anyone else.”

Eremina smiled warmly at him. “Stubborn as always, I see. That’s why I fell in love with you.”

“Jeez, don’t say that. You’ll make me blush.” Unlike most kings, he kept no concubines, and he got along wonderfully with his only wife. “You came back to help secure the summit, right?”

“Exactly—not to mention that I’m still technically the queen. It’s only thanks to your support that I can keep adventuring at all. I need to support you at times like this if nothing else.”

“Thanks. It’s good to have you back.”

He wanted nothing more than to catch up with her, but the Demon King’s daughter was nearly on their doorstep. Both of them had their roles to fill, so they kept their reunion to a lingering gaze.

Landze broke the silence first. “Well, we’d better prepare.”

“Yes. I’ll go join the other S-Rank adventurers.”

With that, she turned with a flip of her cloak to leave, but—

“Kyah!”

The edge of the fabric caught on a nearby potted plant, and the momentum of the heavy fabric was enough to knock the vase from its plinth. She stumbled to the ground, with the heavy porcelainware crashing on her head immediately after.

“Owww!!”

Landze sighed as he helped her to her feet, gingerly checking the bump on her head. “Clumsy as ever... Just try not to trip all over the demonkin delegation, okay?”

He hoped dearly that his whispered wish didn’t jinx anything.

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“So is that Windberg’s capital over there?”

“That’s the place.”

The troupe of demonkin was only a short distance from the city gates. They were the very delegation that would meet with the king. At their front were the Demon King’s daughter, Routier Byuute, the General of the Third Demon Regiment, Reiya Farzer, and the rest of the top brass of the Demon Army.

“Are you sure we should all be here, Milady?” Reiya asked. “Who’s going to protect Granbeige while we’re gone?”

“No need to worry. The White Dragon God-sama said he’d watch it.”

Reiya’s shoulders relaxed. “If he’s there, I suppose it’ll be fine.”

Routier’s expression darkened a tad as she continued. “But Kreiss is still there... Why didn’t he want to come? Is he feeling okay?”

“There’s no point worrying about him,” Reiya insisted. “You’d be better off making this summit a success and proving him wrong.”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right.” She nodded and looked ahead at their destination.

The Second Regiment’s General, Zolua Waltoure, cursed under his breath. “You sure I can’t just murder the creep? He was bitching nonstop about the evil humans this and bad blood that... The little shit’d be better off dead.”

The leader of the First Regiment, Zeros Arbana, shot him a level look. “At ease. I also hate him, but you forget yourself.”

“The hell you on about?” The vampire’s scowl intensified. “You gotta know he’s plotting something, right?”

“But what proof do we have?” He solemnly shook his head. “Our hands are tied. I cannot swear no ill will come to pass, but I have my First Squad watching him.”

“Hah! You’re gonna babysit his creepy little ass? Yeah, your regiment’s the strongest and most feared, all right?”

Zeros’s eyes narrowed. “Say that again.”

As the sparks began to fly, the head of the Disciplinary Squad, Jade Raven, sighed. “I’m so glad you boys are fired up, but don’t be rude now.”

Zolua snorted. “What’s wrong with sayin’ it as it is?”

Zeros pointedly turned away. “He started it.”

Jade shook his head disapprovingly. “Why is this the only thing you can agree on? Honestly, it’s too cute.”

That shut both generals up.

Routier smiled at them. “Zolua, Zeros, thank you for worrying, but I trust Kreiss. He’s as much an ally to demonkin as anyone else.”

The pair obediently returned their princess’s gaze.

“Yeah, fine...”

“As you say.”

Having witnessed their entire exchange, the Fourth General, Rialetta Balheim, turned to the Fifth General, Urs Bamew, and sighed.

“Oh, my heart nearly stopped! I never dreamed they would continue fighting here, did you?”

“Urs? Wait, did you faint?!”

The stress of Zolua and Zeros’s fight had knocked him out cold.

Finally, the group arrived at Terbelle’s great gates.

“So this is the Royal Capital, Terbelle.” Routier breathed in awe.

She stepped forward to pass through the gates, but a soldier standing outside the gatehouse stopped her.

“Hold up there. Mind if we run a quick contraband check?”

The guard was Claude Schraizer. He’d called out to them as he would any travelers, without so much as glancing at them, and didn’t even notice Zolua was about to rip him in half.

Routier held out her arm to stop him. “Very well. May I ask why?”

She had assumed word of their party would’ve reached the capital by now.

He shrugged. “A buncha important demonkin are coming to visit, and we’re doing all we can to keep things safe and orderly. Wait... You guys are demonkin, too, right?”

She nodded. “We’re the delegation you’ve been expecting.”

“Huh. That so... wait, WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!” He looked at them in shock, realization dawning for the first time. “I’m so, so sorry!” He stuck his head

through the gatehouse window. “Hey, somebody get a messenger! The delegation’s here! Go tell the king!”

“R-Right!” came the reply from inside, and a moment later, a soldier came running out and down the street.

Claude turned back to the demonkin, feeling a bit guilty. “I-I’m so sorry... I don’t know how I can make it up to you folks.”

Routier shook her head. “Don’t apologize. You’ve made it clear that your people are taking this meeting seriously. If anything, I should thank you.”

“Huh?”

He blinked in confusion but didn’t have time to say anything else as a carriage rolled down the street toward them a moment later. The guard kept staring as they climbed inside, but managed to regain his composure before they left.

He flashed the demonkin a broad grin. “Right, I almost forgot. Welcome to Terbelle!”

“Yes... Thank you.”

With that, all the players had finally assembled in the royal capital.

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Kaizell Empire’s throne room.

The Emperor-King Sheldt vol Kaizell sat with his legs crossed on his throne while his trusted mage and confidant, Helio Lorban, kneeled before him.

“Your Most Excellent Excellency!” Helio rasped. “Following closely behind the S-Rank adventurers, the demonkin delegation has arrived in Windburg.”

“Splendid!” The old ruler grinned. “Are all the preparations made?”

“Naturally. All our squads have been fully outfitted with the best dungeon-harvested equipment we could find and are lying in wait as we speak. Give the word, my liege, and all will end.”

“Kakakaka! And what of Zakiya?”

“He has been stationed in the Kingdom of Deoll. Once he has finished his business there, he’s been ordered to join the closest squad we have and repeat his orders.”

The Emperor-King grinned. “Excellent! What use is the Kingsblade if not to strike down Our enemies? Tell me, Helio, who is overseeing Our protection in his absence?”

“That would be me, my liege,” came a voice from the shadows.

A man swaddled in unsettling black robes slipped into the light. Only his eyes could be seen, his eerily-small pupils staring out from great pools of white, with dark bags lingering beneath.

Sheldt raised a brow. “Oh? You, Leutis?”

“Indeed. My Assassination Division shall oversee your safety and assure no foreign power’s spies can approach you.”

“Hahahahaha! Wonderful, simply wonderful! Speaking of which, what of the Twilight Assassin We sent to Windberg?”

Leutis’s brow furrowed. “The beastkin girl seems to have failed. Unsurprising, I suppose—one cannot expect an animal to do a human’s task.”

“Hmph. What a pity. We had hoped your training was sufficient to fix it.”

The assassin nodded. “We have many capable agents remaining, of course. As infuriating as it is to have my time wasted, the girl has neither information on our plans nor freedom. No harm will come to the empire for her failure.”

Sheldt nodded imperiously. “Very well, then. Guard Us well, now.”

“As you will.”

With that, he disappeared into the shadows once more.

“Our preparations are finally complete! Now, unite this fractured land under Our glorious banner! Crush all those who resist!”

Helio bowed deeply. “As you will, Your Imperiousness.”

With the mighty shifts underway in the Kingdom of Windberg, the Kaizell Empire finally saw its chance to strike.

Chapter 12: The Heroes Versus Seiichi

I, Seiichi Hiiragi, had been living happily and peacefully ever since my return from the Underworld. I had been watching the classes. It amazed me how each of the kids had different textbooks and worksheets to suit their individual needs and how they organized study groups with the smart kids and students like Agnos. Unfortunately, I couldn't help them at all, so I was forced to just keep watching.

Mom, Dad, and the others had already left for Terbelle. They could've used Treasure Chest's teleportation magic to take them directly there, but since they weren't in any rush, they decided to enjoy the trip there by slower means. That normally wouldn't be an option, given all the monsters and the like roaming the countryside, but I was pretty sure they could handle themselves.

I mean, a former Hero's party, the first Demon King, and the Heroes' own mentor? I feel sorry for anyone stupid enough to bug them.

My parents were especially excited to travel, and I could still remember their words now.

"Makoto-san! It's been forever since we've gone on vacation! Let's find lots of tasty things to eat!"

"Of course! Plus, we might be lucky enough to find something that could be worth a bundle back on Earth—assuming we ever make it back, of course."

"Don't be like that, dear! Oh, and Seiichi? Can we borrow your camera?"

The sight nearly moved me to tears. They were way stronger and more resilient than I could ever be. Still, it was pretty sad to say goodbye to them again, if only for a little while, but I knew I'd see them again. That thought was enough to support me through it.

That being said, something about Zeanos's last words before they left still bugged me.

“Seiichi-dono. Please allow me to thank you again for everything.”

“Nah, I should be thanking you.”

“I know that there isn’t any point worrying about you, but allow me one last word of warning. Be wary of the Kaizell Empire.”

“Huh?”

“I hope I’m only imagining things, but should my fears prove correct, their so-called Emperor King is extremely dangerous.”

“Okay... How so?”

“I haven’t the proof needed to say for certain, but be careful.”

He didn’t give me a single actual reason, but that only made me more suspicious of the Empire.

As I lost myself in thought, however, I heard Agnos’s voice.

“How’s this?!”

Beatrice sighed. “I’m glad you’re scoring a little better, but how do you still think ‘guts’ is an appropriate answer?”

“‘Cause if you’ve got enough guts, you can do anything!”

“Of course you can’t.”

Apparently, that was still Agnos’s go-to answer for his exams.

Helen cradled her head in her arms at the sight. “How are you *still* saying that after all the time I’ve spent tutoring you? Are you really just that stupid? Maybe I’m stupid for wasting so much time on you...”

“Damn, you’re mean!” Agnos retorted.

“It’s the truth, that’s all.” Helen turned to Irene. “And you, Irene. Don’t you need to study at all?”

Irene swept a hand dramatically through her hair. “Of course not! How could anyone as perfect as me need to study?”

“Uh-huh. There’s nothing you struggle with?”

“Naturally not. If I had to say, perhaps I struggle at balancing my letters perfectly so that they’re as immaculate and beautiful as I am?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with studying.”

Helen let out another heavy sigh.

“Um, Helen?” Rachel asked uneasily. “What about me~?”

“Uh, lemme see.” She looked through a few papers. “You’re definitely improving; I can say that much.”

“Really? Yay~!”

The sight of her light, fluffy smile made Helen follow suit.

Flora handed her books to Helen. “Hey, hey! So what about me?! How’ve I been doing?”

Helen glanced at the papers. “Average, I guess.”

“Average?! That really hurts, y’know!”

“I mean, you’ve improved to the point where you can do it at least as well as an average person,” Helen corrected herself. “You’re not doing too much better, but you should be scoring higher now.”

Flora let out a frustrated sigh. “I should be happy to hear that, but how am I still just average?! This isn’t fair!”

Poor, ignorant Flora. Being normal’s great, trust me! If you ever find yourself doubting that, you should really pay the Terbelle Guild a visit!

“Done!”

Saria’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts once more. She’d been studying hard with materials made specifically for her, and she’d been working hard to improve. Luckily, she had already mastered reading and writing by studying Abel’s journal she found in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak—and I was really grateful she didn’t let onto that in front of Abel or his friends.

Helen took her papers and compared their answers. “Wow... They’re all correct.”

“Really?! Look, Seiichi! Look how I did!”

“Wow, that’s great!”

I could tell she was just begging to be praised, so I ruffled the top of her crimson-haired head for good measure.

“Gh...!” Lulune glared maliciously at her own specialized materials. “I don’t understand any of this! ‘What herb is this’—how am I supposed to know the difference?! They’re all the same once you eat them!”

Origa-chan shot her a curious look. “Hungry? Are you dumb, too...?”

“WHAT?!”

That’s pretty harsh, but, uh... I can’t really argue.

Glancing over at the problem on Lulune’s page, I could see two plants pictured—one was a useful medicine, and the other, a lethal poison.

You really shouldn’t eat both of those, y’know.

Among the subtle chaos of the classroom, however, only one of the students was plugging away as diligently as always.

Agnos looked over Blud’s shoulder. “Doin’ well, are ya?”

“Of course. My head is full of brains, after all, not muscles.”

“I heard that, asshat!”

“Heard what?” He shot Agnos a look of feigned curiosity. “I never once said *you* were a muscle brain. Why take such offense?”

“Oh, really? Haha, guess I must’ve misunderstood!”

“You *are* a braindead fool, of course.”

“I’m gonna kill you!”

Man, those guys get along so well.

Blud was really smart, though, since he didn’t even need specific tutoring to score really high, and Berard was just as good. The only really problematic one was Leon, who’d still bury all his tests and worksheets in scribbled apologies, but both Helen and Beatrice-san seemed used to it by now. Other classes

might've been different, given the recent state of affairs, but at least Class F was business as usual.

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Several days had passed since Helen had begun leading our little class study sessions. Origa-chan and I were heading to class that morning when I heard an unusual clamor from within our classroom.

“What’s going on in there?”

Origa-chan peered up at me. “Sounds like there’s a lotta people in there.”

“Yeah... I think you’re right.”

At Origa-chan’s observation, I used Clairvoyance to scan the inside of the room and found that there were more than eight people inside—more than all of Class F. At least that was what I could feel in the flow of life energy, and I had absolute confidence in my abilities.

That was all the information we could get from outside, however, so we opened the door. Inside, Agnos and the other guys were forming a rough sort of wall, shielding the girls behind them from a new group of visitors.

One of the intruders shook his head. “C’mon, don’t make me repeat myself.”

“That’s my line, shitface!” Agnos snarled.

“Oh? You think you’re good enough to talk to *us* like that?”

The intruders were none other than a group of Heroes, my own former classmates. They were all guys, though.

“We’re the Heroes!” one of them announced. “It’s our job to save *your* world from the Demon King. How dare you talk down to us?!”

“Who fucking cares?! That doesn’t mean you can do whatever the hell you like!”

“You clearly don’t know your place,” a Hero hissed. “You pricks cheated in the Clash of Classes, we all know it. Don’t think you can take any of us in a fight.”

I had no idea where either party's hostility came from, let alone why the Heroes were here in the first place—though I guessed Kannazuki-senpai was the same. Worse, there were no teachers in the room, as Beatrice-san and Al were nowhere to be seen.

I never thought people would accuse Class F of cheating, though.

I technically used magic to awaken their inherent casting abilities, so some people might interpret that as giving them an unfair advantage, but Agnos and the others didn't cast so much as a single spell. What I did shouldn't have affected them, then—they won on their own personal merits.

I walked right up to Agnos. "So what's going on here?"

His eyes brightened. "Aniki!"

The Heroes glared at me. "You!"

I put myself right between the two groups as I sized up the Heroes. I recognized almost all of them—my old bullies Ooki, Kobayashi, and Aoyama were among them.

Seriously, what the hell are they doing here?

I would've been on the run at the sight of a group like that back on Earth, but as soon as I registered that Saria and Lulune were in danger, my own wellbeing went out the window. The bullies also seemed to remember those days, and they were clearly pissed at me.

"What are you boys doing here?" I asked, ignoring their silent threats. "This is Class F. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Hehe. It's pretty simple, really."

One of the boys in the back—a set of three, older-looking ones—replied. Now that I was looking at him, I recognized him as an idol back on Earth. His name was Masaya Kisaragi, and while I barely knew anything else about the guy, which wasn't surprising given how popular he was and how invisible I was.

Kisaragi-senpai was smiling, but something about the look in his eyes sent a chill down my spine.

"We were just asking for the girls," he replied smoothly.

“Huh?”

I couldn't understand what he was saying, much less reply.

“What's so hard to understand?” mused his friend, Rento Tougou. “Just let them walk away with us.”

Tsuyoshi Ooyama grinned at me and cracked his knuckles. “You'd better play along if you don't wanna get roughed up!”

Aoyama and the other small-fry Heroes smirked along with them.

Blud shook his head at them. “You're Heroes, certainly, but don't think that makes you exempt from common decency.”

The Heroes exchanged glances for a moment before bursting out laughing.

“Hahahahaha! That's a hoot! You're the Second Prince of Kaizell, right? You're full of filthy commoner blood!”

“Yeah! You're a dirty-blooded little weakling freak!”

Uh, you guys are commoners, too. I'm pretty sure none of my schoolmates were literal royalty, at any rate. Not even Kannazuki-senpai would count, and she's an heiress. Why're you getting so worked up about it? I don't even know what to say.

Kisaragi-senpai chuckled and looked down at his nose at us. “Look at it this way—we're giving you a chance to be useful to real-life Heroes. The boys can handle all our grunt work, I guess, and the girls can find other ways to service us.” He pointed past the boys at Saria. “You. You're not half bad. I'll let you please me if you beg first.”

“Huh? Me?” Saria stammered.

“That's right. You have no future anyway, so you should be grateful we're willing to put you to use. You girls are lucky in that you at least look attractive. I won't bite, I promise. Let me spoil you a little.”

She smiled at him. “Nope!”

The sneer on Kisaragi-senpai's face froze. “Do you really think you have any right to refuse? You'll get to worship me like the Hero I am! You can't possibly

ref—”

“I refuse!”

Finally, Kisaragi-senpai’s smile shattered. “And here I was, asking you nice and modestly...!”

Modestly?! That?!

“Why would you dare refuse me?!”

“Cause I love Seiichi!” she replied cheerily.

His eyes widened. “What?”

The other Heroes seemed just as stunned, and I could feel my cheeks flush red from shyness. I was afraid that would blow my cover, but apparently not even Aoyama and my other regular bullies recognized the name. That wasn’t surprising—I had been more of a victim than an actual human being as far as they were concerned.

Kisaragi-senpai was only confused for a moment, and a dark sneer reclaimed his face a moment later. “Oh, so that’s how it is. You like that Seiichi guy, huh?”

“Yep!”

“Sucks to be you, then. This Seiichi guy couldn’t stop us if he tried. You’d be way better off sticking with me. Not only am I a Hero, I was even an idol back on Earth!”

“What’s an idol?” she immediately asked.

That’s the only thing she has to say, with all he just said?

Kisaragi-senpai was taken aback by her reply, so Tougou-senpai replied in his stead.

“Idols are what we call handsome, capable men like ourselves. We weren’t just idols, though—we were *top* idols.”

I couldn’t believe they were saying that right in front of Blud, of all people, let alone that laughable “top” bit. Sure, Kisaragi-senpai and the others were handsome by Earth’s standards, but they weren’t as attractive as Blud or Class

S's Roberto. Not only did they have a sense of grace and dignity around them, but they were objectively more handsome to boot.

Saria seemed to understand Tougou-senpai's reply, though, and she grinned innocently at them.

"Okay. That means Seiichi's the best idol ever, then!"

"Huh?"

The Heroes gawked at her, and I found myself just as surprised. She didn't even seem to notice.

"Seiichi's way more handsome! And stronger, too! Right, Seiichi?"

My eyes boggled. "Why are you asking me?!"

That finally allowed Kisaragi-senpai and the others to figure out who I was, and they all turned to glare at me.

"So you're Seiichi?" Kisaragi-senpai hissed.

"Uh... Yes?"

He eyed me carefully before snorting in derision. "Such dirty robes... and are you really so ugly that you have to cover your face with that hood? Hahahahaha!"

The other Heroes laughed along mockingly.

Class S's teacher Cliff-sensei had also mocked my clothes, but I still couldn't wrap my head around it. Its effects were downright busted, after all.

Maybe that's why they're laughing?

According to my Second Sight Skill, though, none of them had used Analysis or anything on me.

Seriously, why does nobody ever use Analysis? Do they really think it looks that bad?

While I was mulling it over, however, Saria reached out and grabbed my hood from behind.

"That's not true! Seiichi's really handsome, see?"

“Eh? S-Saria?”

I wasn’t expecting that, so she managed to flip down my hood without any resistance.

“...”

All the Heroes instantly froze, to an almost comical extent. Finally, Kisaragi-senpai forced an incredibly awkward smile, sweat pouring down his brow.

“Man, a-are you, uh... ugly...”

“Y-Yeah...” his goons echoed unconvincingly.

“Y-Y-You’re, uh... A little more handsome than I thought you’d be...”

The other Heroes were just as floored.

“Better believe it!” Agnos crowed. “Aniki’s real hot shit!”

“Wh-Who cares what he looks like?!” Kisaragi-senpai awkwardly protested. “B-But is he strong?! Yeah, that’s it! We’re Heroes *and* idols, meaning we’ve got real power to back up our looks! What have *you* got, huh?!”

I get why being a Hero would matter for strength, but being an idol? What kind of strength would that give them—singing, or maybe dancing?

Nonetheless, the other Heroes desperately hung on to his words.

“Y-Yeah! You’re not strong at all, are you?!”

“You cheated during the Clash of Classes like everyone else! You can’t cast spells or use a sword half as well as any of us!”

“If you don’t wanna get hurt, you’d better clear out!”

I noticed Agnos and the others were starting to get agitated, but I didn’t really mind the Heroes’ heckling. If anything, I was kind of surprised they were acting so desperate. I could imagine them being proud of being idols, since there was probably a lot of time and effort that went into their work that I couldn’t even guess at. But what did being a Hero even matter? Without even getting into the matter of the Demon King and if he was actually evil or not, I couldn’t really understand being so obnoxiously proud about it—though maybe that was just me.

Saria smiled and shook her head. “Nope, wrong! Seiichi’s super strong, too!”

I was honestly happy to hear her say that, but Kisaragi-senpai and his goons didn’t seem to agree. They scowled for only a moment, though, before shifting into mocking smiles.

“Right... I remember the bullshit you pulled during the Clash of Classes.”

“Bullshit?”

“Don’t you remember? Nobody else in this world needs to be strong except us. But no, you’re the kind of cocky little bastard who just *has* to defy us!”

Uh... Something tells me they’re not being very reasonable.

“You know what?” Kisaragi-senpai hissed. “Fine! If you’re so sure you’re stronger than me, then how about you prove it!”

“Aniki, look out!” Agnos shouted.

In the blink of an eye, Kisaragi-senpai manifested broiling flames in both hands and sent them shooting toward me. Despite Agnos’s flustered warning, though, I just watched the flames. Then, sure enough, the fire stopped in midair just in front of me.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Kisaragi-senpai blinked in shock at the flames. “Go on, burn him! Burn him to hell!”

Still, the flames didn’t move.

Tougou-senpai turned to their lackeys. “Hey, what’re you doing? Cast something!”

“R-Right... Wind Cutter!”

“Fire Lance!”

The Heroes fired spell after spell at me, but just like Kisaragi-senpai’s fire, their magic all stopped in the air around me.

“Wh-What the hell is going on?!” Kisaragi-senpai shouted.

I barely even heard him, though, since the spells were already talking to me.

“Master! What should we do with these guys? Should we get ‘em?”

“Want us to all go at once?”

“What are your orders, Master?”

Each one of the spells was eager to betray their casters. I smiled a little at them.

“No need to attack them. I’m sure you’d be great at it, but I don’t want any collateral damage in the classroom, just in case. I’d much prefer it if you’d just disappear. Is that okay?”

“If you say so, Master, we’ll do as you wish... but are you sure?”

“Thanks. I’ll make sure to call you if I need anything.”

At that, the spells readily poofed away in joy, with lingering cries of *“Yay! Master thanked us!”*

The Heroes, however, didn’t even know we were talking, and their eyes widened in shock as their spells disappeared.

“Wh-What happened to our spells?!”

I smiled at them as respectfully as I could. “Um... Are you done now? We have a lot of studying to get to.”

In the span of a second, Kisaragi-senpai’s facial expression went from shock to fury.

“You’re so damn full of yourself! Hey, guys, throw some more magic at ‘em!”

“Yeah!”

Again, Tougou-senpai and the others fired off volleys of magic, but evidently my words reached even the new magic, as it all continued to poof out of existence before hitting me.

This is gonna take a while, isn’t it?

I turned back at my class. “Helen?”

“Wh-What?”

“I’ll deal with these guys, so you can go ahead and start the study group.”

Her eyes widened. “Now, with all this going on? Are you insane?!”

Is it insane? I don't wanna waste time, but I guess that's being too picky.

Agnos and the others had already started studying, though, and despite Helen's complaints, she readily joined them.

Oh, nice.

With that, though, Saria shot me a worried look. "Will you be okay?"

"Of course I will. You can go study with the others." I gave her another reassuring head-pat.

"Okay, thanks! Knock 'em dead, okay?"

She readily joined Helen and the others.

Kisaragi-senpai went bright red with rage. "The fuck are you doing?! How DARE you ignore me?! Shit, shit, shit!! Why won't any of my spells hit?!"

Sorry, I asked your spells not to hurt me.

No matter how much he raged or how powerful his spells were, they all fizzled before they could hit me or even damage the classroom we were in. He kept on trying, though, not even stopping to take a breath and reassess his very questionable life choices.

"Fine... I'll hit you with the very proof of our Herohood!" Kisaragi-senpai snarled. "You won't be smiling when I pull out my Divine Magic!"

"Uh, maybe you shouldn't—"

"Hahaha, no point in groveling for your life now! You die here! Holy Lance!"

He manifested a spear of glittering, otherworldly light and fired it right at me. Just like the other spells, though, it helplessly fizzled before hitting its mark.

"Why, why, WHY?! H-How is even our supreme Divine Magic not working?!"

He was clearly broken up about his special spell or whatever getting shut down, but since I'd asked magic itself to go away, the element really didn't matter. On top of that—

>You acquired Divine Magic (Intermediate). Due to your latent proficiencies, Divine Magic (Intermediate) has become Divine Magic (Ultimate).

Dammit, I told him to stop it! See, I can't even control myself! Did you see this shit?! It was supposed to be just the Intermediate version, but no, I have to be a goddamn tryhard! I don't even WANT to try!! How am I better at using the Heroes' own magic already?!

Now that he knew his special magic was useless, though, Kisaragi-senpai and the rest of his Hero lackeys pulled swords out of literally nowhere. They looked a lot like the standard holy swords you'd find in video games, and each of them had one.

"If magic won't work, we'll use our swords! These are our true trump cards, the *real* proof of our being Heroes—the Holy Swords!"

On a whim, I used Greater Analysis on one of the weapons.

**>HOLY SWORD: A divine weapon that can only be wielded by a Hero.
Deals massive damage to demonkin... probably.**

Wow. Just as advertised, and without any actual abilities to boot. How is that trash at all special?! True trump cards, my ass! It even only "probably" deals more damage to demonkin! How worthless is that?!

I started in surprise at the uselessness of the weapons, but Kisaragi-senpai somehow misinterpreted it as fear and started bragging.

"Hehehe... These are only supposed to be used on those god-awful demonkin. The Holy Swords deal huge damage to them, after all. I bet I could one-shot the Demon King with this puppy!"

Uh, that's a hard no.

"Now, I hate to waste such an amazing blade on a maggot like you, but you've pissed me off *just* enough for me to make an exception. You'll pay for your sins with your life!"

"Uh..."

Why are they literally trying to murder me after something so small? Are they crazy or something? Though I guess I've killed enough monsters by this point that I can't point fingers.

"Die, asshole!" Ooyama-senpai cackled, lunging at me with a wide swipe.

He was just as violent and impulsive as he looked, and he was clearly relying on brute strength instead of any kind of technique or even agility.

“Hup!”

I dodged it without even having to try.

Ooyama-senpai sneered, “You little shit... You’re not half-bad, dodging me like that!”

Well, I guess at least I know they’re as good as harmless to the Demon King, all ethics aside.

They obviously couldn’t read my mind, though, so they kept taunting me.

“C’mon, Tsuyoshi, stop toying with the poor guy!” Kisaragi-senpai chuckled. “Go on, show him your full power.”

“That’s right!” Tougou-senpai sniggered. “Put him out of his misery!”

“Yeah... Yeah, I’m gonna kill him!” Ooyama-senpai licked his lips as he sized me up. “Enough games, baby boy! This’s the end for you!”

“If you say so, I guess.”

His brow furrowed in genuine anger. “What’s with that attitude? The hell do you think you are?!”

He charged right at me again. I had to trust he was somehow trying harder this time, since I honestly couldn’t see any difference from his last limp swing. Again, I stepped out of the way without feeling even remotely threatened.

Oops, looks like he might hit the floor there... I’ll just use a little magic to prevent it from scuffing.

Ooyama-senpai’s eyes widened in shock. “What?! That was my strongest attack!”

“Y-You’re kidding!

“Ts-Tsuyoshi!” Kisaragi-stammered. “I told you to get his ass! Stop playing around!”

“Gh... Graaaahh!!”

He began swinging around in a blind rage, but it was even easier to avoid his swings now that he wasn't even aiming properly.

Oops, that one almost hit the wall... Maybe I'll use a little Wind Magic to keep his sword from scratching anything.

None of the Heroes even noticed my subtle casting, however; not even Ooyama-senpai himself.

"Goddamn it! Why can't I fucking hit you?!"

Kisaragi-senpai shot Tougou-senpai a quick look. "Rento, let's kill that freak."

"Y-Yeah," he nodded. "Let's go, guys!"

"Yeah!"

Finally, the other Heroes got tired of waiting and charged me, their Holy Swords raised high. That didn't change much, though, as I just continued to dance around their attacks. If anything, I had to use more magic to keep them from tearing up my classroom.

"What's wrong?!" Tougou-senpai sneered at me. "Why're you running? Are you that scared?!"

I didn't even grace him with a reply. It wasn't that I was keeping my cool—I was ticked off that they tried to hurt Saria and the others. The only issue was, I couldn't attack back.

I mean, I can make the fabric of reality scream just by punching! How am I supposed to work around that, especially since my Stats keep going up even now?! How does just getting upset make me so much stronger?! Sure, I can stop my Stats from getting so disgustingly high if I just stop reacting to stuff honestly, but that sucks even more!

I continued dodging my attackers as I wallowed in misery. They had to know by now that there was no point trying to hit me, but they kept swiping blindly at me. A few of them tried to break off from the group and target Saria or the others, but a little discreet magic made all their attacks miss, so they quickly gave up and refocused on me.

After nearly twenty minutes of pointless combat, I noticed that the Heroes were all running out of breath.

“Hahh, hahh... Wh-What the hell... is going on here...?”

“Gahh... Hahh... You monster...!”

“G-Guh... I-I can’t... move anymore...”

“Um... Are you guys okay?”

In several meanings of the word, actually.

I was of course worried they’d faint or something from driving themselves so ragged, but there was also the fact that these incompetent idiots were trying to go up against the Demon King. If the new guy who was due to resurrect soon was half as strong as Lucius, none of the Heroes stood any chance.

Kisaragi-senpai shot me a furious look, even as he was doubled-over and trying hard to breathe.

“Hahh... hahh... W-We won’t forget this! I-I’ll let you go for today, but... I’ll get you for this...!”

That’s a shitty way to talk to someone, especially after you just tried to kill me.

With one last look of irritation, the Heroes hobbled weakly out of the classroom.

I shook my head sadly. “What were those idiots even thinking?”

“You’re just stupidly strong! Seriously!” Helen snapped.

The important thing was that peace had finally returned to the classroom—or so I’d thought. I’d barely had a moment to gather my thoughts before the classroom door banged open once more.

“Seiichi-kun, are you hurt?!”

“Tell me you’re okay, Sei-chan!”

“Huh?! ”

This time, the visitors were Kannazuki-senpai—and more surprisingly, Airi Seto, my old friend Airin.

Chapter 13: Saria's Feelings and the Heroes' Fate

“I heard Kisaragi and his cronies had left to harass Class F and came as soon as I could, but—”

“Yuuka and the others finally convinced me to come see you, but—”

“What are *you* doing here?” Kannazuki-senpai and Airin accused each other in near-perfect unison.

“That’s my line!” I shouted at them both.

Kisaragi-senpai and his goons had finally left, but of course there had to be two new troublemakers here to make trouble. Agnos and the others were shocked at their arrival, but nobody moved to interrupt us.

Okay, I need a minute to figure all this out...

Kannazuki-senpai made sense. I was grateful she’d come to help me with Kisaragi-senpai and his posse, and from the looks of it, she’d rushed over as soon as she found out.

Airin, however, was a total mystery. I hadn’t seen her once since starting high school—I mean, I was grateful she was so understanding in middle school and everything, but I actively tried to avoid her so she wouldn’t throw her new popularity away. She’d just made some actual friends at the time, and being seen with me would’ve not only turned her back into a loner, but she might’ve even gotten bullied over it.

A new set of voices echoed out from the doorway.

“Shit, what’s going on here?”

“So like, why’s the student council president here?”

“Dunno. Kinda looks like a love-triangle sitch, though.”

I turned to find a trio of flashily dressed girls there, trying and failing to be indiscreet. They were probably Airin’s friends.

Both the intruders turned to me accusingly.

“What is the meaning of this, Seiichi-kun?! What on Earth is Seto-kun doing—?!”

“Sei-chan, why’s the pres—?!”

As soon as they saw me, though, they both froze blankly, just like Kisaragi-senpai and his cronies had.

“Uh... Something wrong?” I asked them hesitantly.

“...”

Neither of them said a word or moved a muscle. Finally, the group of girls by the door took a step closer, curiosity written across their faces.

“What the hell’s goin’ on... Well, shit.”

“Something up...? Oh.”

“Is, uh... You sure that’s Sei-chan?”

They froze pretty much the same way at the sight of me.

Jesus, what the hell is going on here?! Somebody tell me, PLEASE!

Finally, Airin snapped out of her funk and rushed over to me, the blood suddenly rushing to her cheeks.

“Wow, Sei-chan, you’re so hot now! You’re too hot! What diet did you use?!”

“Huh? Uh... the Fruit of Evolution diet?”

“Ohh, what’s that?! God, you’ve changed so much more than I ever have!”

Right... Wasn’t she kind of plain-looking when I first met her? She looks a lot more popular now, at least.

Apparently, I’d somehow changed more than she had, though I found that hard to believe.

“Have I really changed that much?” I wondered aloud. “I guess I’m thinner and taller now, but...”

“God, have you *seen* your face?! When’s the last time you saw a mirror?!”

“Sure, I’ve seen what I look like.”

Really, what’s so weird?

Even in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, right after my initial transformation, I’d seen my face in pools of water and the like. I didn’t think I’d changed that much, though—my main reaction was that my pimples were finally gone.

Airin shook her head. “Just how low is your confidence, really? And like, losing weight doesn’t make you hotter or anything.”

“Wait, are you complimenting me right now or insulting me?”

One of Airi’s friends chose that moment to cut in. “Maybe you were just so ugly before that you couldn’t check yourself out properly? That’d be, like, pretty sad if true, though.”

“Oh, please.” Airin started to roll her eyes, but she stopped halfway through. “No, wait... That *does* sound like something Sei-chan would do...”

I guess she figured me out? Somehow?

I didn’t really mind, given the circumstances, but it did make me think about how we hadn’t even talked properly in years.

Man, that takes me back.

“It’s a little late to bring it up now, but it’s been forever since we talked,” I told her.

“You’re telling me! Why’d you have to keep avoiding me like that, jerk?!”

“Uh... sorry.”

No matter my reasoning, I’d hurt her by avoiding her, and I had to apologize.

Her cutting glare quickly melted into a kind smile. “Oh, who cares about that now? I’m just glad to see you again.”

“Uh, thanks.”

It was a little embarrassing, but she changed tones again before I could dwell on it.

“So, Sei-chan? What’s going on here?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t try to weasel out of it. Are you in some kinda relationship with the pres? Why the heck is she here?!”

“It’s nothing special, really. We’ve known each other since we were kids, that’s all.”

She shook her head with a huff. “Oh, c’mon, stop playing dumb! My instincts are telling me there’s something more to this! Go on, spill!”

“There’s nothing to spill!” I insisted. “That’s really all there is to it!”

At that, however, she just changed tactics, this time marching up to Kannazuki-senpai. “And you, pres! I asked you about Sei-chan before, and you told me you had no idea where he was! Liar!!”

“...”

“Are you even listening?!”

Kannazuki-senpai was still silent and didn’t even react to Airin waving her hand in her face.

She’s been quiet for a while now, actually... Is she okay?

Finally, Kannazuki-senpai looked me square in the eyes with an air of nobility and composure that took me totally off-guard.

“Marry me.”

“Wait, what?!”

Did she hit her head or something?! And where’d this whole marriage thing even come from?! Is she living in some alternate reality?!

Both Airin and I were shocked into silence, but Kannazuki-senpai didn’t even seem to care as she continued, “I had resolved to wait, but now that I’ve seen your face, I can’t hold myself back any longer. Where do you want to hold the ceremony?”

“Phrasing it differently doesn’t mean it makes more sense!”

“Wh-What’re you saying, pres?!” Airin cut in indignantly. “Are you nuts?!”

“Yeah!” I echoed. “You tell her!”

“Sei-chan’s gonna marry *me*, not you!”

“Et tu, Airin?!”

Damn, it must be catching somehow.

Airin shot me a reproachful look, her cheeks turning strawberry pink. “D-Don’t look at me like that! I’ve always had a crush on you, so what do you expect me to do when you show up even cuter than before?!”

“You always... what? Huh?!”

“I’ve loved him for longer!” Kannazuki-senpai announced. “Since before you even met him! I can’t restrain myself anymore.”

“You WHAT?!”

Airin likes me, and Kannazuki-senpai?! Holy shit, I don’t even know how to process this! I’m gonna lose my mind!

“You’d better get ready!” Airin told me pointedly. “We’re gonna get married, just watch!”

“No, you’ll marry *me*! Of course you’ll choose me, won’t you? If you don’t, I’ll kill you and then myself!”

“That’s not even a fair choice!”

This is getting out of hand fast! How’d this even happen?!

Just as I was starting to lose it, though, I felt someone squeeze my arm.

“N-No, you can’t have him! I’m Seiichi’s wife! He’s mine!”

It was Saria.



All three of us looked at her, surprised, not just Kannazuki-senpai and Airin. Even after Al and I had become lovers, she never got upset or jealous, not even once. This was the first time I'd even seen this from her. From the way she was squeezing my arm, I could tell that she was nervous as she glared at the two interlopers.

Finally, Saria blinked in surprise, having evidently realized what she was doing.

"Huh? Why was I...?"

"Saria?"

She looked up at me confusedly. "Seiichi... Why do I feel so weird? When Kannazuki-san said she wanted to marry you, I felt so sick..."

"..."

"I've never felt this way before... What am I supposed to do now?"

She looked up at me with genuine unease in her eyes. As soon as I saw her like that, I knew what I wanted to say.

"I'm sorry, Saria."

"Huh?"

Saria blinked back in surprise. I didn't bother explaining as I turned back to the newcomers.

"Kannazuki-senpai, Airin, I'm sorry. I appreciate you both telling me how you feel, but I already have Saria. I can't return your feelings." I bowed to the pair apologetically.

Al was my lover, sure, but only with Saria's informed consent.

Maybe I should talk to them both about this, though...

Finally, Kannazuki-senpai was the first to speak.

"Seiichi-kun... I understand how you must feel, but I'm afraid I can't surrender so easily."

"Same!" Airin echoed. "I finally got to see you again, and I finally got to tell you how I feel. Like, there's no way I'll let it end like this!"

“ ... ”

All I could do was keep my head bowed—but Kannazuki-senpai’s next words sent me reeling anew.

“In that case, I shall become your second wife!”

“You whuh?”

“No fair! I’m totally his second wife!”

Responding to Kannazuki-senpai alone was too much for me, so I was totally at a loss when Airin rejoined the fray.

“Hm? Why so surprised?” The president looked down at me in confusion. “This world accepts polygamy, does it not? If you’re so insistent on keeping this Saria-kun as your first wife...”

“H-Hold up!” I protested. “This is all way too sudden, a-and that’s not the main issue here! Right, Saria?!”

“I get to be the first wife?” Her expression immediately lightened. “Okay, then!”

“That’s *not* what I was hoping you’d say!”

What the hell is going on here?! There’s no way this problem has such an easy solution!

Saria only looked up at me and grinned. “I love you and want to marry you, yeah, but didn’t I tell you already? It doesn’t feel fair to hog you all to myself.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Besides, these girls both know you and have loved you longer than I have, right? It’s not fair to turn them away for my sake, especially since I kinda came out of nowhere.”

“Well... I can see what you’re getting at...”

She gave me a reassuring smile and a tight little squeeze of my arm. “Don’t worry, I’ll always do my best to be your favorite! Okay?”

“ ... ”

Honestly, she's way too good for me.

With that, Saria turned back to Kannazuki-senpai and Airin.

“Oh, but neither of you can be his second wife! He has AI, too.”

“H-Hahaha...” I laughed awkwardly.

Behind me at the study group, I could hear Flora mutter to herself, “I guess this's a weird time to be thinking about it now, but who *is* Seiichi-sensei, really?”

God, I wish I knew!

※ ※ ※

“Shit... I'll make him regret this!”

“He made fools of all of us...”

“Damn, he makes me sick.”

After fleeing from Class F, Kisaragi and his friends were stomping in irritation down the corridor. The few remaining students who still remained at the academy quickly moved out of their way.

Finally, Kisaragi whipped around from his spot at the head of the group to address his assorted friends and lackeys.

“Enough of this shit. We're going leveling. Right now.”

Ooyama blinked in surprise. “The hell got into you?”

Kisaragi's face split in a cruel grin. “We're gonna get so powerful that he won't stand a chance. We're the goddamned Heroes, and our Stats are better than everyone else's! With enough levels, we'll blow that asshole out of the water!”

“Yeah... But what level is he anyway?”

“Who cares?” Kisaragi shrugged. “It doesn't matter. The point is, we beef up and rip him apart. That's all we need to know. For now, we just need to recover our mana and go grinding.”

With that, they stalked off to one particular classroom—ignorant all the while to the fate that awaited them.

Just as they moved to scale the stairs, it happened.

“Huh...?!”

Kisaragi’s foot missed the step and slipped backward, and as he was at the very front of the group, he tumbled back into the other Heroes, causing a massive avalanche of bodies. They all collapsed at the foot of the stairs in an aching heap.

“Gaaah?!”

“M-Masaya! The hell’d you trip?!”

“It was an accident! I... What?”

Kisaragi looked out at the stairs to find a cloth there, one sopping wet.

“Shit!” he cursed. “When I find out who left that rag there, I’m gonna fucking kill them!”

He picked it up and spiked it onto the floor and out of his path, seething with rage. Tougou tried and failed to calm him on the way, and when Kisaragi arrived at the classroom, he slammed the door open and stormed inside.

The room in question was an alchemy lab, well-stocked with herbs and materials for medicine making. A number of students were using the space to craft their potions.

“Hey! Get me some mana potions!”

The students inside gawked at him. “Huh?”

“Who do you think I am?! I’m a fucking Hero! Get me my goddamned potion!”

“O-Okay!!”

He huffily threw himself down on an open chair to wait.

The would-be researchers had heard plenty about the Heroes’ foul reputation, and they obediently followed his commands. They barely knew

where all the proper reagents were, but they knew better than to second-guess Kisaragi.

“I think this is it...?” one of them muttered nervously, a set of dubiously colored elixirs laid out on the table.

“Stop dawdling and give me my potion!” Kisaragi barked.

He snatched the closest bottle and downed its contents. Tougou started passing out the other flasks to the Heroes, then finally downed his own.

Kisaragi wiped his mouth roughly. “There... That should be better.”

“Y-You can’t just drink them all!” a student protested.

“What? You think you can give *me* orders?!”

“I... Um...”

None of the students dared speak, and Kisaragi snorted with laughter at them.

“You weaklings make me sick... you don’t even deserve rights. Just be good little slaves and do whatever we say.”

With that, Kisaragi and his posse of Heroes stormed out with all the same chaos they’d barged in with.

None of them realized, however, that the potions they drank were nothing close to mana potions. If even one of them had bothered to use Analysis on their potion, they might’ve realized their mistake before it was too late.

>NEGA-APHRODESIAC: A potion crafted for high-libido monsters like Goblins and Orcs. It is extremely effective, and even a single sip can render one’s reproductive systems completely inept. No matter the circumstances, intercourse becomes completely impossible.

Still under the impression that their mana was recovered and their members were still capable, they made for the forest closest to the academy.

“This’s supposed to be the best place in the academy for leveling,” Kisaragi announced. “We’ll focus on beefing up here for now.”

“Yeah!”

They spread out to search the woods for monsters, but to no avail.

Unbeknownst to the Heroes, the headmaster Barnabus had visited the woods after Demioros and Angreia's raid to discover that nearly all the monsters in the woods had been slain. Fearing a fundamental change in the ecosystem, the forest was declared off-limits due to potential danger following the Clash of Classes.

Kisaragi and his cronies, however, were ignorant of the forest's new dangers, and as time passed, their leader grew increasingly agitated.

"Where are all the damn monsters?!" he screamed into the woods, unable to take it any longer. "Where are the Goblins? The Slimes?! Why won't any of those stupid weaklings come out?!"

Finally, the nearby underbrush began to rustle, branches snapping loudly.

He peered into the woods. "Huh? What's that?"

Finally, *it* emerged from the darkness between the trees.

"Grrrrrrrrgh..."

It was a colossal bear-like monster, unlike anything Kisaragi had ever seen.

"What the..." He cowered for only a moment before regaining his bravado with a brazen grin. "Well, look who decided to show up! You'll be the perfect experience farm!" He extended his hand toward the creature. "I'll kill you nice and quick, then move right on to the next! Fire Lance!!"

Despite saying the proper incantation, nothing happened.

He blinked in surprise and stared at his hand. "Huh...?"

Tougou rolled his eyes. "What do you think you're doing? I suppose I can handle this one in your stead... Wind Shot!"

Again, nothing happened.

"Huh? Wh-Why...?"

"GRROOOOOOOOOOORGH!!"

"Shit?!"

The Heroes cowered and retreated a few steps as the massive bear roared. Little did they know that the beast's roar had a powerful fear-inducing effect, and the magically induced terror had a wicked grip on their hearts already. They fell into a scattered panic almost instantly.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

"D-Don't be so scared!"

"Use your damn spells!" Kisaragi shouted over the din. "Now!"

"O-Okay! Fire Lance!"

"Wind Cutter!"

"Water Shot!"

Kobayashi and the other Heroes readily obeyed his orders, all trying their own spells—but again, to no effect.

"Why?!" Kisaragi swore. "What's going on?!"

The answer was simple—none of them had any mana remaining. The Nega-Aphrodesiac they'd drank had no effect on restoring their mana following their scuffle with Seiichi. They were not completely out of mana, of course, but they lacked the skill and experience needed to operate on low volumes of mana, having all but skipped even basic mana-manipulation practice.

The bear-monster, noticing that the Heroes' spells weren't activating, leisurely approached what it was now sure was easy prey.

Kisaragi desperately resisted the urge to flee, finally remembering their only remaining tool.

"Right... Use your Holy Swords!"

"Right! Monsters are basically demonkin, so this'll be easy!"

"Take this!"

The Heroes drew their blades and rushed the bear, flailing at it with clumsy, unpracticed strikes.

In the blink of an eye, Kisaragi and his underlings were sent flying across the forest floor.

“Gah?!”

The bear must’ve swiped at them, but it was far too quick and vicious an attack for any of them to follow the movement. Had they been more careful, they might’ve been able to foresee the attack—but the combined fear from the roar and the shock of being out of mana clouded their judgment.

Heroes crashed limply into trees left and right, with the unlucky few Heroes at the front of the formation taking gaping slashes across their arms.

“Owowowowowwww!!”

“Gagh... Ugh...”

“Ungh...”

“Guh... Waaaaaaaahh!!”

They were lucky that none of them died outright, but that one blow had rendered them all but defenseless. Then Kisaragi witnessed something that drove an even deeper despair into his heart.

“Huh...?”

Their Holy Swords lay shattered on the forest floor.

“Y-You’re kidding...”

“What the hell...?!”

The Heroes could only watch in horror as the Holy Swords sparked into motes of light and disappeared.

While they were gawking at the fading swords, however, a much more fundamental change was taking place. They all had lost their Titles of Hero.

Holy Swords could not shatter so easily, nor would the destruction of their swords lose them their Herodoms. Under normal circumstances, the blades would regenerate naturally—but with their Titles gone, their Swords would never again return to them.

They had lost far more than just their Holy Swords, however. Their Divine Magic was gone as well, and their superhuman growth rates were reduced to average—no, below average rates. Given their upbringing in a peaceful world,

they were reduced to Level 1 with little to no hope of advancement and Stats so feeble that even a child could best them.

To Kisaragi and the others, the only change was their Holy Swords, but that was enough. The bear lunged forward once more, its mighty claws outstretched.

“Waaaaaagh!!”

Kisaragi desperately tried to haul his agonized body out of the path of the blow, but to no avail.

“M-My face! My perfect, beautiful faaaaaaaaaaaaaace!!”

The beast’s claws raked his face, tearing deep grooves in his shallow flesh and ruining his perfect idol face.

It continued carving through the remaining Heroes—slicing, beating, and stomping a path of carnage through the now-powerless students. Each was scarred and reshaped, to the point that nobody could possibly think of them as idols ever again.

They were lucky, however, all of them. If they had posed even a remote threat to the monster, it would’ve killed them outright instead of tormenting them and toying with their lives. Even that came to an end, however, as the bear began to grow bored of the former Heroes’ screams. But as it opened its cavernous maw to swallow Kisaragi and his allies—

“Don’t you idiots know this place is off-limits?”

With a single blinding flash, the bear-monster’s head fell clean from its shoulders, collapsing dead to the ground a second later.

“Damn, you guys look bad,” Altria Grem muttered as she entered the clearing. She’d arrived to investigate the woods and happened to stumble across them. “You guys’ll probably live, but get used to those scars. It’s what you shitheads deserve.”

The instructors had been asked by Barnabus to investigate the woods and assess the likely changes to the ecosystem.

She furrowed her brow at the mangled boys. Kisaragi and his allies were all mangled and battered, and many of them had wet themselves from fear. The reek of blood and sweat was so thick in the air that it was hard to breathe.

“I’ve got enough healing potions for you all, but that ain’t gonna get you your blood back, so hang tight until you recover. The other teachers’ll be here soon enough.”

Sure enough, help arrived before too long, but while their pain and bleeding could be alleviated, the scars remained. There was no future for any of them as idols, and while Kisaragi and his compatriots had fainted in relief, they would surely despair upon awakening.

Why did such calamity befall them in a world abandoned by even the gods themselves? The answer was simple—the World decided to curry favor with a certain young teacher and took their fate into its own hands.

Chapter 14: A Step Forward, For Humanity and Demonkin

Arkenciel Castle, Terbelle, Kingdom of Windberg.

The usually-peaceful halls of the palace would ordinarily make for a beloved tourist destination, but its every inhabitant was wound tight with anticipation of the fateful meeting to come. Even the maids and butlers, who would ordinarily chat amicably in their free time, were now hurrying about in an attempt to serve the delegates.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

In the conference hall set aside for their meeting, King Landze of Windberg was seated opposite the Demon King’s daughter, Routier. Standing at attention behind them were their respective ministers. Aside from them, the assembled S-Rank adventurers were standing at solemn attention—

“Pardon me, miss, but wouldst thou be free after this? Shouldst thou have the time, I would love to leave and—”

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Euste snapped at his ally, Yurine. “Stop trying to leave, and don’t hit on the maids!”

“Kehehehe!” Cornelia snickered to herself. “That butler there on guard... I daresay he looks like a bottom! Oh, I can see it now...”

“And you! Stop the horny fantasies about the butlers!”

Gargarand gave one of the demonkin generals an intrigued look. “Hm? He looks punchable... Hold my place, Euste.”

“Why are you trying to punch them? Are you trying to make everything worse?!”

“Zzzz...”

“And you, Nemu-san, you’re... sleeping?!”

Orvall gave Euste a sympathetic look. “You sure have your work cut out for you.”

“You could help me, y’know!”

The S-Rank adventurers were watching the proceedings as seriously as they could manage. Only Euste Horace was keeping them in check, and he was already exhausted.

“Seriously... Wait, Afross-kun is patrolling the halls alone, isn’t he? Do you think he’ll be okay on his own?”

“He’ll be fine,” Orvall assured him. “He’ll have more success on his own than he would with any of these clowns, at least.”

“We’re supposed to be protecting this place!”

“Besides, Eremina-sama is patrolling the castle on a different route. They’ll be fine.”

Euste sighed. “Yeah, but just imagine her roaming the halls alone... The whole palace’ll be a disaster area by the time we’re done here.”

Despite their apparent tomfoolery, they were still some of the most elite adventurers alive. Other issues aside, their power was undeniable... probably. Hopefully. One could only hope. If nothing else, they were astoundingly bold for operating as usual even in such stressful circumstances.

Landze awkwardly cleared his throat. “I’m, uh... Just try to ignore them.”

Routier smiled just a little. “Don’t worry. There’s nothing wrong with a little liveliness.”

Finally, the king nodded. “Well, then, let’s cut right to the chase... I hate formalities. What is it you want?”

“What do I want?”

Landze’s casual demeanor was suddenly replaced with the dignity and presence of a proper king. Routier herself didn’t mind, simply composing herself enough to meet him properly as an equal.

She softly closed her eyes to think for a moment, continuing in a low whisper.

“I want to live in peace with the humans.”

Landze didn't say anything for a long moment, his gaze unwavering. “All right, then. And you expect me to believe you?”

Behind Routier, Zolua bristled. “The hell'd you say? You got a death wish or something?!”

She held out a hand to stop him. “Calm down, Zolua.”

From the look of it, however, all the demonkin generals were upset by Landze's words and quietly seethed with discontent. Even among the S-Rank adventurers, Orvall found himself unable to understand Landze's accusation. They had assembled for peace, not to accuse each other.

The king didn't seem to mind the subtly mounting hostility. “If you calm down and think for a minute, you'll see what I mean. No matter what you and your people want, a lot of people out there believe you're evil, and most places consider you people. See what I'm getting at? I'm taking a risk just by meeting you here.”

“...”

For a long moment, nobody seemed to even breathe.

“I could say the exact same of you,” Routier finally replied, meeting Landze's gaze unwaveringly.

“Hm?”

“We're afraid of dealing with humans again. Even I personally must admit that I hate what your people have done. You... sealed away my father, after all.”

Landze didn't react, and she continued.

“But we can't stay afraid forever. Even if we hid ourselves away from the rest of the world, the end would come eventually, and there would be no future for us should such a day come.”

Landze nodded. “Yeah.”

“I refuse to accept such a fate,” Routier asserted. “As the present leader of the demonkin, I have a duty to guide my people and my country safely into the future. No matter how perilous the path, doing nothing is far worse.”

As soon as she finished saying her piece, there was silence between the rulers once more.



Finally, Landze nodded.

“Hmph... Sorry for being so harsh.”

He seemed to relax all at once, his solemn dignity fading into kindness once more. As the demonkin started in surprise at his sudden transformation, one of Landze’s aides, the Winter Wizard Florio Palse, shook his head and sighed.

“Honestly, Your Majesty, you must stop. You’ll give me a heart attack.”

“Hahaha, don’t be like that! I had to be sure, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but still.”

Finally, Routier’s curiosity got the better of her. “What, exactly, are you referring to?”

“Hm? Oh, I guess I didn’t tell you, did I? The Kingdom of Windberg would like to establish a formal political relationship with the demonkin.”

Her eyes flew open. “What?! A-Are you sure?”

“Of course I am! That’s what you’re here for, right?”

“Well... yes, but—”

“Let’s not stress the details, then! And don’t worry about any interference—my minsters are more than capable of handling anything that comes up.”

A figure in pitch-black armor—the Black Paladin—nodded solemnly. “Naturally. I shall engulf any interlopers in the dark flames of purgatory!”

Beside them, the reputed strongest knight, Louisse Palse, readily agreed, “As a Transcendant, I swear no enemies shall stand before us.”

Landze suddenly whipped around, eyes wide. “You’re a *what?! You never told me that!*”

“I did—just now.”

“I’m your king, dammit! You gotta tell me these things!” He turned back to Routier with a heavy sigh. “Look, I know my aides are kind of a motley bunch, but I swear they’re strong. That means you’d better not cross us,” he added jokingly.

“Don’t worry,” she returned with a soft smile. “My generals are also quite strong.”

Behind her, said generals were moved half to tears.

“Right, then!” Landze announced. “How about we shake on it, make this official? We can hash out the details in the paperwork later.”

“Of course.”

They both stood from their seats and approached each other.

“Here’s to a profitable relationship!” The king grinned.

“Agreed,” Routier replied.

They reached out to take each others’ hands—

“Hold up, there! I can’t just let you do that!”

“?!”

A dark shadow began to ripple and form between the two rulers, causing them to recoil. Lousse grabbed hold of Landze’s cloak and yanked him hard away to safety, while Zeros put himself between the demonkin princess and the mysterious interloper.

Landze gagged and tried to loosen his cloak about his neck. “L-Lousse! Can you pull me to safety more gently next time?!”

“My apologies. It looked like an emergency.”

“Still, look at them! Her bodyguard just stepped in! *That’s* the smart way to watch someone’s back!”

“My apologies. That would be too much work.”

“That’s the real reason, isn’t it?!”

Landze and Lousse’s exchange was almost frivolous, but the S-Rank adventurers and assorted generals alike braced themselves to confront the intruder. Before their eyes, a man emerged from the darkness. He had spiky, rust-red hair and goggling reptilian eyes. He smirked amusedly as he took stock of the room’s inhabitants.

“Gyahahahaha! Sorry ‘bout that! Am I interrupting?”

“Who are you, wretch?” Zeros hissed at the intruder.

Instead of recoiling in fear, however, the man grinned in amusement.

“Ah, excellent! You’re strong, aren’t you?”

“Answer me!” the general barked. “Identify yourself!”

The man flinched away just a little. “No need to be so mean, now! You can call me Lester, Servant of the Cult of the Wicked One!”

Zeros’ brow furrowed. “The Cult...?”

Behind them, Zolua snarled mockingly. “Ooh, looks like we got a big fish here! What’s a fancy-pants like you doing in a dump like this?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Lester trilled. “I can’t allow this alliance! I mean, *talking* to humans? Gyahahahahaaaa!”

“You can’t allow it...?”

All Lester received in reply was a room full of blank looks. His hackles raised.

“Can’t you idiots tell?! You can’t be allowed to join forces! You can’t!!”

“Oh?” The Black Paladin’s voice had a tint of humor to it. “And on what authority do you intend to ‘disallow’ His Majesty?”

Lester sneered up at the massive warrior. “What, you’re a talking suit of armor? Gyahahaha! Man, technology, am I right?!” After laughing his fill, his eyes rolled about the room disconcertingly. “Whose authority, you ask? The Wicked One’s, of course! Rights have nothing to do with it!”

“The Wicked One?” Zeros repeated warily.

Lester grinned madly. “Exactly! All for the Wicked One! We’ll gather every bit of dark emotion in this rotten little world and return Him to His former glory! You can’t just go fostering peace and understanding! Blegh! You should be killing each other! Let rivers of blood stain the world red!”

Landze glared at the Servant. “I don’t know this Wicked One of yours, and I frankly don’t care. All that’s clear is you’re up to no good.”

Lester didn't so much as blink. "You don't need to know! You'll die either way! Gyahahahaha!"

"You're nothing but a fool." Florio glared at him. "Not only are you looking at the greatest powers of both Windberg and the Demon Army, but there's also a host of S-Rank adventurers here as well. What makes you think you can handle us alone?"

"Hey, now—who said I was alone?"

"What?"

Just as Lester's eerie grin widened, the door flew open and a guard burst in.

"Y-Your Majesty! A massive horde of monsters is fast approaching on the city!"

Landze's eyes widened. "What?! How many are there?!"

"Well... Easily several times the last horde's number, at a glance."

The king was struck speechless.

"Gyahahahaha!" Lester cackled. "*That's* proper despair! Well, king, what now? Are you going to deal with me or prevent your precious people from getting overrun?!"

"Gh!"

The last horde was only vanquished so easily because of Seiichi's aid, and Landze knew it. With him gone, however, he couldn't imagine the damage that would be caused.

"Black Paladin!" Landze barked. "Get your Abyss Schwartzen out there and deal with the horde! Louisse, same with your Valkyries! I'll leave the rest on that front to you!"

"As you will."

"Of course."

"Florio, have your mages get their mana cameras in the air now! The scouts should be deployed by now, so coordinate with them. The rest of you, evacuate the city now! Lead everyone here to Arkenciel Castle!"

“Are you certain?” a guard asked. “You’d be leaving yourself defenseless.”

“Forget me! Save the people! I’ll cover my own ass!”

“As you will.”

With that, the guards and Landze’s aides alike hustled out of the room.

“King Landzelf?” Routier looked to him in solidarity. “Allow us to help.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. We’re already good as allies, and it would be beyond cruel to abandon you now.”

“Right... Thanks, then.”

She nodded before turning to her subordinates. “Zeros, Zolua, Reiya, Urs, Rialetta.”

“Hah!”

“I need you to join the humans in vanquishing the monsters. If we’re lucky, you might be able to communicate with the enemy.”

The generals snapped to attention. “As you will!”

Finally, she turned to Jade. “You’ll stay with me.”

“Of course, Milady! Leave it to me—oh, and Zolua-chan, Zeros-chan? Play nice, now.”

Zeros haughtily looked away. “I shall try.”

Zolua snorted. “Worry about yourself. Routier-sama better be safe when we get back!”

“Oh, of course she will be!”

With that, the entire demonkin delegation except Jade and Routier rushed out of the room. With every person that left the room, Lester’s grin only widened.

“You sure you can protect your precious people with so few fighters?” the Servant sneered. “This time, they’re all S-Rank monsters, and there’s a Servant or two in the mix!”

Landze's eyes widened in horror. "So the last attack was your doing, too!"

"Ding-ding-ding, correct! 'Course, everything went sideways when you killed them all..."

As Lester feigned a pout, the S-Rank adventurers mobilized.

"Your Excellency," Orvall addressed Landze. "We'll be heading out to dispatch the monsters as well. We're quite adept at hunting them, after all."

Gargarand scowled a little. "I'd much rather punch that Servant prick over there, but I guess this is urgent... Fine, I'll join you!"

Euste nodded understandingly. "Of course. In that case, I'll remain here to ensure His Majesty's safety. Leave that creep to me." He gestured at Lester, whose laughter was now thin and pining.

Orvall nodded. "I know I can trust you. Be careful, not."

"Of course! Best of luck on your own marks—and more importantly, controlling that rabble."

They both glanced over at the other S-Rank adventurers.

"Man, I don't wanna go," Gargarand muttered sulkily.

Euste forced a smile. "Y-You'll be fine! Good luck out there!"

Orvall nodded eagerly. "Don't worry, I've got this! We can't fail, not when demonkin and humans are finally starting to get along... Hey, Nemu! You're coming with us to fight!"

He grabbed her by the wrist and started dragging her away. "Zzz... nnh? Hey, let me... zzz..."

"At least stay awake while I'm dragging you!" The demonkin adventurer rolled his eyes as they left.

"If you see Afross-san or Eremina-sama on the way, take them with you!" Euste called after the group.

Orvall waved in recognition as they passed out of sight.

With that, only Landze, Routier, and their protectors Jade and Euste remained.

“Your numbers are looking pretty thin now!” Lester cackled. “You sure about this?”

“Why, of course we are!” Jade retorted. “We’ll be more than enough for the likes of you, especially since it’ll be two-versus-one.”

“Is it, now?” For the first time, Lester’s grin took on a startlingly toothy, predatory quality, and his aura began to ripple and split. “Whatever you say... Let’s get this little deathmatch STARTED!”

In the blink of an eye, there were *two* of him.

“What?!” Landze swallowed hard in shock.

“Gyahahahaha!” the delinquent duo howled with perfectly-coordinated laughter. “That’s what I wanna see! Don’t blink—there’s more of me coming!”

Before their eyes, Lester split into four, six, and even more bodies, until the room was full of him, duplicating with ferocious speed.

“Do you still think it’s two versus one?!” thirty identical Lesters screeched at once.

At that, however, Jade only smiled.

“Oh, marvelous! I can take you on myself, then.”

“Huh?” the Lesters echoed in confusion.

“You sure about that?” Euste asked him worriedly.

Jade shot him a burning look. “You sweet little boy, are you worried about little old me? How thoughtful! But don’t worry, I’ll be more than fine on my own.”

Euste could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “O-Okay... If you say so...?”

“Don’t you realize the trouble you’re in?!” the Lesters hissed furiously. “Being outnumbered fifteen-to-one wasn’t enough? You really wanna take on all thirty of me?!”

“I know what I’m getting into.” Jade smiled. “I should ask you—are you ready?”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, the air around Jade shifted, and glittering mana began to ooze out of his aura. He smiled gingerly back at Routier.

“Do you mind if I use my true power, Milady?”

She nodded. “Good luck.”

“Of course.”

Then, in the blink of an eye, the room was filled with glittering mana-light.

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“The Cult of the Wicked One, you say?”

“Do you know them?”

Just as Euste had instructed, Orvall reunited with Eremina and Afross before heading out of the castle, still dragging Nemu behind him. Almost all the S-Rank adventurers and Demon Generals were there, and they were in the process of exchanging information on recent affairs.

Eremina seemed to recognize the name of the Cult, however, and nodded before sharing what she knew.

“I’m sure you know I’m the queen of this country, but adventuring is my passion. I met my husband—Landze, that is—while on an adventure, even. It’s all thanks to him that I can continue traveling as I do. As a result, I’ve done a great deal of research into any possible threat Windberg may face in hopes of easing his rule. No matter where I went, however, there were always rumors of a particular organization.”

“The Cult of the Wicked One?” Orvall asked.

“Exactly. Nobody knows how many members they have, and all that was known about them was their ultimate goal of resurrecting their sovereign.”

“‘Was’?”

“Yes. You see, they’ve begun to act more openly now, and with every move, their motives and capabilities become clearer. Apparently, they hope to

resurrect this Wicked One of theirs by gathering negative emotions.”

Zeros nodded understandingly. “That cretin said something to that effect, yes.”

“Sorrow, anger, hatred—all of it feeds the Wicked One and hastens its rebirth.”

“But what’s that Wicked One guy, anyway?” Zolua asked. “I’ve never heard of ‘em. What, has it got to do with us anyhow?”

Eremina shook her head. “It’s no more closely tied to demonkin than it is to humans. You may think that they’re related, given the similar connotations of Demon King and Wicked One in particular, but they’re completely unrelated.”

“Then what the hell is it?”

“A god,” she replied simply.

“Huh?”

Everyone, let alone Zolua, was taken back by her reply.

“A god?” he echoed. “You mean like the Black Dragon God we’ve got or something?”

“No, not at all. From what I can glean, ‘god’ in that context refers only to its status as superior to normal humans or monsters. He’s not a god in the truest sense.”

“Wait... In the truest sense...?”

Sensing that he still didn’t understand, she spelled it out for the group.

“I’m referring to the ancient Gods, those that created and abandoned this world countless ages ago. Does that answer your question?”

“H-Hold up! So this Wicked One is—”

“Precisely. He’s the God that lost the ancient war of the gods and was sealed away. The Cult of the Wicked One seeks to return him to power.”

There was dead silence. Not even the adventurers dared kick up a fuss.

“That’s why we must be careful,” Eremina continued. “We’re referring to ancient disciples of a very real and very dangerous deity. We mustn’t take the Servants’ powers lightly. Are you sure none of you need to return to protect your masters?”

Reiya shook her head. “Zolua and Zeros are plenty strong, but Urs, Rialetta, and I aren’t strong enough to properly protect Routier-sama from such a threat. Jade, however, is one of the strongest of us. He’ll be fine.”

Zolua nodded. “If Jade loses, then it won’t matter if we’re there or not. ‘Sides, we’ve got enough on our plates out here.”

“Agreed,” Zeros echoed.

“All right. Then I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

At that moment, a thunderous crash rang out from outside the city. They turned to see a 150-foot wall of roiling black flames burst into the sky, easily dwarfing the stone walls themselves.

“I’m glad Terbelle has these walls,” Eremina mused aloud. “It makes our last line of defense that much easier to define.” She turned to address her comrades. “I’ll be heading out to support the Black Paladin in their efforts. The rest of you should split up into four groups and take one cardinal direction each... Oh, and promise me you’ll all come home in one piece.”

“Got it!”

Content with their reply, she nodded and muttered an incantation.

“True Thunderous Regalia.”

In the blink of an eye, crackling electric armor manifested around her. That was her true form—the full might of the Thunder Emperess.

“I’d best be going, then.”

With that, she zipped off at breakneck speed, zigzagging across rooftops toward the edge of the city.

As they watched her leave, Reiya paused for a moment before turning to the adventurers. “I’m sure Jade will be fine... but now that I think about it, do you suppose the other one will be all right?”

“Huh?” They looked at her blankly.

“I’m not sure how to phrase this,” she started, “but the adventurer guarding your king frankly didn’t look very strong.”

Zolua nodded. “Yeah... You sure you should’ve left the little guy behind?”

For a long moment, there was silence as the adventurers exchanged looks. Then— “*Hahahahahaha!*”

They all burst out laughing as one.

“Huh? Huh?!”

Reiya stared back at them blankly, with the other generals looking just as confused. Finally, Orvall stopped laughing enough to explain.

“No need to worry about him! After all—”

His next words left the demonkin utterly speechless.

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“Th-This isn’t possible...!”

Lester groaned, trying hard to drag himself away along the ground.

Jade smirked. There wasn’t so much as a scratch on him. “Oh? Done already? What a shame.”

“Y-You’re kidding!” Lester shouted, a mix of shock and horror in his eyes. “Do you know how many doubles I made? *A thousand!* Each of them brimming with the Wicked One’s dark power! How did you do it?!”

Landze chuckled dryly, the sheer violence of the preceding few minutes still burned into his vision. “Louisse and the Black Paladin are strong, sure, but you demonkin have some crazy-powerful shit... I’ve never seen anyone use mana itself to beat the crap out of someone...”

“Zeros and Zolua are just as strong, you know,” Jade added.

“Haha... No wonder nobody dares mess with you guys...”

Jade had the power to give mana physical form and manipulate it at will. Despite how quaint it might've sounded, it was far stronger than Landze could've imagined. Mana existed everywhere in nature, after all, and having access to infinite ammunition meant he never ran out. He could fight effectively in every direction at once, not even needing to see his targets directly to slaughter them. There was apparently a limit to his range, but even so, none of Lester's clones stood a chance.

Euste chuckled to himself nervously. "I've never seen anyone do that before... Nice trick."

He had a lot more experience and had witnessed far more than the king. It was an impressive technique, for certain, but he was used to the unusual and overpowered.

"More importantly," Landze continued, "we'd better decide what to do with that guy."

"He probably knows something," Routier guessed. "We should take him alive."

As they talked, however, Lester began to chuckle from his spot on the ground.

"Hehe... Gyahahahaha!"

"What's so funny?" Routier asked him accusingly.

One of Lester's goggling eyes fixed on her. "We'll be having the last laugh!"

"What?!"

A dark shadow began to form immediately behind Routier, and a man appeared from within.

"Kreiss wanted the demonkin to start hating the humans," he muttered, "but I guess I can just kill 'er instead..."

He had a rough, unkempt beard, and his clothes were so dirty and poorly-mended that they nearly fell off him. From the silent, practiced nature of his approach, however, he was evidently a master of his art. He didn't so much as hesitate before driving his knife down toward Routier's back.

"Routier-sama!!"

Jade hardened a long tendril of mana to stop the blow, but he was too slow to stop the strike. Landze was too shocked by the assassin's appearance to move. It was clear Routier was good as dead—clear to everyone except one man.

“Sorry, I can't let you do that.”

Euste drew the blade at his waist with blinding speed, knocking the knife cleanly out of the attacker's hands in an instant. He closed the distance to the attacker with unsettling speed and grace, stooping and twisting so the razor-sharp edge of his sword was a hair from his opponent's neck.

“What?!”

“I can't let you do that. Just give in, okay?”

Euste Horace, S-Rank adventurer. He held tight reigns on every pervert in the guild, and worked ceaselessly to better the organization as a whole. Some knew him by a different name—The Unparalleled. He was, beyond any doubt, the strongest adventurer alive.

Chapter 15: The Former Heroes and One Unlucky Servant

While Euste was neutralizing the Servants inside the castle, the Demon Generals headed to support Louisse and her Swordsaint Valkyries, while the S-Rank adventurers made for where the Black Paladin and their Abyss Schwartzens were holding off the invading monsters.

“Will you wake up already, Nemu?!” Orvall muttered in irritation, Nemu still tucked firmly under his arm. “We can’t strengthen our barrier without you!”

“Nnngh...” She blearily rubbed her eyes. “What? I’m still so tired...”

“You can sleep all you want as soon as we’re outta this mess! Look, you need to strengthen the barrier that’s erected here right now!”

“Mmm... Fiiine... I’ll do it...” She sleepily grabbed the wand from her waist and held it high. “This’s my barrier, anyone... I made it for Al-chan... Come to think of it, I should really pay her a visit while I’m here... I wonder if she’s doing okay? She’ll be in big trouble if she ever leaves, so I hope she’s still here...”

“Less thinking, more strengthening!” Orvall urged her.

“Fine, fine... Barriermancy: Anti-Evil Field~”

As soon as she finished muttering the incantation, white light burst from her staff into the sky, blanketing the entire city in a protective aura.

Nemu Dormir was a famous S-Rank adventurer, also known as the Sleeping Beauty, though she was known in Terbelle for a very different reason. The barrier about the city was technically raised for her good friend Altoria and was specifically designed to help counteract the curse of bad luck that used to plague her. It was thanks to said barrier’s effect that Altoria could live within the city for so long without calamity striking on a city-wide scale.

Orvall sighed with relief at the sight. “Great! Now let’s keep—”

“Zzz...”

“How’re you asleep already?! There’s still monsters left! Wake up!!”

“Miss?” Yurine called, peering into a nearby crowd. “Miss! Thou, the beautiful one! Wouldst thou care to spend a night of intense passion with—”

“Yurine?!” Orvall gawked at her in horror. “Get back here! Shit, now I know why Euste is so stressed all the time!”

The S-Rank adventurers were all a tad too strong-headed for their own good. Still, they had finally arrived right beside where the Black Paladin and their men were fighting, and Eremina’s blistering lightning-strikes were flashing across the battlefield.

“Damn,” Orvall cursed under his breath. “We don’t stand a chance, do we?”

In front of them, Eremina was squaring off against a massive draconic creature. Its scaly hide was covered in countless sharp spikes and spires. Each was stronger than the finest blacksmith’s blade, and the beast’s impressive natural mana stores enabled it to cast a wide variety of lethal spells from the blades.

“They really *are* all S-Rank monsters... I haven’t fought a Blade Dragon in ages.”

“GROAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!”

“I’m sorry. You couldn’t have picked a worse opponent.” She extended her free hand toward the goliath lizard. “Blistering Thunderlance.”

A mass of raw electricity began bubbling around her arm, rapidly gathering into a single, girthy spear. It was the same spell her son had utilized against Agnos at the Clash of Classes, honed to mastery. The lance blasted forth, punching clean through the dragon’s blade-studded body with unbelievable speed.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH?!”

It spasmed a few times with electricity, great clouds of black smoke rising off its charred flesh as it collapsed lifelessly to the ground.

Orvall could only watch in shock. “She’s gotta be the strongest queen in the world.”

“I’d imagine she is,” Cornelia remarked with a matter-of-fact nod. “Well, we’d best not leave all the dirty work to her. I’ll be joining the fray now.”

She flipped open her fan so it modestly covered the lower half of her face, striding forward with trained elegance.

“Oh, how I wish I could leave this brutish work behind and live out my days in peace...”

She stopped before the writhing horde, extending a single, slender finger toward them.

“Now, children, allow me to return you to the earth.” In a great rolling wave, decay spread across the ground like wildfire. “Sink, now, and return to the soil—Rotsea.”

The rotting soil reached the first of the monsters mere seconds later, converting the ground into a fetid swamp.

“G-Gahh... Grrr...”

“Gyeeeeee! Gyeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

“Grogh... o-ogh...”

No matter how desperately the creatures struggled, they sank unrelentingly into the ground, completely disappearing into the rotten earth. The soil recovered from its malady just as quickly as it’d been corrupted, leaving Cornelia alone to languidly fan herself and watch.

“I hope your next lives are peaceful,” she remarked.

—Cornelia Arnauldi. She was the sole master of Rot Magic, and between that unique proficiency and her nobility, she was often referred to as Lady Decay.

She let out a heavy sigh. “Homon-sama isn’t here, either... I wonder if he and his boys are fighting over there?”

She was *not* called that due to a unique sort of brainrot she enjoyed—no, of course not.

With Cornelia off the field, Yurine dashed into the fray, dancing with a flurry of fierce slashes.

“Damn thee to hell! It’s all thine fault I can pull no bitches!”

Her ulterior motives aside, her raw power could put any sword master to shame, and monster bodies fell and faded into light all around her.

“How many countless women must there be in this city?! And yet, thou wouldst dare attack them... May the gods show mercy on thee, for I shall not!” She leapt into the air, raising her blade high above her head. “Scatter and fall—Hundred Lily-Petals!”

Countless tiny blades of light scattered through the air, raining down with otherworldly beauty, their incomprehensibly-sharp edges burrowing through flesh and scale alike.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaagh?!”

“Silence, fools! Perish in voiceless anonymity!”

“Gya-gyaaargh?! Kyaaaaaaaaargh!”

With horrific efficiency, motes of fading monster bodies took flight alongside the lily-petals drifting through the air.

—Yurine Lesby. From the beauty and grace of her swordplay, she was known far and wide as the Lily Blade. In recent years, her association with lilies was increasingly due to her profound love of women, but that was beside the point.

“Hmm... I ain’t never seen some of these guys before...”

Afross scratched his poofy-haired head in confusion at the horde. As he did so, one of the monsters lunged at him, fangs bared.

“Hm? I know you!”

It was a Guardian Dragon, a subspecies of the fantastic magical lizard that boasted legendary defenses, even among the S-Rank monsters. No weapon could pierce its hide, making it exceptionally difficult for fighters like Yurine or Gargarand to safely dispatch.

“GWOOOORGH!”

“Right...” He sighed disappointedly. “You’re one hard little bastard, aren’t ya?”

The reptile charged, intent on crushing him under the great weight of his armored hide. Not even an S-Rank adventurer could take such a heavy blow unscathed, but Afross didn’t seem bothered in the least.

“Not that your hardness matters, ‘course.”

Just before it collided with him, Afross ducked his head, forcing the creature into his voluminous hair—and it disappeared inside.

“That’s one in the pot.”

He casually raised his head, sticking his hand deep inside his hair to grab hold of something.

“Damn, this sucker’s big...”

Finally, he succeeded in pulling out one of the Guardian Dragon’s great bones, now picked completely clean.

“I hate fightin’, but at least this nets me some sweet materials.”

Humming to himself, he continued absorbing monster after monster into his hair, removing only the bones to stow safely away.

Afross DeNoire. As an adventurer in the truest sense and a frontiersman of the dangerous untamed wilderness, he became known as the Wildlander, with his signature, mysterious afro guiding him safely through his adventures.

Orvall shot a sidelong look at Gargarand, who was still standing with his arms crossed, watching the battle unfold.

“Aren’t you going to join them?”

The so-called champion shrugged. “Pass. None of them look human enough.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know.” Orvall sighed. “Then again, with how they’re carving through everything, I don’t think we even need to step in.”

Between the Eremine, Cornelia, Yurine, and Afross, not to mention the Black Paladin and the full host of the Abyss Schwartzens, it was only a matter of time

until the last monsters fell. Despite their questionable tastes and hobbies, the strength of the S-Rank adventurers was undeniable.

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“Wow...”

“Indeed... the numbers alone are sobering.”

When the Demon Generals arrived at the Swordsaint Valkyries’ side, they were shocked at the sheer number of monsters present. The Valkyries’ efforts, however, kept even the fiercest of monsters well away from the city walls.

“So?” Reiya turned to Zeros. “Do you think they’ll hear us out?”

He shook his head. “Impossible. None of these monsters have any rapport with the Demon Army, and they seem blind with rage besides.”

There were a fair number of monsters within the Demon Army, meaning that they could command some monsters to stop and obey. Evidently, none of the attacking monsters were the correct type.

“Screw that, then.” Zolua let out a toothy yawn. “Now we just kill ‘em all, right?”

With that, darkness enveloped his body, and he turned his blood-red eyes on the monsters.

“Run through.”

The thick layer of shadowy mana around his body sharpened into countless piercing blades, then launched in a rain-like volley at the monstrous throng. As they flowed, the spikes split and multiplied, tearing countless bodies to shreds.

The vampire shot Zeros a dark look. “Whaddya want, an invitation? Do something!”

“You need not tell me—but indeed, the time has come.” Whirling magic accumulated around his body, subtly warping the air around him. “With such numbers, there is a limit to what my magic can achieve. I trust you can handle the scraps?”

“Hah! I don’t need to waste mana like you... but I guess I can’t take on all these guys. Keep a good eye on your mana, now—don’t you dare run out.”

“Who are you to command me?” Zeros hissed, but he noted Zolua’s advice.

With that, he raised his arms toward the throng, allowing his contorting magic to amass before compacting it to his hands alone.

“Erasure Cannon.”

He released the compressed power all at once, letting the mighty wave of mana crash into the monsters. Anything that his mana so much as grazed was instantly erased from existence.

“You sure you ain’t getting too fancy there?” Zolua shot him an irritated look.

“Worry about yourself,” the draconic general spat. “Do not dare let such vermin kill you.”

Between the pair’s powerful bombardment, the monster’s numbers were beginning to thin rapidly. Reiya shook her head at the sight of the pair.

“Those two are the *real* monsters.”

Urs nodded. “Got that right. So? Should we get going?”

“How about we find someplace less busy?” Rialetta suggested. “I don’t think we could cover this entire wall if we tried.”

Reiya nodded. “Good idea. We’ll be able to put our talents to better use there.”

Just as the trio made to leave, a voice began echoing all around them.

“Not bad... Impressive, almost.”

“Who’s there?!”

They hurriedly glanced about, finally spotting the speaker from his perch on the wall above them.

“Who are you?”

“I suppose I should introduce myself,” he drawled. “I am Lordias, a Servant.”

Reiya frowned a little. “A Servant, huh...”

He was difficult to get a proper read on. His right eye was covered by his loose-flowing violet hair, through which she could feel his piercing glare.

“What does a Servant want with us?”

“You’ve heard from Lester, no doubt. Our only goal is to return the Wicked One to his proper place in the world.”

“And if you’re here, that can only mean one thing.”

The three generals braced themselves for combat.

The Servant nodded. “As you have guessed, I am here to claim your lives.”

“Then we’ll have to kill you before you can kill us!”

Reiya covered herself in rolling flames and charged toward Lordias.

“I have your back!” Rialetta called. “Wind Jet!”

Rialetta’s spell added yet more speed to Reiya’s headlong rush.

“Hmph... How amusing,” the Servant muttered. “A phoenix demonkin.”

“That’s right! I’ll burn you to ash!”

“How will you deal with *this*, then?”

Lordias easily drifted out of the path of Reiya’s attack.

“What?!”

The Servant smiled darkly. “Even of the Servants, I am one of the strongest combatants. Such paltry attacks could never hit me.”

“How’ll you take this, then?!” While Lordias’s back was turned, Urs leapt forward, his entire body brimming with energy. Then, by funneling his strength into a single arm, he threw a heavy punch at the Servant. “High Onikin Strike!”

Lordias smoothly whipped about. “A High Onikin? Amusing. Let us compare strength, then.”

Instead of dodging Urs’s blow, he threw a heavy punch of his own. Onikin were renowned for their might, and as a High Onikin, few could compare with Urs’s raw power—and yet the Servant’s punch cancelled out the force of his attack completely.

“H-He negated my attack?!” Urs paled.

“Get back, Urs!” Rialetta shouted. “Bewitching Gaze!”

Lordias tilted his gaze toward her. “A succubus queen? The Demon Army keeps quite the menagerie, I see.”

Despite being exposed to the full, unfiltered effect of her charm magic, the Servant was utterly unaffected.

“No...!”

“Why so glum? Our fight has only just begun.”

“What about this, then?” came a new voice from above him.

The Stranger started, throwing himself backward and out of the way of the newcomer’s attack. Standing there, blade drawn, was the Knight of the Sword herself.

“Who are you?” Lordias asked warily.

“Me? I am Louise Palse. Perhaps you will know me better by my title, Knight of the Sword?”

He nodded. “Ah... One of Windburg’s own Great Knights. The other seems preoccupied on the opposite end of the city, but—”

“They’ll be fine. The S-Rank adventurers are there as well.”

Reiya finally composed herself from the shock of Louise’s sudden arrival, and she quickly put some distance between herself and the enemy Servant.

“You seem to possess a unique strength,” Lordias husked.

Louise nodded. “I’m impressed you noticed. So? Will you fight me next?”

The Servant didn’t so much as move a muscle, but the power of the mana enveloping him eagerly intensified.

Louise raised her voice so the Generals could hear. “My apologies, but could I ask for your aid?”

Reiya blinked in surprise. “What?”

“I fear he will be too much for me to handle alone. I would greatly appreciate a few more blades in this fight.”

Even as she asked them for aid, her gaze didn't part from Lordias once.

Reiya nodded. “All right, then.”

“Thank you. I greatly appreciate your aid.”

Urs and Rialetta readily agreed as well, and the four of them prepared themselves for the imminent fight.

“Four against one,” Lordias mused. “Very well. Come at me, then!”

With that, all four lunged to attack as one.

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“All right, why don't you explain yourself?”

“Why are you here?”

Landze and Routier were in the process of interrogating Lester's main body and the shadow assassin. Jade and Euste were holding them both down so that they couldn't flee.

The dirty assassin only chuckled. “Hehehe... You think you can hold me down?”

Jade shot him a dubious look. “What?”

“Enough of the bravado, thanks.” Euste pressed his blade a little more firmly against the assassin's neck. “There's nothing you can do now.”

“Maybe so.” He shrugged. “But there's more Servants where I came from. As long as the Wicked One continues to exist, there'll always be more of us. You should be more worried about your friends right now—I bet Lordias is killing them right now.”

Landze sighed. “Are you stupid? I don't care how strong that Lordias guy thinks he is. There's no way he can handle so many of our elites at once.”

“You can think whatever makes you happy, but he’s not like us. He’s a combat specialist. Don’t come crying to me when all your friends wind up dead.”

Landze’s expression soured. “Let’s get this conversation back on track. I bet I can guess what you’re after—and I’m not referring to bringing back your god, or whatever. I mean, why you attacked us.”

Lester spat at the king in disgust. “Like we’ll ever tell yo—”

“We’re here for the Demon King’s daughter’s life.”

“Edmund?!”

Despite Lester’s pointed refusal to cooperate, the other man—Edmund—seemed eager to spill the beans.

“You’ve sure got loose lips,” Landze remarked.

He shrugged. “I didn’t say anything you can’t already figure out.”

“But *why* did you try to kill her?” the king pressed.

Euste put a little more pressure on his blade as a threat, but Edmund just laughed again.

“Hehehe... Who knows?”

“Hm?”

It took Landze a moment to realize the strangeness of his reply, but by that point, Edmund had already made his move.

“Sucks to be you!” he hissed. “Who said we gave up?!”

His mouth flew open, and a blade shot out. Instead of hitting Landze or Routier, however, the hidden weapon whistled past them both, embedding itself in Routier’s shadow on the wall. Euste immediately grabbed him by his hair and drove his face into the ground, but it was too late to interrupt him successfully.

“Don’t you know the trouble you’re in?!” Euste hissed angrily.

“Routier-sama!” Jade cried. “Are you all right?!”

It was at that very moment...

“Gh... uh...”

“?!”

Routier slumped weakly to the parlor floor.

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“How absurd,” Lordias muttered, glaring down at Louisse who was struggling feebly in the dirt.

“Gh...!”

On the Servant’s chest was a proudly-emblazoned Mark, much like the symbol of Demioros’s power when he attacked the academy.

“I had such high hopes for the mighty Knight of the Sword, but you were a laughable disappointment.”

From the front lines, Zeros, Zolua, and the Swordsaint Valkyries cried out in shock.

“Reiya!” Zeros shouted.

“The hell’d you get beaten for?!” Zolua cursed.

“Louisse-sama?! ”

“You bastard!”

They tried to move to aid Louisse or the fallen generals, but there were far too many monsters to break away, and they could only glance back in horror. Lordias only glanced up at them before turning back to his fallen prey.

“What a pity. Nobody will be coming to save you, it seems.”

“Maybe so,” Louisse muttered. “But I won’t simply give in!”

The Servant raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

She managed to stumble to her feet and fired off a blazing-fast slash.

“Your speed is impressive, and such a blow could fell any foe—any except me, of course.”

“What?!”

Instead of dodging her attack, he blocked it with a small knife he’d drawn.

“I suppose I should check in on Lester,” Lordias mused. “This battle, therefore, must come to an end.” As he spoke, a dozen-odd knives began floating through the air, hovering eagerly around Lordias’s opponents. “Rest assured; your deaths shall be swift.”

“Louisse-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!” one of the Swordsaint Valkyries cried out in horror.

In that moment, however, everything changed.

“Hmph. I assumed this was Terbelle, but perhaps not.”

Lordias immediately tensed at the newcomer’s disembodied voice, poised to strike. “Who’s there?!”

A rain of black spears thudded down on the monstrous horde from above, wiping them out with startling speed.

Zeros shot Zolua a baffled look. “Was that your doing?”

“Nah... That’s ain’t *my* darkness.”

“Then whose?”

The mystery did not go unanswered long, as a second voice rang out.

“Jeez... Seiichi-kun said this was a nice place to live, but I never thought I’d see my kinsfolk getting beaten on.”

Lordias turned to face the pair of newcomers, who were treading slowly and threateningly toward the Servant.

“Zeanos Zeford. I’m a tutor of Heroes.”

“Lucius Alsare. I’m just a little Demon King.”

“So?” the pair echoed in unison. “Are you ready to lose?”

The cavalry had finally arrived.

Extra: A Day in Origa's Life

“Hup... Hnnngh...”

I, Origa Karmelia, strained to keep ahold of the printouts Beatrice-san had given me as I tried to keep up with Seiichi-oniichan.

“You okay there, Origa-chan?” he asked me.

“I-I’m fine. I want to help you... if I can.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, but... you sure?”

There was a concerned look on his face.

Oh, no. Am I bothering him?

I looked up at him pleadingly. “So... I can’t help?”

“What? I-I didn’t say that! I’m glad, really glad you’re helping!”

“Hehe... good.”

“Just don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“Okay.”

Seiichi-oniichan gave me a good-job pat on the head.



I loved it when he patted me. He was always very gentle, and it made me feel so relaxed.

I never thought my life could be this happy...

As soon as the Kaizell Empire bought me, they taught me how to kill. That was all I had. They gave me nothing else. I wanted to smile and be happy, but my hands were too bloody to keep hold of any happiness. I hated myself for it, but nothing ever changed. I was filthy either way.

I don't deserve to have Seiichi-oniichan and everyone else.

We walked for a minute in silence.

"Hey, Origa-chan?"

"Hm?"

"Do you like your life now?"

"Huh?"

I looked up to find him watching me with kind eyes.

"I dunno, I just... I can't even imagine how rough your life must've been before this. That's why I want to make you happy, enough to make up for all that misery."

"Oh."

"So? Would you say you're happy now?"

He seemed a little nervous, so I looked him in the eye. "Yeah... I'm happy. I like you and Saria-oneechan, and I have Altoria-oneechan and Hungry, too. Things were hard before, but I'm really happy now."

"Really? Great!" He smiled warmly and patted me on the head.

Soon after that, we arrived at the classroom Seiichi-oniichan taught in. His students all looked up when I went in.

Agnos waved. "Hey, Aniki! How's it goin'? What's that you got there?"

"Just worksheets for next period."

"Oh, shit, uh... M-My stomach hurts, so I'd better go to the infirmary..."

He tried to slip out of the classroom, but he bumped into Beatrice-san.

“Agnos-kun?”

“Gah?! B-Beatrice-neesan?!”

She put a firm hand on his shoulder. “You’re going to study with us, aren’t you?”

“O-Of course I will!”

Agnos-kun bowed politely, then stiffly walked back to his desk and sat down.

Beatrice-san sighed and looked over at us. “Oh, honestly... Seiichi-san, Origa-chan, thank you for your assistance.”

“It was nothing,” Seiichi told her. “Let us know if you need anything else.”

I nodded. “I wanna help, too.”

She smiled warmly. “I’ll make sure to keep you both in mind, then.”

We walked away. Seiichi-oniichan saw Saria-oneesan studying, and he went over to say hi.

“How’re you doing, Saria? Understanding the material okay?”

She grinned at him. “Oh, Seiichi! Origa-chan! I’m doing great! If there’s anything I don’t get, Helen-chan says she can explain it to me, and she’s a super good teacher!”

“I’m not that good,” Helen-chan insisted. “Saria-san’s just that good a student.

“Really? Ehehe~!”

She blushed a little... She was cute when she blushed. She was always very kind and honest, and she shared how she felt. I was always impressed by that.

I hope I can make people happy like her when I’m an adult.

On the other hand, there was Hungry.

“Again...?! These questions make no sense! How am I supposed to know which of these infernal reagents can make a healing potion?! Why would I waste my time mixing when I could just eat everything instead?!”

“They’re not the same at all!” Seiichi-oniichan insisted. “Besides, some herbs change their properties when you mix or prepare them—even poisonous herbs can become medicine if you prepare them right! Seriously, you’ve gotta stop eating everything you see and use your head!”

“But Master, my stomach can take it!”

“*You* can, sure!!”

Hungry still didn’t understand how to think. I had to eat poison sometimes in the Kaizell Empire and they called it survival training, but I never thought you could eat everything and let your stomach figure it out.

No. If I tried that, I’d die.

I looked up at her. “Are you stupid, Hungry?”

“Am I *what*?! And stop calling me Hungry! Repeat: Lulune-oneechan! Say it, I dare you!”

“Okay, Hungry.”

“Why don’t you understand?!”

She reached out to grab me, so I hurried and hid behind Seiichi-oniichan. Hungry didn’t chase me. She just sat down, grimacing.

This is fun... Why is saying stuff that doesn’t matter so fun?

It didn’t seem fair that I got to be so happy. As long as I could, though— “Hm? What’s up?”

“Seiichi-oniichan?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll try hard, okay?”

“Uh... okay?” He seemed confused, but he smiled again soon after. “Whatever you’re going to try, don’t think you have to push yourself. You can take your time to relax.”

“Huh...?”

“You’ll live longer than humans like us, right? That means you can take your time growing up. You’ll have your share of hard times ahead, but there’ll be plenty of fun, too. Just don’t worry too much and take life at your own pace.”

“... Okay.”

He patted me on the head again, and now I was extra sure.

I really love Seiichi-oniichan.

Back Matter

Author: Miku I'm a university student, and I love karaoke and reading. Flawed as it may be, I sincerely hope you enjoy my work. (December 2017)

Illustrator: Umiko/U35

I was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (December 2017)



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