The cover features a young man with dark hair and a wide smile, wearing a dark, high-collared uniform with gold buttons and a belt. He is holding a white envelope. A young woman with long, flowing white hair and a gentle expression looks up at him. She wears a light blue and white dress. They are standing in a city with tall, gothic-style buildings and spires in the background. The foreground is filled with vibrant yellow and orange flowers, and red petals are falling through the air. The title 'DISCIPLE OF THE LICH' is prominently displayed in the upper right, with 'LICH' in large red letters and a skull icon integrated into the letter 'I'. Below the title, a subtitle in a smaller font reads 'OR HOW I WAS CURSED BY THE GODS AND DROPPED INTO THE ABYSS!'.

# DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

OR HOW I WAS  
**CURSED** BY THE GODS  
AND DROPPED INTO  
THE **ABYSS!**

NOVEL

7

WRITTEN BY Nekoko  
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara



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# DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

OR HOW I WAS  
**CURSED** BY THE GODS  
AND DROPPED INTO  
THE **ABYSS**!

“...I have no  
choice but to do  
it. I don’t have  
any more time  
to worry.”

■ ZERO

LUNAÈRE ■





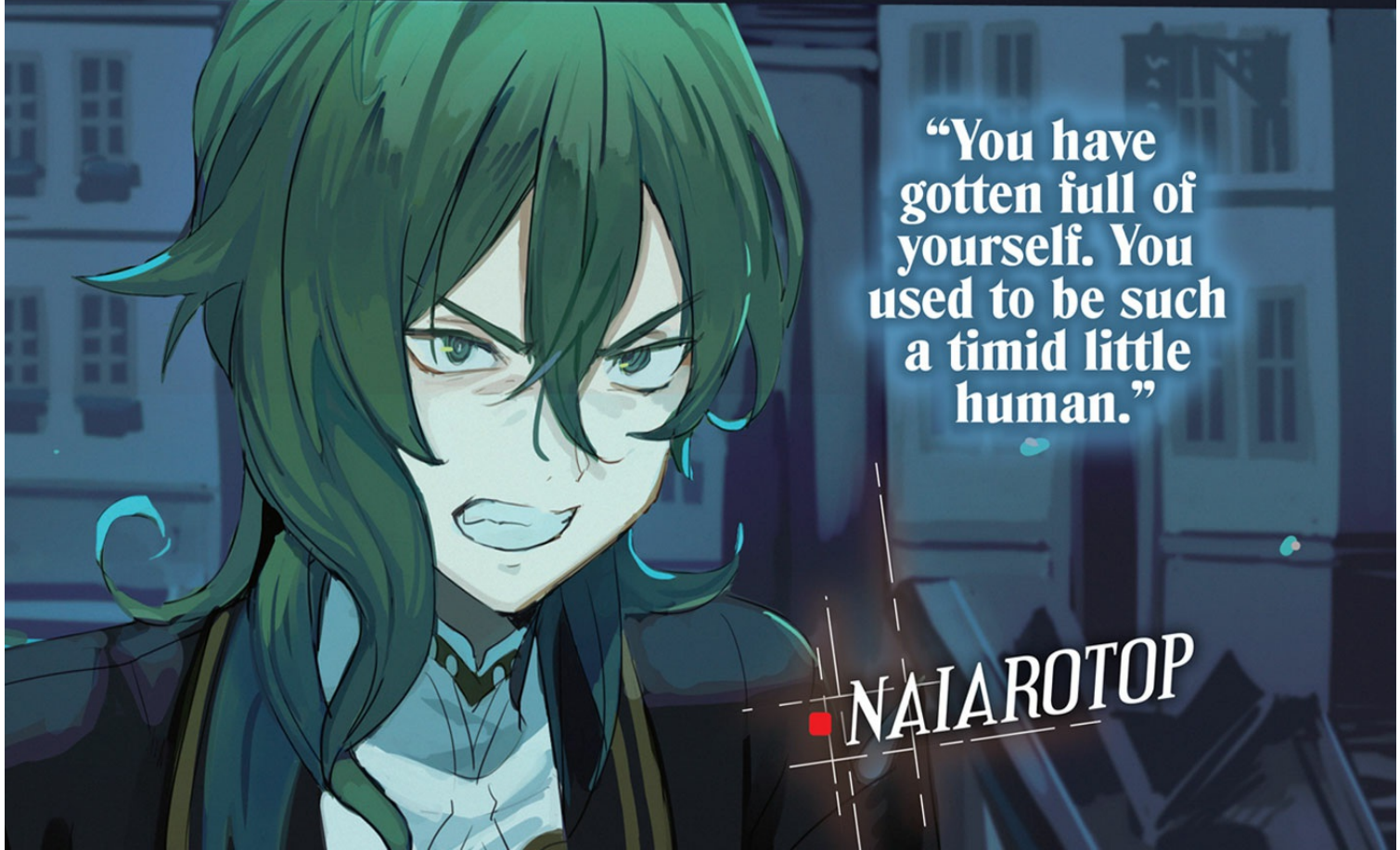




A young man with short black hair and green eyes, wearing a dark blue uniform with gold buttons and a high collar. He is holding a sword with a colorful blade. The background is a dark, stylized city at night.

**“It’s been a while...  
Naiarotop.”**

**KANATA**

A young man with long green hair and green eyes, wearing a dark blue uniform with a high collar. He has a confident, slightly smug expression. The background is a dark, stylized city at night.

**“You have  
gotten full of  
yourself. You  
used to be such  
a timid little  
human.”**

**NAIAROTOP**





# DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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Seven Seas  
Entertainment





Disciple of the Lich: Or How I Was Cursed by the Gods  
and Dropped Into the Abyss! Vol. 7  
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# DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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# Chapter 1:

## Chaos in the Capital

-1-

NAIAROTOP

“**T**O THINK SUCH a minor incident would bring Locklore...to *this*,” grumbled Naiarotop, manager of the world of Locklore, as he stood in the blank whiteness of the Upper Realm.

To gods like Naiarotop, Locklore was a form of entertainment, even if he ultimately controlled it. He knew he had to eliminate Kanata and Lunaère, the two people who’d destroyed the balance of his life’s work.

But Naiarotop had consistently made bad moves against the two of them. Lunaère defeated his former direct servants, the Unseen Hand of the Gods. They even joined forces with her!

Naiarotop had lost all control. No matter how hard he tried, Locklore was moving further away from its defining concept: recorded entertainment that the gods refrained from interfering in.

Naiarotop’s boss was originally planning to just destroy Locklore and cancel the show, but *you know who*—the highest of the High Gods, their progenitor and king—expressed how much he would dislike it if Locklore’s management wiped out the world in a slapdash series finale. *You know who* even went out of his way to contact Naiarotop’s boss and demand a suitably tragic last episode for Locklore and the Kanata fiasco. Any other ending was *not* an option.

Which meant they couldn’t just eliminate Locklore and be done with it. In order to get rid of the world, they’d first have to bring this fight with Kanata to some sort of resolution. With that in mind, Locklore’s management decided to finish Kanata with *extreme* interference and with no consideration for what would happen afterward. Once it was done, they would make up some reason to end the world and flip the switch.

And for that purpose, Naiarotop brought back someone who had been in



eternal imprisonment for the crime of pushing Locklore to the brink of destruction.

“Eternity has passed, and you may appear once more, Zoras the Cataclysm,” said Naiarotop. As he spoke, a huge magic circle appeared in front of him.

The summoned man stood in the center. His entire body was white, like a weathered statue, and only the top half remained. Chains of light bound him tightly and held him motionless in midair. His eyes were sunken, leaving gaping eye sockets.

This was Zoras.

In ancient Locklore, there existed a kingdom of advanced magic named Rodacoff. Their king had gained immortality through undeath by using forbidden magics. For generations, he used his quick intellect to oversee governmental affairs, while he devoted most of his time to delving into magical secrets. His name spread throughout Locklore as the great and absolute king, and the people’s trust in him was deep.

But although this king brought prosperity to Rodacoff for hundreds of years, it all changed the night he plunged the entire country into magical fire.

No records remained to explain why he did it. Perhaps it was simply a whim, or perhaps it was the price Rodacoff paid for worshipping a single man as if he were a god.

The wicked king’s power stretched across the planet until the higher beings stepped in.

The mere shadow of that king was now in front of Naiarotop.

“What business do you have with me, higher being? I doubt you want to look at my face,” said Zoras as he raised his head slightly.

“Oh, come on...this isn’t a bad thing for you,” said Naiarotop. He snapped his fingers, and light surrounded Zoras. His body regenerated rapidly, and his vitality returned.

The chains loosened and dropped off as he landed on the ground. There were still faint chains of light around his arms and legs, but the weight of the restraints had almost completely vanished.

“Hmm, what is this about?” Zoras asked as he looked at himself in curiosity.

“I’ve completely restored your body. And I’ll send you to Locklore like this... but your actions will be bound by these magic chains to make sure you don’t betray us,” said Naiarotop flatly. “I believe our goals align. There is a nuisance of a traveler...Kanata Kanbara. I want you to kill him. While you’re at it, I want you to take out the lich, Lunaère. She’s not the lead of this story, just a side character—so you can do it however you want. Dispose of her where the gods here can’t see, but just keep in mind that she will get in the way when you try to kill Kanata. I don’t care how you kill him. It doesn’t even matter if Locklore itself ends up as collateral damage.”







“A higher being is relying on me?” Zoras gave an ironic smile. “But I don’t see what I get out of siding with you repulsive entities.”

Naiarotop clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Don’t you love destroying the world? We won’t stop you this time. You can do whatever you like. And if that’s not enough, when it’s all over, I’ll take off those shackles and send you to a different world. How does that sound? It’s an incredible deal.”

Naiarotop wasn’t sure what would happen to whatever world he sent this man to, but failing to deal with Kanata wasn’t an option. This wasn’t just a problem for the world of Locklore at this point. Having *you know who* involved had an impact on all the related media of the parent organization that managed Locklore.

“How generous,” said Zoras. “A very tempting offer, but it’s not enough. Higher being, add me to your lower ranks.”

“Wh-what?!” At Zoras’s bold demand, Naiarotop’s polite manner dissolved, and his true form, that of a great tree-like monster, burst to the surface in sheer rage. “How arrogant, you lowly creature!”

“This isn’t arrogance. In fact, I believe my evaluation of this situation is far more accurate than yours. *You* once declared I would suffer eternal torment, but now you go out of your way to call me back? You’re out of options, aren’t you? The fact that you so quickly offered me freedom means your Upper God’s trust has been damaged by this situation and the problem can’t be solved on Locklore alone. Am I wrong? With that in mind, I believe this is a perfectly fair arrangement.”

“You—!” Naiarotop hated being taken lightly by lower beings more than anything else. But Zoras was right. He couldn’t refuse.

Naiarotop had already used the Unseen Hand of the Gods to their fullest, then openly sent two of the Eternal Convicts who he had imprisoned just like Zoras. Management’s involvement was plain to see now, meaning this show was coming to the end of its run. They couldn’t let it continue living. If the ratings dropped, Locklore would be nothing more than a drain on resources.

But *you know who* was still paying attention to the Kanata mess. He had

reached out to Naiarotop's superior and specifically said he was expecting something great from Locklore. That meant they needed some sort of big finale. The time when the managers could end this storyline quietly had long since passed.

Zoras was the last hope for Naiarotop and the rest of the showrunners—and there were no other options left. If Naiarotop refused, Locklore's management had no moves left to make.

The embattled god had underestimated Zoras and assumed there was no way he would refuse this offer and re-condemn himself to an eternity of suffering. He hadn't expected Zoras to be so quick on the uptake.

"I...accept. After you kill Kanata, I will add you to the lower ranks of godhood," he said through gritted teeth.

"Are you fine promising that without checking with your superior? You are still only a servant, after all," said Zoras with a sneer.

"...We have no other choice."

"Don't go back on your word, higher being. Your kind is strict about that sort of thing... If you break your agreement while all the other higher beings are watching, you'll lose your own place here in the Upper Realm," said Zoras, his eyes narrowed. "And I'm sure you are aware that I *hate* being betrayed."

"...I can't believe a pathetic worm of a lower being backed me into a corner," muttered Naiarotop quietly.

Zoras smiled confidently, pretending not to hear him.

**-2-**

**O**N VERANTA'S ORDERS, Pomera, Philia, and I went to an alternate dimension to recover one of the world's pawns. It was a single flat, empty space, stretching out for infinity. The ground was covered with shallow water that sharply reflected everything above it. It was quite a magical view.

"So, this is the Old Realm of the Gods...?" I asked.



According to Veranta, the last pawn in the world was here. It was one of the older pawns, and it wasn't easy to get to, so we'd been putting it off.

If we could overcome all the world's pawns, it would mean the higher beings were completely out of powerful allies on their side, as well as being a means for making powerful allies of our own.

To get here, we had to gather the twelve Dragon Crystals scattered throughout the world and use a special spell to open a gate. It was such a pain that Veranta debated just ignoring this pawn, but he said he felt uncomfortable leaving any possibilities on the table. He decided that we might as well deal with it...just in case.

I did sort of get how he felt, but he could be annoyingly fussy at times.

So, the Sophia Trading Company put out huge sums of money to get the Dragon Crystals, and Veranta researched the particular spell we needed. Then we came here, since we had nothing left to do.

"Wow! Wow! It's super pretty here!" cried Philia happily as she waved at her own face reflected by the water.

Pomera, flustered, tried to stop her. "Um, Philia...this isn't a tourist spot, it's..."

"Hey, guys...I think it's coming," I said, but I was all but drowned out by the booming sound of powerful wing beats.

Along with the sound came a massive creature, over 130 feet tall, flying toward us in this strange world. The space around us rumbled as it landed.

*"Who breaks the seal binding me?"* The creature's huge eyeballs stared at us. *"I know not what you seek in coming here, but you are fools. My desire has changed none despite the passing of 10,000 years. I shall eliminate all the foul peoples residing in this world, turning it into a land governed solely by wise dragons. The gate is open... None shall stop me!"*

The dragon's powerful mental wave struck us.

Sharp talons. Massive, spreading wings. A slowly swaying, forked tail. A tough, thick hide. ...Its great form was a bit bigger than I remembered, but I had seen

this creature before.

**DRIGVESHA**

**Race: The First Dragon**

**Lv: 3666**

**HP: 17045/17045**

**MP: 9843/9843**

Yep, it was Drigvesha-san—Philia-chan's go-to form. To think the real thing was tucked away here, in this weird place.

*"Wither to nothing in the heat of my destructive breath. But do not lament your annihilation. It is the greatest honor for lowly and diminutive humans such as yourselves to be the first to perish as an eternity of prosperity for dragonkind begins!"*

"Level 3,000 and a bit...?" I said.

It wasn't low. It was *definitely* not low. I could see why Notts, the former priest of Zolophilia, referred to Drigvesha as the most powerful creature in existence.

But I had been threatened with the—now obviously incorrect—possibility that Drigvesha was close to level 6,000. This was a bit of a letdown. It still ranked pretty high on the list of powerful beings in Locklore history, but seeing as I'd already fought Lucifer, who was over level 8000, Drigvesha just wasn't that scary.

The plan was to retreat and call in someone like Lunaère or Nobunaga if we needed to... But I didn't think we would.

"Philia's never seen the real thing before!" cried Philia, her eyes sparkling.

*"...You filth! Why do you react so in the face of my majestic presence?"*  
Drigvesha glared at us, seething with rage.

"Philia-chan, you can attack," I said. With that level, it was better for me to

support and limit Drigvesha's moves, while Philia got the experience. I also wanted Pomera to get in a few hits, if she could handle it.

"Okey dokey!" Philia swung her arm up and rainbow light sparkled through the air, then a dragon that looked just like Drigvesha appeared.

*"What the...? Is that supposed to be me? What is the meaning of this?!"*

"First Dragon Boom!"

Philia swung her arm down.

Her copy of Drigvesha rushed toward the real thing. The two of them collided, causing an earthquake to ripple through the surroundings.

"Groaaah!"

Drigvesha let out a frenzied roar and pushed back against Philia's copy. They seemed nearly perfectly equal in power.

*"Impossible... It is as powerful as me! What is happening? Is this a dream? An illusion?"*

"Pomera-san, you attack too," I said. "You could use a few extra levels. I'll protect you in case anything happens."

"I sort of...feel bad for the dragon," she murmured.

"Y-yeah... But it's an evil dragon. It tried to wipe out humanity several times. And if we spend too long in here, the situation out in Locklore might change. Let's get this over with."

*Ten minutes later:*

Drigvesha, completely drained of both magic and health, lay in a burnt heap in front of us.

"That was perfect for leveling, since it was higher-level than the demons in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm," I said, sheathing my sword. "And there was just the one. And it didn't have any annoying spells."



“There were a few times I thought I was going to die...but it *was* better than leveling in the Mirror,” panted an exhausted Pomera.

By defeating Drigvesha, Pomera’s level increased to 1,824 and Philia’s to 3,356. They were going up pretty steadily now.

With that, we successfully defeated the final pawn and the First Dragon. In the Old Realm of the Gods, we’d finished off our to-do list.

*“Impossible... I...rule this world... To be...treated like this...”*

I stood before Drigvesha. “...You were strong. You’d probably make it into the top five most powerful opponents I’ve ever fought. There’s only one reason you lost.”

*“Reason...I lost...? What was that...?”*

“You’ve been sealed in here for so long that you couldn’t keep up with level creep.”

Drigvesha slumped to the ground in disappointment and drew its last breath.

Then the area around us shook, and a huge crack opened in space.

“Kanata, the Old Realm of the Gods is crumbling!” cried Pomera.

It was time to get out of there.

### -3-

**N**EAR THE ENTRANCE to Cocytus, which was surrounded by thick walls as a countermeasure against monsters, was now a gigantic white cylinder of a building. It was over 300 feet in diameter, so tall that it reached the clouds.

“Wow! It’s huuuge!” Philia cried with childish joy.

“...The scenery here changes every time I stop by,” I said.

There was only one person I knew capable of such a feat. This was obviously the work of Veranta—Ruler of the World, leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods—and wielder of the gift skill, Omnipotent Alchemy.

He was currently directing the Unseen Hand and its subsidiary organizations, while also protecting one of the world's pawns, Cocytus, which was why he made his base here...or so I was told. I didn't expect he'd build a building like this.

As I looked up at the gigantic tower, the gold gates opened in front of us, and out walked the masked man himself.

"Kanata, Pomera, Philia. Did you destroy the pawn in the Old Realm of the Gods?" he asked.

"Yeah, we finished quickly. It...it wasn't as tough as we expected," I said.

"B-but Drigvesha the First Dragon was among the top ten highest-level beings in this world! Well...I'm glad you are unharmed. If you fell in that battle, I would end up torn limb from limb by the lich girl, because I was the one who convinced her to let you go. And I cannot die until our fight against the higher beings is over," he said with a shrug.

When we were planning to go to the Old Realm of the Gods, Lunaère insisted she should go too, but Veranta had lots of things he needed her help with. He had to explain three times over that those things would help more in the long run. She eventually agreed. Barely.

My master could be a little bit of a worrywart. I thought it was cute of her.

"So...what's with the building?" I asked, and Veranta nodded slightly.

"A fortress against the higher beings. I prepared it after you left. Inside is where I store and manage the items I make using Omnipotent Alchemy, and also where we raise the levels of the fighting force we've gathered from across the world."

Okay. That meant it was the Unseen Hand's new base.

"We are serious about taking this fight to the higher beings," said Veranta. "We've already used the influence of the Sopia Trading Company to spread word throughout Locklore of the situation with the higher beings and of their evil deeds. And...we also confessed to being their agents in controlling Locklore for hundreds of years."

I gulped. They were working so fast. They really managed to do all that?

“I know you said before that we needed to do that, but are you sure we didn’t jump the gun...?” I asked.

If we just told everyone in Locklore the situation about the higher beings, the people of the world might not be able to accept living in what was basically a livestream of a game. Locklore was entertainment with the assumption that no one knew of the higher beings’ involvement.

Now there was no way to avoid a clash between Locklore and the higher beings. The people of this world weren’t going to be okay with the fact that they were the gods’ playthings, and with the gods causing disasters in the world whenever they wanted.

And the higher beings couldn’t just leave things as they were. They couldn’t pretend they didn’t see the fuss and try to hide it. They would probably get even more annoyed and start interfering in even bigger ways to try and force a resolution. Either that, or they’d try to wipe out the world of Locklore. The nuclear option wasn’t entirely out of the question.

“That move does shorten Locklore’s life span, after all,” I added.

“Hmph, surprising you would say so,” said Veranta. “When the Unseen Hand lost to you and your friends, Locklore had no choice but to stand against the higher beings. Then we collected the world’s pawns and defeated Reniement and Lucifer. I thought you’d realized long ago that resolving this fight was the only hope to save the world.”

I did understand that, but I couldn’t help feeling shaken that all our routes of retreat had been cut off.

But I was the one who decided to thrust the truth on Locklore for my own peace, and the peace of the people I cared about. And I didn’t regret it. Which meant that I couldn’t run from accepting it now.

I calmed my breathing and looked back at Veranta. “...I’m sorry. I wasn’t taking this seriously enough. Wanting there to be wiggle room for us to find some way where Locklore doesn’t have to stand against the higher beings is just wishful thinking.”

“Good. I have also steeled my resolve. This tower is an expression of that. Look. It is based on the Tower of Babel, the tower of Earth legend built to reach the realm of God,” said Veranta as he turned and gazed up at the gigantic tower.

That seemed weird. “You know Earth mythology?”

“Of course. I’m *from* Earth. That’s why I have a gift skill...only travelers get those. I used my Omnipotent Alchemy to prevent aging, but I’ve been here for thousands of years now. The thing is, though...due to the time distortion, I was probably born on Earth not too long before you were.”

“What?!” This was a huge reveal. “B-but isn’t everything the travelers do public to the higher beings as part of the entertainment? I didn’t think Naiarotop and his bunch would want a traveler involved in the management side at all, let alone as their leader...”

“At the time, they didn’t have the knowledge of how to make Locklore exciting while balancing it against the conservation of civilization and the world’s residents. The equilibrium was far worse than it is now. Human society was constantly on the brink of destruction. As a traveler, I defeated a Demon King of the time...but I learned that that was never going to save Locklore. That’s why I made an agreement with Naiarotop. I agreed to fake my death, change my face and appearance to hide my true identity, and manage Locklore from the inside. That was the beginning of the Unseen Hand of the Gods.” Veranta touched his mask as he slowly told the story.

This man wanted to protect Locklore so much he took on the shame of being the higher beings’ servant and continued a fight alone for thousands of years. I might have underestimated him.

“Well... Enough about me,” he said. “Wonderful work defeating the First Dragon in the Old Realm of the Gods. It is now safe to assume we have finished neutralizing all pawns that can be destroyed. Come rest a while in the tower.”

“Where is Lunaère-san? I wanted to go see her in person, since she seemed worried,” I said.

“She’s currently in the basement of the tower, tackling both the leveling of our most important fighting force and analysis of the tablet.”

I gave the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm back to Lunaère before I went to the Old Realm of the Gods. I wondered what she was going to use it for. I should have known...

“Leveling? Aha ha...right...” I said with a concerned grimace.

Thinking about the adventurers forced to face the demons in the mirror, I couldn’t help feeling bad for them. Lunaère’s training was pretty rough. Though she definitely could train up the few powerful people in the world in a short time if she was serious about it...

“Kanata, the demonic leveling instructor, is afraid?! Lunaère must be incredibly tough, then,” said Pomera when she saw my face. I did question being called a demonic instructor, but I was more worried about the other thing she said.

“Lunaère-san is an incredibly kind person. She just...doesn’t really know how a normal person feels. Or works. Or how much they can take.”

“...She’s nice, but doesn’t know people’s limits? Just hearing that makes it very clear to me she was your teacher,” said Pomera.

“...To Philia too.”

For some reason, both Pomera and Philia were clutching at each other and trembling as they agreed. I didn’t really get what the big deal was, but I was happy to be put in the same category as Lunaère.

So anyway, Lunaère was busy leveling the fighting force and...analyzing the Ravia Tablet?

I’d received the Ravia Tablet as a gift from Ridler, the Dragon King in the Garden of the Dragons.

## **THE RAVIA TABLET**

VALUE CLASS: LEGENDARY

A traveler with the ability to see the true nature of magic analyzed a spell used by a higher being. The sage Ravia recorded that information on this tablet. However, the sage was unable to fully understand that spell, nor was



he able to correctly record all the information he did understand. A human's lifetime is not long enough for such a task.

It was possibly the sole record in Locklore of a higher being's magic. It could be a powerful weapon against them if we used it properly.

Lunaère was the most powerful magic user in Locklore, but we didn't even know how long it would take her to decipher the Ravia Tablet. We lacked manpower across the board, so we didn't want to split our forces to do things like go after pawns. But deciphering the Ravia Tablet was something we had to leave to Lunaère.

"The lich is far below the surface in the tower. I'll take you," said Veranta.

"Thank you, if you don't mind," I said.

He raised his hand to the air and a gold gate appeared. He passed through, and we followed him in.

**-4-**

**V**ERANTA TELEPORTED US into the deepest part of the tower before leading us down the hall.

"Lunaère-san is up ahead?" I asked.

"Yes. She selected four trustworthy people from among our warriors who have potential and is now using your Cursed Mirror to raise their levels—"

He got that far when a man came running toward us from down the hall.

He had pierced ears, black hair with blond highlights, and a huge sword on his back.

"Double...Speed Mode!"

I recognized him: my fellow traveler Mitsuru Ijuuin.

"Why is Mitsuru here...?" I asked, and then a girl with bobbed hair came racing after him. She pulled a chain from her shirt, quickly wrapped Mitsuru up,

then pushed him to the ground and straddled him.

“Gah! Let go of me, you gloomy girl!” he cried.

“I won’t allow even one person to get away... You’re coming with me,” she said, her eyes cold. Then she looked up toward me. “Oh, Kanata?”

Another traveler, like me: Kotone Takanashi, Aries’s Hand.

Thinking about it, she had been called by the Sophia Trading Company when Lucifer made a mess out of Cocytus. She joined Veranta’s forces then. Which meant she’d been here underground after that...

“Are they two of the four people Lunaère-san is training...?” I asked.

Veranta nodded. “Yes. The more we train Double and Aries’s Hand, the more advantageous they are. They will easily and quickly become a valuable force against the higher beings. Arie’s Hand’s ability to use any piece of equipment at will, even cursed items, means we can quickly boost her power using my and the lich’s collections. Double is also intriguing for his ability to output a force to rival an opponent twice his strength under the right conditions. Used well, they hold the power to give the higher beings a fright.”

Veranta sounded cheerful. He continued, “However, a surprise attack from Double is...*unstable*, from a skill perspective. If used well, he’ll be a powerful weapon, but one misstep and he can be easily dealt with. What I have in mind right now is increasing his level to the max, then boosting his attack power. We’ll pull him back out of the fight quickly and use him like a cannon. This is the single best way to draw out his peak performance. ...Now if only we could get him to understand that.”

Veranta talked about that crazy plan like it was nothing.

“Help me, Kanata! They’re crazy! I’m gonna die!” Mitsuru, normally so prideful, lay pressed to the ground, his arm desperately reaching out toward me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but, um, the fate of the world is sort of resting on you...”

“Kanata, you’re back!” came a voice from down the hall. There were Lunaère and Noble...along with Rosemonde, who looked completely worn out and

sullen. She was apparently the third of the four.

“You aren’t hurt, are you?” asked Lunaère. “How did it go with the pawn?”

“We had no problems defeating the First Dragon. All of the pawns are handled now,” I said.

“Oh, good,” said Lunaère with a sigh of relief.

“All that’s left is continuing to protect the ones we can’t destroy, like the Dragon Vortex, while we carry on leveling our fighters and keeping an eye out for the higher beings’ next move...” I glanced toward Rosemonde. “Um...you okay, Rosemonde-san?”

Rosemonde, Mitsuru, Kotone...none of them had any life in their eyes.

“Okay...? Kid, if you can call being forced to overdose on potions and fight demons in a mirror dimension over and over ‘okay’, then...I guess I’m *okay*.”

“Urgh...” Pomera let out a groan, sympathy in her eyes.

So far we had Mitsuru and Kotone, and then Rosemonde. It would defeat the purpose of training people if we chose the wrong person, leveled them up, and then they shifted to the higher beings’ side and went on a rampage. Both Kotone and Rosemonde were the kind of people who could be trusted.

Mitsuru was...iffy. His personality was a bit hard to deal with, but he wasn’t actually a bad person.

“I heard you’re training four people, Lunaère-san, who’s the fourth?” I asked.

“Your best friend,” she replied.

My...best...friend? I hadn’t exactly been making friends left and right since coming to this world, so who could possibly be considered my best friend? I felt bad for whoever it was. But to be honest, I couldn’t think of who it might be.

Then another set of footsteps echoed from down the hall.

“So, you cry and flee, with no regard for your honor or reputation. Mitsuru Ijuuin, I once respected you, but it seems that was your limit. You were never someone who could carry the fate of the world.”

I looked in the direction of the voice to see a tall man dressed in black.

“I, on the other hand, am fulfilled. I feel no unease, no fear. I’ve learned what the world is and my place in it. My heart is as clear as a crystalline lake. I feel myself approaching heights I never before even considered reaching for. I am certain that I was born for this fight.”

Walking gracefully this way with eyes closed was Lovis, the Black Reaper. A memory flitted across my mind of when we recently ran into each other in Grede’s mansion in Ploroque.

...My best friend?

“Uh, he can’t seriously be the fourth person?” I asked.

Lovis’s eyes snapped open, and then he threw himself to his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground. “Oh, Kanata, it’s been such a long time! I can’t believe I’d see you in a place like this! I’ve currently devoted myself to training as Lunaère’s disciple—”

“Lunaère-san’s *disciple*?” A bit of annoyance slipped out in my tone. My master-disciple relationship with Lunaère came with precious memories. To be fair, he could technically be considered Lunaère’s disciple now—it was the right term—but that was *my* gig!

“I-I’m so sorry! It’s insolent of me to call myself her disciple!” he said, his face pale as he looked up at me.

“...Uh, no, it’s not,” I sighed.

“Yo, man, you just said you felt no unease or fear. You’re shaking like a leaf,” said Mitsuru when he saw Lovis’s reaction.

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**P**OMERA AND PHILIA stood in front of Lovis, looking annoyed.

“Wh-what is it, you two...?” he asked, forcing a strained smile on his face.

Pomera looked away from him, then at me as if demanding answers. “Um, Kanata, do you really know this person? This is Lovis, the Black Reaper. He’s wanted for joining forces with thieves in the attack on Manaloch.”

He did that...? It was my first time hearing it.

“Well, we have met, but I wouldn’t say we’re actually—”

“A-ah! The Manaloch incident! I committed a severe indiscretion against you, Saint Pomera! But, there was a serious reason for that! I was attempting to earn the trust of the criminal group, the Cup of Blood, by pretending to join them so I could expose them!” His face was white as a sheet as he turned an appeasing smile toward Pomera.

Philia also glared at Lovis coldly and pointed a finger at him like she was identifying a criminal. “Kanata, Philia thinks this person is a *bad person*.”

“Y-you’re a difficult little lady, aren’t you? K-Kanata, perhaps I should take my leave, if I’m in your way...” he said, waterfalls of sweat pouring down his face.

What was he just saying about being certain he was born for this fight?

“No need to be so cruel,” said Veranta, stepping in. “The Reaper...has some untrustworthy aspects, but he has been gifted with a talent for battle. I have lived nearly ten thousand years but have never seen anyone so resourceful in close combat. I have decided this man is worth training.”

Lunaère nodded firmly in agreement. “He’s also the only one able to keep a level head fighting against the demons in the cursed mirror. That makes him suited to this type of leveling. I would expect no less from someone Kanata saw potential in. But, it’s just...” Her face turned red, and she squirmed uncomfortably as she stammered, “Um...I understand why you trusted him, Kanata. Just, uh...I’m not happy that you would talk about me. It’s embarrassing...”

“...I’m sorry, what are we talking about?” I had no idea what Lunaère was getting at.

“You’re pretending like you don’t know? Are you trying to make me say it out loud? He told me, when I first met him in Manaloch. I found out...you just went and told him that you I-love me. R-really, now... I was so embarrassed. I felt like my face was on fire.”

I still didn’t know what she was mumbling about. Seriously. What did she mean?



I glanced sideways and saw that Lovis was slowly standing up and moving away from Lunaère.

“So, I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t do that,” continued Lunaère. “I would be lying if I said it didn’t make me happy...but, um, well, it’s not like I don’t want to talk about that, it’s just...” She started fiddling nervously with the tips of her beautiful white hair.

“Uh...I haven’t actually told Lovis-san anything like that...” I said.

“Hm?” Lunaère’s expression froze when she heard that, like she had no idea what was happening.

“And actually, I have run into Lovis-san a few times, but we aren’t friends at all. I think there might be a misunderstanding...”

“Th-that’s... I-I... B-but!”

I watched as her face turned redder and redder. There was blatant confusion in her expression, and her pretty mismatched eyes were practically swirling.

“K-Kanata, uh, you’re just too embarrassed to admit it...right? If not, then, then I’m a humiliatingly self-absorbed idiot. Um, Lovis...”

“Short Gate!”

A magic circle enveloped Lovis and he disappeared. He reappeared in the distance and immediately darted straight off in an escape attempt, panic on his face.

I was starting to figure out what was going on. Most likely, Lovis joined forces with the criminal group for the Manaloch incident and bumped into Lunaère, who just happened to be there. He’d pretended to be an acquaintance of mine to escape danger. There were several times I’d seen Lovis resort to flattery, exaggerated apologies, and bold lies to get out of tight situations.

Lunaère launched herself after him, her face as red as a tomato. That running start alone was enough to send cracks shooting through the floor and make this portion of the hallway tremble. There was no way Lovis was going to escape her. She had him by the scruff of the neck in the blink of an eye and dragged him back down the hallway.

“Gah!”

“Y-you, y-y-you really embarrassed me in front of Kanata! You weren’t even... agh! You were never even his friend! I can’t believe I let this pathetic man get away because his idiotic lies made me lose my head!”

A magic circle appeared at Lunaère’s hand, and a deep black light started to compress.

“You’re a terrible person, I’m going to shatter you into a billion tiny pieces right here!”

Veranta quickly used his gold gate to teleport over to Lunaère. “Calm yourself, lich! This man is a valuable warrior!”

“Don’t interrupt!”

“Agh!”

Lunaère swung her arm back and easily sent Veranta flying. I used that opening to pin her arms down from behind. “C-calm down, please! I don’t know what happened, but it sounds like we need him for the fight!” I said.





“Let me go, Kanata! I can’t let him get away with this!” Lunaère turned to me with tears in her eyes, her face red from embarrassment.

“Lunaère-san, please calm down!” I said desperately. “I love you! I do, I love you! Please just calm down a little!”

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LUNAÈRE HAD BEEN one step away from killing Lovis when she learned he’d deceived her, but I somehow managed to calm her down.

“I’m sorry, it looks like I lost my composure somewhat,” she said.

“I-it’s okay.”

“*Somewhat?*” said Noble, butting in. I gently jabbed his chest lid with my elbow.

“Veranta has been helping, and I do have experience with this from when I raised your level, Kanata, so we’ve succeeded in raising these four people’s levels to around 1,000. I believe Kotone and Mitsuru will be able to perform higher than normal for their level,” said Lunaère once she got a hold of herself. Her cheeks were still tinged with pink, though, so it seemed like she wasn’t entirely calm. More like she was desperately trying to control herself so as not to make the situation worse.

It sounded like the main reason they agreed to train Lovis was that he was my friend, so they thought he could be trusted. I honestly wasn’t certain it was a good idea to keep him here now. Though, maybe it’d be a bigger loss to get rid of him since they’d already invested this much time into raising his level to this middling range.

“About the Ravia Tablet, the item you brought that has a record of a higher being’s magic,” said Lunaère, “to be honest, deciphering it isn’t looking promising. It is more complex and higher ranked than I originally anticipated. More importantly, I think it is likely that even if I do manage to decipher it, we might not have enough magical power to use it.” She sounded a little



disappointed.

...We didn't even know what the spell was. We were hoping that if we could just understand this spell used by a higher being, then we could use it for... something. Unfortunately, there seemed to be little point in rushing to decipher it.

"I thought it would be some sort of clue...but I guess it was too hard," I said.

"Right now, I'm focusing on training these four. But it's not actually difficult to work on analyzing the Tablet while I train them. It might turn out to be useful in some unexpected way, so I'll keep looking into it."

If Lunaère thought it might be better to let her keep investigating it, I wasn't going to disagree. "Well, all we're doing right now is waiting for the higher beings to make their move anyway," I said, turning around to confirm with Veranta.

He nodded slightly. "Kanata. The higher beings' first attacker...Renient, he did say there were three like him, correct?"

"Yeah..."

In his last moments, Renient said, *"Curse Locklore! I only pray the other two will bring destruction upon the world!"*

So besides Renient and Lucifer, Naiarotop must have one last ace up his sleeve. The first two had serious personality flaws, meaning it was unlikely the last one would be pleasant to be around. Renient and Lucifer were imprisoned for thousands of years in an alternate dimension for the crime of trying to destroy Locklore. The third person was definitely going to be a criminal of the same kind.

"All pawns remaining in the world have been neutralized or are under protection," said Veranta. "The higher beings were likely planning to send those three individuals at us in a series of tumultuous events. Until that third person arrives, we can—"

Just then, a small section of space warped and what looked like a tiny toy bird appeared. It had a mask like Veranta's on its head.

“Hmph...one of my windup birds. I’ve deployed them around the world to gather information. They come report to me if they detect anything unusual,” explained Veranta. He raised his arm, and the windup bird landed on it.

Did he make that with his Omnipotent Alchemy too?

“That gift skill really is powerful,” I said. “I’m glad Lunaère beat you before I had to face you.”

“You say that, but my level is not that high. If I were to face you in combat, the best I could manage would be to run away. You wouldn’t have been able to handle Zero, though.” Veranta glanced a little resentfully in Lunaère’s direction. It seemed like Veranta had had complete faith in Zero, who had tried to run away before the battle with Lunaère could start, but she managed to capture him and knock him out easily.

The bird’s beak chattered open and closed. “Zero, the Silent Void, assigned to defend the World Tree. Defeated by an attacker.”

“What!” Veranta reeled backward, struck by shock.

“Zero-san is useless!” I snapped at Veranta without thinking.

Veranta cradled his head in his hands with a groan. “Th-this can’t be...but...argh...”

The World Tree was connected to the roots of Locklore itself, meaning it was one of the pawns we couldn’t easily destroy. It was a massive tree that served as protection for the Spirit World. Zero was put in charge of defending the World Tree, so the higher beings couldn’t use it for evil. So much for that.

Zero was the highest level out of the members of the Unseen Hand and an expert of the greatest caliber in Death Magic, Space-time Magic, and Barrier Magic. If someone defeated him, we should probably assume it was the last of the three people we were just talking about.

“Um...I was just thinking...if we had the time to beat the First Dragon and to spend in training, then shouldn’t we have increased the guard on the World Tree...?” murmured Pomera.

“U-ugh...” Veranta shuddered at her cruel comment.

Feeling bad for him, she added, “A-actually, the First Dragon could have been stronger than we expected! It’s just, hindsight makes things clearer, right?”

First of all, Veranta built the base here to prevent an attack against Cocytus, and there were a few other pawns like the World Tree that were valuable and couldn’t easily be destroyed. The strategy might have failed in the end, but the higher beings were making their moves after seeing what cards we had in our hand. We were bound to take a few hits.

Besides, we were the ones who put Veranta in charge. We shouldn’t be blaming him for this.

“Uh... Windup Bird-san, how bad is the damage to the World Tree?” I asked.

The windup bird opened its beak again and said, “No damage to the World Tree. The attacker has already left the Spirit World.”

So, they weren’t trying to use the World Tree to prepare a stronger fighting force or to try and inflict damage on Locklore?

I didn’t know what this person was trying to do, but at least the World Tree was safe.

“...What happened to Zero?” Veranta hesitantly asked the windup bird.

Again, it opened its beak. “The attacker defeated Zero. They took him and left the Spirit World.”

That confused me. Was the attacker after Zero the whole time, not the World Tree?

“Wh-what?!” shouted Veranta in a panic. “They kidnapped Zero?!”

“Veranta-san, please calm down! I understand you’re worried, but Zero-san is still alive. And we haven’t lost the World Tree. We’ve avoided the worst-case scenario,” I said.

With his head still in his hands, Veranta shook his head “...You’re wrong. We haven’t.”

“How am I wrong?”

“Zero is a homunculus I made in preparation for the worst-case scenario.”

*Oh.*

I'd never wondered where Zero came from. Now I knew his backstory, I still wasn't sure what to make of this news. "This is my first time hearing this, but... what does it even mean?"

"When I took on the role of adjusting the world, there was something I had trouble dealing with," Veranta explained. "It was a mass of unknown power, disasters and curses that couldn't be regulated... I needed somewhere to bury it, somewhere that wasn't Cocytus. I made a specialized space, forced the power into it, and sealed it away. However, I couldn't get rid of the space entirely. After contemplating what to do, I decided it would be a good idea to provide the seal itself with a personality to act as my guard."

"And that was..."

"Zero. This bane, this power beyond all reason...is Zero, the Silent Void. If Zero's power is used for ill, it may very well destroy the entire world."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Then, without thinking, I grabbed Veranta by his lapels. "Th-th-that is clearly a more important pawn than the Dragon Vortex, Cocytus, and even the World Tree! And you just sent Zero off like he's some sort of errand boy?!"

"I-I didn't think there was any way Zero could lose! And even if he did, then we would have no other means of resisting..."

"He already got trounced by Lunaère-san! Even if you weren't confident you could protect him, it would've been way better to keep him here in the tower with Lunaère-san! We shouldn't have been chasing after the First Dragon, that thing was just an old lizard!"

"B-but even if Zero is captured, they can't possibly undo the seal to use him for ill! Even I would need several years to undo those chains!"

"...Except this person is so confident they can undo the seal and do what they want with this power that they just left the World Tree alone, even though it was defenseless and carried Zero-san off."

"..." Veranta fell silent. He must have reached that conclusion, that the enemy was after Zero, the moment he learned the World Tree was unharmed.

“C-calm down, Kanata!” Pomera grabbed my arms. “You’re going to kill Veranta if you keep strangling him like that! Remember, hindsight makes things clearer! We couldn’t just assume someone more powerful than Zero and better at magic than Veranta was going to come attack! Besides, we’re the ones who left Veranta in command!”

“But we’re supposed to be assuming the worst,” I said. “If it’s bad enough that he immediately realized Zero was kidnapped, then it doesn’t matter how strong Zero is, we should have been treating him as something that needed protection.”

“...Well, yes, I guess...” said Pomera.

“I might have gotten too carried away, as we’d already openly declared war against the higher beings and there seemed no way to avoid extreme situations now. I apologize... I made a mistake when assigning Zero,” said Veranta as he coughed and rubbed his throat. “And it may not be my place to say this, but now that the situation is what it is, we don’t have the time to bicker among ourselves. We must find this attacker, defeat them, and take Zero back. I will face any criticisms you have after that.”

Fair. We might not have a clear picture, but we were starting to get an idea of this last assassin from Naiarotop. We knew they were strong enough to overpower Zero, and that they knew enough about magic to use Zero’s power for evil. We also knew they planned to take that power and attack the world.

“But if we send out people to search, we’re splitting our forces,” I said. “This is a pain. If only we had some clue to lead us to where they were...”

As if prompted, the windup bird opened its beak and said, “Message from the attacker. ‘Kanata Kanbara, I am waiting for you in the capital.’”

“Well, they’re confident. I know they just got a weapon, but to intentionally tell us where they are...?”

It sounded like the windup bird only got away because the attacker let it. They must have captured it so they could leave that message.

“In the end, the higher beings are after Kanata. Regardless, we should be grateful for our opponent’s confidence,” said Veranta. “This allows us to place



our whole force in one location. It is likely a trap of some sort, but we have no option except to go.”

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## NAIAROTOP

“**M**<sub>ASTER</sub>...I have sent the last Eternal Convict, Zoras the Cataclysm, to Locklore.”

In the Upper Realm, Naiarotop was in contact with his superior, the being with the highest authority over Locklore.

“However...” he continued, “Zoras made the absurd demand that we add him to the lower ranks of godhood once this incident is over.”

“An aggravating request, but unavoidable if it will end this mess in Locklore. Zoras... He must know that even if he is raised to the rank of Lower God, his life will still be in our control, yet he still asked. Perhaps he plans to act skillfully and outwit us. An untrustworthy Lower God can be dealt with.” The Higher God let out a snort of laughter. “Well, that is a problem for later. More importantly... have you written a scene that will satisfy *you know who*?”

“Yes, indeed I have.” Naiarotop’s lips curled into a smile. Zoras might have one-upped him this time by forcing him into a frustrating agreement, but everything was in place for the Locklore grand finale. Naiarotop was

confident he would even satisfy *you know who*, who was focused on Locklore right now.

“As planned, Zoras has captured Zero, the Silent Void, and lured Kanata to the capital. It will begin a fight where the fate of the world hangs in the balance, a fight between Zoras, the most powerful magic king in history, and Kanata, the traveler who stood against the gods. It looks like they’ll even be bringing in some more travelers worth mentioning and a load of extras. This episode won’t just make *you know who* happy, it’ll entertain *all* the Higher Gods.”

“Hm, that synopsis sounds decent.”

“And once Zoras has won, the curse activated using the Silent Void will eat away at the entirety of Locklore...ending the lives of all living creatures. This plan naturally brings Locklore to a conclusion that ends all storylines.” Naiarotop grinned.

Locklore’s management faced two problems right now: bringing the fight between Kanata and Naiarotop to an end...and, once that was taken care of, ending the world of Locklore itself.

When managing alternate worlds like this, you had to close them down quickly when they lost any hope of providing profits. It was expensive to keep a world running.

This mess all started when Locklore’s management interfered too brazenly in dealing with Kanata, but Locklore’s original concept was that the adventures and lives of the travelers were “real,” without any interference from the higher beings. Even if they managed to get Locklore back on track, the suspension of disbelief had been ruined. Plus, they’d already watched all sorts of fights between enemies with levels in the thousands, so any fights involving travelers with mere three-figure levels would be boring.

So now they just had to deal with Kanata—who *you know who* was interested in—and then close down Locklore as quickly as possible. Handling this carelessly could severely damage the reputations of the gods who were showrunners. They needed to end Locklore *naturally* while also keeping their expenditures to a minimum.

Using the same assassin sent to take out Kanata to also end the world was the neatest way of handling the problem.

“Have you done a full risk assessment?” asked the Higher God. “If Zoras loses, we will have absolutely no more moves.”

If Kanata won against Zoras now, Naiarotop was finished. He’d lose all methods for interfering with the world, and he’d have to make some excuse for eliminating Locklore and Kanata, all while *you know you* was watching. They couldn’t allow an inadequate ending like that.

But if it ended up like that, they couldn’t step in, they couldn’t eliminate the world, and they couldn’t keep maintaining it. All paths forward would be

blocked. But they couldn't just leave Locklore running either. Worlds didn't operate in the red.

They had to avoid that at all costs.

"Yes, there are no problems," said Naiarotop proudly. "Zoras has already removed the seal on Zero and made preparations for plunging the world into the curse. Even if Zoras loses, the curse can't be stopped. As much as it annoys me, Zoras gave me the idea. Not even the lich, Lunaère, can stop Zero's curse once it's in motion. It may not be the ideal solution, since it is a little forced, but this is the other bad ending I've prepared. A bad ending where, even if they win the fight, they still lose everything."

"So, you have a fail-safe in place?" The Upper God seemed satisfied with Naiarotop's outline.

This episode would see the final battle play out, one that would satisfy *you know who* but also featured a surefire way to wipe out Kanata along with the entirety of Locklore. Naiarotop might have caused the Higher God all sorts of trouble before, but he was sure to win this time.

Naiarotop raised his hand, and an image appeared of Kanata as he currently was. He'd received Zoras's message and was teleporting to the capital using Veranta's ability.

"Now, Kanata Kanbara, this is our last match! It doesn't matter how the dice fall, the only possible future for you is destruction...along with the entire world!"

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**W**E PASSED THROUGH Veranta's gold gate to an expansive city on the other side. There were rows of intricate, towering buildings, making for quite a magnificent sight. Crowds of people and wagons passed each other on the paved streets.

It would be no exaggeration to say this was the most prosperous city I'd seen in Locklore. In the center of the city stood a gigantic castle, with a dignity that almost illustrated the concept of luxury itself.

“So, this is the capital...” I said.

And it was soon to be swallowed by conflict, probably. The atmosphere in the city gave no indications of the coming cataclysm, and that disconnect made me feel uneasy.

“Is this your first time here, Kanata?” asked Veranta. “If the times weren’t what they were, I would have liked for you to take a moment to enjoy the sights.”

I turned to look at him and saw the others following just behind.

There was Kotone, Mitsuru, Rosemonde, and Lovis, who all had their level increased to close to 1,000 in the Cursed Mirror... Then there was Veranta, Pomera, Philia, Noble, and most importantly, Lunaère.

I looked at each of our team members in turn and felt a little calmer. Everything was going to be okay. Nothing was impossible with the people I had on this team.

We would defeat Naiarotop’s last assassin before they could use Zero’s power for evil, and once we did that, Naiarotop would have no more weapons at his disposal for interfering with Locklore. This could potentially be our last battle.

“What do we do, Veranta?” I asked. “There hasn’t been any influence from Naiarotop’s assassin yet...”

“Our only choice is to split up and search for them. Once we find them, we’ll need to evacuate the people of the capital, defeat the attacker, and retake Zero...all at the same time. We will use the tower as the evacuation center, so it will be easy to use my power to teleport the citizens there directly from here. We can bother with persuading them later. If they refuse, we will make them go by force if we have to.”

Just as Veranta was explaining that, a gigantic magic circle appeared in the center of the city, complex and glowing with malevolent light.

There was no doubt about it, Naiarotop’s assassin was on the move. The timing was just too coincidental to be anything else.

“It appears we are expected. How considerate of them. That saves us the

trouble of searching and persuading the citizens,” said Veranta with a hint of sarcasm, then he clicked his tongue in annoyance.

The magic circle’s color shifted until eventually it settled into a dull, disturbing rainbow made up of a mixture of colors. The light bent and changed shape into the long and slender but gigantic form of a dragon. More dragons appeared one after another, their numbers reaching double digits in no time at all.

The outlines of the dragons’ forms were irregular. One of them had more than ten eyes, one of them had several gaping mouths...but every one of them looked rough and malformed. Their haphazard appearances made me think of the demons in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm.

“Groooooaaar!”

The warped dragons’ dreadful roars echoed across the capital. The city was immediately filled with the people’s shrieks of terror and bellows of anger.

I checked a dragon’s level.

***Race: Chaos Dragon***

***Lv: 2284***

***HP: 13932/13932***

***MP: 10278/10278***

Chaos dragon...? I’d never seen that name before. The thing that caught my attention more was the level, though. It was lower than the demons in Cursed Mirror, but being able to pump out multiple monsters of this level was beyond extreme.

“Chaos dragons...their levels are in the two thousands,” I told the others. I could almost hear them all gulp. Monsters of this level didn’t appear in swarms like this out in the normal world, it shouldn’t happen.

“...They resemble the demons in the Cursed Mirror. Not just their appearance, their nature as well,” said Lunaère.

The Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm was a gate to a distortion in another dimension. We weren't even certain if it was still within Locklore, but the demons there had incredible power, and they seemed to appear and disappear without rhyme or reason.

"Maybe this is the same principle...?" I asked.

"Perhaps at a basic level," said Lunaère. "Regardless, this isn't something you can conjure with measly magic tricks. I believe it would be appropriate to assume a portion of the mixed curses sealed inside Zero are manifesting as those dragons."

In other words, while Veranta might have bragged there was no way anyone could undo the seal, someone already had.

Lunaère and I looked at Veranta together. He touched his mask, looking uncomfortable, then shook his head slightly. "...I will assign myself to evacuating the citizens using my gold gate. The four Lunaère trained, you are assigned to defeating those wicked dragons. Kanata and the rest of you...can I ask you to retrieve Zero and defeat the person responsible for this?"

"We have no other choice," I said.

Naiarotop's target was me, it had been this entire time. If I made an appearance, the person who attacked should come out to fight. Once we defeated them, we should be able to find some way of stopping Zero now that he'd been turned into a dragon production device.

"Pff, I go out of my way to get myself involved in this, and I still end up just a supporting act," said Mitsuru as he drew his sword and glared up at the dragons above.

"If it bothers you, go ahead and attack the castle alongside Lady Lunaère," said Lovis. "Just howling isn't enough, even a dog can do that. Considering your strength though—you'll die like a dog too. Courage is taking a good look at exactly how strong you are...or *aren't*...and having the will to move forward regardless. It's not mere recklessness."

Lovis let out a snort of laughter, but Lunaère gave him a cold stare.

"I haven't exactly forgiven you for the embarrassment you caused me in front

of Kanata.”

“I-I have of course not forgotten,” said Lovis, immediately dropping to his knees.

Just then, I saw a chaos dragon looking down at us from the sky.

“Rooooaar!”

I pointed my sword up and formed a magic circle. “Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!”

A dragon of deep crimson flames emerged from the magic circle. Like raging hellfire, it surged straight toward the chaos dragon, erupting into a massive explosion of fire in the sky.

“Gyeee!”

After the dragon of fire crashed into its head, the chaos dragon fled through the air, its body engulfed in flame. It flew for a little while longer, trying to regenerate its body as parts of it burned away, but its strength seemed spent at last. It crumbled in midair.

“...They’re pretty tough,” I said. I had been confident one shot of Apocalypse would immediately wipe out one of these, if their level was in the two thousands. It looked like they might be able to survive a poorly aimed shot. These were the kind of monsters that were both tougher than average for their level and skilled at regeneration.

“We don’t have time to enjoy this little show,” said Veranta. “Kanata and the others, head straight for the castle. Now.”

“But can the rest of the team really handle these chaos dragons...?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter. We have no future if we don’t strike the source of this at once! Go! We will do something about the dragons!”

I gave Veranta a slight nod, then ran toward the castle. Pomera, Philia, Lunaère, and Noble followed me.

I could see panicked soldiers and nobles fleeing from the castle ahead. There were even some royal knights standing frozen and confused, just staring up at the sky.



I could also see a man on top of the highest roof of the castle. He wore a large hat and showy robes. He was still far away, but he appeared in his late twenties. He looked down at the capital as the chaos dragons ravaged it, but then our eyes met.

Like Reniement, like Lucifer...I had this instinctive feeling that this was the third. He was Naiarotop's last assassin.

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**KOTONE**

**K**OTONE, traveler from another world, watched as Kanata and his group ran toward the castle, and then she turned to look up at the sky.

“Rooooaar!”

“Rooooaaaaaar!”

More chaos dragons were coming toward them. Unfortunately, it wasn't just one this time, but two.

By now, there were chaos dragons flying all across the capital. As far as Kotone was able to confirm using Status Check, each one of them was over level 2000. She had undergone Lunaère's training, but she was still only around level 1300.

“Veranta, there are two chaos dragons on their way. I only had a quick look at the ones in this area, but I think it's safe to assume none of them are below level 2000,” said Kotone, sharing what she'd learned with the masked alchemist.

At the moment they had Kotone, Rosemonde, Mitsuru, and Lovis, who were all around level 1000, as well as Veranta, who was around 3000. Not only did Veranta have the highest level, he was also used to handling situations and was the brains of the operation. In the fight against the higher beings, Kotone decided the first step was to follow his orders.

“Hmph, I’m leaving your group to wipe out the chaos dragons,” he said. “I’m not combat-oriented, after all. I will lead the evacuation of the citizens, as originally planned.”

“...Y-you might not be battle-oriented, but you’re still level 3000. I figure you can fight way better than me!”

“We’ll find ourselves in trouble if you expect me to be able to fight as well as my level implies. On the other hand, you and Mitsuru have gift skills that allow you to achieve far greater combat potential than the literal number of your level. That is not the case with my gift skill.”

“But just the four of us aren’t strong enough—”

“Work together. Find weak spots. I know you can efficiently cull the chaos dragons. That’s what I ask of you. We can’t wait to evacuate the people either. If I get the opportunity, I will return to support you, but you need to begin eliminating as many of the chaos dragons as you can in order to limit the damage. It will not be an easy fight, but we’re relying on you.”

With that, Veranta made a magic circle, and the gold gate appeared in front of him. He passed through, and the gate faded into the light as he went off to start the evacuation to the tower.

Kotone stood there dumbfounded for a few seconds, staring at the space he’d disappeared into.

“Guy’s a massive help, forcing us to take on the fighting while he scurries off to do the safe job of evacuation,” muttered Rosemonde.

Kotone had listened to Veranta ever since she was brought to the tower for training. She didn’t think he was the kind of person to flee in fear for his own safety, so she did believe he must have decided this was the most appropriate course of action, but she’d be lying if she said she didn’t have her own thoughts on the matter.

“Hmph, even I might be unable to land a decisive blow against an enemy that big,” said Lovis. “I’ll work to make openings. Mitsuru, when you see the opening, you hit it with an attack boosted by Double.” He stepped forward with his scythe at the ready. He was the only one getting pumped up.

“...Are you insane? Like I can get close to an enemy flying around like that when I’m heavier than usual from using Attack Mode. And then if I do get close enough, I’m a dead man,” said Mitsuru with frustration.

“And if you’re zipping around, you’ll have no strength at all. Fine, whatever. Having a coward holding me back spoils all the fun. I’ll do it myself,” said Lovis.

“The hell—!”

Lovis rushed forward as Mitsuru became agitated.

“Groooooaar!”

A chaos dragon flew straight toward Lovis.

“Short Gate!”

The moment the chaos dragon was about to swallow him, he teleported himself to the dragon’s back. He whirled his scythe rapidly, slashing open the dragon’s hide as he raced across it. The dragon lunged to catch him, but he used Short Gate again to move elsewhere.

“Ha ha ha! How’s this?!” Lovis laughed. “You can’t even handle me because of your excessively long body!”

“Dammit! I mean, they’re basically giant, squirming worms, right? Just gotta hit ‘em with one good shot!” Mitsuru raised his sword and followed after Lovis.

“Must be nice to be that dumb. Glad they’ve managed to live this long, being that reckless,” said Rosemonde with a sigh of exasperation.

“...I would’ve been happy to live a normal life,” muttered Kotone.

She would have been perfectly satisfied coming to Locklore and living a peaceful life, but travelers were entertainment for the gods. It was a fate she couldn’t avoid.

She became an adventurer because it was necessary for her to make a living, and then everyone around her started to expect her to be on par with the fighting force of an entire city because she could use any equipment to its fullest with her gift skill, Aries’s Hand.

That ended up sweeping her along until she was an S-Rank Adventurer, and

before she realized it, she'd been thrown into the frontlines in the battle against the higher beings.

"Don't have much of a choice since the world is at stake," she said. "But once this is over, I swear, I'm going to do whatever I want."

"I'm looking forward to it. I need you to keep drawing more of those mangas," said Rosemonde as she lifted her weapon, a huge cross-shaped staff. "Earth Magic Level 10: Ground Missile!"

A large magic circle appeared, and the surface of the ground bulged up in several places, coming together to form three spheres of earth, each over thirty feet tall.

"Come at me!"

Rosemonde thrust her staff into the air, and the earthen spheres launched toward a chaos dragon Lovis and Mitsuru weren't fighting.

Three explosions tore through the air. The skin of the dragon caught in the blast was ripped from it, leaving it horribly burnt. Its hate-filled eyes turned toward Rosemonde below.

"Groooaar!"

This spell Rosemonde had learned from Lunaère worked by compressing the earth's surface, increasing its hardness, then pouring magic into the center to turn it into a powerful explosive.

"...Welp, that's everything I had. Let me top up," she said as she pulled a vial from her breast pocket. She popped the cork out and gulped the entire contents in one go. It was a potion Lunaère had made, and it immediately recovered all of her mana.

Ground Missile was a violent spell that could damage even higher-ranking enemies, but it used loads of MP. Lunaère made Rosemonde carry lots of potions to account for that.

"Roaaaarg!"

Now angered, the chaos dragon opened its mouth and flew straight for Kotone and Rosemonde.

Kotone crouched, then leapt up into the air. There was the sound of a horse's whinny, and her shoes began to glow as her body flew higher into the sky.

### **SHOES OF THE SKY HORSE**

**VALUE CLASS: LEGENDARY**

*The horse spirit, Pegasus, resides in these shoes, making the wearer light enough to run through the air.*

*However, it is said that any not approved by Pegasus will be thrown from great heights.*

Kotone borrowed those shoes from Lunaère. It was normally a dangerous item that selected its users, but Kotone's Aries's Hand allowed her to use any equipment to its fullest...not just weapons.

Kotone took the chaos dragon by surprise and soared over it, then drew a short sword and slashed at the creature's giant head. There was a flash of bright light, and a huge gash appeared in the dragon's skull.

The short sword was also borrowed from Lunaère and had its own backstory.

### **IDEA, THE SWORD OF TRUTH**

**VALUE CLASS: GODLY**

**ATTACK: +2800**

*This short sword appeared randomly from the gap between dimensions. Nobody knows where it originated.*

*This sword ignores all physical defenses, curses, and preconceptions in order to strike directly at the target's essence. The wounds it inflicts cannot be healed, and it will continue to gnaw away at the wounded's flesh for eternity.*

*Just holding it causes the world's truths to flood into the wielder, driving anyone even somewhat unstable to madness.*

As the chaos dragon writhed in the sky, Kotone slashed at its belly.

“Pick on someone your own size!”

“Gyaaah!”

With that slice, the dragon let out its dying shriek. Kotone landed as the hideous creature crashed to the ground behind her, spewing bodily fluids.

“Double...Attack Mode!”

She looked up to see Mitsuru was launching himself off a roof toward another chaos dragon. He swung his large blade at the beast’s chest, splitting flesh and bone alike as he swooped past. He soared defenselessly through the sky until Lovis gathered him up and used Short Gate to return to the ground.

The second chaos dragon slammed into the pavement.

“Looks like we might be able to manage,” said Rosemonde as she tossed an empty vial to the ground.

“...For now, but we don’t know how long that’ll last,” said Kotone, just as another gigantic magic circle appeared, centered on the castle. As it did, even more chaos dragons emerged from the circle and flew toward every corner of the capital. Among them was one twice the size of all the chaos dragons they’d seen so far.

“At this rate, I think the capital’s going to be swallowed up first,” said Kotone.

“Looks like they’re gonna have to turn this off at the source. Well...we just gotta do what we can until then,” said Rosemonde, raising her cross-shaped staff.

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KOTONE

“G ROOOAAAR!”

“Groooooaaaar!”

Two chaos dragons crawled across the ground, tearing up the pavement as they chased after Rosemonde.

“Earth Magic Level 9: Earth Machine Gun!”

Around Rosemonde, pockets of earth bulged upward, then fired toward the two chaos dragons in a hail of earthen bullets. The projectiles sunk into the dragons’

bodies and exploded, blasting away chunks of scales and flesh. But, while that might have temporarily slowed them down, the creatures quickly opened their eyes again and sped up.

“Gah!”

Her next spell wouldn’t make it. She decided to take the gamble and instead lowered herself into a fighting stance, her cross staff raised to fight.

“Double...Attack Mode!”

Just then, Mitsuru leapt from a nearby building and dropped onto one of the chaos dragons, his sword plunging deep into its head.

“Atlas Axe!”

Kotone swung an absolutely massive axe—close to fifty feet tall—and lopped off the head of the other chaos dragon. The bodies of the two monsters collapsed to the ground, their spinal cords severed.

“...I’m running out of steam, but they just keep coming,” said Kotone, standing on top of the axe she’d just swung. She was covered in injuries and completely out of breath.

“Thanks, Kotone, and Mitsuru...or whatever your name is. And, uh, Lovis...” said Rosemonde.

“He’s over there, off in his own little world.” Kotone pointed to the sky.

Lovis was far above them, fighting the larger chaos dragon. He was flung down several times, but each time he would use his teleportation magic to hang in the fight. If you listened really closely, you could faintly hear him laughing.



“...Is he nuts or just an idiot? Whatever. Helps us if he keeps the boss dragon preoccupied,” said Rosemonde. “Not that we can actually coordinate if he’s in his own little world.”

“And...he doesn’t look like he’s going to hold out much longer,” said Kotone with a sigh as she checked the level of the dragon up in the sky. Lv: 3177. It was probably the highest-level chaos dragon in the capital.

Lovis was suddenly hit by the dragon’s tail as it lashed it rapidly. A sonic boom crashed through the air and Lovis went flying, but then he was enveloped by a magic circle and landed neatly on the ground.

He was covered in blood, his eyes gleaming, as he glared up at the dragon above.

“Ha ha ha! Fierce indeed! No reaction even though I cut it a thousand times. It’ll fall in time, though!” he said.

“How are you still alive...?” asked Kotone, somewhat disturbed.

The four of them had already defeated more than ten of the chaos dragons. Lovis’s level had jumped up a decent amount, but the level of the giant chaos dragon above was still nearly three times his. It was such a big difference you would expect Lovis’s body to be in tatters even if he was just grazed by the creature’s tail.

“I fended off the worst of the tail strike,” he said. “Even so, I would have been a mess if I’d struck the ground, but I can avoid that impact by putting a Short Gate in the way.”

“...Can I ask you something? How’d you manage to fend it off if it’s flailing about way faster than you can even move?” she asked.

“Instinct. There’s no time to *think* during split-second attacks and blocks.” Lovis swung his scythe, casting the blood off it.

“Uh-huh...right... Thanks. I learned something totally unhelpful,” said Kotone with a hint of exasperation. She scanned the area.

The horde of chaos dragons had started to target their group as they went around defeating their fellow dragons. Ten were already approaching from

nearby. On top of that, the highest-level one up in the sky was descending toward them.

“...Not sure we’re going to hold out through much more of this,” said Kotone.

Other than the battle-addicted Lovis, they were all covered in wounds. Even if they hadn’t been, the enemy had the advantage in levels. They wouldn’t be able to handle them at all if the dragons banded together and came at them at once.

Kotone looked up toward the giant chaos dragon and let go of Atlas’s Axe.

“Dimension Pocket.” She gripped the Sword of Truth. She pointed it toward the dragon and called, “We’re at least going to take you down with us, so bring it on!” She lowered the short sword to the level of her eyes and let out a small sigh. “...And my manga was just starting to take off.”

Kotone had been an apathetic girl. No matter what she did on Earth, she never felt like she had any fun with it. She wasn’t good with people, but she liked reading manga even if she never really wanted to share that with others.

Her only point in living was for that private, unshared hobby. She never thought that was a bad thing, but she was suddenly frightened when she realized that was her everything.

*“I’ll make you a hero of Locklore!”*

That’s when Naiarotop came along with his inconvenient invitation to travel to another world. Travelers to Locklore were selected from lonely people who had no attachments. They would go to a world they knew nothing about where they could forget their past and do whatever they wanted, as the protagonist of their own story. Kotone couldn’t say that sales pitch wasn’t enticing, but in the end she wasn’t satisfied being typecast as a warrior and hailed as a hero.

The attack on Manaloch happened when she was considering stepping back from her work as an adventurer. Then, while she was in a coma, Garnet butted in and decided on his own to publish the manga Kotone wrote. And while it all started from a misunderstanding, Kotone found a compelling purpose as she began a life as a manga artist in Locklore...something she’d never felt before.

A manga culture was on the verge of spreading throughout Locklore, despite

starting from nothing. And Kotone was in the center of that. She had just started to feel a great hope for the future.

“Graaaah!”

The massive chaos dragon roared as it approached, bringing Kotone back to reality.

She steeled her resolve and adjusted her grip on the hilt of the Sword of Truth, and that’s when Lovis wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

“What are you—?”

“Short Gate!”

He repeated a rapid series of teleportations, and in the blink of an eye, Kotone found herself on the roof of a building a little way off. Mitsuru and Rosemonde were there too, probably picked up during the repeated Short Gates.

The massive chaos dragon smashed into the ground right where Kotone and the others had been moments earlier. That impact alone was enough to shake the entire capital. Its wicked head immediately turned and found them gathered all in one place. It grinned evilly.

“Running away temporarily isn’t going—” started Kotone.

“Fire Magic Level 21: Temple of Searing Hellfire!”

A deep, hoarse voice rang out, and a huge magic circle appeared. Out of it spewed dark crimson flames in the form of a temple, swallowing the large chaos dragon, and it let out a shriek as its body began burning to ash.

“You’re one annoying snake.”

The next moment, the dragon’s body split in two, and a huge man, nearly ten feet tall, stepped out from the dark flames. He had a peculiar hairstyle, with the front swept back into a topknot, and he was wearing ornate armor. His face was as evil and wicked as an ogre, and the red glow from the fire only made him appear more beastly.

“Wh-who are you...?” asked Kotone as she fumbled for the words.

The large man let out a snort of laughter and sheathed the sword in his hands. “You four are the lich’s disciples, aren’t you? Heard about you from Veranta. He asked me to come support the defense of the capital. He really loves to abuse my goodwill—telling me I have to defend all these pawns, then out of the blue he orders me to come here.”

Just as Nobunaga finished speaking, golems wearing oval masks appeared throughout the city.

Kotone had seen those golems before. They were the same as the ones Veranta mass-produced in order to push back the monsters overflowing from Cocytus when the higher beings interfered. He had a lot of them sitting in the tower as backup.

It looked like he was making arrangements to get as much of their fighting force to the capital as he could.

“And we thought he abandoned us,” said Kotone with a deep sigh.

“Don’t relax yet. Those dragons get reinforcements at regular intervals, after all,” said Lovis as he raised his scythe.

He sounded like he was having...*fun*.

## Chapter 2: Zoras, the Cataclysm

-1-

LUNAÈRE, POMERA, PHILIA, NOBLE, and I were heading toward the castle where Zero and the final assassin sent by Naiarotop were waiting.

As we were moving, we could hear screams in the distance. I turned to look and saw a chaos dragon swooping down toward a crowd of evacuating people running down the main road. It drew in a deep breath, and a red light of magic gathered at its mouth. It was going to burn them away with its fiery breath.

“Gah!” I knew that we needed to hit the main source of this as fast as possible in order to limit damages, but that didn’t mean I could just stand there and watch people die.

I stopped before I could think, but if I cast a spell from this range to wipe out that dragon, I’d hit the people nearby as well.

“Hiya!”

Philia acted while I hesitated. She crossed her hands and two huge arms appeared, their fingers interlaced to protect the people from the dragon like an umbrella. The fire breath from the dragon bounced off the backs of the hands without reaching the people underneath.

“Hraaagh!”

The chaos dragon rose higher, putting space between it and this unknown enemy. That’s the moment I chose to cast my spell.

“Apocalypse!”

The dragon of raging fire rushed forward, slamming into the monster’s flank. The flames from its fangs licked at the chaos dragon’s entire body, and the chaos dragon writhed as it fled into the sky.

“That takes care of the immediate problem...but it looks like the defense

squad doesn't have enough people. I was worried about that..." I said.

While Kotone and the others might be stronger than normal for their level, there was no way those four were going to be able to protect the entire capital alone.

"Yeah..." said Philia sadly.

Her hands might have protected the people from the direct flames of the chaos dragon's breath, but it couldn't stop the spreading sparks from starting fires in the city. I could see several people collapsed, probably with burns from the heatwave. While they were crouched, curled up in pain from their injuries, other people pushed them out of the way in their desperation to flee.

"Sorry... Philia wants to go help those people," said Philia.

It was a simple fact that we needed people to fight Naiarotop's last assassin. And that wasn't something we could put off, or there'd just be more extensive damage. This was the last assassin—someone powerful enough to successfully kidnap Zero, who was also high level. I was expecting him to be more powerful than Lucifer... But maybe it would be better for Philia and Pomera to work on saving the people instead.

"...Pomera-san, can you go with Philia-chan?" I said. "Heal the wounded with your white magic. And...Noble, would you protect them for me?"

I looked at Lunaère, and she nodded without hesitation. She agreed.

"...Okay. I'll go help save people. I'm praying that the two of you stay safe," said Pomera after a moment of uncertainty. She bobbed her head in a bow and then ran off with Philia.

"And you look after Lunaère, Kanata!" said Noble, before stretching his tongue out and wrapping it into the shape of a thumbs-up.

My level did jump up to the mid-five thousands after I defeated Lucifer with Lunaère, but she was still a much higher level than me. That didn't mean I could just let myself be the one being protected all the time, though.

"Of course I will!" I replied.

"Both you and Noble..." said Lunaère, her cheeks tinged pink in

embarrassment, but her expression quickly turned serious again.

Noble chased after Philia and Pomera toward the injured. Lunaère and I exchanged a look, then set off toward the castle again.

“Let’s finish this with a swift strike...to save the capital, and all of Locklore,” I said.

It would also bring a close to this drawn-out battle with Naiarotop.

We easily leapt over the castle gate, over walls, and onto roofs until we made our way to the highest roof of the castle.

There stood a man who looked like a magic user, wearing a large hat and ostentatious robes. Chains of pale blue light wrapped around his arms and legs, the same as with Reniement and Lucifer. This man probably also had his actions restricted, like them, after being kept prisoner in the higher beings’ realm before he was brought here.

I didn’t see Zero, who this man had kidnapped and supposedly turned into an energy source for creating these chaos dragons. This man was the more important one, though. We’d have time to search for Zero after defeating him.

“Ah, I’ve been waiting,” he said. “Kanata Kanbara, traveler from another world, and Lunaère, the poor lich girl. I know *all* about you. The hubris of that farcical god told me everything.”

He waved casually to us, like he was waving to a friend.

**ZORAS RODAL REGREHI**

***Race: Lich***

***Lv: 6486***

***HP: 27241/27241***

***MP: 42807/42807***



I gulped. The last assassin. Zoras Rodal Regrehi.

The thing was, while his level was high, it wasn't as absurdly high as Lucifer's, which had been over 8000. I was around 5000, while Lunaère was around 7000. We should actually have the advantage if we both joined the fight.

"I'm guessing that was the Status Check of a traveler," said Zoras. "Are you feeling hopeful now? I hate to be the bearer of bad news...but even if you fight me two to one, you still won't defeat me."

It was like he'd read my mind, and he said it like he was talking to an ignorant little child he felt sympathy for. I was left speechless for a moment.

"Besides, even if you manage to take my head, it won't remove the bomb I put in place," he continued. "And if you could, do you think getting rid of it would make the higher beings leave Locklore alone when it's lost its future? If they really wanted to, they could wipe the entire world out at their leisure. It's a dead end for both you and Locklore."

He continued his eloquent speech as if he never intended to wait for my response in the first place.

Even if we fought back, everything might be erased anyway. Veranta already pointed that possibility out. If we eliminated all ways for the higher beings to interfere with the world, our enemy probably had the power to just destroy the entirety of Locklore from the outside.

I hadn't come here with the intention of accepting my enemy's argument, but Zoras wasn't threatening us or making fun of us. He spoke calmly as he laid out the facts, and I found myself shaken.

"Kanata, don't you think this childish, mindless rebellion has gone on long enough? Locklore will never have a happy ending, no matter how much you struggle."

"...Say whatever you want, I can't stop now," I said. "I'm just doing everything I can do. That's how I atone to Locklore for getting it dragged into this."

"There is a *smarter* way, Kanata. I swear to you, you can strike back against these pitiful buffoons. They've grown fat from indulgence as they live for nothing more than consuming limitless entertainment to ward off the

monotony gnawing at their souls because they think they know it all.”

I waited for what Zoras would say next, my grip still tight on the hilt of my sword.

My enemy was dictating this encounter, I was getting swallowed up. But my unease with that was being beaten by my desire to learn just a little more from this mysterious Zoras before we fought.

And if he did indeed have some sort of magical solution for Locklore, which was doomed to disappear, then I wanted to hear it.

“Stop resisting. Die for me. Both of you. Once I kill the two of you, I will return to the higher beings, where they have promised to make me a Lower God. I will use my position to raise hell in their world next. In that way, I will get revenge for you. Ha ha ha, how does that sound? That’s much better than risking a fight where I might die as well, wouldn’t you say?” He stroked his chin, speaking without hesitation.

His argument was selfish and absurd. I felt like I vaguely understood Zoras’s position from the higher beings’ perspective, but there was nothing else to be gained in that. Just like Reniement and Lucifer, Zoras just wanted to destroy everything he could get his hands on. There was no point in continuing a conversation with that kind of person.

Without another word, I rushed toward Zoras, closing in. Lunaère used space-time magic to teleport behind him at the same time.

He struck the flat of my blade from the side, shifting it off target, then he ducked to avoid the swift kick Lunaère launched at him from behind.

I immediately swung the other direction with my sword, right at his neck.

“Gate.”

Light enveloped him, and he disappeared, then reappeared above us.

“Ha ha, I thought it might go like this. I just had to try anyway. Hm...I don’t have much time, however, and this looks like it might take a while.” A magic circle appeared around Zoras. “Space-time Magic Level 22: Garden of the Muse.”

Something about Zoras seemed to change drastically.

“Now, let’s begin. Try your best, won’t you? So that you have no regrets.”

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**I** GLARED UP AT Zoras as he floated.

The magic circle around him was still held there, and there was something menacing about him now. What was that Garden of the Muse space-time spell he just activated?

“Lunaère-san, do you know that spell?” I asked.

“It’s a space-time spell that makes everything pass through the target. How troublesome...” she said, her eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“Makes everything pass through...?”

None of our attacks would work. That seemed a bit more than troublesome.

“It’s supposedly a rare spell, but I just happened to see someone use it recently,” Lunaère added. “The caster’s mental resources are split as long as they are using the spell, creating significant openings in their actions. He likely won’t be able to use any other spells effectively. Also, there are certain spells that interfere directly with magic that will work on him, as well as gravity spells, as they can interact with additional dimensions. It is not an unbeatable spell, by any means.”

Zoras clapped. “Well done. The perfect textbook answer from the little lich girl, Lunaère! Now let us see it in action!” He swept his arms wide, and a golden khakkhara staff appeared in his hand.

“Gravity Bomb,” said Lunaère, pointing toward Zoras. He moved far to the side, and a moment later, Lunaère’s spell erupted in the space he’d just occupied, black light imploding and exploding.

“I’m skilled with such spells, myself,” said Zoras. “My specialty in fact, everything from standard uses to detecting the spell’s target location. Best to assume you won’t hit me with such a powerful attack.”

“If so, then Gravity!” I created a black transparent box enclosing a large area in front of me. Since Zoras was in the field, his movements slowed, and he was pulled sharply closer to the ground.

Gravity was a level 7 space-time spell that increased the force of gravity in a given area.

“Hm...”

“Got him!” I said. Low-level spells could be cast quickly and were easy to use. This spell was also easy to hit with since it had a wide area of effect. Slowing him down with this meant we could hit with other gravity-based spells.

“Gate.” A magic circle appeared around Zoras, and he disappeared while Lunaère was pulling together the magic circle for her next spell. He took barely any time between preparing the spell and casting it.

“Behind you,” said a voice, and I spun around. My eyes met his as he gave me a disturbing grin.

“Agh!”

I swung my sword to try and hedge his movements while I leapt backward to put distance between us, but he swung his staff at me without concern. My blade passed through his chest.

“That’s the Garden of the Muse effect!” I cried as Zoras’s staff slammed into my gut. It dug in deep, I could feel bone breaking as red liquid surged up my throat and out of my mouth, and my vision tinted crimson.

“Kanata!”

I was on the brink of passing out, but Lunaère’s voice snapped me back. She teleported to where I was sent flying and caught me.

“Lunaère-san, I’m sorry...” I said.

“It was my miscalculation. The caster of that spell shouldn’t be able to physically touch anything while it’s active...” She glared at Zoras.

“It depends on how the caster manipulates it,” he said. “You seem like you’re a higher level than me, but you didn’t even know that. I think I’ve found your limits. I apologize...but there is no one in this lowly world of Locklore that can

rival me in magic.”

He came straight for us.

I forced Lunaère away as I stood. My body groaned and my consciousness wavered, but Zoras wasn’t going to be nice enough to let me recover.

“Space-time Magic Level 11: Primordial Predator.”

Zoras formed a magic circle which glowed with rainbow light as a beast with a vague ovular outline appeared. Its body was long and simple, and its tooth-filled maw gaped wide. I wasn’t sure if it was really a living creature...but I was sure it was *creepy*.

“Aaaaaah!” The thing let out something resembling a scream and came at the two of us with its mouth wide like it was trying to swallow us both whole.

“Impossible!” said Lunaère, looking panicked. She’d claimed that you couldn’t use other spells effectively while using Garden of the Muse, but apparently Zoras didn’t care.

Lunaère dove to the ground and pushed at my back, getting us both out of the way of the oval creature’s teeth. The moment its jaws clamped onto nothing, it melted into thin air.

But just as we avoided the Predator’s attack, we found ourselves face-to-face with Zoras, who’d used another Gate spell to head us off.

“It’s not wise to fight me while protecting someone who only slows you down, lich girl,” he said.

I rushed to put together a magic circle. We weren’t going to win against someone using Garden of the Muse if we fought head-to-head. For now, our only choice was to throw out gravity spells to force him to dodge, giving us a moment’s breathing space to get back on our feet.

It used a lot of MP, but I threw out a Gravity Bomb knowing it wouldn’t hit.

“Wind Magic Level 19: Boreas.” Zoras created a magic circle, summoning a black wind that blew away my own.

“What the—!”

That was clearly against the rules. There was no way we were ever going to hit him while he was using Garden of the Muse, which made him immune to everything but gravity spells. It didn't help that he could use a quick succession of Gate and Boreas, which destroyed our magic circles. His defense was flawless.

"Hm, can you dodge this?" he said, swinging his staff at my head. He didn't just have magic, his strength was on par with his level too. I'd be a goner if I took a direct hit to the head.

I automatically thought of blocking with my sword but realized the next moment that his staff would just go through my block, and his staff was swinging closer the entire time I thought.

Lunaère quickly threw herself between me and the staff. She apparently thought I wouldn't be able to take the attack and instead decided to use her own body as a shield.

I grit my teeth. This fight...it was just me holding her back as she protected me.

"You're the crying martyr type, aren't you? I just hate that sort of person, mindlessly, pointlessly devoted," said Zoras, his staff passing right through Lunaère toward my head.

My vision cut out, and I went flying backward. I felt myself crash into the roof, but I also felt detached, like an outsider watching this happen to me.

"Huh...?" I heard Lunaère make a sound of confusion, the sort of thing that didn't suit her. I lifted my head and could just about barely make out her face, tears welling in her eyes.

"Ah ha ha ha! The look on your face!" gloated Zoras. "I'm sorry."

Lunaère was looking at me, but then her brow furrowed in blatant rage, and she turned back to Zoras.

He pointed toward me. "You're going to prioritize fighting me over saving him? That is the correct choice. Because right now...you can't risk turning your back on me."

“Be quiet. Your entire existence is unpleasant,” she said with a glare.

-3-

**M**Y CONSCIOUSNESS WAS FADING, but I endured the intense pain and urged my body to move.

I couldn't do it.

Not even a finger. I couldn't think, I could barely breathe. I was at my limits just keeping my head raised.

I watched as Lunaère flew around and unleashed a kick at the back of Zoras's head, but it passed through because of Garden of the Muse, which he still had activated.

“I do think it was wise of you to prioritize fighting me over saving him, but you seem agitated,” he said. “That was a pointless attack. Do you really think you'll find a way to break through Garden of the Muse with those kicks? You're just opening yourself up for attacks from me.”

Light engulfed him, and he appeared above Lunaère while swinging his staff. It struck her right shoulder. There was a dull thud and she grimaced in pain.

But she grabbed onto the tip of the staff at the same time.

Zoras could use Garden of the Muse to choose whether or not to allow physical contact. He could make all attacks toward his body pass through, while making one-sided attacks of his own.

However, he had to choose between being corporeal or not: it couldn't be both. Lunaère could grab his staff at the same time he attacked.

“You are desperate, lich girl,” he said.

Lunaère had the staff in her hand for a moment, but then it just passed right through. She ducked to evade his oncoming swing, but his leg snapped up to kick her while she was crouched. That kick passed right through her arms and legs and squarely struck her abdomen.



He flung her defenselessly into the air, then followed with a merciless slam of his staff.

“Gah!”

My consciousness was moving further away, but Lunaère’s cry made it snap back.

*What am I doing here, groveling on the ground? How long am I going to stay down?*

I felt my finger move, just a tiny bit. I put all my remaining strength into my arm.

As Lunaère soared through the air, Zoras pointed his staff at her and said, “Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse.”

A massive dragon of raging flame passed through his magic circle and rose straight up as it aimed to consume Lunaère.

Apocalypse homed in on its target—there was no way for her to dodge.

She created a huge magic circle of her own. “Space-time Magic Level 25: Ruler of the World!”

She disappeared from the sky just as the fiery dragon snapped its maw around her. Then she reappeared behind Zoras, already working on her next magic circle.

“A spell that stops time...?” he said. “But you can’t cast another spell while in a world where time has stopped. How unfortunate... It doesn’t do anything against my Garden of the Muse, which shuts out all but a few specialized spells. You can’t touch me even if you do stop time. Isn’t that a bit too draining to use for a one-off evasion spell?”

He turned back to face her.

“Space-time Magic Level 20: Gravity Witch!” Lunaère reached her arm toward Zoras. There was a large, spectral arm overlaying hers that looked made of black fog, and it kept reaching toward him.

He pulled back to dodge, but the black arm almost seemed to suck him in, catching him in its powerful gravitational pull.

“Oh my, look at me, caught by this juggernaut,” he said with clear confidence on his face.

Lunaère’s black arm grew bigger, thicker, wilder as it tried to crush Zoras.

“Gate.”

He was swallowed by light and disappeared. Lunaère black arm swung through the air, pointlessly clenching its fist.

Zoras appeared in Lunaère’s blind spot and swung his staff at her. She tried to block with her arm but was flung back. Lunaère regained control and landed, then fell into a stance that would keep him in check as she maintained the black arm of her Gravity Witch.

“Ha ha, I just do not understand why you fight so desperately. Do *you* even understand why?” he said. “Lunaère—the lich girl—I heard a little about you from Naiarotop. Born into a famous family of magic users, died as you killed a Demon King for your country...became a lich out of concern for your mother who was left all alone. What a poor girl. I also know what happened next.”

He spread his arms and shook his head.

“Your mother tricked you, and you were captured by a group of church magicians researching taboo magic... And they put you through living hell. They never allowed you to die, not with your unclean soul. They beat you, tortured you...they even carved off pieces of your flesh and drew your blood to use as ingredients in potions! Ah ha ha ha! Is there a more comical tragedy than that?!”

My mind jolted.





Lunaère hadn't told me about that aspect of her past. She did tell me that the religious beliefs at the time meant she couldn't be accepted for what she was, and though she was worried about her mother, her mother rejected her. But this was the first time I'd heard anything about being tricked and tortured.

"And you haven't even learned from your experiences. You're trying to defeat me with no regard for your own life in an effort to protect the world. Is this some sort of joke? I have to be honest, I find this desire of yours a little bit odd, and even a little scary. I don't understand it at all. Perhaps you aren't even thinking, you simply assumed, like some sort of automaton, that this was good. Is that it? No matter how much you are scorned, you go off and sacrifice yourself for this world time and time again. It's like you're trying to be some kind of saint. It's disgusting."

Zoras delivered his monologue with overexaggerated movements and gestures. In contrast, Lunaère remained emotionless as she stared back at him.

"Zoras...you are a sad, empty man," she said. It wasn't a counterargument, and it wasn't an attempt to agitate him either. That's all she said, and his expression went blank.

"I had wanted to speak with you directly after hearing your story...but you're surprisingly boring. You're a disappointment, Lunaère," he said. "Let's end playtime now. I was right to assume Locklore was a far too bland and constricting toy box for me. I'll finish it off quickly, then play with the higher beings."

Zoras narrowed his eyes and raised his staff.

My reaching finger finally touched my magic bag and a recovery potion, a Nine Lives Elixir, appeared by my mouth.

I gulped the whole thing down. My wounds closed, and my mind became clear. I leapt to my feet, steadied my breathing, and pointed my sword at Zoras's back.

"So...you had something like that with you? Hm, I trounced you that badly and yet you really want to come back for more?" he said, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

“I’m sorry, Lunaère-san, for making you listen to this bore so you could buy time for me,” I said.

“...That is a poor attempt at getting under my skin, Kanata,” said Zoras with irritation.

Lunaère had kept striking violently at Zoras even when he was untouchable to keep him from finishing me off. She probably let him talk for so long just to buy time for me. She might not have been able to heal me, but she at least gave me the chance to do it myself.

**-4-**

**T**HE TWO OF US glared at Zoras. He looked at us in turn, then held his hands up in feigned resignation. “More two-against-one? Well, this is bothersome. If I had known you’d be this stubborn, I would have killed Kanata when he was down. We don’t even have the time for this.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, a bad feeling coming over me.

“I am still bound by the higher beings’ magic. This plan of mine incorporates things they wanted, not me, really. I told you earlier, didn’t I? We’ll both lose if you two don’t die soon.”

He swept his arms up, showing the chains of blue-white light. Reniement and Lucifer had those.

“What is this about...?” I asked, then a gigantic magic circle appeared over the castle where we stood. The light from the magic circle morphed into dragons which then escaped out into the capital.

“Groooooaar!”

It was the magic that Zoras was using Zero’s curse to make, still happening at regular intervals, even while we fought Zoras. But there was something else that caught my attention.

“The chaos dragons are getting bigger... Their level is going up...” I said.

It felt like we were running out of time. And worse...the rate their levels were

going up was accelerating. It had been since we got here, and the gap between their appearances was shortening.

“This isn’t just fun and games,” said Zoras. “The spell I activated using Zero, the Silent Void, doesn’t create these dragons. They’re actually more of a side effect. The main use of Zero’s curse is to destroy all of Locklore. The longer this drags out, the more likely I’m going to get caught in the fallout when it activates. Which would be...*inconvenient*.” Zoras stroked his chin, speaking like these were all minor details he was still sorting out. Lunaère and I couldn’t even keep up with what he was getting at.

“Wh-why would you activate the curse before the fight?!” I asked. “I thought you were trying to kill us and get taken back to the Upper Realm. You must have realized you could get caught in it too if you activated it while we were fighting!”

“I explained this to you several times already. The higher beings wanted some insurance. Besides, they would find it very convenient if I died with Locklore. And I can’t act against their will,” he said.

I hung my head.

Was that why Zoras was so oddly against the possibility we’d take each other out?

We had no idea when the curse would activate. Zoras probably knew, but to us, it was like fighting with a bomb we couldn’t see tied to our backs. And more importantly, it didn’t matter what happened because if the dragons kept getting stronger, the world was done for.

To top it all off, no matter how hard we fought, the battle against Zoras looked like it would turn into a drawn-out affair. As long as he had Garden of the Muse running, he could never get hurt. It would take us a long time to take down his defenses and land a decisive blow.

And while Zoras might be capable of defeating us quickly and fleeing back to the Upper Realm, there was only a slim chance we would be able to defeat him.

The worst thing of all, though, was that the curse was clearly independent of Zoras. Killing him wouldn’t stop Zero’s curse. Even now it was growing in

influence, getting more out of control...turning into something that couldn't be stopped.

I closed my eyes, flipping back and forth between the options, but I made up my mind quickly. Our only choice here was to save Locklore.

"Lunaère-san...go stop Zero's curse. He's got to be in the castle, that's where all this is centered. It shouldn't be hard to find him," I said.

Lunaère was the world's greatest expert on magic and curses. She would be able to find a way to stop Zero's curse if no one else could.

We didn't have the time for caution. This couldn't wait until after we defeated Zoras—she had to go now.

"Ha ha ha! I told you from the very beginning you two were trapped," said Zoras. "Zero's curse is already active. Even I can't stop it easily. That lich girl will never stop it, even if she uses every trick up her sleeve. And anyway, I have my orders, and I can't let the curse get me as well. I need to kill you two immediately. You don't think I'm going to sit and wait for you?"

I looked at him and glared. "I'm going to take you down while Lunaère-san goes to undo the curse."

"...You're still that confident, after I beat you so terribly before?" Zora's eyes opened wide as he looked at me. "You're just the lich girl's baggage."

"Kanata...it won't work. He's too dangerous," said Lunaère uneasily.

"I knew this would be a dangerous fight from the very beginning. This is our best chance at succeeding. Besides, I acted cool in front of Noble, I can't back down now," I said.

Lunaère bit her lip. I imagined she agreed with me that she couldn't leave Zero's curse as it was for any longer. She also knew Zoras wasn't the kind of opponent we could defeat quickly, even working together.

I didn't have the knowledge to deal with a complex curse. That meant Lunaère was the only one who could handle it.

"Kanata...if you die, I will never forgive you. Promise me you won't," she said.

"I promise," I said. At once, a magic circle surrounded her, and she



disappeared. She must have teleported into the castle.

“Ha ha, this is fine by me, I can kill you faster if it’s one-on-one,” said Zoras. “It doesn’t matter, she can’t stop Zero’s curse. Honestly, there never was a path that led to a happy ending for you two, so I suppose it doesn’t matter if you satisfy yourselves by struggling as much as you like. Did you really think the higher beings would use a curse as insurance if it could be easily dealt with? If you want to outwit a god, you must play by the same rules.”

“You really like the sound of your own voice. Let’s get this over with, Zoras. You don’t want the curse to go off before you kill us either, right?” I raised my sword so the tip was level with Zora’s neck.

“How impudent. I can kill you in less than a minute now that the lich girl is gone.”

**-5-**

**L**UNAÈRE LEFT THE FIGHT with Zoras and entered the castle to find Zero and stop the curse he was being used to activate. The soldiers and royalty had already fled, leaving the place abandoned.

She quickly followed the traces of evil magic to a spacious hall on the first floor, where she encountered an odd sight. A beautiful boy with pale white skin was fixed in midair, surrounded by a fissure; black mist seeped through the crack in space. The cloth normally covering him had been torn away, but she immediately knew this was Zero by the odd nature of his magic. She also recognized the same strange magic formulas on his arm that she’d gotten a peek of when she fought him before.

The floor around him was covered in obsessively inscribed, finely written magic formulas.

“So this is Zero... Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the thing behind him is Zero,” she said, turning her eyes toward the spatial distortion near the boy. There was a vast interior beyond, where she could see a large, mannequin-like head inside a black haze. Its eyes were closed, but occasionally

the eyelids would flicker like they were about to open. Lunaère instinctively knew that when that thing began moving, Locklore would be finished.

Lunaère thought back to what Veranta said.

*“When I took on the role of adjusting the world, there was something I had trouble dealing with. It was a mass of unknown power, disasters and curses that couldn’t be regulated... I needed somewhere to bury it, somewhere that wasn’t Cocytus. I made a specialized space, forced the power into it, and sealed it away. However, I couldn’t get rid of the space itself. After contemplating what to do, I decided it would be a good idea to provide the seal itself with a personality to act as my guard.”*

That space behind the boy was the uncontrollable mass of power Veranta pushed into Zero. Which meant Zero was nothing more than something created to guard *that*.

And, just as Zoras had said, Zero’s seal was already almost completely undone. It didn’t need any more outside help, the space would soon be wide open, and the world would be devoured by the curse of death.

“Veranta...you just had to make something this extreme, didn’t you? It couldn’t be eliminated, so instead you made it as complex as you could...”

Lunaère bit her lip.

Zero’s curse was far beyond what Lunaère anticipated. She honestly didn’t think she could reseal something like this...at least not in this situation. She couldn’t eliminate it either. She understood why Zoras was so confident.

The worst part was she was running out of time. She wasn’t certain exactly how long she had, but it likely wouldn’t last more than half an hour.

“There’s nothing I can do about something like this...”

She’d had a hard enough time holding off Zoras, who was capable of both powerful attacks and magical defense, but he’d set up this unstoppable curse to be unleashed while they were distracted. At first, this curse seemed to just be an addition to the main event—but in reality, the curse was far more difficult to deal with than any battle with an enemy. Forget half an hour, she didn’t think she could stop this curse if she had a hundred years.

Perhaps it would be better if she gave up on undoing or resealing Zero's curse and went back to Kanata to help him fight Zoras. The thought crossed her mind, but she knew that if she left Zero here like this, Locklore would have no way of escaping its destruction.

"...I have no choice. I don't have any more time to worry," she muttered to herself as she touched Zero's head with her fingertips. Intellectually, she knew it was pointless, hopeless. But she had no other option than to give her all to overcome the difficulty in front of her.

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"Space-time Magic Level 21: Primordial Predator!"

Rainbow light poured from Zoras's magic circle, and out came a disturbing creature formed of nothing but a great big mouth. Again.

"Yaaagh!"

The giant teeth rushed toward me, far too fast and far too big.

Since I couldn't dodge that by just flying around like I normally did, I prepared a spell, always having the magic circle ready to go. "Space-time Magic Level 12: Slow World!"

I placed the magic circle behind me as I ran. A purple light surrounded the creature, slowing its movements. It quickly passed through the purple light and returned to its original speed, but that pause let me narrowly evade. The beast slammed into the roof right next to me, opening a hole.

"You can barely dodge with that," said Zoras, who had already used Gate to move around to where I leapt to. He was using the Predator, with its speed and wide area of effect, to herd me into a space of his choosing. He was good at this combo.

I knew that, but I couldn't deal with it. Even if I could anticipate his actions, I couldn't touch him unless I used gravity magic. I'd have to catch him off guard with a gravity spell while dealing with the vicious, one-sided beating he was giving me...but I clearly didn't have the skill to pull off a stunt like that.

"You really don't have any more time," he said. "This won't be as nice as it

was before.”

His staff came at the side of my face. I thought my neck snapped. My consciousness wavered as my body went flying. I tried to pull back my fading mind.

I’d promised Lunaère I would defeat this man and come back alive.

“Uuugh!” I swung my sword, but it passed through Zoras because he still had Garden of the Muse up. It didn’t hit.

“A reckless strike. You’re so desperate it’s actually sad,” he said with a snort of laughter.

I made a magic circle for Gravity Bomb right in front of Zoras.

“You think I’m going to let this opening go unused? Are you really that desperate?” he said as he thrust the staff into my gut. It felt like the colors of the world inverted. My mind, my body...they both screamed in agony.

But I refused to drop the magic circle. I kept the point of my sword trained on him. “Gravity—!”

“Boreas.” Once again Zoras’s spell scattered my magic circle. My Gravity Bomb was wiped away a moment before I could cast it.

“Don’t think your desperation will let you win!” he said as he swung his staff up to smash my chin. I flew defenselessly up.

“Ugah!”

Through my patchy vision I saw Zoras looking up at me. If he struck me with a magic attack now, while I was defenseless, it could be the end of me.

*I can’t win. I don’t know if the difference is in experience, or in tenacity, but we’re not in the same league. His fighting style is too perfect. There are no gaps.*

“This is the end. Primordial Predator!”

He pointed his staff at me as I soared through the air. A giant monster came at me, mouth gaping.

“Aaaarrgh!”

There was no dodging. My only choice was to roll the dice and try intercepting

with my own magic attack.

I quickly put together a magic circle for Gravity Bomb, but I realized partway through that the creature would kill me before I could cast it.

I acted cool as Lunaère left, but in the end, I couldn't hold my own against Zoras. I pulled all of Locklore into this fight, and this was how it was going to end.

I heard Zoras laughing. "Don't worry. Once I kill you, I'll send the lich girl to join you." At first he'd seemed like a perceptive, calm, gentlemanly type character, but maybe this was just a chance for him to show his true nature: cruel and sadistic.

If I stopped, he would kill Lunaère next, and Locklore would drown in a sea of curses. I didn't have the luxury of giving up.

I kicked at the teeth of the monster as it approached and tried to twist away from it. But it didn't work. Pain shot through my left shoulder as its jaws clamped down over my arm. I couldn't get it off.

"Kanata, I never thought you would hold out this long. I will remember you..." said Zoras.

Without a moment's hesitation, I pointed my blade toward my own shoulder. "Gravity Bomb!"

"Graaaaah!"

The creature cried out in what sounded like a shriek. My arm was torn to pieces, and the explosion sent me tumbling across the roof, but I did manage to make it out of that life-or-death moment alive.

"What in the—!"

Even Zoras didn't anticipate that move from me. I could tell he was thrown off for a moment.

And, though I didn't plan it this way, the explosion happened to throw me near Zoras. I let myself be taken along while I activated my other magic circle, the other casting of Gravity Bomb I'd prepared using the Twin Minds Method right before I cast the first one.

I wasn't thinking about consequences. Everything was a blur. I hadn't even fully steadied myself on my feet before I launched my Gravity Bomb at Zoras from close range.

"Eat this!"

He looked at me, his eyes wide in disbelief. "This can't—!"

This was my first time ever successfully dual casting a high-level spell like Gravity Bomb with the Twin Minds Method. It wasn't even like I was consciously aiming for it. I just cast as if on autopilot, because gravity spells were the only way to effectively hit him.

If the first Gravity Bomb hadn't happened to throw me right in front of Zoras, this all would've been pointless. I guess luck was on my side, there was no other explanation.

Zoras was swallowed by the imploding and exploding light of Gravity Bomb.

I thought it'd worked, but he immediately appeared in another location. He must have dodged in the nick of time using Gate.

"Heh heh, that was close," he said. "I nearly panicked. Though, even a direct hit won't kill me outright. I could move away and recover anyway. Such resistance is futile. This only showcases the difference in power between the two of us."

I raised my sword in my one remaining hand. "Looks like Lunaère-san was right."

"...What do you mean?" Zoras frowned with displeasure.

She'd said, *"The caster's mental resources are split as long as they are using the spell, creating significant openings in their actions. He likely won't be able to use any other spells effectively."*

That was Lunaère's evaluation of Garden of the Muse right before this battle started, but Zoras actually was capable of casting high-level spells with high precision while maintaining it. It was proof his skill as a magic user far surpassed Lunaère's expectation.

But he still had limits.

“Just after you cast another spell while you’re maintaining Garden of the Muse...you’re wide open,” I said.

He could use the spells without issue, but it must really be dividing his cognitive resources. He very obviously reacted more slowly to my spell when he cast Primordial Predator while holding Garden of the Muse.

“That’s good,” I said. “I was really starting to think you were undefeatable, but I’ve finally got you figured out.”

And with that, I had hope. I could keep on fighting.

**-6-**

“**Y**OU FIGURED ME OUT...? Is it really appropriate to be saying that in this situation?” said Zoras with a look of irritation. “You are incredibly stubborn. I still have to fight the lich girl and finish my mission so I can flee this world before Zero’s curse swallows it.”

“The curse’s time restriction doesn’t matter. Lunaère-san will take care of that. We can take our time and fight. If we do, she’ll come to back me up eventually. That works better for me.”

“How optimistic of you! It doesn’t matter how much you struggle, you will be destroyed along with Locklore! You’re just the opening act for the lich girl. So stop getting in my way, small fry!” Five magic circles appeared around him. “Space-time Magic Level 15: Primordial Polygons!”

There was a flash of rainbow light, and five disconcerting geometric shapes appeared. Then they flew at me at high speed.

I jumped side to side to dodge them. They zipped past me and sliced through the roof of the castle as easily as a knife through butter, then they rose again on their own and came back at me.

So basically, they were powerful, fast flying, and tracking. And this spell made several copies of them at once. That was an incredible and terrifying spell...but it wasn’t enough to break me by now. I’d passed that point a long time ago.

“I’ll slice you to pieces!” shouted Zoras as the five shapes flew randomly past, cutting up everything around me.

While I was focused on dodging, Zoras disappeared. I knew by now that when he did that, it meant he was going to come at me from a blind spot.

I dodged an incoming polygon, and behind it was Zoras, his staff already swinging toward me. I couldn’t block his attack. He would pass through my guard with Garden of the Muse. My only option was to dodge completely.

I focused all my attention on the tip of his staff and ducked. Just as I thought I’d dodged, he kicked me in the stomach.

“Urgh!”

I barely had any HP left. My left arm was gone too, meaning I had limited moves at my disposal. I pulled a healing potion from my magic bag.

“I won’t let you heal now!” Zoras swung his staff down.

I just managed to dodge, but the potion flask got smashed instead.

A polygon came at me from behind. I immediately jumped and dodged, but Zoras was chasing me, with another swing of his staff incoming. I took the hit in my right shoulder so I wouldn’t have to take it in my chest or gut.

The impact lifted me up into the air, the five polygons whirling around me.

“You are just too persistent. Just give in and die already!”

I couldn’t dodge, not with everything coming at me at once.

“Space-time Magic Level 12: Slow World!”

I threw the magic circle below me. That would slow down the polygons coming from beneath, shifting them out of sequence with the others. Zoras was also down there, meaning I could hold off his magic attacks. He could handle this with Gate regardless, but it was a big help knowing he had to add in one move before attacking.

I moved down to escape the polygons’ attack. I heard two of them collide into each other above me.

As expected, Zoras came flying in to attack me using Gate. I launched myself



from the surface of one of the passing polygons, then another as I moved left.

Just a moment behind me came Zoras, using a series of Gate castings to chase after me. I continued using the polygons as footing to jump up and down, left and right, while I used the Twin Minds Method to pull together some magic circles.

“Double Gravity Bomb!”

Succeeding once at that meant I could do it again...even if I'd never managed it before. Zoras escaped the blast using Gate, but three of the polygons were swallowed in the explosion.

I leapt from a polygon to land on the castle roof.

“Even doing all that I can't hit him...” I grumbled.

Even parallel castings of spells that complex couldn't hit him. By watching him all this time I could tell that his reactions were far slower than normal when casting multiple spells or when he had to maintain fine control of his spells. But I still couldn't penetrate his defenses, not at my level of skill.

“Might be impossible unless I can pull off a triple casting of Gravity Bomb.”

I steadied my breathing. I hadn't even been able to do a double casting before, but I managed it here. Triple couldn't be entirely impossible.

“You are too persistent!” yelled Zoras. “I don't have any more time to give a weakling like you! I have tried to explain the futility of it to you, but you still think you can accomplish something here?! It doesn't matter how hard you try! Just give up already and die!”

Five magic circles appeared as he roared, “Every single person is just a mindless marionette moved only by desire and the higher beings' will! There is no worth in the hopeless souls of these fools, simply allowing themselves to be swept up in events! What does it matter if one or two of these disgusting worlds are destroyed?!”

Polygons flew at me. I jumped to avoid them.

“I am one step away from becoming a Lower God! And once I do, I will outsmart those pigs and put an end to this entire filthy cycle! Kanata Kanbara!

Do not get in the way of my righteous mission!”

Gaping mouths emerged from the five magic circles he made.

“This is getting serious!” I said.

Five spells at once, all of them Primordial Predators. Things seemed quite severe, perhaps because of this time limit imposed by Zero’s curse. I was starting to see him scramble.

With five terrifying screeches, the massive beasts flew at me. They tore through the roof, sending bits flying as they chased after me.

“Die, die, die!”

I laid a Slow World casting behind me, setting it so they would be slowed if they came at me directly from behind. That let me slip between the monsters while using a Gravity Bomb to push one out of my way.

“Why...? Why won’t you just go down...?! Why can’t...why can’t I kill just one human who’s already nearly dead!” Sweat began to trickle down his temple. He was really starting to lose his cool.

“You said you’d kill me in a minute if I was on my own. Guess you got that wrong,” I taunted as Zoras ground his teeth.

This wasn’t a bad situation. I was staying alive, even if it was by the skin of my teeth. If Zoras kept panicking and throwing out big spells, I could assume he’d eventually leave himself wide open for me.

“...I have no choice. I created this spell after thousands of years of meditation...and I didn’t want the higher beings to see it yet,” he murmured. The polygons and beasts he’d made seemed to vanish into the air and disappear. Then he began to float upward.

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“...I F YOU INSIST on living any longer, even I will be caught by Zero’s curse. I just...never imagined I would be forced to use this on someone like *you*,” he said, looking down at me as he hovered in midair.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ve heard that in your world, there is no magic. Instead, all other technologies have made immense advances, so perhaps you already know this... There are tiny particles that exist in all matter and cannot be separated using normal means.”

I’d heard about this. He was talking about atoms and molecules. I never thought someone in Locklore would figure that out.

“What about—”

“During my many years of meditation, I became aware of their existence and developed an ultimate spell to undo the bonds between them. The physical object itself is destroyed, turning it into incredible amounts of heat.”

“Wait, you’re talking about nuclear power?!”

I couldn’t believe Zoras actually had something like that at his disposal. I had no idea how huge a scale a ridiculous spell like that would be in this situation.

He pointed his staff at me. A gigantic magic circle appeared, centered on me, leaving me no time to evade.

“Space-time Magic Level 25: Horus’s Destruction! I will use your body to call forth the flames of gods! Feel pride as you die...the first test subject for my spell!”

The complex magic circle built up into several layers, expanding, and I couldn’t shake it off even if I rushed around. It was perfectly locked on.

“Forget Zero’s curse! If you use that here, you’ll get wiped out by a nuclear explosion!” I said.

“Zero’s curse is something formed from a mixture of all impure power...I would not survive its activation. Horus’s Destruction, however, cannot reach me while I am in the Garden of the Muse.”

Which meant my only option was to hit him hard and interrupt the spell. Zoras was focused on weaving together the magic circle... I might be able to get an attack in now.

“Double Gravity Bomb!”

I let loose two Gravity Bombs, caging Zoras in, but he used a series of Gate castings to fly away, easily evading my attack. He didn't seem flustered at all.

"I can take my time casting Horus's Destruction. No need to chase after you while focused on my plan. Evading your spells is far too easy."

The layers of the spell kept building up, getting more complicated. I couldn't stop it now. How powerful was the explosion from Horus's Destruction going to be?

I had a vague idea of how things were going in the capital, since I caught glimpses now and then as we fought. Veranta had mobilized the huge masses of golems that were stored in the tower and sent them to save people, but the scope of their reach kept shrinking. I couldn't see people in the process of evacuating anymore, so the evacuation itself must be done already.

I stopped moving, since I realized I couldn't shake this spell off even if I did. I glared up at Zoras and started casting my own spell.

"Huh, you still haven't given up?" he said.

I couldn't hit him now. I knew that full well.

I'd spent this whole battle observing Zoras, watching for openings. He was most open just after casting something big. I would hit him with a gravity spell in that brief moment, right when he showed that fatal opening.

I gave up on stopping Horus's Destruction.

"Goodbye, Kanata Kanbara, traveler from another world," he said.

It felt like I was being melted from the inside out. There was a boom, and my sense of hearing cut out. My vision went white, then empty of anything at all. I could feel my life slipping away...

"Ha ha ha! It was even more powerful than I expected. It's turned the entire capital to ruins! The lich girl was fairly close by, but I doubt she would have died in that. Now to finish my last job of wiping out this worthless everything!"

Zoras hovered above me.

I raised a trembling arm to point my sword at him and activated the magic circle I prepared *before I died*. “Gravity Bomb!”

He was completely defenseless, and the Gravity Bomb latched right on.

“Gah! What in the—?!”

He didn’t even know what was going on as he got dragged into the shimmering darkness of the implosion and resulting explosion, then fell to the ground in front of me, covered in blood. He couldn’t maintain the magic circle for Garden of the Muse, and it disappeared.

I drew on my last remaining strength to slash his chest. Blood spurted out, and he collapsed.

“How...are you alive...? This...is impossible... Is this really the end...? I...I...I still haven’t accomplished anything...” he gasped, dumbfounded.

A broken snake ring slipped from my finger.

### ***OUROBOROS WHEEL***

#### ***VALUE CLASS: GODLY***

***A mere shadow of the legendary two-headed serpent that decimated an entire continent during ancient times. The serpent could not be killed, so it was defeated with a curse that caused it to turn to silver and shrink into its current form. Even now, the immortal snake’s wicked will was sleeping inside the metal.***

***In case of death, the ring consumes a portion of the wearer’s magic power and resurrects them.***

It was one of the items I got from Lunaère. It’d been with me ever since my training days back in Cocytus. Apparently it couldn’t withstand a close-range Horus’s Destruction, but it revived me one last time with just enough strength that I could move my body, if barely.

The items in my magic bag were vaporized too. It was a good thing that at least my sword, the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, survived. I wasn’t going to get

another chance like this if I couldn't take him down here and now.

The biggest obstacle for this strategy was whether or not I'd be able to maintain a magic circle until after the Ouroboros Wheel activated. I needed to attack Zoras after taking the hit from Horus's Destruction, when his guard was down. There would probably be a similar opening when he cast the spell, but he would obviously be cautious then.

The problem with the Ouroboros Wheel was that you completely lost consciousness for an instant. I had nothing but my force of will to snap myself back as quickly as I could, maintain the magic circle, and cast the spell fast. Obviously, I'd never tested this before. It was a crazy gamble, but I had no other option.

I tried to pick up the Ouroboros Wheel, but it crumbled to gray sand.

"That ring held so many memories of my time with Lunaère-san..."

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## ZORAS

**I**N LOCKLORE'S ANCIENT TIMES, the gods didn't have the experience necessary to balance it. The world ended up teetering on the brink of destruction every time there was a monster calamity. There were organizations dotted throughout the world with fighting power of the highest level, and the balance of power between countries was incredibly unstable.

How could a country stabilize itself in a world as chaotic as that? They called for a powerful king—one who would never grow old, so there would be no need for a change in power.







The kingdom of Rodacoff came together in its entirety and began researching forbidden death magics. Once the flurry of research began to settle, the question remained of who would become the undead king. They selected the youngest prince, a sickly boy named Zoras with little time left to live.

And thus, Zoras became the undead king of Rodacoff and ruled for the following 400 years.

Though, in reality, “king” might not have been the most accurate title. He was more a weapon than a ruler. By the time he reached 400 years of age, his level had reached 700—powerful enough that he could single-handedly win battles against the entire military of a small country. He wasn’t treated as a normal person, rather he was worshipped like a god.

When it came to the government, it wasn’t just Zoras in charge. There was a council of wisemen, ten of the country’s leaders gathered to decide the kingdom’s future. Zoras himself had very little say in politics. He was more a figurehead who signed off on decisions as a matter of ceremony.

And over that 400-year period, the chaos in Locklore began to settle into a modicum of peace, and Rodacoff began to have difficulties controlling a powerful individual like Zoras. The country hid the inconvenient truth that it took the sacrifice of many lives to make Zoras undead. Instead, they proclaimed him a man who achieved sacred power and eternal life through divine blessing.

Zoras, too, grew bored of his long life. He had no freedom because anything happening to him would be a threat to the kingdom. He could have no children because he was undead. He had not a single equal in his life. He’d already accomplished the role he’d been given. It wasn’t uncommon for him to spend his days sitting mindlessly on his throne, like a weapon gathering dust in the corner. He would occasionally devote himself to researching magic, but that didn’t truly provide a balm for his soul.

“Oh, will no one make time move for me again?” he murmured sadly to himself as he sat on the throne.

“They may be mere words, Your Majesty, but during emergencies, the kingdom requires your strength. It is not my place as a mere man to give my opinion to one so great and wise as yourself, but I would hope you would seek

peace, Your Majesty. The kingdom is at the height of prosperity. Nothing need change at the moment.”

The man who spoke as he knelt was Fudolf, the prime minister. He was middle-aged, with elegantly curled hair. He was the head of the council of wisemen, and, if Zoras was the king in name only, then Fudolf was the king in practice. He also acted as an advisor for the Royal Magic Association.

“What a sober man. That would be your answer,” replied Zoras with a sigh.

Then one day, something happened in the court. The king of a small kingdom came on a visit and presented the gift of a young high elfen girl as a slave.

High elves normally resided in the country in the sky; they rarely came to the surface. They were better with magic on average, compared to humans, and blessed by the spirits.

This was a clash of cultures. The other country assumed a gift of a person from a rare race capable of using magic would be joyfully accepted, but general views toward slaves in Rodacoff meant they were seen as lowly, filthy beings. No matter how rare a high elf slave was, it was an insult to gift one to someone like the king, someone near godhood.

But Zoras decided no good would come of turning this minor infraction into a quarrel and kindly accepted the gift, thinking the girl might come in use in his magic research. He calmed his troublesome vassals who were throwing a fit and smoothed the situation over.

The problem was that—even if he hadn’t really wanted to—he had to keep the girl because he said he would.

When the discussion turned to educating her and giving her some work in the palace, Zoras was taken by a whim.

“She is a rare high elf, and I should make her useful since I was the one to accept her. I will tutor her myself,” he said.

Fudolf’s face paled, and he argued against it.

The relationship between humans and high elves was poor to begin with. The only reason a large-scale war hadn’t broken out was because the elves resided

in the skies, far from the humans on the earth.

And this high elf girl, named Elsie, hated humans as well. She had been chased out of the high elven country for her parents' crimes, then attacked by slavers once on the surface. There were many in the court who felt she couldn't be trusted, even if placed by the king's side.

But Zoras insisted and took on Elsie's education himself. He was a false king, ruler in name alone, and he had plenty of free time.

In the beginning, Elsie had a bad attitude toward Zoras, and that threw his retainers into a panic, but he knew she meant no harm. She began to open up as she interacted with him.

"Your Majesty! I can now use level 3 spells!" she said one day.

"Ah, well done. This is how I know you are suited to be my disciple."

She would report happily to him every time she learned to do something new. He would pat her head and compliment her. That was their daily routine.

Before long, Elsie became the only person who treated Zoras like a normal person.

In the beginning, he'd been the youngest prince—and a sickly one at that. No one expected anything of him. He was finally given a role, turned undead in an occult ritual, then treated like some sort of god. But he'd never been treated like a man. There were a few limited emotions people seemed to have when dealing with him, and those were disinterest, adoration, and fear. This was the first friendly relationship the lich had felt in his hundreds of years of life.

When he was with her, he felt like he was with his own daughter. When he interacted with her, he thought about how he couldn't even remember how his own father, the former king, treated him so long ago. Had he been treated with love?

This high elf girl may have only come to the palace out of a misunderstanding, but she ended up healing the heart of Rodacoff's ultimate king.

Three years passed. Now Elsie was eight years old. She was already starting to

become a master of magic.

One day, Elsie seemed happy as she went to Zoras. "I made a spell using dragon psychic waves so I can tell people far away what I'm thinking!"

"Oh, an incredible spell if that's so. You are a truly clever girl, Elsie," he said, and she beamed proudly.

"Barrier Magic Level 5: Dragon Speech!"

Elsie formed a magic circle, wanting to show the spell in action as soon as possible. Her thoughts flowed into Zoras's mind.

*"He...I...lo...th...nk...you."*

The thoughts were...fractured, fragmented.

"Ah...it seems you're having some difficulties adjusting it," he said.

"I wanted...to express how thankful I am..." she said, near tears.

"W-well, I think your intentions came through quite clearly! It is an incredible spell! And I felt your emotions more than your words! Or...something like that."

"Really? Oh, Your Majesty!" Her expression glowed.

"Y-yes, really. Or at least, I felt I did."

Regardless, this didn't change how incredible it was for an eight-year-old to develop their own spell without assistance. Zoras had heard high elves learned quickly, but she seemed to be even more extraordinarily talented than that would explain. He couldn't wait to watch her grow up.

Seven years had passed since Elsie came to the court. She was now twelve years old and distinguished even among the Royal Alchemists.

"Your Majesty... I love this world, because you are in it!" she said. She was always with him, not because she didn't have her own place in the court, but because he was her teacher and she owed him a great debt.

"I feel the same, Elsie. I never thought I would have something so close to a family of my own."

“D-d-do you mean I’m to be your bride?! I’m honored!”

“I meant...you’re like a daughter to me.”

Her shoulders slumped.

“I can’t take a wife anyway. Not only could I not give her children, but the kingdom’s law forbids me from marrying,” he said, as if talking to himself about someone else. The political structure in Rodacoff was complicated. The members of past councils seemed opposed to the idea of an undying king having a wife or adopted children. The kingdom’s laws stated the king, someone close to godhood, should not have family as it could cause discord in the court.

Elsie was now fifteen years old. Once nothing more than a high elven child, she’d grown into a beautiful young woman. Her magic skill might not be anywhere close to Zoras’s, but she stood on par with any royal magic user.

Around that time, a terrifying ogre Demon King took up residence in the great forest on the kingdom’s eastern side. The nearby lord sent soldiers to fight it, but they were no match. There was concern it would only grow in power, so Zoras went to dispatch the monster, accompanied by ten knights.

“It would be easier on my own,” said Zoras, sounding bored. If he were by himself, he could travel to the edge of the kingdom, defeat the Demon King, and be back in half a day.

But taking ten knights meant preparing for travel and explaining to the local lords. He’d even have to slow down to match their travel speed—it would take four days just to get there. This seemed the height of absurdity considering the havoc the Demon King could wreak in that time.

“And now I won’t have as much time to play with Elsie,” he complained.

“Your Majesty, please understand, we cannot simply send our divine king out alone,” said Prime Minister Fudolf as he took a knee in front of Zoras.

“Yes, I know, I know.” Zoras let out a tired sigh.

“Your Majesty, I pray for your safe return,” said Elsie as she also knelt before him. Not even she could get away with ignoring decorum at her age.

“Of course I’ll return safe, Elsie. No one in this world is stronger than me.”

But the fight to defeat the Demon King was more difficult than Zoras anticipated. The monster was of a significant level and quite intelligent. On top of that, someone had given it information about Zoras, and the undead king was not at his best during the fight. He had difficulty forming magic circles.

They did manage to win, but it took quite a lot out of him. Less than half of the knights he started with were still alive.

“...I’m worthless, that’s why this happened,” he said as he and the remaining knights walked through the forest. “What sort of demigod, what sort of protector of the kingdom am I, if the natural occurrence of a mere Demon King can give me such a hard time?”

“Your Majesty... I’m sorry, this is not all your fault,” groaned a wounded knight who was being carried back.

“How can you say that? If I were stronger, this would never have happened to you.”

“This was all planned. I am so sorry, Your Majesty...the wisemen, the prime minister, I couldn’t go against them.”

“Wait, what are you saying? I don’t understand...”

A large magic circle appeared on the ground. It was some sort of barrier spell and affected a wide area—a spell cast on the forest itself.

Zoras knew a lot about magic, and he knew immediately what it was. It was a spell that drained mana from someone whose magic was attuned to a specified wavelength. And this spell was set to target him.

“Impossible... This must be why I’ve been out of sorts since coming to the forest...” Zoras paled.

He could hear footsteps of countless people approaching from the forest’s darkness.

“Come now... Please don’t resist, Your Majesty,” said Fudolf with a laugh.

One of the court magic users had their staff pressed against Elsie’s head. Her body was covered in injuries, like she’d been tortured. Manacles were clamped

around her wrists, and a cloth was over her mouth so she couldn't speak. She was clearly being used as a hostage.

"Elsie! What is the meaning of this, Fudolf?! Don't think you'll get away with treating her like that!"

"You may have realized this yourself long ago, but Rodacoff no longer has a need for a monstrous weapon such as yourself. You were the unwanted child born from an age of chaos, and I will now send you back to that chaos."

At that, even the knights who'd accompanied Zoras turned their swords on him. Their mission from the start was to limit his actions, lead him, and hold him back.

"Someone with absurd power who never dies is nothing more than a risk to the kingdom. Now marks the end of the era in which we are ruled by an undead king who failed to fulfill his purpose. We could have left you alone if you were merely a weapon, slowly rusting away. But you developed feelings for this long-eared slave when you needed to remain an object with no will of your own.

"Plans have already been laid to reveal your true nature to the people, that you are a human-eating undead parasite who took root in our kingdom. You joined forces with the Demon King and attempted to destroy the country. I was the one who defeated the two of you. The council of wisemen has already been disbanded, and Rodacoff belongs entirely to me now. The dark, hidden history of the past royal families, the mountain of corpses they left behind during their research into death magic...it will all support my claims!"

As Fudolf finished, the court mages began firing orbs of magic at Zoras.

If he dodged, if he blocked, they would see that as resistance and then kill Elsie. All Zoras could do was stand, letting the orbs of magic slam into his body.

After taking dozens of strikes, he fell to the ground covered in blood, but he was still clinging to consciousness.

"Tsk, still alive?" said Fudolf. "What a sturdy and frightening monster you are. You there, help out! You must still have mana left."

"Ah!" The magic user holding Elsie looked up when Fudolf called him.

That's when it happened. Elsie rushed out of the magic user's grip.

"Grab the long ear!" shouted Fudolf. The magic users quickly encircled Elsie, but she threw herself to the ground, smashing her head against a rock nearby. Blood poured from the wound, and her body spasmed.

"Elsie...?" said Zoras in disbelief.

It was self-inflicted. She had been taken hostage, and that act was her last resistance.

"What a nuisance...but I meant to kill her anyway," said Fudolf. "Oh well. The *king* no longer has the strength to fight back. Finish him now. Get over there and remove his head."

Then thoughts appeared in Zoras's mind.

*"Your Majesty... Please avenge me. This world is too filled with evil."*

It was Elsie's last thought as she passed away. The words were faint, but they rang clearly in Zoras's mind.

His eyes snapped open. That was the spell Elsie created based on dragon thought waves, Dragon Speech.

A knight raised his sword and approached Zoras. Zoras slowly sat up and swung his staff at the man's head, cracking it open.

"Tsk, he can still move! Kill him! Everyone, attack at once!" shouted Fudolf.

The knights came at him swinging, while the mages fired magic bullets. Zoras swiftly dodged their blades, pulled up a wall of soil to block the magic, and then unleashed fire to burn them away. He took them down, one by one, until only Fudolf remained.

"No...impossible... We poisoned you, drained your mana with the barrier, threw you against the Demon King so you'd be injured, and you are still capable of...this?" Fudolf stumbled backward. Zoras's gaze fell to Elsie's body, then snapped back to Fudolf. "Y-Your Majesty, please remain calm! I, too, was put up to this! There are powers hidden in the shadows of the court! I'll confess to all my crimes! A-and I have already painted you as an undead creature trying to bring calamity to the nation! You have no place in the kingdom anymore! But if I



devote myself to the task, I can—”

“Death Magic Level 10: Death.”

Zoras waved his staff, and a magic circle appeared, followed by a reaper’s skull formed of purple light that rushed straight toward Fudolf.

He screamed and tried to run from the reaper, but it quickly caught him. The moment it did, his body aged and decayed in an instant as if a hundred years had passed, then rotted away until only dust remained.

The fight was over. Zoras pulled Elsie’s body into his arms. His eyes fell on her fingers. The nails had been ripped from her pale, slender, beautiful fingers. They were bent in disconcerting angles, as if smashed with a hammer.

*“Your Majesty... Please avenge me. This world is too filled with evil.”*

Elsie’s words echoed in his mind.

“Elsie... I offer this world to you in tribute,” he murmured, alone in a dark forest littered with corpses.

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I LOOKED DOWN at Zoras’s collapsed form, my chest heaving.

Honestly, my win against him was nothing short of a miracle. I couldn’t even believe I’d won in that situation. If we fought a hundred times, I bet I would’ve been killed in ninety-nine of them.

I pressed down on my shoulder, where my arm was still missing, and let out a deep breath.

The Ouroboros Wheel could only return your body to how it was right before you died. All it did was keep you from dying, it wasn’t for recovery. I’d blown my own arm off with a Gravity Bomb, and it was still gone.

All my potions and items evaporated in the explosion from Horus’s Destruction, meaning I couldn’t heal using an item. My only option was to find Lunaère.

I looked out at the city.

Its once elegant streets had been turned to ruins by the blast from Horus's Destruction, and I could still see chaos dragons flying overhead.

I wondered if there were any residents who hadn't evacuated in time, and if Pomera and everyone who went to save people were all right. I didn't know how they'd do if they were near the epicenter of the explosion, but they were supposed to be far away. The lowest level out of any of them was still near a thousand, so I wanted to believe they were okay...

Then I saw Lunaère, standing in the remains of the castle. There was a spatial distortion in front of her.

Tentacle-like things made of black fog reached out and held a boy in midair. It seemed safe to assume that was Zero, being used as a medium by the curse.

The first thing that hit me was relief that Lunaère was okay, but then I saw the dagger gripped in her hand and pointed at herself. That in itself was ominous enough, but her brooding expression only made me more uneasy. It looked like something odd was happening, something bad.

"Lunaère-san!" I called. I leapt down and rushed to her side, where I immediately grabbed the dagger in her hands.

"Kanata!" She looked at me in shock, as if coming back to her senses.

"I beat Zoras. What...are you doing?"

Her gaze drifted away when I asked that, but then she looked serious, like she'd made her decision. "Kanata...listen. If this continues as it is, Zero's curse will soon be fully activated, and the world will be destroyed. I went through everything I know, but there was only one way to deal with Zero's curse that could be implemented immediately."

"And that one way is...?"

"Hit it with another powerful curse to cancel it out. Zero was created to dispose of powers that shouldn't exist in Locklore, it's like a rubbish bin filled with a mixed soup of curses. Some of it was canceled out when Zoras forced it to transfer, and some more has dissipated as it erupted out in the form of chaos

dragons, but...even with that, it can't be canceled out by an everyday curse."

Once Lunaère explained that much, she brought a hand to her chest and said, "I have an unholy impurity that repulses the living...and...I'm one of the highest-level beings in this world. If I use my soul, I should be able to cast a curse that can rival Zero's. I've thought it through many times, and there's no other way."

My mind went blank. "But... But there's got to be some other way! Wait, that's it! If we need something that's high level, there's the demons in the Cursed Mirror, or even the chaos dragons!"

She shook her head. "In order to have the curses completely cancel each other out, the curse itself must have a will. It *must* fight back as it collides with the resisting curse. And it must be finely tuned. Even if we pulled together some high-level demons and made a curse that way, we couldn't use that to counter Zero's curse."

"But, but, there's got to be another way!"

Intellectually, I got it. Lunaère was clever. In terms of level and magic knowledge, there were few that outclassed her in all of Locklore's history. And she was saying there was no other way. We didn't have any more time, anyway. I could brainstorm all day, but it wouldn't matter. If Zero's curse wiped out Locklore, Lunaère would die regardless.

So, intellectually, I understood. But I couldn't accept it.

"Let's ask Veranta-san! He can probably think of something from a different perspective! And there's loads of high-level people in his tower! Let's go now and ask them for their input!"

But as expected, Lunaère shook her head. "We don't have time. Besides, I'm a lich. I know a lot about death magic. I can say with certainty there is no other way. I don't think there's anyone who knows more than me. This strategy will need a lot of fine-tuning anyway. I only have one chance at it, and...even then, the chance of it succeeding is about fifty-fifty. But this is the only way that has any chance of succeeding."

"But... I just... I don't want you to die here, and to die as a curse..."

Tears spilled from the corners of my eyes. The world was on the brink of

destruction, and I couldn't even say anything that looked remotely like a solution. It was just a clumsy, emotional argument.

Just then, I sensed someone behind me. Both Lunaère and I fell into fighting stances and whirled around.

And there was Zoras, covered in blood. He pressed down on the stab wound in his chest and glared at me.

"Kanata Kanbara! That strike from your heroic blade hurt...but you didn't quite finish me off! You left me to go check up on Lunaère!" he said.

"You're still alive?!"

He looked different from before. The whites of his eyes were now black, and the unholy impurity flowing from him felt even more powerful.

"Death Magic Level 23, Obsession... Uses a lot of mana, but it cancels out your death! Don't assume you're the only one with a fail-safe in place for their life! Though I doubt you'll find another chance to use that piece of advice!"

I bit my lip and glared at him.

I'd dropped everything and run to check on Lunaère the moment I saw her, so I didn't do a good job making sure Zoras was dead. I lost my cool and led Zoras here.

It did seem true that Zoras had almost no magic left in exchange for the forced resurrection, though. His wounds weren't fully healed.

"You're just struggling for no reason," I said. "Do you really think you can win against the two of us in your state?"

"I didn't heal my injuries so that I would have enough magic left to kill you both. And...I told you long before, didn't I? You're the ones who are struggling for no reason! Even if you kill me, you won't stop Zero's curse! And even if you stop the curse, the higher beings won't let the world remain!"

Zoras grinned evilly as he went on, "I heard what you two were talking about. You were thinking of using your own soul to activate a curse and cancel out Zero's curse, is that right? It won't work! You said it was a fifty-fifty chance, but I estimate a 90 percent chance you die in vain!"

Ninety percent chance...of dying in vain...? I looked at Lunaère. Her face was filled with agony, and she wouldn't look me in the eye.

If the chances of her death being pointless were that high, I couldn't let her do it, even if it was the only way that had any hope of working. Lunaère had known the odds of success were low, and she hid it because she didn't want me to stop her.

"Lich girl, not even I can hold back my laughter at your absolutist views! You died for the peace of the continent, then you became undead for your mother! Despite being betrayed, you sealed yourself away in the depths of the abyss to avoid hurting anyone! And even after all that, you choose to turn your soul into a curse and endure eternal suffering to save this world? Even goblins can learn, but a lich who's lived longer than any human can't?! I'll never understand you!" Zoras's normally logical and arrogant attitude was gone now. He opened his mouth wide, his tongue lolling out as he sneered at Lunaère. There was a mix of hostility and glee at the opportunity to ridicule her.

"Keep your mouth shut," I said. I drew my sword and pointed it at him. "I won't let you insult her."

"...I finally understand why you come after me so persistently," said Lunaère. "You think our pasts are similar. Which is why you can't forgive me for having the exact opposite mindset from you. You only show that expression when talking about my past."

Zoras's expression immediately froze, then quickly turned to rage. "So, you are aware of how misaligned your actions are. Lunaère, you should have been on the same side as me from the very beginning. Do you really think you should loathe the higher beings but not the world of Locklore itself? You're wrong! How can you think that when the higher beings made these filthy lands and shaped how the fools in it live? We were betrayed! We have a duty to bring an end to this farce!" he shouted.

His anger was so intense that he was on the verge of tears. I had noticed Zoras was oddly hung up on Lunaère, but I never guessed it was because he saw her as a peer.

"I devoted my life to ensuring the prosperity of my kingdom, but they stole

the person I loved, took away my position, and persecuted me like a cursed criminal. And they were only fools being forced to dance for the higher beings! I will offer Locklore and the higher beings to Elsie's memory! I can't rot away halfway through! You can die now, forced to dance for them, while being used by them, thoughtless and still believing you're a good person!"

Zoras pointed his staff at us.

He'd already taken fatal wounds. The forced resurrection using death magic just wore down his mana and soul even further. He was only still standing out of sheer force of will, determined to carry out his obsessive goal.

"I'm not the same as you, Zoras," said Lunaère, glaring at him. "My past was the result of me dabbling in forbidden magics."

He looked back and snorted with laughter. "Still spouting pretty words of no substance?!"

He formed a magic circle.

Lunaère made one too, at the same time, as she jumped in front of me.

The fight was decided in a moment.

Zoras sent a monster at us using Primordial Predator, which Lunaère wiped out with a Gravity Bomb—and then I slashed across his chest in his moment of weakness after he cast a spell.

It was nothing more than a final, pointless strike. He didn't have enough strength for a real fight.

He collapsed to his knees.

"I...I can't go yet... Not until...I've offered Locklore and...the higher beings to her!"

He lay on the ground as he groaned resentfully, and Lunaère looked down at him with pity.

**H**E WENT DOWN with the strike from Kanata's sword, falling to his knees, then collapsing to the ground.

He wasn't in any condition to fight anymore. His dreams of killing Kanata and Lunaère with his own hands then returning alive to become a Lower God were dashed.

But he still couldn't give in.

*"Your Majesty... Please avenge me. This world is too filled with evil."*

He remembered Elsie's last words. Thousands of years had passed, and he still remembered those thoughts with stark clarity as they filled his mind.

He had to avenge her. That's why it wasn't enough to just destroy all life on Locklore with a curse. He had to settle the score against the higher beings, those who made this filthy world to be their plaything.

"I...I can't go yet... Not until...I've offered Locklore and...the higher beings to her!"

He mustered the strength to raise his head and saw her looking down at him with pity. His eyes met hers.

"...I would be lying if I said I never despised this world," she said. "But I still love it. Kanata, the one I love, is in this world, and that is enough to make me love the world itself. I have no regrets spending my life to protect this world, to protect him. Maybe you can't understand because you are the one who was left behind."

Memories of Elsie flitted through his mind.

*"Your Majesty... I love this world, because you are in it!"*

Elsie once loved this world as well. And, oddly, her reason was the same as Lunaère's.

But that was just something Elsie had said far before the tragedy occurred. In her last moments, Elsie hated Locklore.

"Don't you dare...try to speak of what was in her heart..."

It sounded like Lunaère was almost trying to say that the person who passed away didn't hate the world, but what did she know? He was sick of Lunaère, even now trying to push flowery ideas on him like she knew anything about Elsie.

"Did that person you care about really hate Locklore so much they would force you to endure ten thousand years of suffering?" she said. "To me, it looks like you're simply looking for a target for your rage."

He could feel his anger building. It sounded like Lunaère was belittling Elsie. In her last moments, she really had asked him to curse Locklore. He couldn't possibly be wrong about that.

"I told you not to speak of Elsie! Her words are still fresh in my mind! What she said—!"

And then he realized something did seem wrong.

*"Your Majesty... Please avenge me. This world is too filled with evil."*

The words he remembered Elsie expressing to him were *too* clear.

She'd been gagged; she couldn't speak. That's why she used the spell she developed that projected her thoughts, so she could leave her last words with him.

But that spell wasn't perfect. It has improved somewhat since Elsie made it when she was a child, but no matter what, there was always some loss caused by the process that turned the thoughts into something that could be transmitted.

And yet, when he thought back to her words, they were perfectly clear, not broken up at all. Was it possible that over all these many years, he'd adjusted, interpreted it until he convinced himself those were really her words?

No, that couldn't be. He was obeying her wish when he killed Fudolf, the Prime Minister.

He wasn't so sure now that those really were Elsie's words. Perhaps he had been driven so mad with rage that he twisted those last words of Elsie's to fit his own purposes, then convinced himself they were true all along.



Would Elsie really want him to live that sort of life if their positions had been reversed? Would he have forced her to avenge him? Did she really kill herself just to force him to mete out her vengeance?

If Zoras's hatred really had warped her words, then what had she really wanted to tell him in that moment, using the spell that brought back such memories for both of them?

*"Please, run...survive...find happiness. Your Majesty, I love this world, because you are in it."*

Suddenly, words he could never have heard rose in his mind. He tried to reject them, to push them back...but they kept returning, taking over.

"It can't be...it's not possible... If it's true, then...what have I been doing all this time?"

**-11-**

**Z**ORAS STAYED on the ground, stiff and unmoving.

Lunaère stared down at his back with pity. She said she wasn't like him, but she didn't seem entirely sure about that.

"What a tragic man... But perhaps his hatred is a reflection of the depths of his love," she said. She sighed and looked back at the source of the curse, Zero, held in place by black fog. She touched his cheek, then looked at me. "We've talked for too long. We're nearly out of time. Kanata, this is our goodbye."

Tears spilled from my eyes. She was planning to use her own life to try and cancel out Zero's curse.

"Lunaère-san... I'd rather let the whole world of Locklore be destroyed than sacrifice you," I said.

She shook her head, then slipped her slender, white arms around me and held me tight. Her body was cold. I could feel the primal fear that the unholy impurity caused. But to me, it just felt warm and comfortable.

"If you say that, all the people of Locklore and all your friends will be angry

with you. I know this isn't the place for it...but it has made me so happy to know you care for me. But please don't disregard my feelings. Please find a way to live, find your happiness."

"Lunaère-san...you can't say it like that, it's unfair," I said, and Lunaère patted my back like she was soothing a crying child.

"...Wait. If the lich girl does it, she'll surely mess it up," came a voice, and Zoras slowly stood. "I, Zoras...will fill this role. I'm confident my death magic is far better than a love-struck girl's. Besides, it was I who removed the seal on Zero and modified the curse so it would spread to all of Locklore. Canceling it out will be child's play."

## -12-

**"Y**OU'RE GOING TO CANCEL out the curse...?" I asked, and Zoras nodded, expressionless.

"I am. I'm a lich, just like Lunaère, and my unholy impurity is plenty powerful. I also pride myself on the fact that my magic skills are a step above hers. I would be more suited to being turned into a curse to cancel out Zero's. Or do you not trust me? Then feel free to cut me down, kill me, and have Lunaère throw her own soul against Zero."

I didn't get the impression he was trying to deceive us. Besides, I was willing to clutch at straws. If Zoras was going to sacrifice himself in Lunaère's place, then I had no reason to stop him.

Except...

"I don't get why," I said. "You're the one who plotted to kidnap Zero, then destroy the whole world. And now you're going to sacrifice yourself to stop that?"

I didn't understand what could motivate Zoras to go out of his way to expend his life and save us. Never mind whether I even trusted him not to betray us in the first place.

“...You’re right. I was the one who suggested this plan to the higher beings. But it was only because I needed to get them to compromise themselves when they’re normally so timid and focused on self-preservation. My primary goal was always revenge against the higher beings. If I can’t kill you and return alive, I can’t fulfill that goal. So I might as well annoy them. You two stopping the curse and surviving will be far more of a nuisance to them.” He spoke calmly now. There wasn’t any of the easygoing manner from before.

He let out a small sigh, then glanced at Lunaère. “And the rest is her doing. I was taken aback that someone who was in such a similar position to me could think of others as much as she does, could live such an upstanding life.” At that point he paused and bit his lip. “I...couldn’t do that. I was filled with my own hatred, and I twisted her final, pure emotions, sullied them, belittled them. I’m grateful that you made me realize that, Lunaère.”

His shoulders trembled slightly, and there was a trace of tears in the corners of his eyes. I could see he was trying to push down his powerful emotions. I felt like I was finally seeing his true intentions.

What he said just now made me believe we really could trust him. Any trace of mockery was gone from his voice.

“But...are you sure?” asked Lunaère. “If you do this, your soul will turn into a curse no one can ever save, and you’ll be trapped for eternity in the gaps between worlds.”

I gasped. Turning your soul into a curse needed a lot more courage than I’d originally thought. Had Lunaère really chosen such a route without telling me that?

“Let me tell you something, lich girl. Nothing is eternal. I was kept imprisoned by the higher beings as an Eternal Convict, threatened regularly with eternal suffering. Do you think that word will phase me now? Besides, the higher beings aren’t as all-powerful as they believe. They will face their destruction one day.”

Lunaère took a step back, and he moved to stand in front of Zero. He took in a breath, let it out, and then touched Zero’s forehead.

Then the chains wrapped around Zoras’s arms and legs burned with a brilliant blue-white light.

“What’s that?!” I said as I covered my face with my arm.

The chains of light quickly grew longer, wrapping around his whole body, layer after layer until he was held fast.

“It means that joining sides with you is a violation of my agreement,” he said. “You are desperate, aren’t you, Naiarotop?” He looked at the chains around his own body.

Those chains had been on Reniement and Lucifer too. Apparently, they had the effect of robbing the person of their ability to move if they went against the higher beings’ will.

“Urgh!”

I drew my sword.

I knew it was cruel, but I needed Zoras to cancel out Zero’s curse. If Zoras couldn’t move, then Lunaère would try to use her own life to solve the problem.

“Stop,” he said. “These chains aren’t so weak they can be dealt with by human hands.” He seemed calm despite the situation.

“How can you be so casual about this?! We need you to cancel out the curse!”

“...It’s not like I was sitting silently as a prisoner for thousands of years. I was bound by these chains for so long it would drive a man mad. In that time, I thought about nothing but how to undo them...and tear out their throats. Naiarotop’s greatest failure was giving a genius like me time to think.”

A huge magic circle appeared around Zoras, then expanded to three layers.

“Barrier Magic Level 25: Blank Contract.”

Bright light filled the area, then cracks ran through the chains of blue-white light wrapped around Zoras and they shattered to pieces.

“How amusing, Naiarotop, that you really thought you’d leashed me,” said Zoras with a defiant grin.

It looked like the spell he used, Blank Contract, interfered with magic to eliminate any contracts or limitations placed on the user. This guy...could even do something like that? Well, he had used all sorts of spells and fought both

Lunaère and me together, with energy to spare.

“Ah, well, it does look like he had a fail-safe in place,” said Zoras as he raised his arms. The tips of his fingers were crumbling to sand.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“The higher beings’ backup plan. It appears they made it so my body would crumble away if I broke free from their control. Though, not even this will make it in time to stop me from eliminating Zero’s curse. Hmph, what an insufficient backup. Ha ha, they seem truly panicked. Not unsurprising, though. Locklore’s management will have no moves left at all if I fail to kill you two.”

“They’ll have no moves left...?”

This seemed like something important, something I couldn’t mishear. What would they do to the world after they’d lost any means of controlling it?

“It’s exactly as it sounds,” said Zoras. “You two have created chaos, rapidly shortening the life span of Locklore as a puppet show for the higher beings to enjoy. The cost of maintaining a world is massive. They obviously can’t continue something which gains them no profit. But the way you went about making your mess has drawn attention even among the higher beings. They can’t shut down Locklore until they resolve this incident with you, for the sake of the managers’ egos.”

I sorted through what Zoras said in my mind.

They couldn’t continue managing Locklore. But they also couldn’t end Locklore before this situation was brought to a conclusion. And, right now, they’d run out of cards to play, Zoras was their last, meaning Naiarotop had no more means for interfering with Locklore.

“Which means...what?” I asked.

“Who knows. Let them worry about that. I will say one more thing: since you’re the person the higher beings are paying attention to the most, by revealing the situation going on behind the scenes in Locklore’s management to you, I’ve also revealed it to all the higher beings who were watching Locklore as a show. The management will surely hate that.”

Would that save Locklore?

I got that this wasn't an ideal situation for the higher beings. And this meant there was a pretty good chance they wouldn't immediately wipe out Locklore. But the important thing was what would happen after that. Did this promise more than just the temporary survival of Locklore? Could this bring a permanent peace to the world?

"Just do the best you can after this," he said. "If I were to give you some advice, I would tell you that they honor contracts and reputation...and that you already have a *valuable* method for resisting."

"What—"

"Figure the rest out yourself. They are listening to this conversation, after all."

The magic circle Zoras made this time was black, and a purple light wrapped around his body. He was making preparations for turning his soul into a curse to cancel out Zero's.

"Elsie...I carry too many sins. I doubt I'll be going to the same place as you," he said. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Then he opened them and looked at me from the corner of his eyes. "Kanata, Lunaère...I pray that a happy ending waits for you." His voice was weak, almost pleading.

He turned back forward, and the magic circle shone even brighter. "Death Magic Level 22: Curse of the Lifeless Soul!"

Purple light seeped from Zoras, forming the shape of a skull. That skull flew at Zero, passed through his body, and disappeared into the spatial distortion behind him. A blinding light poured from the distortion as howling winds tore around us. I couldn't see anything. I covered my face with my arm, only looking up when the winds calmed down.

The tentacles of black fog holding up Zero crumbled away, melting into the air. He was thrown forward and fell limply to the ground.

Then, the spatial distortion slowly started to close.

Zoras lay on the ground in front of us, dead. His body turned white and cracked like stone. It seemed he left behind an empty husk after turning his soul

into a curse.

“I know...it was your plan in the first place, Zoras, but...thank you. Thank you for saving both Lunaère-san and Locklore.”

I bowed low toward him.

Did he think we could beat the higher beings? We had no idea what they would come at us with next if they were so stuck.

Zoras was *not* a good person. He was willing to sacrifice Locklore just to carry out his revenge. But...that didn't mean I wanted to waste the hope he'd given us at the cost of everything he had.

“...We'll do the best we can,” I promised his remains.

## -13-

**T**HANKS TO ZORAS'S SACRIFICE, Locklore had escaped the destruction brought on by Zero's curse. This meant the higher beings had lost all means of interfering with the world. Their hands were completely tied.

But that didn't mean Naiarotop and the others would leave Locklore alone. We couldn't sit around without any plan in place.

I walked up to where Zero was lying on the ground, and crouched down and brought my face close.

Zero's true nature was to act as a vessel for all of Locklore's impure powers. Zoras had canceled that out with the sacrifice of his own impure power. Which meant it was unlikely Zero was going to be okay.

I'd never interacted with Zero, but he'd been sacrificed all the same. There was no changing the fact that I couldn't save him.

I'd been focused entirely on saving Locklore and stopping Lunaère from sacrificing herself. I never stopped to think about him, and thinking about that now left me with an extreme sense of guilt.

“Ah...ah...” Zero groaned and looked up at me through narrowly opened eyes.

“Zero...! He’s alive!” I exclaimed, but Lunaère shook her head with a look of discomfort.

“...Whether for better or worse, Zero is a personality Veranta added afterward to control the mass of gathered powers,” she said. “It seems he’s still alive because that personality was independent from the main body, but...I doubt he will survive long. His heart has been destroyed. It looks like his brain is only barely functioning.”

“Oh...” I looked back at Zero.

We needed to call for Veranta. Zero didn’t speak, he never interacted with others. But Veranta was the person who made him, and they’d worked together for many years.

Besides, we needed to know how everyone was—not just Veranta, but Pomera and the rest, and we needed to know what was going on in the city. At the moment, the most important thing was to hurry up and rejoin the others.

Lunaère used magic to heal my wounds, including my missing arm, and then I lifted Zero onto my back and we left the rubble of the castle.

It looked like the chaos dragons had been wiped out. Or at least I didn’t see any in the skies. That at least came as a relief. There had been chaos dragons flying around even after Zoras cast Horus’s Destruction. If there were none now, that meant people were still working hard to kill them after the explosion. There was a better chance they were okay if that was the case.

We traveled through the city, now in ruins, and eventually found one area that looked like it hadn’t been affected by the blast. When we approached, we found a horde of golems with Veranta’s mask. Behind them was a group of evacuees and Pomera, who was healing the wounded.

“Kanata! Lunaère! You’re all right!” She looked up at us with an expression of joy as she worked on using white magic to heal the people.

And then...further in I saw four more Pomeras. I was taken aback, trying to figure out what was going on, but then the four Pomeras broke apart and mixed together, then reformed into one Philia.

It looked like she had learned to morph into Pomera because she was good at



white magic. This let Philia help with the first aid.

Once again, I was reminded how useful Philia's powers were.

"I'm so glad you two are okay," I said. "But what's going on here...?"

"We couldn't move the people we were protecting to the tower using an item, like Veranta did," explained Pomera. "I got Philia to help me put up a barrier in the square to protect people from the chaos dragons and create an evacuation point. Because of that, we managed to keep the people of the city safe from that explosion. I have no idea what would've happened if we didn't have the barrier up..." She shuddered.

*"That explosion"* that Pomera mentioned had to be Horus's Destruction. Pomera just happened to have a barrier up already to protect the people of the city, but that actually let her protect them from the blast as well. She and the other high-level people might have survived, since they were far away from the source, but a lot of citizens of the capital would've died if it hadn't been for that barrier.

After that, Pomera gave me all the details. She told me Rosemonde, Kotone, Mitsuru, Noble, and even Lovis were okay. I was relieved to hear they'd managed to keep casualties to a minimum.

"Kanata, does this mean you two won against the higher beings' last assassin?" she asked.

I didn't know how to answer. I thought of Zoras, sacrificing himself to stop Zero's curse.

Could you really call that winning? If Zoras hadn't turned on the higher beings, then Lunaère at least would have lost her life. And the chances of her plan working had been slim, meaning there was a good chance Locklore would've been destroyed already by now.

"...I'm not really sure," I murmured.

"D-do you mean it's not over yet?!" Pomera paled. "The world's still in danger?!"

"Oh, I guess you could say it's over..."

I heard footsteps approach from behind as Pomera and I were talking. I turned to see Veranta.

“It appears you have successfully defeated the last assassin and rescued Zero. You two have done well. Perhaps this means we’ve evaded the immediate threat,” he said. My heart ached when he mentioned Zero.

I hesitated to respond right away, but I went to speak. This was something I had to tell him right away. “Zero’s...not going to last much longer. I’m sorry...I was so focused on doing something about the curse, I couldn’t save him.”

“I...see. I suppose it wasn’t likely you could reseal him. No need for apologies. You did well.” Veranta maintained an air of composure, but his voice trembled.

He moved toward me and held out his arms. I lowered Zero from my back and passed him to Veranta.

“His strength is completely gone...I see,” he said as he stroked Zero’s head. “Because Zero was a mass of powerful curses, I was concerned he would cause terrible things to happen in the world if he showed himself or spoke. Which is why I forbade him from ever speaking... But Zero, there’s no more need for that now. You may speak. I don’t even mind if you express all your hatred for me.”

Zero’s eyes opened slightly, and he looked up at Veranta. “V-Veran...ta...”

“I gave you a consciousness for the sole purpose of protecting a vessel filled with curses. I knew it was cruel from the very beginning. Never to show yourself, never to speak...I practically doomed you to a fate of being used by the higher beings in the end, only to die. And yet...I chose to do it, to give you awareness, only because it was more convenient for me.”

Veranta’s shoulders shook, his voice half a sob. Zero reached out and touched his mask.

“Veranta, thank you... You gave me a spirit. I learned things. I felt things. You taught me so much. I would have been born and died in the dark, the cold, just a curse. You gave me life. I’m glad...I could tell you how I feel...in the end. I was happy.”

His voice was frail, weak.

“Zero...”

“I just wish...we could have...talked more...”

With that, his head slumped listlessly, and his eyes closed, never to open again.

For a while, Veranta just stood there, unmoving, hugging Zero to his chest.





## Chapter 3:

# The Battle for the World

-1-

**A**FTER ZERO PASSED, we borrowed the house of one of the people who'd been protected by Pomera's barrier to talk about what to do next.

The meeting was made up of me, Lunaère, Veranta, Noble, Pomera, and Philia, as well as Kotone, Mitsuru, Rosemonde, and Lovis, and then Ramiel and Nobunaga: a total of twelve people. Essentially, it was everyone in Veranta's squad who took part in the battle at the capital.

"We have successfully defeated the higher beings' final assassin, thanks to Kanata and Lunaère's work," said Veranta. "The problem now is that it's unlikely the higher beings will leave Locklore as is. We have to predict our opponents' next move and try to counter it."

Veranta was taking control of the situation and telling us his thoughts, but he seemed a bit less energized than before.

"Veranta-san, are you okay?" I asked. "It's just...if you're tired, I can take over."

Not long ago, Veranta had been with Zero as he passed away. The guilt he seemed to carry for how Zero was created and the way he was forced to live must have been terrible to endure.

"No...it's not a problem," he said. "I can't let Zero's death weigh me down, not when the higher beings are looking for a fight. I am one of the people who dragged Locklore into this; I cannot allow my personal emotions to sway me. I can grieve and cry like a child once this is all over. At the moment, I must put that aside and focus on the difficulties we face."

"So, uh...our enemy basically has our lives in their hands, right?" said Ramiel, her feet on the table and her tone casual. "Sounds like all we can do in that sort of situation is pray to the gods. Though, guess that means we'd be praying to

our enemy. Ha ha ha, that's not even funny."

A heavy atmosphere fell over the group.

"It's not like we ever had a chance of winning, and you're getting all worked up, Veranta," she added. "It isn't like you. Don't we still have a chance to take Kanata out somewhere? Or was that your plan in the beginning and you just got swept away by your own pretty speeches? You do that sometimes, even though you pretend to be all pragmatic." Ramiel cackled.

"The higher beings aren't going to allow Locklore to exist much longer after this big of an incident," said Veranta. "I understand their circumstances and thought processes to some extent. Pandering to them now will only mean a short-term extension. Besides...I've tired of preserving this charade while they order me around."

After that, he turned to me and said, "Kanata, do you have any thoughts on how the higher beings will come at us? Or, perhaps, how we could take the fight to them? Anything is helpful, whether it's new information or new ideas. You interacted directly with all the people the higher beings sent to kill you, Reniement, Lucifer, and Zoras. I imagine they would be far more knowledgeable about the higher beings' desires, since they were held prisoner in the Upper Realms for such a long time."

"Well..." I racked my brain.

We really didn't have enough insight into the higher beings, and Veranta was right that those three assassins were a valuable source of information. Thinking about it now, I should've tried to pull more information out of Reniement and Lucifer. I didn't really think either of them were going to go about spilling the higher beings' secrets, but it could've been worth the effort to try and stick it out and see if I could get anything.

Zoras, though... He did tell me a little bit about the higher beings in the end.

"We started this theatrical fight with Locklore's management while the higher beings were focused on us, because it's entertainment," I said. "It sounds like Locklore's management wants to destroy the world after they manage a neat win against us, one that'll satisfy the other higher beings."

“A neat win, hm...?” Veranta grumbled.

In this case, a neat win to them would probably be my death, since I started all sorts of problems, and I was at the center of it all.

But the higher beings had already sent out all the pawns they had in play for that. Which meant we had no way of guessing what their next move would be. They could probably spend some time supplementing their forces, putting off Locklore’s destruction for a bit.

The thing was, while a neat win for the higher beings had only one condition—killing the traveler that started all these problems, me—there were way too many conditions to meet to call it a neat win for *us*. We not only had to make sure they couldn’t interfere with Locklore, we had to make sure Locklore would survive permanently. Was that even possible?

“They’re really going to take time out of their busy schedules to finish things?” said Ramiel. “I bet they’re totally likely to just say they’ve had enough and wipe the world out. Actually, that seems more likely, if you think about it, right?” She shrugged.

...Like she said, that possibility was always there. If the higher beings decided that things weren’t going to get better with Locklore no matter how hard they tried, they weren’t going to attempt a compromise with us. They’d just give up on trying to settle things and wipe out Locklore completely. That seemed likely.

Though, if we’re following that line of thought, then there was also no reason to keep thinking about it once we decided to fight against the higher beings.

“Whose side are you on, anyway?!” Rosemonde shouted at Ramiel.

“I might be on Locklore’s side, but that doesn’t mean I’m on Kanata’s side,” Ramiel replied. “Obviously. Even if there’s not much of a reason to do it at this point, I just think we need to keep in mind the option of taking Kanata and Lunaère to the higher beings and trying to find a peaceful solution. Wouldn’t you normally prioritize the many over the few in the very end, considering Locklore itself hangs in the balance? Or are we going with the insane policy that it’s fine in the end if hundreds of thousands of Locklorians die for these two?” Ramiel gave an utterly malicious smile.



“We already rolled the dice, kid. You’re just trying to stir up drama for your own entertainment. I’m done with you,” said Rosemonde.

“I’m just double checking what the situation is! We won’t get anywhere by ignoring reality to talk about hopes and dreams!”

When Rosemonde ignored her, Ramiel clung to her even more desperately. I really wished she wouldn’t obsess over getting Rosemonde’s attention during the most extreme of situations.

But...while the way she said it might be showing off her worst side, her point was logical, for everyone except me and Lunaère. It was something we should probably keep in the back of our minds. But Rosemonde had a strong sense of loyalty, so I doubted she could accept that logic.

There was no guarantee Locklore’s management wouldn’t take decisive action if they really were trapped in a corner. The thing was, though, I wasn’t sure how I would feel about it if it was just me, but I definitely couldn’t accept a plan that involved serving Lunaère up to the higher beings just to gain some time.

Other than the whole, “Locklore’s management needs a neat win in order to end the world,” thing, what else did Zoras say? I scoured through my memory.

*“Just do the best you can after this. If I were to give you some advice, I would tell you that they honor contracts and reputation...and that you already have a valuable method for resisting. Figure the rest out yourself. They are listening to this conversation, after all.”*

Contracts...reputation...valuable method for resisting...

I was mulling over that when one thought flitted through my mind. Or, maybe it would be more accurate to say Zoras’s hints let me put the puzzle together.

Maybe Zoras did give us the answer for standing against Locklore’s management, but he couldn’t say it directly because the higher beings were watching, so he said it in code instead.

I had no proof they’d accept this plan. There were too many uncertainties, too much information I couldn’t see. There wasn’t a single guarantee things would go the way I thought they would, even if we tried it. It was an

assumption based on assumptions. You couldn't even really call it a plan, it was more like a wild fantasy.

I didn't even think it was possible that they'd bid a valuable chip like Locklore on this ridiculous plan. But it might be the only plan that could break Locklore free from the higher beings, the only plan that could ensure its survival.

"What is it, Kanata? You've gone quiet," said Veranta as he looked at me.

I wanted to tell him what I was thinking, but I realized that if I did, the higher beings would overhear.

I took a deep breath and calmed myself before saying, "I have a plan that will protect Locklore from the higher beings. If it fails, it'll be the end of the world. I know this is a crazy thing to ask, but...I need everyone to follow along without me telling you anything."

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## NAIAROTOP

**"S**<sub>TOP!</sub> Zoras, stop!"

Naiarotop was transfixed, desperately begging as he stared into the dimensional rift, watching what was happening with Kanata and the others.

On the opposite side of the rift was Zoras, declaring he would use his own soul to cancel out Zero's curse.

Kanata had defeated Zoras. But Zoras left Zero's curse in play, which should have finished off that infuriating traveler. It would have dragged all of Locklore down with it, but, so long as this satisfied *you know who*, then Naiarotop would receive minimal punishment and might even get a chance to reestablish his reputation.

But at the very last moment, Zoras decided to side with Kanata. What was he thinking?! Naiarotop had no idea. He never imagined this could happen.

He'd used the magic chains he had in place for insurance, so he could limit

Zoras's actions...but Zoras managed to break through with his own power. Zoras understood far more about magic than any of the higher beings had suspected, including Naiarotop.

"Stop, please! It'll really be the end for me if you do that! Stop! Staaaahp! I'll make you a lower god, I'll make you whatever you want to be, please just don't do that!"

Naiarotop cradled his head in his hands, though his eyes were still glued to the spatial rift.

"What is with these people?! No matter how much they struggle, we're still going to destroy Locklore! How could destroying a measly ant nest get me in so much trouble?! You all need to just shut up and die!"

But Naiarotop's begging was in vain. Zoras was just changing his soul into a curse on the other side of the rift. There was a flash of blinding light, and Zero's curse was canceled out, left to fade away.

Naiarotop's legs gave out beneath him, and he fell to the ground.

It was over. It was all over.

Zoras was his last option, and he was gone. His double-layered plan had been perfect, but now even Zero's curse was erased thanks to Zoras's betrayal.

"How could this be...? How could they...?" muttered Naiarotop in shock.

He tried to stand, but the sheer despair he felt sapped his body of all strength.

He made no attempt to move for a while—he just sat there, stunned.

What should he do now? He couldn't think of a single idea. He didn't even *want* to think about it.

He'd played all the cards in his hand. There was no way for him to effectively interfere anymore. And if they erased Locklore, forcefully cutting off the story with no conclusion, then the other Higher Gods would be angry. Worse, even the highest god was paying attention.

If they let it keep going, they'd be run into the ground because they couldn't cover the cost of maintaining Locklore. This was the only conceivable end-state if Kanata and Lunaère were left to their own devices. The higher beings were

easily bored, and now that Kanata and Lunaère had defeated the secret final boss of the game, there wasn't much excitement left to be had in watching battles between lower-level opponents.

He was utterly stuck. No matter what he did, he was a failure. This sloppy ending would mean all Higher Gods involved would lose trust in Locklore's management, and management was done for. And at the end of it all, they would have angered the highest of gods.

"Veranta, Reniement, Lucifer, Zoras, you are all useless morons! I am your god! How dare you drag me down! How ungrateful, how shameless it is to demand freedom for a world created by the power of the higher beings! Don't be absurd!"

Naiarotop slammed the ground with his fist, then slumped down and lay there for a while.

His master, a Higher God, hadn't contacted him. Naiarotop imagined not even his master had considered what they should do in this situation...probably because there was nothing left to be done. That was why the Higher God kept saying failure was not an option in this fight.

But now that that problem had become a reality, Naiarotop needed to quickly manage this failure and find the path that would result in the least amount of damage. Unfortunately, the overwhelming despair he was feeling kept him from actually doing anything.

Naiarotop stayed there on the ground for a bit, doing nothing, but then a spark of motivation hit him. He reached out a shaking hand and opened a rift in space.

On the other side of the rift were countless rows of words: the gods' social media platform, Divinitter.

Most of the gods that took a liking to Divinitter were the difficult kind who had too much time on their hands because they were all-powerful. Their ultimate pleasure was derived from seeing others' unhappiness and failures. They were most likely writing snide comments after seeing Zoras, Locklore management's last pawn, both fail and then betray them. Naiarotop knew that was what it would be like before he even looked.

Obviously, Naiarotop didn't want to look at comments like that, but he couldn't ignore them. He had to check what they thought of Locklore now, and of him, the person in the firing line of their criticism.

*#IneptNaia*

*so he screwed up the plan then everything got leaked? Lol*

*I think Locklore's management's panicking cuz we're watching.*

*we're watchinnnnnng*

*#IneptNaia*

It was like Naiarotop was a free, all-you-can abuse punching bag. His head and stomach hurt more and more as he kept reading. His previously dull feeling of despair hardened until it overtook him.

*So. He brings in some dude that hates Locklore to destroy Locklore, then that guy betrays him like it was nothing? It's astounding how little dedication he inspires in others.*

*Is Locklore seriously over?*

*The world is screwed thanks to Naia's incompetence.*

*If they keep messing this up, all the worlds they manage are gonna be*

*destroyed since no one'll trust them.*

*Multiple worlds are screwed thanks to Naia's incompetence.*

*This is getting really exciting now! I wonder what Locklore's management will do next!*

*pretty sure no one wants to know that more than them*

As usual, no one was thinking of the impact of what they said on Divinitter. It was just a one-sided deluge of self-absorbed statements.

“Look at them all, spewing their drivel...worthless, every last one of them,” said Naiarotop, covering his face with his hands. “It doesn't matter, not with how things are... Locklore is done for. They all know about my agents and my pawns! Kanata, Lunaère, Veranta... I'll bring a calamity down upon them that will make them rue the day they were born!” he screamed.

Then, when he looked up, he saw that the mood on Divinitter had changed.

*What?!*

*whats kanata doing?*

*Is that to us?*

*I think it's to Naia.*

*Uh...what does it mean?*

*seomthing crazies about to go down!!*

Divinitter was awash with confusion. All the insults toward Naiarotop that had saturated the platform had disappeared without a trace.

Naiarotop followed the feed for a bit but couldn't figure out what was going on. The only thing he knew was that Kanata had done something to completely change the higher beings' attitude—something so unexpected they had no choice but to pay attention.

"What...is happening...?" He couldn't take in the situation at all.

"My servant," came the voice of Naiarotop's master, from no specific direction, just as he was about to stand and see what was going on with Kanata. "Be glad, your head still remains attached to your shoulders by a bare thread. This is your last opportunity to make up for your most recent failure."

"Master... What do you mean...?" said Naiarotop as he looked toward the spatial rift that showed Kanata. The traveler stood on Locklore, shouting up to the sky.

"Naiarotop, I know you've got no future! Come down here so we can finish this off neatly!"

Naiarotop didn't immediately understand what Kanata was saying. "...What is he going on about?"

"Let's fight this out, one on one, with Locklore's fate decided by the winner!" shouted Kanata as he thrust his sword toward the sky.

A tremor ran down Naiarotop's back. "He wants *me* to go down to a lowly world like Locklore to fight a *human* to settle this...?"

The shudder he felt was from rage, anger that he would be placed on the same playing field as a human. It was also joy, a tremble of excitement that he would get the opportunity to end Kanata himself and wipe the slate clean of all his failures.

Divinitter was exploding over Kanata's declaration.

*Whoooooa he's calling out Naia specifically!*

*ew. gross how full of himself he's gotten thinking he can actually beat a higher being*

*he's super serious, this is no joke.*

*There's no way he can win...*

*Naia, don't run away from the human, all right? lol*

The messages came like a storm. Naiarotop glanced sideways at them and gave a snort of laughter. "Idiots...he's barely even level 5000. There's no way he could win against me. Kanata, you can't take back your challenge now." Naiarotop's lips curled up in a grin.

"It seems they are desperate to prevent Locklore's destruction," said Naiarotop's master. "But it appears they have misjudged your level. My only fear now is that he will change his mind and complain. Go now, my servant, and finish off Kanata Kanbara."

"Yes, Master. As you command!"

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**"LET'S FIGHT THIS OUT, one-on-one, with Locklore's fate decided by the winner!"** I declared, pointing my sword to the sky.

Naiarotop was completely stuck and had no options left. I was betting that he'd take advantage of me saying I wanted to settle this with a one-on-one



fight. The proposal probably looked like a lifeline to the higher beings.

Standing in a row behind me were all the people who had been in the anti-Higher Beings meeting earlier.

“Do...do you really think...the higher beings are going to respond?” said Pomera, looking uneasy. “I mean...you’ve told me everything about them, and they sent people to attack, so it’s not like I doubt you, but... It’s just... I still have a hard time believing there are people who made this world just to play with it!”

“They’ll come. I’m sure of it,” I said.

I imagined they were all watching me, after all. There was no way my message wasn’t going to get to Naiarotop.

“If he does come...can you really win?” asked Lunaère, with concern in her voice. “From what I’ve heard, he can easily cast spells that connect worlds... That one spell is far above what I or even Zoras is capable of.”

“I’ll win. If I don’t, then Locklore...then we don’t have a future. Please trust me,” I said.

She still looked worried.

It was normal to be anxious at a time like this. Naiarotop was, at a minimum, far more powerful than Zoras. I only beat Zoras because his time limit made him rush...and I got lucky. I honestly didn’t think I had a real chance of winning in a fight against Naiarotop.

But I had a plan. I didn’t know if the conditions would line up so that I could put the plan into action, and I didn’t know if it would really work, but there was no way for me to ask everyone else for their input, since our enemies were listening to everything we said.

I knew this was a gamble and that the odds weren’t in my favor. But I could only assume that Zoras had been referring to *that*. If I trusted him, that is.

“I really think you should let me fight with you!” said Lunaère, and that’s when it happened.

A magic circle appeared in front of us.

“I can’t remain silent...while beings of a lowly dimension insult me.”

I recognized that voice. It appeared along with a person—a young man in black formal wear. His green hair had a slight curl to it, and his blue eyes were filled with the dull gleam of hatred, despite the gentle crinkling around them.

The sky began to warp when he appeared. Clouds twisted and the light from the sun faded as deep-blue darkness filled the sky. Within that darkness were what looked like large, strange masks.

“Now, Higher Gods of distinguished taste!” said Naiarotop. “I have been singled out by this courageous young man, Kanata Kanbara, and in response I have come down to this lower plane of existence. This is not your everyday occurrence! I do feel the difference in power between the two of us is too great, but...he wishes for true freedom for Locklore! That difference in strength is a small price to pay for such a valuable prize. Most importantly, this is a rare proposal by our very own Kanata Kanbara, a popular star in the Upper Realm. So we, the management of Locklore, have answered his courageous plea and arranged for this event!”

Naiarotop wore a polite smile as he gave his speech with exaggerated gestures, then bowed low to the sky.

Tension ran through the higher beings who responded to the call, as well as the group around me.

“Wh-what in the world...are those things in the sky? A-are they all...Higher Beings? What the...” Pomera shifted uneasily back and forth.

Physical distance probably wasn’t a big deal to the higher beings. I mean, they created a world just for fun. Our normal, everyday laws of physics weren’t going to apply to them.

“It’s been a while...Naiarotop,” I said, pointing my sword at him.

He turned to me. “You have gotten full of yourself. You used to be such a timid little human. I’ve had to look at your face so much it disgusts me. But that ends today.”

His eyes opened wide as he glared at me, and I couldn’t help feeling incredibly overwhelmed. Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced at the higher beings in the

sky. The crowd of disturbing faces was staring at me with excitement. Some of them were even laughing.

I was facing off against Naiarotop while the eyes of the higher beings were on us, and it was getting uncomfortable. But there was no way Naiarotop could go back on an agreement made here, under these conditions.

Naiarotop and the other higher beings were insistent about formality and appearance, after all. They couldn't break their word. Zoras had even said they valued contracts and reputation.

Naiarotop pointed at me. "Kanata Kanbara...we'll keep this simple. If I win this fight, I end the world. If you win the fight, Locklore's continued survival will be guaranteed, and I swear to not interfere with it again in the future. Does that sound good?"

"Actually...I'm betting the world on this fight. I can't have you using nitpicky rules to complain and cancel the whole deal out," I said.

"What?" He looked at me in disgust.

"I want us to clearly define 'winning.' It's also important we hammer out what 'one-on-one' means. There's a chance you'll run away if you find yourself at a disadvantage and try to brush the whole thing off. I'm also worried someone on this side won't be able to stop themselves from interfering, and then I'll lose for violating the rules."

"This is such a nuisance!" He was blatantly annoyed.

"I'm sorry, I am the one that called you here, but I won't accept the fight if I don't think the conditions are good. This fight will determine the fate of the world, and the odds aren't in my favor. I don't want to lose it all because of nitpicking over some loophole."

A vein throbbed in Naiarotop's temple. "Are you trying to pull out favorable conditions for yourself after having learned our weakness? Check your inflated ego, lowly human." The anger came off him in waves, buffeting me. Sweat ran down my forehead.

*It's okay, I told myself. It's not like he's going to lose his cool and let his anger ruin this situation.*

“I’ll say it again: all I want is a fair fight,” I said. “No matter what I do, your side still has the authority here. That’s why we need to decide on the rules beforehand.”

Naiarotop’s increasing frustration was nearly palpable. My proposal was like a lifeline to the higher beings in charge of Locklore, so he rushed down here to take advantage of it...and now I was insisting on haggling over the rules and definitions. They weren’t going to be happy with that. Though I might even give them the hint that I might call off the whole thing if they couldn’t satisfy my conditions.

“How about, whichever of us is still alive at the end, you or me, is the winner. Is that satisfactory? No complaints?” said Naiarotop, as if rushing his words.

“I’m okay with that part, but...the other part—”

“I am not going to flee from a lifeform from a lower plane! And actually, *you* should feel relieved to know that no matter how far *you* flee, I will hunt you down and tear you limb from limb! You don’t have to worry about being disqualified for breaking the rules! I’ll keep the others out!” said Naiarotop. He pointed at Lunaère and the others, and a magic circle appeared around them.

“Space-time Magic Level 23: Forced Relocation!”

They disappeared, then reappeared more than 300 feet away.

It’d been a long time since I’d seen Naiarotop cast magic, but now I remembered how insanely fast he could cast high-level spells. That kind of spell was already hard to handle, and not even Lunaère had a chance to react.

“Barrier Magic Level 27: Absolute Sanctuary.”

Next, a blue magic circle more than thirty feet across appeared around me and Naiarotop. A dome of light grew up from the edge of the magic circle, closing us in.

“How’s that?” said Naiarotop. “This barrier can’t be broken by human means. It’s so powerful, no spatial or time-based interference can break through. I prepared

the ring for our match. You can’t really mean to nitpick anymore, can you?”

He glared at me.

“K-Kanata, this isn’t going to work! I don’t think...I don’t think you can win this fight! Stop it now!” Lunaère shouted desperately as she clung to the barrier.

“Lunaère-san...*you promised*,” I said.

“Ah...” Lunaère froze, taken aback by what I said.

My theory was right. Everything Zoras said was advice that anticipated what would happen. He had been absolutely correct.

“What do you say, Kanata Kanbara?! Rise to the fight!” roared Naiarotop.

I steadied my breathing and readied my sword. “Okay. I have no complaints with that. Let’s finish this, Naiarotop!”

Naiarotop’s smile was filled with malice. “You really were the greatest fool of all the travelers, Kanata Kanbara! Die as you despair at the difference in our power!”

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“**I** T WOULD BE a bore if we finished this too quickly... This is Locklore’s last show, after all. I will pour all my hatred toward you into this fight, I will destroy every last inch of your body, I will torture you until you die in agony!”

Naiarotop came at me, trying to grab me.

A higher being—I couldn’t forget that. He was without a doubt the most powerful enemy I’d ever faced, though he couldn’t possibly be unbeatable.

Naiarotop cast magic the same way I did. I already knew that from the first time I saw him.

He looked down on Locklore for being a lower plane, but it used magic that operated on the same principles. Nothing was better proof that he wasn’t some sort of being utterly unlike me. He was on the same plane as me, just further ahead.

And if that was the case, he should have a level and stats. I didn’t think he

could be so powerful I'd have no chance against him.

I checked his level. The all too familiar video game-like screen popped up in my mind.

**ЎЇЖ\$Å%οξ**

***Race: Demigod***

***Lv: 12388***

***HP: 75566/75566***

***MP: 72371/73089***

*He's over level 10,000...*

That was way higher than I'd anticipated. My spells were going to be too slow. I had no choice but to face him with my sword.

I swung my sword to meet Naiarotop as he leaped toward me, but the moment I did, his form blurred into three and he shifted behind me. My sword hit nothing but air as I spun around and swung again at him. He blurred once more, and I realized I'd swung my sword at nothing but an afterimage.

Just as I was wondering where he went, I felt a finger pressed against the back of my head. I hurried away and raised my sword again.

"Ha ha ha...all I did was brush your head. What are you so afraid of?" said Naiarotop with a sneer, his arm still raised.

"Enough with the weird tricks," I said.

Maybe he had an item of some sort. If so, I needed to figure out its characteristics, or weak spots, or something.

"Tricks...? Ha ha ha ha! You really do say some funny things. This is simply the difference in speed between the two of us. I could kill you five times over in the time it takes you to swing your sword."

I gulped. I might have underestimated the difficulty level of this fight.

“Really use your head and body, please. Give us a good struggle. This is a show, after all. Opinions of Locklore will fall if you can’t even give the audience something to see.” He flopped his head to the side.

He wasn’t on guard. He wasn’t coming at me with swift attacks to end this. My only option was to strike while he was acting this way.

I rushed toward him while I formed a magic circle.

“That magic circle...is it a space-time spell?” he said. “A lot of space-time spells ignore the target’s resistances and defenses, and they might even be effective against me. *If you can hit, that is...*”

I held the magic circle as I kept slashing at Naiarotop. He quickly dodged out of the way of each attack, antagonizing me again and again.

*If I could just get a tiny opening*, I thought, but there were no signs Naiarotop’s stance was going to falter. I had to just go for it.

After missing four times with my sword, I cast my spell.

“Space-time Magic Level 17: Fracture!”

Space itself fractured, starting from the center of the magic circle, turning the area around us into a broken glass-like space. Of all the space-time spells, this one was one of the fastest ones you could cast for getting a large area of effect.

But Naiarotop gave a carefree smile and wove his way through the gaps in Fracture as if it were nothing.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “If you keep this up, this is going to end with a real snooze fest. In the end, you people are nothing but puppets. You should be aware of that.”

I expected him to be able to evade Fracture. My goal was to use the area of effect from Fracture to limit where he could go.

Naiarotop was messing around too much as he dodged. Even with that godly speed of his, he shouldn’t be able to dodge my sword now.

“Here!” I shouted as I swung my sword at his head.

“Oooh!”

Naiarotop raised his left arm to protect his head, and my blade couldn't cut through. The best I could manage was a slight tear in his clothes.

"No way, it's too tough..." I muttered.

"Sorry, but you are hopelessly outmatched."

Naiarotop's arm bulged, splitting his sleeve, and root-like tendrils writhed out. One of those roots was blocking my sword.

"Agh!" I let Fracture go down and leapt backward.

"Maybe it's about time I shift to the offensive, hm? Take this!"

Naiarotop swung his arm. The roots reaching from his sleeve instantly expanded, stretching all the way to where I stood. And now the tip of each root ended with a beast-like claw.

I leapt backward, evading them. I kicked at the roots right in front of me and twisted out of the way to put some space between us. But the roots kept chasing me, growing faster and faster, until they slashed across my chest. The claws dug in and flung me away, sending me tumbling across the ground.

I could hear Naiarotop cackling. The bulging roots shrank back down, rustling as they returned to his sleeve.

Then he came at me.

"Gah!" I barely managed to scramble to my feet and ready my sword. But the moment I thought he was coming at me from the front, his form blurred and he disappeared from sight.

Desperate, I spun around, wildly swinging my sword.

"Over here, fool!"

A sharp blow struck me in the back. A moment later I realized Naiarotop had kicked me from behind.

As I was flying through the air from the kick, I saw Naiarotop had already circled around in front of me. I struggled, trying to regain control of my body, and pulled my sword into position to fend him off.

His roundhouse kick passed neatly around my sword straight to my chin. I



slammed to the ground, my consciousness blinking out.

“You seem to be under some misconception that you can win,” said Naiarotop. “The only reason I haven’t personally done anything about you before now is because Locklore’s rules stopped me.”

He walked slowly toward me.

“Ha ha ha... Did I hit you a little too hard?” he continued. “It looks like I’ve already broken your spirit. My mistake. I need you to hang in there a little longer.”

If I made the wrong move and got up, Naiarotop would just slam me back down again. I stayed down and took a moment to see what was going on outside the barrier. I could see Nobunaga out there, attacking the barrier with swings of his sword.

“Tsk, not even my magic sword has any effect!” he bellowed. “That pipsqueak went and placed the entire world on his shoulders, and now he’s making a fool of himself!”

“Just do anything you can!” said Pomera, who was in a fluster as she ordered Nobunaga. “We need to nullify this fight! If we don’t, then Kanata...”

“Hey, where the heck did Veranta an’ the lich girl go? And at a time like this?” said Ramiel with annoyance. I looked around, but I couldn’t see the two of them either.

That meant Lunaère got my hint and was doing what I needed her to. The plan was in motion. Lunaère would hurry for me. And that was why I couldn’t give up now, I couldn’t let myself get run down.

“If that’s the case, let’s put an end to the wrestling match and move on to a more entertaining show: death by torture!” said Naiarotop. “Ha ha ha, why don’t you try crying and begging for your life? You never know...I might just change my mind!” He watched as I got back to my feet, then scowled and said, “How can you still look so determined?”

“I used to think you were some ultimate being, but...meeting you again...just makes me realize you’re more like a kid who’s been given too much power. Are all the higher beings like you?” I asked.

I could see the veins throbbing in Naiarotop's forehead. "I am so, so happy, Kanata Kanbara. You're such an idiot, and I'll get all the more pleasure out of torturing you."

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**N**AIAROTOP COULD SHOOT out several of those hard, plantlike tentacles at once. That meant he could defend against my sword attacks, and I wouldn't be able to land an effective strike unless I caught him by surprise.

It looked like there really was no way to defeat him other than using space-time magic. And my only choice was to use the most powerful space-time spell in my arsenal: Gravity Bomb.

I prepared two parallel castings of Gravity Bomb. Maintaining magic circles drained your mana, and casting high-level spells with the Twin Minds Method took quite a lot of your mental resources. That meant I was less capable of keeping up with his actions.

A normal opponent wouldn't approach someone making such a blatantly large attack like this, but Naiarotop didn't see me as a threat. He came straight for me, easily dodging my sword strikes. That was fine. I would find a way to open his defenses while we were in close combat, then strike with my double Gravity Bombs.

"I'm so glad you let me in on your plan, Kanata Kanbara. And you've really made this final episode of Locklore so exciting for me," said Naiarotop as he darted around me.

Just like before, Naiarotop wasn't showing anything that even remotely resembled a chink in his defenses. I let go of one of my magic circles, casting Gravity Bomb. He easily moved out of the way of the imploding black light, then swiftly moved around to my blind spot.

"Maybe it's about time I make a move!" he said, jabbing toward me with a tentacle-covered arm. I stopped the attack with my blade, but the tentacles dented my sword.

Now. I could hit now. I released the other magic circle, immediately launching a Gravity Bomb.

“Oooh!”

Naiarotop tried to flee backward, but the implosion of black light caught him, drawing him in. The light exploded, tearing his right arm, along with its tentacles, to bits.

“Argh!”

His clothing tore. Gravity Bomb hit his abdomen too, carving into it, sending blood and flesh flying. He was flung backward, then landed on a knee.

“H-how dare a human strike *me*?” He pressed down on his stomach with his remaining left hand. “Just kidding!” His look of shock flashed into a carefree smile. Tentacles grew from his remaining right sleeve, twisted together, and formed quickly into another arm, along with repaired clothing. He stood easily, then looked at me with contempt.

“Did I get your hopes up?” he said. “I thought I’d give you one last chance to show off. Does that make you happy? You’re just so pathetic.”

I caught my breath, then gave a snort of laughter. “It was a pretty bad performance, actually. Turns out you really aren’t suited to either directing or acting, are you?”

“What did you say?” He scowled.

I could tell he’d made it look like his tentacles hit my sword so that he could let my Gravity Bomb hit. He was purposefully making it appear like I had the upper hand for a moment just so he could turn it around and make a joke out of me. He probably wanted to show me how tough he was by taking my spell’s attack.

He looked at me with a condescending sneer. “You really are hard to like. Fine. I think that’s been enough.”

His body began to arch, and, as it did, the surface changed, morphing into something resembling a tree trunk, growing larger and larger.

His eyes, nose, even his mouth changed to spirals, and his hair fused with his

head. In mere moments he'd transformed into a ten-foot-tall tree monster.

"This show is over. I'm going to rip your limbs off, then gouge out your heart, and crush your organs," he said. "I have wanted to do this from the very beginning...but we have a system. Let me show you the true power of a higher being. Tremble in fear! Squeal in terror!"

He'd finally shown his true form. His human figure wasn't his real self, I learned that the first time we met, but I hadn't realized he could become such a hideous monster.

I felt overwhelmed just by having him standing in front of me. It almost made me lose control, but I braced myself and raised my sword. "Gravity Bomb!"

I threw the spell right at him from the front. Black light contracted then exploded.

He made no attempt to dodge. The spell tore at his arms and body, but it was immediately obvious it caused essentially no damage.

This was completely different from before. He'd been just toying with me—it hadn't been a real fight at all. Could I really beat something this tough...?

The moment I started to pull together my next magic circle, Naiarotop's huge body was right in front of me, his huge tree-limb-like appendages raised to strike down at me.

I had no time to react. His massive swing slammed down, and I could feel the impact running through my entire body. I thought I would be broken to bits from just one attack.

I couldn't lessen the blow. I tumbled across the ground. When I came to a stop, I put my hands on the ground and tried to push myself up, but I didn't have the strength, and another strike slammed into my head.

"Don't feel like getting up again, do you?" asked Naiarotop. "You will suffer agony and death like nothing you've ever experienced before. Isn't that terrifying, Kanata Kanbara?"

Naiarotop's huge body approached to loom over me.

"Huh... What in the...?" he said, stopping and looking up. The barrier covering

us—the Absolute Sanctuary—its color was steadily fading as it grew weaker.  
“What...in the world is happening?”

I could feel my expression relax, although I still lay facedown on the ground.  
She made it. Lunaère made it in time.

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“**W**HAT’S THE MEANING OF THIS?!” screamed Naiarotop, losing his composure.

The barrier of light he’d put up, Absolute Sanctuary, slowly lost its glow and eventually disappeared altogether.

“...Did I drop the spell in my excitement?” he asked. “No, that’s not possible. Could Master have stepped in and removed it...? No! What reason would he have for that?”

“Naiarotop... I won my biggest gamble when you were in such a rush to define the rules of this match,” I said, mustering the strength to speak.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no rule...stopping third parties from stepping in...”

“What?”

We had talked about making it a one-on-one fight, but the only real rule we *agreed* on was that the match was decided when one of us died. The only thing making sure this fight stayed one-on-one was Naiarotop’s barrier. Which meant that now that the barrier was down, other people could step in and join the fight. He couldn’t use the rules to stop that.

“You filthy—! What are you saying?!” he said, and then it happened.

“Earth Magic Level 10: Ground Missile!”

Rosemonde’s voice rang out, and several huge masses of earth flew toward Naiarotop from the other side of the barrier, crashing into him and exploding.

That seemed to act as some sort of signal. Next, a huge warrior with three swords strapped to his back rushed in front of me. It was Nobunaga. He swung

his blade at the explosions.

“Fire Magic Level 21: Temple of Searing Hellfire!”

A giant magic circle appeared, then crimson flames in the shape of a temple erupted out of it above the explosion.

“Atlas’s Axe!”

Kotone leapt into the air, bringing down a fifty-foot-tall axe toward Naiarotop. The axe smashed into the temple of fire, shaking the entire capital city.

“Spirit Magic Level 10: Behemoth’s Rage!”

Pomera waved her staff, and a huge rhinoceros made from fire charged toward Naiarotop.

I felt someone clap on my back. I looked and saw Lovis. “Short Gate!”

The two of us were engulfed in a magic circle, and the next moment, we had teleported away. Lunaère was standing right there.

“Space-time Magic Level 23: Retrograde.”

A white magic circle appeared, and my body was surrounded by warm light. My wounds healed in an instant.

“Thank you, Lunaère-san. The plan went well,” I said, standing back up.

“I wish you had explained it a little more... Things would have gone poorly if I were just a little bit slower,” she said with a heavy sigh of relief.

But I couldn’t have done that. If Naiarotop had realized what I was doing, he’d have either demanded different rules for the match or come up with some countermeasure.

What I asked Lunaère to do was to use what she learned from the Ravia Tablet—a stone recording of a spell used by a higher being—to shut down Naiarotop’s barrier. Lunaère had figured out through her research that it was some sort of defensive barrier, but concluded it wasn’t something that a human could recreate. I agreed at the time that that meant there really wasn’t much reason to keep analyzing it.

*“If I were to give you some advice, I would tell you that they honor contracts*

*and reputation...and that you already have a valuable method for resisting. Figure the rest out yourself. They are listening to this conversation, after all."*

But then Zoras said I had a valuable method for resisting already. I thought through it over and over, but the only thing I could think of that might fit that description was the Ravia Tablet.

So, I thought about it, and I wondered if Lunaère wouldn't be able to find a way to use the principles and structure of the spell she already learned to find a way to undo the barrier when used by a higher being, even if she couldn't cast the spell herself. When I thought back to Zoras talking about the higher beings honoring contracts and reputation along with a valuable method for resisting, I realized Zoras was speculating that there was a high probability Naiarotop would use the spell on the Ravia Tablet when we met.

And just as Zoras's advice implied, the barrier spell on the Ravia Tablet was the exact same spell Naiarotop used: Absolute Sanctuary.

Zoras had learned about us through Naiarotop. He must have figured this was the only way we had to protect Locklore from the higher beings.

The biggest gamble was whether or not Naiarotop would be in such a rush that he didn't insist on clarifying the rules, which was the weakness left when he relied on the barrier. The moment he agreed to my terms without thinking them through, I seriously felt like luck was on my side. I was sure we would win.

That was how I was able to keep getting back up, no matter how big a difference in power he kept showing me.

"How dare you make a fool of me with your ridiculous little plan! You're nothing but worms, don't let this go to your head! You can't win against me, no matter how many of you gang up on me!"

He was already back to his feet, the tentacles of his arms stretching out to lash out at the area around him. It looked like his first move was to gain control of the battlefield so he could recover the damage he suffered in the surprise attack.

"Hee hee hee! A swing and a miss, moron!" cried Ramiel as she twirled effortlessly through the sky on her dragon wings, evading Naiarotop's tentacles.

“Double Slash!” Mitsuru brought his huge sword down hard onto the tentacles as they stretched. “Whoa, they’re actually not that tough! Hey, Naiarotop, you remember the first day we met? You were all looking down on me, and I was just thinking ’bout how I’d kill you someday!” Mitsuru grinned wide as he shouted his challenge.

A large gold gate suddenly appeared in front of Naiarotop. The second it opened, a flood of mask-wearing golems poured out, pushing toward him.

“Argh! They don’t stop!” he cried with hatred as he lashed his tentacles around. The horde of golems showed no signs of letting up. Veranta must have made a lot of them with Omnipotent Alchemy.

“Your back is wide open!” said Nobunaga as he unleashed a sword strike into Naiarotop’s back, sending him stumbling. “Gya ha ha! A tough one, aren’t you? Never met a tree that needed to be turned into a stump as much as you do!” Nobunaga howled with laughter.

We got a surprise attack in while Naiarotop was caught off guard, and now we were hitting him with lots of attacks before he could gain control again. And yet, none of it looked like it was going to take him down.

“Let’s go, Kanata,” said Lunaère.

“Yes, let’s.” I nodded.

Lunaère and I would defeat Naiarotop while the others kept him occupied.

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**C**OUNTLESS GOLEMS thronged toward Naiarotop as he was buffeted by gales of magic.

“Don’t underestimate me, you insects!” he said as he created several magic circles. “Space-time Magic Level 28: Cube of Erasure!”

Four glowing, white cubes appeared around Naiarotop. Their light exploded in a blinding flash, then they disappeared, and everything that was in their space was neatly eliminated from this world. Close to one hundred of Veranta’s



golems were wiped out. The ones that had been right on the edges of the cubes had portions of them cut out with perfectly straight edges.

Even the gold gate which the golems had been pouring from was erased by Naiarotop's spell.

"That's...an insane spell," I murmured as Lunaère and I moved toward him.

"We can't let ourselves be intimidated at this point," said Lunaère. "And...no matter how skilled the magic user, there is always an opening in their defenses the moment after they cast multiple spells."

As if to prove Lunaère's point, Naiarotop was increasing the number of his magic attacks. He was desperate to reduce the size of the golem horde, even if that meant weakening his defenses.

We had the advantage now, but we wouldn't again. Naiarotop had an insanely high level, high HP, and high MP. If he reduced our forces and came for a real attack, we would all be wiped out in an instant.

And with the golden gate gone, Veranta couldn't supplement the golem horde's numbers any further. The tables were going to steadily turn in Naiarotop's favor. This was the only chance for me and Lunaère to take - advantage of these concentrated attacks and go after him.

"How are we going to do this, Lunaère-san?" I asked.

"Let's cripple that huge, sturdy body in one go with space-time magic. He may be a higher being, but he must still have some organ inside him that he can't survive without, something like a human's heart or brain. Let's dig that out and expose it."

I nodded.

But I hadn't been able to effectively cut through Naiarotop's body with a Gravity Bomb. The two of us would be attacking this time...but would it really go well? I was a bit worried, but the only people here who could use space-time magic powerful enough to destroy Naiarotop's sturdy body were me and Lunaère...

Right ahead of us, I saw Philia about to be attacked by Naiarotop's tentacles.

A giant shield with a face drawn on it immediately appeared in front of her, but a tentacle slipped past the shield, and that one hit sent Philia flying all the way to where we were.

“Aaah!” she cried, but I caught her. “Thanks, Kanata.” She looked back at me in relief.

I looked into her face, and then it hit me. “Philia-chan...can you turn into Lunaère-san and split yourself into four?”

She looked at me with a blank expression for a second, then she split into a huge grin. “Yep! Philia can do that!”

Lunaère, Philia, and I moved around Naiarotop, looking for an opening.

“Cube of Erasure!”

Another four cubes appeared and blasted away Veranta’s golems. The horde that had been swarming the battlefield was now reduced to nothing but a pile of remains.

“Aaargh!”

On top of that, Nobunaga took a glancing hit from the cubes. He collapsed, blood pouring from the wound. One shoulder, a chunk of his hip, and part of his leg were gone.

The others seemed afraid to get closer to Naiarotop and his erasure magic. A reckless dash toward him might end up with them missing parts of their body, like Nobunaga. Their entire existence might even be erased.

“You’ve been quite persistent, but this is the end!” howled Naiarotop.

The golem horde was gone. Nobunaga, who was extremely valuable as someone to take Naiarotop on at close range, was lying on the ground. Morale was dropping fast.

Just after Naiarotop cast Cube of Erasure, there was a moment where his attention was diverted. Our only chance was to hit him with everything we had. Now.

The four Lunaères that Philia had turned into approached Naiarotop from behind. “Four times Gravity Bomb Boom!”

Four explosions of black light tore into Naiarotop's back.

"Gah! You little—!"

Naiarotop was being worn down, bit by bit.

Lunaère and I came after Philia, flying toward Naiarotop with Lunaère holding me up by my back. Lunaère was first to form a set of two magic circles.

"Gravity Bomb!"

Her two castings slammed into Naiarotop's back in quick succession.

I used all the strength in my body to thrust my sword into his damaged body.  
"Gravity Bomb!"

Black light exploded at the tip of the sword, sending blood and pieces of Naiarotop's body flying. We'd hit him with a total of seven Gravity Bombs now. We'd worked our way into a mass of flesh, evil looking and reddish black. It expanded and contracted over and over. This must be one of his important organs.

I rushed toward it, still with the momentum of flying, and struck it with my sword. The mass of flesh spewed out a dark red liquid. I punched right through his body, coming out the other side.

"Kanata...Kanbaraaaaaaaaa!" He turned his wide-eyed gaze upon me.

He was...still alive.

My stance was shot. I'd been so focused on putting everything I had into that one strike that I hadn't thought about how I was going to land.

Naiarotop's reaching tentacles chased after me, closing in on my back.

I couldn't dodge them, not like this. And if I didn't finish him now, he would immediately regenerate. We had no chance of winning if that happened.

"We're not going to—!" I started, but something warm wrapped around me. At first, I thought it was another one of Naiarotop's tentacles, coming from a different direction, but I was wrong.

...It was Noble's tongue.

"Noble!"

He whipped me around, then threw me at full speed toward Naiarotop. “Get ‘im, Kanata!”

I slipped past Naiarotop’s tentacles back to the gaping hole in his body. His organ, that heart-like mass, came into view. The tip of my sword tore into it. It beat weakly, and I thrust my sword in with all my might.

“No! How? To a lowly puppet...?!” said Naiarotop.

And his large body finally crumpled to the ground.

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I STOOD ON TOP of his remains, my chest heaving with each breath as I looked down at his face. His expression was twisted, his eyes frozen in time, filled with intense rage and confusion. He never believed he could lose, not even at the very end.

I looked into those eyes, and I was certain that Naiarotop was finally dead. I slowly lowered my sword and returned it to its sheath.

“The winner of this match...is us!” I declared, standing atop Naiarotop.

“We won... That means the world is safe, right?” said Pomera, sinking to the ground as all tension faded from her body.

“Well done, boy! Gya ha ha! There couldn’t be a more joyful end!” said Nobunaga with a proud laugh.

“Ha ha ha... This means it’s over...everything...at long last... Ah, I still can’t believe what I’m seeing with my own eyes...” said Veranta, tears flowing from behind his mask. No one wanted true peace for Locklore more than Veranta. He’d lived his last few millennia specifically for that purpose.

While we were each savoring the victory, we were suddenly swallowed by a whirlwind of applause and cries in a language we’d never heard.

It was the higher beings floating in the sky. Countless huge hands appeared alongside the faces, clapping energetically. It looked like they were celebrating our victory.

I was hit with mixed emotions. We won against Naiarotop in the end, but this was forcing me to acknowledge we were nothing more than entertainment to these beings.

But that didn't change the fact that what we did today was pull off a miracle, a miracle that would save Locklore. Supposedly.

I turned to the higher beings in the sky and shouted, "In accordance with Naiarotop's agreement...the higher beings won't interfere with Locklore anymore, and they won't erase it either. It's safe to assume that's true, right?"

I had to check. I'd made that agreement with Naiarotop, and he was dead now, and we had used some underhanded tactics, even if they were technically within the rules. And I didn't actually know how much they intended to hold up their side of the bargain.

The answer didn't come immediately. I tried to hold back my unease as I glared up at the sky. The answer didn't come for more than a minute.

"I am the one who created the Upper Realm... I am the highest of the gods. I have no name, as I am the only true being," came a voice, booming out from no direction in particular.

*The highest of the gods...?*

"Kanbara Kanata... Your heroic, god-vanquishing story did not disappoint. No human has ever accomplished such a feat. On my honor, I vow that Locklore's existence will continue...and that we will not interfere with it."

I felt relief wash over me. I didn't really understand who this god was or how things worked in the higher realm, but this at least meant Locklore was safe.

"Kanbara Kanata, come," the god's voice echoed. "You are the first to ever provide me with such entertainment, entertainment greater than even that given by any of the higher beings. I wish to grant you a boon."

As it did, what looked like a distortion in space appeared next to me. I got the impression that if I went through it, I'd find myself face-to-face with this Highest God or whatever he was.

All the higher beings in the sky erupted into excited cries. It looked like it was

a huge honor among the higher beings to be called for by this Highest God. It wasn't like I wanted to go visit him, but the higher beings seemed really worked up by the invitation. Maybe they thought this would make me happy.

"...Yes, Your...Godliness."

I bowed and stepped down from Naiarotop's body. As I approached the rift in space, Lunaère grabbed my hand. "Kanata...are you really going? It could be dangerous...you should say no. Or I should go instead..."

"Thank you, Lunaère-san, but...I think it would be dangerous *not* to do what he says."

I had no clue what this boon was, and, honestly, I didn't really care. The god was being pushy, but if I refused and made him angry, there was a chance I could ruin Locklore's newfound freedom. I might not like this god, but I had to keep our interactions pleasant.

"Kanbara Kanata...it goes without saying that you must come alone. I will not accept others accompanying you or taking your place. However...I do not particularly mind if you choose not to come," said the Highest God.

"If that's the case...I'll come alone," I said.

Lunaère stepped back with a look of apprehension. "Okay..."

I smiled at her to try and reassure her. Then I put my hand into the rift and was sucked in.

The next moment, I found myself in an entirely white space.

A simple platform of stone appeared before me, then stairs rose up, stretching off into the heights as if to say, *Come on up*.

I climbed, step by step. At the highest point, I arrived before a massive throne. On the throne was a...something. Maybe a hundred feet tall, even. Its outline was vaguely human shaped, but its colors and its form couldn't be described with any words I knew. It looked strange. And I couldn't focus on its face, like when your head was filled with haze.

None of this felt real. Just looking at the being wasn't enough for me to figure out if this was real or something I dreamt up in my head. I was forced to

acknowledge that this being was the leader of the higher beings. He was something totally different, even from Naiarotop.

“I am grateful for your efforts, traveler from another world, Kanbara Kanata,” he said. “There was no real need to call you here, but I did wish to meet with you face-to-face, just once.”

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“**Y**OU DON'T APPEAR in good spirits. Do you dislike me?” he asked, looking down at me from his throne.

“...It's all too much, I honestly don't really know how I feel. Locklore wouldn't exist if it wasn't for all of you higher beings, after all.” I stopped there for a moment, then said, “Why did you call me here? I just happened to get rescued by Lunaère, and just happened to reach a high level... The people around me kept saving me, and I just got swept along until I found myself defending Locklore. Then I fought Naiarotop. I don't think there's anything I can do for you.”

“Just swept along, hm? How humble. You are the human who defeated a demigod. Don't worry. I won't be asking anything of you. I told you...I called you here so that I may grant you a boon.”

“A boon...” That was what he'd said. “You're the highest of all gods. What would you want to give me?”

I honestly wasn't expecting anything. There was nothing I wanted at this point. We made it so Locklore would survive...so both Lunaère and I survived. By the time we got the higher beings to agree to maintain the world and not interfere with it, I actually didn't want anything to do with them anymore.

“That is for you to decide. The only thing I want from you, is for you to entertain me with whatever answer you give,” said the Highest God.

That...sounded like he was basically going to grant me one wish. This was the leader of the beings that created a world just for fun. If he said he could grant me any wish, that probably wasn't a boast; it was likely the truth.

“Though, I don’t wish for you to go crazy and ask for something outlandish,” he added. “I simply want to hear what you want now that you’ve made it here.”

“So...high-level magic can create worlds and grant people’s wishes, meaning this is completely open?” I asked.

“High-level magic...? Ah, it seems you misunderstand. The magic ranking system is for no other purpose than to limit the Lower Gods’ power. None of the Higher Gods have ranks on their magic, or levels.”

I couldn’t stop the sigh slipping out. We had just managed to beat Naiarotop. He was a Lower God, made so that his power level was dropped down within the same realm as us humans. Now I was realizing that even he was just a puppet of the Higher Gods.

“The Lower Gods are merely dolls given the ability to use any magic that falls within the ranked system. There is nothing binding me—I have no limits. I have the power to grant any and all wishes. Don’t worry about any limitations. I am truly all-knowing and all-powerful,” said the Highest God without hesitation.

“That...must be incredibly boring,” I muttered. Having everything you ever wanted, without limits, granted immediately? That didn’t sound all that different from lying in bed forever daydreaming. And then I realized what I’d said and hurried to fix it. “Uh, I mean, no offense.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha...” The god covered his mouth with his hand, trying to stifle his laughter. “Incredibly boring...? Yes, you would be right. That is why I imposed the bindings and created the gods in my continuous search for something, some being, to entertain me.”

I probably should have realized this sooner, but it might be better not to say more than I had to. At first glance, this Highest God seemed friendly and genial. It made it hard to believe he was in charge of someone as cruel as Naiarotop. But he was probably only like this with me because I was one of the few beings to ever entertain him. One wrong step and I might anger him, which could cause something so horrible I couldn’t even imagine what it would be.

I thought about my wish. Was there something I should ask for here? I managed to reunite with Lunaère. I prevented Locklore’s destruction. I stopped the higher beings from meddling in the world.



What if I asked him to destroy all the higher beings, including himself? Would he do it? That was what Zoras really wanted, and I owed him a lot. I personally couldn't care less about the higher beings at this point, but I did have reason to carry on Zoras's revenge for him.

...No. If I did that, I risked angering the Highest God. I couldn't do that. Asking that would put Locklore back into peril, which I didn't want.

"There...are some things I left back on Earth that I miss," I said. "I have family there, and my parents' grave. I want to go back to visit...and then go back to Locklore. Can you do that?"

That's what I said after thinking for a while. It wasn't something I could ever do without the help of a higher being.

"Huh...I told you I could grant you any wish, and you ask for something so humble. I will not grant that wish."

"What? Why?"

"Because it's boring. It's less entertaining if you use petty wordplay to broaden the scope of the boon I will grant. You want me to send you there, then bring you back. Depending on how you look at it, that is *two* wishes. You may choose only one. If you wish to return to Earth, then that is the end of it. I will not allow you to make a return trip."

...Going back to Earth would be a one-way journey. And since he said he didn't want any wordplay, I couldn't use the classics of saying I wanted him to temporarily send me back to Earth, or ask him to increase the number of wishes by two or something.

"Think hard. I could even...turn you into a Higher God if you so wished. You wouldn't be as all-knowing and all-powerful as me, but you would be capable of accomplishing anything you might imagine. You would be very much welcome to join our ranks. You could have anything, you could create worlds, live forever..."

"I'm sorry, but...I don't want to play with other people's lives, and I don't want to live forever."

And the Highest God himself was proof that being all-knowing and all-

powerful was torturous boredom. I could see that for myself.

I closed my eyes and thought for a while, then slowly said:

“I wish...”

## Chapter 4:

### The Lich's Proposal

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**T**HREE DAYS AFTER defeating Naiarotop, saving Locklore, and meeting the Highest God...we held a celebratory banquet in the largest hall of Veranta's tower.

It was buffet-style, with people milling around tables filled with luxurious food and drink.

The attendees weren't just the people involved in the battle against Naiarotop. There were also all the people who'd apparently laid the groundwork for the battle, or helped go around the world recovering the pawns, making it a huge party with close to a thousand people. The majority were merchants who did business with the Sophia Trading Company, mercenaries who worked for them, and all the people who controlled Locklore from the shadows.

The Dragon King Ridler was there, and even Cardinal Wardell. I wondered what connections brought them here. I was also surprised to see Garnet, the head of the guild in Manaloch.

...Why was the guild leader from one city here? I'd always suspected he was more than he seemed, so maybe there was another side to him I'd never seen.

I didn't see why we needed to rush to pull all these people together, it had only been a few days since the world had faced incredible danger, but...Veranta insisted we couldn't miss out on this opportunity to hold a celebration because we had to explain the situation to the people who secretly ran the world. And we had to do so before rumors got started, so we could forge the relationships we needed in order to build a new, peaceful Locklore.

There were so many people who'd come from all corners of the world. Veranta apparently went personally to pick up any of the people who didn't already have methods of teleportation at their disposal. He really put a lot of

work into the event.

He was right that, although we brought Locklore out of the higher beings' shadows, this was still a world where a person's level meant everything. A party celebrating peace won for the world was an indispensable moment to draw the world's leaders together in one place and build relationships.

"Kanataaaa!" Pomera cheered. "There is soooo much wine! Lemme pour ya a drink!"

"I don't really like drinking..." I said.

Pomera hauled a cask over to me, her face bright red from the wine. I thought she'd quit drinking... Oh well, I guess it was fine this one time. If she couldn't drink today of all days, she'd never drink again.

"Pomera's face is so red and cute!" said Philia, giggling and bouncing beside her.

I was hanging around the edge of the banquet hall, along with Pomera, Philia, Lunaère, and Noble. We didn't exactly look like we were the MVPs of the victory, but I didn't really like having a huge fuss made over me anyway, so I asked Veranta not to talk too much about me.

Besides, I would've felt awkward being approached by world leaders and having to watch what I said. Right in my line of sight was Kotone, surrounded by nobles and merchants, a sullen look on her face. She wasn't very good with attention either.

Rosemonde was quickly brushing people away, but there were a lot of people here who wanted a chance to talk to a level 1000 savior of the world. Her glower turned more severe with every person who crowded around her. Ramiel was holding her stomach as she heaved with laughter and watched it.

Nearby Rosemonde was Mel...for some reason. She was the artificer we met in Ploroque, the city of merchants. It sounded like Isabella, the provisional ruler of Ploroque, was invited and she had brought Mel as her guest. Isabella had carefully manipulated the cash flow of Grede & Co., meaning she now owned the vast majority of the shares previously held by Grede, the Lord of Merchants. She was probably one of the three richest people on the continent. I

imagined she was invited because of the influence that gave her, as well as for her trading skills.

“All this drink is weak! Yamato sake used to be much stronger!” cried Nobunaga. He was at the center of the party, gulping wine from a cask, his drinking interspersed with bursts of laughter. Should he really be here around...*normal* people? Well, he’d kept himself hidden before because the gods demanded it, but it probably didn’t matter so much now. I’d heard he was pretty dangerous, but I didn’t have a feel for his personality since Lunaère beat him before I could find his magic sword’s weakness and fight him myself. But now, he kind of just looked like a jovial, middle-aged man.

Then I noticed Nobunaga was glaring at me with wide eyes. He looked like he couldn’t even believe what he was seeing.

*Did I...insult him somehow?* But when I checked where he was really looking, I saw his eyes were glued on Pomera, not me. And Pomera was looking back.

“A rival!” she said as she gripped her wine tankard tightly.

“...Please don’t compete with each other,” I said with a sigh.

I looked toward the front of the hall. Veranta was taking his position on a lavish stage.

“Let me express my gratitude to all of you, for taking the time to come from all corners of the world today,” he said. “I believe everyone gathered here is aware that from the moment of Locklore’s creation, ten thousand years ago, it has been under the control of powerful beings. However, only a few days ago, the team of heroes gathered around me battled against the gods and freed Locklore at long last!

“This miracle was not achieved by those heroes alone. I truly believe we were guided by the noble spirits of all those who have suffered in Locklore, those who have been sacrificed for this world. There have been people who refused to live as mere puppets for the gods—those who tried to forge a world where their own will mattered—and it is because of them that we succeeded in winning our freedom.

“But the start of this new era is not all roses. This new dynamic means that we, the citizens of Locklore, are responsible for protecting it. I hope that all of you gathered here today will lend me your strength, so that we may defend the peace of this new world...”

Veranta’s speech continued for a while. He...really could talk for a long time... without any breaks. I’d wondered if he wasn’t suffering from occupational burnout after carrying his burning desires for thousands of years, but I guess I didn’t need to be concerned. He’d already found a new goal, protecting the order of the new world, and he seemed pretty gung-ho about it.

“By the way, Kanata...what did you ask for from the Highest God?” said Lunaère uneasily.

“Oh, uh...”

For the past few days, Lunaère, Pomera, and even Veranta kept asking me that, but I couldn’t muster the courage to answer. I just kept dragging it out by saying it wasn’t a big deal.

I kind of felt a bit embarrassed, sort of like...now that I’d come to my senses, I was feeling pathetic that I asked for *that* out of some selfish urge. I mean, the wish itself wasn’t that big of a deal. I just don’t know what I’d say if someone asked me why I asked for that.

I couldn’t keep dragging it out forever, though. The Highest God might get so angry he’d destroy Locklore if I pretended not to have used his boon just because I was embarrassed about my wish.

“Why’re you dragging your feet so much? Thought you said it was no big deal?” Noble said with frustration.

“Yeah...it isn’t. It’s just, well, if you’re curious...” I started, trying to keep the conversation casual, but Lunaère’s and Pomera’s eyes locked on me with a burning curiosity, despite the fact that Pomera was still very drunk. “So...I, uh, I’m thinking of going back to my home world. And so, I, uh...”

My voice got quieter, and I tried to play it off as nothing, but Pomera’s reddened face suddenly cleared like she’d instantly sobered up. “Kanata...

you're going back to your own world...? Why wouldn't you tell me something this huge before now?!" She clamped her hands onto my shoulders.

"Well, yes, I am, but..."

While I was struggling to gather my thoughts, Lunaère looked away before suddenly dashing out of the hall.

"Ah!" I cried as I tried to chase after her, but Philia grabbed tightly onto my arm and looked at me with a cool expression.

"You need to tell Pomera everything!" she said.

"I'll go after Lunaère—you catch up when you can!" said Noble as he bounded quickly after Lunaère.

**-2-**

**M**Y ARMS WERE HELD firmly by Philia and Pomera, both of them frowning at me.

"Kanata, what's going on? You're going back to your home world? You have to explain to Pomera before following Lunaère. If you don't, Philia will hate you *forever!*" said Philia, looking up at me with a frown.

"Well..." I stammered, struggling to find the words, and Pomera shook her head.

"If it's hard for you to say, then you can say it later. Instead, listen to what I have to say."

"What...you have to say?"

Her grip was tight on my arm as she bit her lip like it *was* hard to say. She looked like she was thinking it over. Then she pursed her lips and took my hands in hers like she got the courage to finally say it.

"Kanata...I've always liked you. A lot! I was nothing but an awful white-magic user with no prospects, who just did random tasks for Roy's party. But you were kind to me! You listened to me! ...You let me join your party. You even trained me! Ha ha, I was quite surprised by the training at the time...but now...they're

good memories. I never liked myself. It was because of you that I became more confident. I left Roy's party, and Arroburg. My horizons grew. I stopped worrying only about what others thought of me, I realized I can live how I want to live now. It's an obvious thing, but you *taught* me that."

"Pomera-san..."

She blushed and looked into my eyes. Philia looked at Pomera, her expression serious, like she was supporting her.

"At first, I admired you, because you're such an incredible person. But then after traveling with you for so long, I realized you're not just powerful...you're kind. Kinder than most people. And you're not exactly knowledgeable about the world—you're pretty dense and you kind of just stumble about figuring things out most of the time. ...I promise, I'm not making fun of you! It's just, even all those sides of you...I think you're cute. I love you. That's why I want to be with you forever!"

I hesitated, but I knew I had to take in what she said and give an honest response.

"Thank you, Pomera-san. You have no idea how happy that makes me...but I can't return your feelings," I said.

"Ha ha...yeah, I know. Honestly, I even love how honest and pure your love for Lunaère is." She wiped at her eyes, the tips of her fingers coming away damp with tears. "I'm a mess. All my emotions get mixed up when I drink, and I start crying. I didn't want you to see me like this. Getting all worked up and saying all that is all the alcohol's fault."







“I’m glad you told me how you feel. I really am. So don’t put yourself down like that, okay?” I said.

The tears spilled from her eyes. “Unfair, Kanata...saying something like that now!”

“Pomera’s not a mess! Pomera’s cool! Good job!” said Philia as she poured another drink and held it out to Pomera.

“Thank you, Philia.” Pomera took a swig.

“I never realized you felt that way about me, Pomera-san,” I said.

“Gack!” She choked on her drink. “Th-that can’t be true! I’m not... I don’t think of myself as someone who’s good at hiding their feelings! Why would you still play dumb at this point?!” She grabbed my shoulders again.

“Even Philia saw! *Philia!*” said Philia as she stepped closer.

“N-no, really...I’m sorry... I’ve never really been good at reading other people... I did think you said some crazy things when you were drunk, though...”

“Oh no...why’d I have to fall for a guy like you?” Pomera plopped her elbows onto the table and hung her head.

“I’m sorry, I really just—”

“It’s fine, Kanata! I don’t even care about you anymore!” she said, grabbing a nearby wine bottle and chugging it. She was going into full drown-your-sorrows mode.

“Pomera, be happy! Philia’s here,” said Philia, then she placed a hand on Pomera’s shoulder.

Pomera wrapped her in a bear hug and said, “Thank you! You’re my everything now, Philia! You’ll turn into Kanata, and we’ll live happily ever after!”

“Hee hee, Philia loves Pomera too!”

Was that really *love*?

I watched the two of them, then Pomera looked up at me and said, “Are you going to hang around here forever? Kanata, don’t be a good-for-nothing! Just

hurry up and run after Lunaère!”

“...Thank you, Pomera-san,” I said, then I bowed to her and ran out the banquet hall.

**-3-**

**“K**<sub>ANATA, IN HERE,</sub>” said Noble, showing me to one of the tower’s storage rooms.

“Thanks, Noble. You’re always there to help me out in the most important times.”

“I know, right? I’m the best treasure you know.”

I didn’t know much about treasure chests in general, but there was no doubting that Noble was the best. He’d stuck with Lunaère for this long, and he was there for the assist on the last hit to take Naiarotop down. And now he was exposing Lunaère’s hiding spot for me.

“All right, let’s go—”

“We? Look, Kanata...” Noble let out an exasperated sigh. “This is something you need to do alone.”

“...Thanks, Noble. Really.”

He skillfully twisted his tongue into knots, so it formed a thumbs-up. I flashed one back, using my actual thumb.

“Lunaère-san, are you in there?” I called.

“No.” The response was cold.

“Well, the fact that you replied means that—”

“The person I love deciding to leave to another world without talking to me might as well be the same as not existing. You deciding to go back without me means I don’t exist for you anymore, right?”

“No, this is just a misunderstanding. I do want to go back to Earth, but not forever. I can actually go back and forth between Earth and Locklore.”

“What?” Lunaère slowly opened the door and stared at my face.

The Highest God had put a restriction on my original wish, saying that if I wanted to go back to Earth that I would just go back; I wouldn’t be able to return to Locklore. He also said he wouldn’t accept petty wordplay.

But I still found a loophole.

*“Make it so I can use all the magic that a Lower God like Naiarotop would be able to use,”* I’d said.

For a moment, the Highest God seemed lost on how to respond, then he burst into laughter.

Included in that set of spells was Space-time Magic Level 28: Dimension Gate. It was the teleportation spell that connected two different worlds together.

By definition, a Lower God could use all spells within the ranked system. My logic was to take my original idea but find a way to avoid getting trapped by the Highest God’s restriction on tricky wishes.

I thought he might be angry about that wish too, since it could be seen as sidestepping his intent, but he seemed satisfied by how interesting my logic was. So he agreed to my wish.

So now, I was able to use any spell within the defined ranking system that a Lower God would be able to use. Dimension Gate was one of those spells, so I could go between Earth and Locklore at will.

Suddenly, I felt a bit bad for Pomera. This meant this wasn’t the last awkward time we’d ever be seeing each other.

“Th-then why did you act so high and mighty?! W-were you making fun of me?!” Lunaère’s face turned beet red and she grabbed my collar.

“N-no! I’m really sorry for not opening up sooner about it, but...there’s something I wanted to talk to you about... I just hadn’t gotten the courage...”

“Something you want to talk to me about?” She blinked in surprise.

I squeezed her hands in mine. “Lunaère-san...will you marry me?”

“Huh? Wh-what... What are you saying?!” Her face turned so red, it looked

like it was on fire.

“Lunaère-san, you don’t like going out in the world, so you don’t...and you wanted me to go enjoy a normal human life, not stay in Cocytus forever. But I’ve been around Locklore, and I saved the world! There’s no reason to chase me away now!”

“Th-th-that might be true, but...well! I think we’re going too fast! I would feel bad trapping you in Cocytus forever!”

Her eyes roved around, looking anywhere but into mine.

I’d always known Lunaère was a little paranoid about going out into the world. But now that I knew her past, I couldn’t blame her. She was captured and tortured, her body used to make potions. I couldn’t suggest to her that we go live somewhere, out in the sun of Locklore.

That’s why I had a different suggestion.

“Come with me to Earth for a bit!” I said.

“Why?!”

“This isn’t just a whim! I’ve thought about it for a while. A long time ago, we talked about how I didn’t feel fear when I touched you that much because I came from a world without magic, so I couldn’t sense the unholy impurity very well. You can probably live a normal life on Earth, without feeling guilty. Nobody will believe that you have any magic power, and every little situation won’t turn into a battle!”

“U-uhmm...maybe...that might be true...” Lunaère was in a daze, overwhelmed by my excitement.

“But most of all, Lunaère-san, I want you to see the world I was born in. I want you to meet my family!”

“O-okay...” Lunaère bobbed her head up and down, her face still bright red as she joined in my excitement. But then a moment later she seemed to snap back to her senses and shook her head back and forth. “I-I can’t answer this right away. Kanata, you need to think this through too. I’m a lich, I’ve violated the laws of this world. Our life spans are just too different. I can’t have children. It

might be fine now, but someday, I'll make you sad. There is someone so much better for you than me!"







She squeezed her eyes shut, large tears forcing their way out.

I pulled her into my arms and held her tight.

“...I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. You’ll live forever. If we were together, someday I’d grow old and die. I’d leave you behind. I couldn’t even think of becoming your partner in those circumstances.”

“Kanata...” She circled her arms around me too, as if to console me. She stroked my hair. “I’m sorry, Kanata... If only I were a normal girl. If we’d been born in the same period... You never should have had to feel this way...”

Then her hand froze, as if she noticed something was wrong.

“Kanata...” she said. “Why am I sensing unholy impurity coming from you...”

She finally noticed. I worried over how to say it, but I made up my mind and decided to just tell her. Everything. “Actually...when I went to the Garden of the Dragons, Ridler gave me two items. One was the Ravia Tablet, the item that saved us. The other...was the Necronomicon.”

A lich of ancient times, Grave Break Norn, had communicated with angels and recorded what he learned there in a tome of extremely high-level death magic spells. Lunaère had taught me almost nothing of that school of magic.

That’s why I accepted that book from Ridler, so I could teach myself. When I had the time, I’d read the Necronomicon, deepening my understanding of death magic.

If all I wanted to do was go between Earth and Locklore, I didn’t need to be able to use every spell ever. It would have been enough to just ask for Dimension Gate. But being able to cast magic like a Lesser God meant that I could try out the spells in the Necronomicon and make myself a lich, like Lunaère.

I actually did the ritual when I was there, with the Highest God.

He loved it.

But as I was walking back down the stairs to Locklore, I got as far as making a plan to take Lunaère to Earth. I decided that without asking her opinion. Then I came to my senses and realized that just going off and making myself a lich for

Lunaère was pretty awkward, and maybe a bit presumptuous. That's why I hadn't been able to tell anyone.

The situation got complicated.

It seemed that my unholy impurity wasn't that bad, because the high-level ceremony was completed in its entirety. It didn't seem to affect Pomera and Philia, who were around level 2000. They didn't even notice.

"What have you done?! Y-you moron! You're an idiot, Kanata! Why would you do something so extreme all on your own, just rushing forward without thinking?! And what would you do if I turned you down?!"

She was completely right. That's why I hadn't said anything once my normal, sane self was back in control.

"Are you...turning me down?" I asked.

Lunaère squeezed me in her arms and kissed me. "How could I turn you down...? You'd be lost without me."

Her face turned bright red, and her voice was so quiet it was nearly nonexistent.

I held her tight, and this time I was the one to kiss her.

## Chapter 5:

### The Couple's Epilogue

-1-

IT HAD BEEN a week since the banquet.

I told Pomera and Philia I wasn't actually going back to Earth forever, and also went around to the people I knew to tell them I'd be gone for a bit on a trip to a different world.

At long last, Lunaère and I stepped through a Dimension Gate to Earth.

"This is your world...?" she murmured as she stared around her in amazement.

We were in the residential area I used to live in, somewhere that wasn't really all that special, a few blocks away from downtown. Lunaère stood on the concrete sidewalk, staring with curiosity up at a streetlight. Everything was new to her.

Obviously, we put away anything resembling a weapon in my magic bag. Things would be complicated if we didn't.

We didn't expect people from Earth to be able to feel unholy impurity all that much, but just in case, and because Lunaère's normal outfit would stand out on Earth, we remade her Impurity Sealing Robe in a more Earth-like style. It still looked a little out of place, but not so bad that anyone would do anything more than frown and think the kids were wearing weird clothes these days.

I'd also changed into something that fit in more with Earth fashion. I had a little money left in my bank account, but I was worried I might not be able to withdraw it. Considering how much time had passed, I wouldn't be surprised if all the belongings from my apartment had been thrown out.

I was also worried how people would treat me after I'd disappeared for so long.

...But I took Lunaère and we went to the apartment I used to rent. The apartment building had two floors and ten rooms in total. It was pretty small, to be honest.

We stood awkwardly in front of the door to my room, and I heard a voice from behind us.

“I don’t recognize you two. Are you looking for someone who lives here?” There was a hint of warning in the voice.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry, I actually... Oh!” I turned around and realized I knew who it was. It was my landlord.

“Is that you, Kanbara-san? You caused me so much trouble when you disappeared without a trace! Where have you been?” she shouted, red-faced. “I had to talk to the police over and over, the real estate agent chucked the whole mess in my lap and skedaddled! I went and tried contacting your relatives, but I couldn’t get in touch with anyone! I had to get a lawyer!”

“I-I’m really sorry...” She was really ferocious. She might even be scarier than the First Dragon.

“Um, I don’t really know what’s going on, but please don’t blame Kanata,” said Lunaère. “Terrible things happened to him, and when he came back—”

“What are you saying?! I don’t understand English! I’m the one who had to deal with this mess, so don’t butt in!”

Lunaère paled in the face of the landlord’s fury and hid behind me. On Locklore, no one could rival her. But on Earth, my landlord was a high-level opponent.

I remembered now, a bit late, that I’d been given the skill “Locklorian” in the beginning, so Lunaère and my landlord couldn’t actually communicate. Lunaère could only guess that my landlord was yelling at me, and bit off more than she could chew when she tried to defend me. The landlord must have seemed terrifying to Lunaère as she babbled at her in the language of another world.

I made a mental note to teach Lunaère Japanese.

“Um, are any of my things left in the apartment?” I asked, and the landlord

scowled.

“What?”

“Uh, well, it’s fine if they aren’t. B-but...”

“I shoved any of the valuables I had an obligation to store in a backpack that was in your room, and then I tossed it in storage! The law kept me from just pawning it off... Such a pain!”

“So, there is something...?” I was relieved. It’d be a win if I could get my debit card back. I didn’t have a whole lot in the bank, but it was enough to pay for a place to stay for a bit.

I followed the landlord down the hallway toward storage.

“This person is terrifying, Kanata...” whispered Lunaère.

“Yeah. And I thought I’d gotten a bit more courageous.” I never thought I’d defeat a Lower God in Locklore, then be scared of my landlord on Earth.

“...And it appears our theory may be correct. She barely seems to notice the unholy impurity. The Impurity Sealing Robe isn’t perfect, but it does seem as if the people of this world have a very low ability to detect the impurity,” she said happily. I smiled back at her.

“What are you two jabbering on about?” snapped the landlord.

“Sorry!” I replied immediately.

“I never imagined when you went missing you’d come back with a cute foreign girlfriend. Is she an actress or something? You haven’t gotten into anything dangerous?” The landlord glared at me from the corner of her eye.

The landlord must have realized from Lunaère’s beauty that she wasn’t just anyone. That did make me happy, and maybe a bit proud, but asking if I was involved in anything dangerous? All I did was fight a god with a world’s existence hanging in the balance. Can’t get much more dangerous than that.

“Ha ha ha...” I laughed and avoided the question, and the landlord let out a sigh.

We came to the storage area, and the landlord took out my backpack.

“I’m really sorry for all the trouble...” I said.

“Yeah, because it *was* a lot of trouble. Here,” she said, then she handed me the key to my old apartment.

“What’s this...?”

“A feral cat’s living in there. I keep chasing it out, but it sits at the window crying all night. Even when I rented the place to someone else, they couldn’t stand the noise and they left. Get that thing out of there.”

“A feral cat? Why should I have to deal with a...” I got that far, and then I realized. “Oh! Thank you so much!” I hoisted the backpack in my left hand and grabbed Lunaère’s hand with my right. “Come on, Lunaère-san, my family’s waiting!”

“F-family...?”

I put the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door. Inside was a black cat sitting in the middle of the room like it owned the place.

“Kuromaru! I’m back!” I said.

“Meow!” She called back to me when I called her name and came running straight toward me. I picked her up and cuddled her, and she laid her head on my chest, looking up at me with blame in her eyes. “Meow...”

“I’m sorry, Kuromaru. I didn’t abandon you,” I said, gently stroking her head.

“There are cats in this world too? The cats in Locklore are much larger and fiercer... Earth cats are small and cute,” said Lunaère, looking at Kuromaru with anticipation.

“You can pet her too, Lunaère-san. Kuromaru is my precious family. She’s supported me for such a long time.”

I held Kuromaru out to Lunaère, and she slowly reached toward Kuromaru’s head. But as Lunaère came closer, Kuromaru lashed out with a quick slap.

“Hiss!”

“Wh-what’s wrong, Kuromaru?” I asked while Kuromaru struggled to reach me. I pulled her back in close and hugged her. She laid her head on my chest

again and closed her eyes like it was comfortable. "...I'm sorry, I guess Kuromaru isn't good with strangers," I said with a wry smile as I stroked her head.

"So, Kuromaru's a girl, right?"

"Yeah... Why?"

Lunaère glared right into Kuromaru's eyes and said, "Kuromaru... I'm sorry, but Kanata is mine."

"Hissss!" Kuromaru responded with another swipe of her paw.

"Don't start a fight with a cat!" I said, sitting in the middle of the room, stroking Kuromaru. "You know...there's a lot of things we need to deal with. I disappeared for a year, you're a foreigner who randomly appeared, and you don't have any identity here. And I don't really have that much money in this world. We have to find an apartment that allows pets and isn't too expensive. And since it's the two of us now, we need a decent amount of space."

"Are all those things really that difficult?" asked Lunaère timidly.

"They're nothing compared to attracting the attention of a crazy god. There's a lot of fun things in this world that only exist here. Locklore can't beat Earth in terms of food and entertainment, and it'll all be new experiences for you, Lunaère-san." I smiled at her.

"I look forward to it. Noble wanted to come too. I'd like to bring him someday."

"Uh, well...let's try that out once you're more used to things here," I said, avoiding the topic. A lot of things could go wrong if Noble came to Earth.

"Speaking of entertainment," I said, changing the subject, "I promised Kotone-san I'd bring back some manga for her. I'll need some money for that too..."

When I told Kotone I was going back to Earth for a bit, she got down on her knees, sobbing as she begged me to bring her manga. Obviously, I couldn't turn her down, but she asked for more volumes than I expected. She even asked me to get whatever manga were bestsellers right now.

"I'd like to bring Kotone-san here some time as well," I said.



“I’m...not sure how I feel about her. She always acts so friendly with you. Do you think she *likes* you? She has to at least have some little feelings for you, I would imagine.”

“Don’t worry.” I smiled at Lunaère. She was a bit of a worrywart, and she could be a little jealous...but I thought that was cute too. “Lunaère-san. Just you and me, we’re going to see everything Earth has to offer. We’re going to make memories together... I want you to come to love the world I was born in.”

“I’m really looking forward to it, Kanata.”

Her smile was full and radiant.

We had to quickly come up with a way to make money on Earth and think of a way to deal with Lunaère’s lack of an identity. There were so many problems to deal with, and so many things I wanted to do, but I knew we would handle it.

And so, the story written by the higher beings came to a happy ending. But the end of my story was just the beginning of *our* story.





## Afterword

**T**HIS IS YOUR AUTHOR, Nekoko, speaking.

Thank you for buying Volume 7—the final volume—of *Disciple of the Lich*!

All right, so, *Disciple of the Lich* has at long last come to a close. I've come to realize since then that a series this long becomes a big part of an author's life, since stories like this take years to write. I doubt my life as a writer can hold many series that are longer than seven volumes.

Speaking of, I was wondering how long ago it actually was that I started writing *Disciple of the Lich*, and so I decided to take a bit of a look back.

I uploaded the first part of the web series in July 2019, and the first print volume came out in May 2020. Which means it's been about three and a half years since I started writing it.

The first volume came out just after I graduated from college, around when I was starting my life as a real adult.

I remember sitting in the lobby of our company dorm, my older colleagues giving me funny looks as I stayed up until three o'clock in the morning, pounding frantically on my keyboard. (I had a shared room then, so I couldn't exactly work right next to my coworker, who was trying to get some sleep.)

To all my coworkers from back then, I'm sorry.

Luckily, thanks to all my readers, I am now able to make writing my full-time job.

Rereading past volumes of *Disciple of the Lich* is quite a trip down memory lane, since it makes me remember the difficulties I had at certain points or what I was thinking at the time, showing me why I had a certain side to a character's

thoughts.

There's something about long series—and I imagine people who write novels as a hobby might feel the same way—but these long works are almost like a compilation of the author's thoughts.

You can sort of feel the author's likes and dislikes, what they were interested in at the time, what lessons they've learned in their life, and there are all sorts of little aspects that show how that person looked at the world and their surroundings. It's obviously true of single novels or shorter works, but when it's a longer series, I can see how I've changed in those aspects over time. Going back and reading it is like looking at the path I've walked in life, which makes me feel a bit sentimental.

Sorry, I went off on a rant. I just wanted to throw all my emotions about ending *Disciple of the Lich* into the afterword, no filters. Later, I might read this and then bury my face in a pillow as I wonder why in the world I wrote something so embarrassing. But I know that the only people reading this are those of you who stuck with me through the entire series and made it all the way to reading this afterword. So I like to believe you'll regard me with compassion.

I don't necessarily think it's a good idea to write what I'm about to say, but to be honest, such a small percentage of you readers will get to the afterword of the final volume that I'm writing under the assumption that it's fine to write whatever I want, so I'll just say it: long series almost never stick to the original concept the author had. It's just not really practical.

There are market conditions to consider, and the author's condition also changes over the years it takes to finish it.

I have another series—not *Disciple of the Lich*!—with another publisher, and the lead editor for the series asked me how many volumes I was thinking the series would be. I confidently declared that I would conclude the series in ten volumes, with a total of a million Japanese characters. They drew back from me in fear.

On average, I think most novel series tend to be four volumes, where it gets

to a point that would be good to cut off, and they just wrap it up there. But fantasy series in particular... When you think about how you have to neatly wrap up the main character's story and any of the relationships with side characters, as well as really work in the fantasy world...well, you probably need about as many words as this series took.

When I look at that aspect of things, I've slowly started to become painfully aware that there's a disconnect between the market and the actual process of writing a book.

But even though it exists among all that, I still feel *Disciple of the Lich* is a happy series, one where I did what I wanted to do, wrote out everything I wanted to write, and brought everything together for a nice, neat ending. Readers, thank you again for coming all this way with me.

Since this is the final volume, there were things I wanted to do, like giving certain characters a chance to say certain things, hinting at what other characters would be doing in the future, and just generally digging into the side characters.

But...it would end up too long if I did too much of that. That would put me in a difficult situation. I could go on forever, but there would be the very big question: Would that actually make an interesting novel?

I didn't necessarily aim to limit the story to certain characters—I was trying to tie up loose ends—but certain characters kept popping up and stealing the spotlight. Sorry, Mel.

If we're talking about side characters, then I can't forget to mention Lovis. He seemed to be the second most popular character, after Lunaère, based on comments on the web series and reactions on social media. Why?

Actually, I originally had Lovis giving the assist during a certain last boss fight, but then I came to my senses and gave that duty to Noble. Dodged a bullet there.

The cover illustration for this volume shows Kanata and Lunaère. I've been thinking ever since the first volume that I want the last volume to have the two of them on the cover. And actually, because of the schedule, the cover illustration hasn't been picked yet. (And if I'm being 100 percent honest, it's because I've been dragging my feet and not doing my work!)

I have received three illustration proposals, though. The meetings in my head go something like this: "This one is clearly the best one!" "Wait, wait, this one is incredible too!" Which means I haven't been able to give an answer on that either. I am sort of pushing the schedule back, so I really do need to just reply right away like normal... I think after I finish writing this afterword, I'll spend the next three hours debating with myself, and then I'll decide.

Really, though, all the character designs and cover illustrations for this series have been amazing! I particularly like Lunaère, and Pomera, and Philia, and Kotone, and Lovis's party of three. All the ladies are super cute. And not just cute—they're cool too.

The backgrounds were all great as well. Every time I received the cover illustration for the next volume, I got super excited, like a reader looking at it and thinking, "Wow, so this is where their next adventure is going to be!" Hihara Yoh-sensei, thank you for all the illustrations you've done for the series!

The manga version of *Disciple of the Lich* ended in July 2022. It covered the first volume of the light novel, and it stopped there because it was a good ending point. It's too bad, since I've always felt that around the second or third volume of the light novels is when things start getting easy to show in a manga. But it is what it is...

The manga version has certain things that you can only express because it's a manga, and you even get to see some of the side characters that couldn't be shown in the light novels' illustrations, and I found that very exciting and fun to read. Lunaère and Pomera are so cute in manga form!

I liked the parts where Lovis made his appearance, and when Naiarotop revealed his true form. Naiarotop's transformation scene was so intense. It was way better than what I had in my head when I wrote the light novel, so when I

was writing Volume 7, I actually had the manga version of him in mind as I was writing. Kasei-sensei, thank you so much for giving us the manga!

I think I might have gotten carried away and said this already, but let me give my final thanks again.

Thank you to my editor for dealing with all the trouble I put you through. Thank you to Yoh Hihara-sensei for giving us your beautiful and exciting illustrations. Thank you to Kasei-sensei for the amazing manga version. I want to thank all of you for being involved in this work.

I also give my thanks to you, the readers who stuck with the series until the final volume and supported me throughout this journey. Thank you for staying here until the very end. I look forward to meeting you again in another series.





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