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**Firehead**  
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3

A WILD

**Last BOSS**  
APPEARED!



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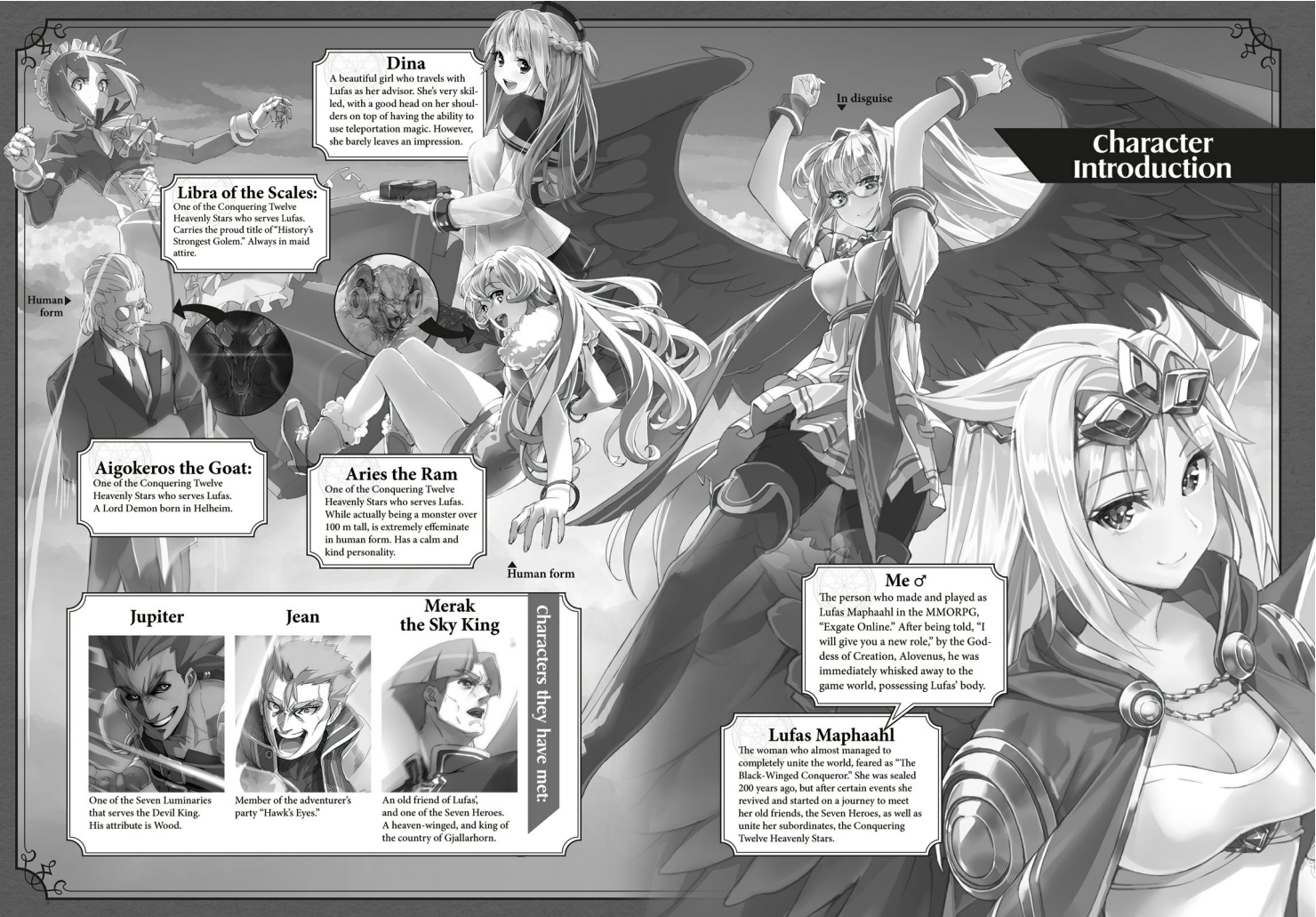
I'll just  
have to  
see if your  
strength has  
rusted in  
these past  
200 years,  
Star that  
Invites  
Death!

How bold!  
Then I'll  
play along!

(...Are...we  
just dead here?)



Character Introduction



**Dina**  
A beautiful girl who travels with Lufas as her advisor. She's very skilled, with a good head on her shoulders on top of having the ability to use teleportation magic. However, she barely leaves an impression.

**Libra of the Scales:**  
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serves Lufas. Carries the proud title of "History's Strongest Golem." Always in maid attire.

Human form

**Aigokeros the Goat:**  
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serves Lufas. A Lord Demon born in Helheim.

**Aries the Ram**  
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serves Lufas. While actually being a monster over 100 m tall, is extremely effeminate in human form. Has a calm and kind personality.

Human form

**Jupiter**



One of the Seven Luminaries that serves the Devil King. His attribute is Wood.

**Jean**



Member of the adventurer's party "Hawk's Eyes."

**Merak the Sky King**



An old friend of Lufas', and one of the Seven Heroes. A heaven-winged, and king of the country of Gjallarhorn.

characters they have met:

In disguise

**Me ♂**  
The person who made and played as Lufas Maphaahl in the MMORPG, "Exgate Online." After being told, "I will give you a new role," by the Goddess of Creation, Alovenus, he was immediately whisked away to the game world, possessing Lufas' body.

**Lufas Maphaahl**  
The woman who almost managed to completely unite the world, feared as "The Black-Winged Conqueror." She was sealed 200 years ago, but after certain events she revived and started on a journey to meet her old friends, the Seven Heroes, as well as unite her subordinates, the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars.

## STORY RECAP:

I, who ended up possessing my character in the game, Lufas Maphaahl, headed to my next destination, the Grave of the Black-Winged King, along with my advisor Dina and Aries the Ram of the Twelve Heavenly Stars.

There, I managed to retrieve history's strongest golem, "Libra of the Scales." Armed with Dina's information, we set out for Vanaheim, where Parthenos the "Maiden" was supposed to be waiting for us, but we ended up stopping by the country of Gjallarhorn, ruled by the "Sky King" Merak, on the way there.

But we arrived to find Gjallarhorn on the verge of civil war. The danger was only being further accelerated by Jupiter of the Seven Luminaries and his helper, Aigokeros the Goat. However, their plans ended in failure due to our intervention.

So we'd managed to safely prevent civil war and bring Aigokeros back into the fold in the process, but the moment I breathed a sigh of relief...

I found out that Dina was one of the Seven Luminaries.





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Main Story

Short Story:  
“A Wild Dragon Appeared”

# 1

Although my fight with Dina had been unexpected, I'd managed to get her to submit. Currently, I was confirming her stats. The stats I'd seen before were fake, so I didn't actually know Dina's true strength.

I wasn't truly doubting her or anything, but Dina did still seem as if she were hiding something. So I decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to get a firm grasp of her abilities, just in case.

**【Dina】**

**【Level】**: 1000

**【Race】**: Half-Elf

**【Class Levels】**

▪ Acolyte: 200

▪ Priest: 200

▪ Ranger: 100

▪ Strider: 100

▪ Mage: 200

▪ Sorcerer: 200

**【HP】**: 35000

**【SP】**: 16000

**【STR (Strength)】**: 1750

**【DEX (Dexterity)】**: 3000

**【VIT (Vitality)】**: 2050

**【INT (Intelligence)】**: 11550 (+2000)

**【AGI (Agility)】**: 3700

**【MND (Mind)】**: 8902

【LUK (Luck)】: 1930

【Equipment】:

- Head: —
- Right arm: Bracelet of the Sage (INT +1000)
- Left arm: Bracelet of the Shadow (INT +1000)
- Body: Traveler's clothes
- Legs: Traveler's boots
- Other: —

That was how her stats went, but... *What the hell is with that super back line specialization?*

It was great that I'd managed to see Dina's real stats, but they were really imbalanced. She had only bothered with back line classes, and she also had several classes at level 200, which you would normally have to pay for. On top of that, her equipment only served to stretch her INT stat even further. I could only say that she was being really thorough.

Her attack power and HP were far lower than what I would expect from a level 1000 player, but her INT stat alone was higher than any stat-boosting could get you. She wasn't quite at the level Megrez had been in his prime, but she was still ridiculous. However, this meant that she'd be easy prey for Libra.

After the fight, Dina and I cooperated and somehow managed to fool Libra and Aries, who of course came chasing after us. We said that the planet was an attack from someone somewhere else, and that I'd dealt with it for now.

Actually, me dealing with it wasn't a lie. It was just that Dina had been the one who'd attacked.

Also, this didn't really matter, but Dina had gone back to her usual blue-haired look at some point.

She was using the Water element spell "Illusion;" it used mist to show others an illusion and could even change one's form. In the game, all the spell did was

raise the target's evasion rate. At least, that was how I understood it.

People did complain, saying that if that was the case, why not change the player avatar like the lore indicated? But there wasn't a peep from the company about changing it.

*To think that that would bear fruit now... Truly anything can happen.*

Apparently, having two affinities was a racial skill for half-elves. For Dina, they were Metal and Water.

*Like, what? That's totally unfair.*

I was told that half-elves had good INT and MND growth, though not as good as elves. They also had decently balanced growth in everything else, though not as good as humans. So, not only did they have good stats for magic and heaven-arts use, they even got two affinities. And unlike normal elves, they could eat meat. Since elves were subjects of the forest, they couldn't do so. That was why Megrez had such low HP even though he stat-boosted with items, and thus was one-shottable by Brachium.

In the game, elves had a definite handicap, since they couldn't eat meat. On top of that, people only realized that fact after they'd started to stat boost... In other words, after they'd reached level 1000. It was a truly mean-spirited trap.

*But half-elves have none of those drawbacks, huh? What the hell? That's totally cheating. Nerf it. Now.*

*Actually, devs, just make an HP-boosting item that isn't orc meat.*

At any rate, now that Aigokeros had joined the party and Dina was once again my subordinate, we entered Tanaka and left Gjallar behind.

*It's starting to get tight in here with all the new people. I should think about expanding Tanaka. While I'm at it, why don't I take the chance to try adding in bulletproof glass and carbon fiber and stuff?*

Those materials didn't exist in the game, but it should be possible now. Materials only possible because of my knowledge from 'the other side'... *I wonder how high-level a golem I could make with them. I'm kind of tempted.*

In the game, it was impossible to improve or incorporate other materials into

a golem once it was completed. If you wanted a golem with new materials, you needed to build an entirely new one. However, it might've been possible now. This world resembled the game, but it wasn't the game, after all.

“By the way, Aigokeros. Do you have any useful information? You were with the devilfolk, so you should have heard something.”

I was sitting on a sofa I'd prepared in the car. Aigokeros sat across from me in human form. Aries was next to him, gnawing on some corn I'd bought for lunch in Gjallar.

At first, he attempted to just eat some grass that was nearby, but I stopped him. I couldn't let him do that in human form. It made it look like I was abusing him. Also, apparently Aigokeros' favorite meal was dandelions. The sight of a gentleman in his prime eating a dandelion... It was so incredibly surreal. It only reinforced the fact that even if they looked human, they were still a sheep and a goat.

“Well... First, I know of another of the Twelve Heavenly Stars who was working with the devilfolk.”

“Oh? Who else was there? Speak.”

“Scorpius of the Scorpion became a vengeful demon and is fully supporting the devilfolk. Unlike me, where our relationship was simply one of mutual interest, she desires to destroy humanity so much that she probably does not mind becoming a simple tool of the devilfolk. Hrotti—the country that the ‘Adventurer King,’ Phecda, founded—was destroyed by her hands.”

*—And there's the current winner of the ‘who's done the worst things’ contest.*

I somehow managed to fight the desire to facepalm but couldn't stop myself from heaving a sigh.

Scorpius of the Scorpion was...well, exactly as it said on the tin. She was a scorpion monster. Her monster name was ‘Emperor Berserk Scorpion.’ Nickname: ‘The Berserk Ruler.’ She could apply poison to her normal attacks and sprayed poison mist. Even if you were already poisoned, she could poison you more, turning it into ‘lethal poison’... Basically, she was a poison specialist who fought by poisoning you, poisoning you again, and then poisoning you *even*

more.

She didn't have any other means of attack, but she was really, really tough, so she forced her enemies into a war of attrition. You might feel relieved, since her attack power was low, but once she lost a certain amount of HP, she went into a berserk state and attacked with amazing momentum. She was quite nasty as a boss.

But to me, she wasn't actually that scary an opponent. *I kind of feel bad for thinking it, but thanks to my dress, any opponent who relies on status ailments is basically nothing to me.*

But to towns and countries these days, there probably wasn't a scarier enemy out there. After all, she could spread her poison mist over a wide area. If she really tried to kill an entire country, she'd be really good at it. *No joke.*

"Ahh, Scorpius... She really worshiped Miss Lufas, didn't she?"

After finishing his corn, Aries spoke up understandingly. "If all that turned into hate, then she could be a very dangerous individual right now."

*Is she really that dangerous?*

Libra nodded in agreement. "Yes. As she is now, she's so immersed in her revenge that she won't even listen to us. In fact, her hatred is so great she broke through her level constraints. Right now, she's level 900. Sorry, but I am no match for her."

*She did something that amazing?! The maximum level for a Tamer's monster is 800. How the hell did she break that on her own? That nut.*

I glanced over at Libra and asked her a question. "Libra, what would happen if you tried to fight her?"

"...I predict my probability of winning to be around 62%. Using my past data on Scorpius to project her current level of strength, I believe my battle capability exceeds hers. Although a preemptive use of Brachium should shave away a lot of her HP, it will not be enough to kill her. After that, it will be a simple comparison of our statuses and abilities. In other words, a question of whether Scorpius or I will fall first."

*So it's even dangerous for Libra, the strongest companion I have at the moment. I'd figured that she'd definitely win, since poison doesn't work on golems, but I guess Scorpius is just that dangerous.*

But Aries should've been able to match Scorpius' poison DoT with his Mesarthim. No matter how high her defenses were, it was basically meaningless in the face of percent damage. *Aries should have higher HP, too.* They were both Fire element as well, so even if Scorpius went berserk, it shouldn't matter too much to Aries. *He matches up pretty well with her.*

Aigokeros himself had admitted that he was no match for Scorpius, so he was out.

As for Dina... She had the advantage in attribute affinities, but her HP was far too low. *I don't think she'll be able to last through a berserk scorpion's attacks.* I wasn't entirely sure how well she could fight, so I couldn't be certain, but it was probably impossible for her.

*That means if we meet, Aries'll have to step up, huh?*

*But Scorpius should be in devilfolk territory right now, so we'll have to let her be for the moment.*

"Other than that... Leon the 'Lion' and the 'Vampire Princess' Benetnasch are at war and skirmish daily. It's a full-force fight to the death between the strongest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars and the strongest of the Seven Heroes. Even the devilfolk's Seven Luminaries won't go near, since they might get caught up in the fight and die."

"Hm... Benetnasch should have the slight advantage for that fight. She even outdid us at close range combat, after all."

"No, well... Leon, uhh... Well, unlike the other Twelve Heavenly Stars, he's never been exactly loyal to you... Once you disappeared he completely returned to the wild, and he's back to being level 1000."

*Wow, now that's chaos for you.*

*So they're ignoring me or any potential heroes to fight for the top of the hill?*

A fight between Benetnasch in her prime and Leon from back when he was a

boss enemy was the stuff of dreams. *I actually want to watch, but I also don't really want to get too close.*

"Hey, Aigo... Wasn't Benetnasch really stuck on seeing Lufas as her rival...?"

"She was. Ever since she lost to Miss Lufas once in the past, she's set surpassing Miss Lufas as her goal. She's very tenacious about it, too. Leon's the same. He used to be hailed as the strongest monster, but he was beaten by Miss Lufas and added to her forces. Even though he obeyed her, he was always on the lookout for the chance to usurp her position."

"A warning, Master. If you were to ever get close to their fight, there is an 80% probability of Benetnasch and Leon stopping their fight and charging at you instead."

*...I take it all back. It's not just that I don't really want to get too close. I don't want to be anywhere near them.*

Apparently Leon and Benetnasch were complete outliers to the usual Twelve Heavenly Stars or Seven Heroes in that they viewed me as an enemy. *Just imagining a level 1000 stat-boosted character and a level 1000 boss monster rushing me along with their armies is scary.*

*I can't even joke about it. Yeah. Let's leave those two for last. They can just keep each other company for a while.*

"Also...this might not really matter, but it seems that the country of swords, Laevateinn, has succeeded in summoning a hero."

"Oh?" I couldn't stop my voice from sounding a little hoarse after hearing that news.

Apparently a proper hero had been summoned to this world.

By 'hero' it probably meant that they had the hidden class 'Chosen.' It was the strongest front line class. Normally, raising Warrior, Light Warrior, Heavy Warrior, and Swordmaster to level 200 was required before unlocking it. In the game, no one had even known it existed until Alioth discovered it. And as far as I knew, there were no other players who'd taken that class other than Alioth.

*I mean, the unlock conditions for it were just awful.*

The abilities for Warrior, Light Warrior, and Heavy Warrior were all similar. If someone wanted warrior-like abilities, only taking one of them was basic common knowledge. On top of that, the player would have to pay real money to raise the max class levels of all those not-especially-powerful classes to 200 when there was literally no other merit in doing so.

The only classes worth paying to raise the max level of were upper-tier classes like Swordmaster or classes for which an upper tier didn't exist, like Alchemist. This was also basic common knowledge for anyone who played the game.

However, Alioth did this anyway. He ignored how awful and inefficient his stat growth was and stuck to only being a front line swordsman. Since he completely ignored the most efficient character builds, I and everyone else viewed Alioth as a joke character. I believed the player behind Alioth himself also at least half played him as one, too.

Everyone, including me, believed there was no way he'd ever become strong.

But at the end of that ridiculous character build lay a hidden class, and Alioth suddenly jumped all the way to being the strongest character in the game. All his terrible stat growth until then was more than made up for once he got the class, and his arsenal of skills became insanely brutal.

The skill "Climax" is at the top of that list. This allowed the Chosen to revive when their HP hit 0 and counterattack, and also raised their crit rate to 100%.

If that class was unlocked at the start...the hero would most likely rival us stat-boosted characters easily just by leveling.

I put my hand to my chin and muttered, "That's bad..."

The hero class was strong. That was why this was terrible news.

*Why is it terrible? Because the devilfolk know about it.*

The fact that I got this info from Aigokeros meant that the devilfolk already knew this. And they should also have known how dangerous the Chosen could be from fighting Alioth. They might try to end him while his level was still low.

But if he managed to raise his level, he might become a monster to rival me or the Seven Heroes. And the devilfolk knew that, too.

*Now if that's the case, what'll happen? What should I do? If I were the devilfolk, how would I act?*

*—No need to dwell on it... I'd kill him before he grew too dangerous. That's the best course of action.*

"That hero will be killed if he is left alone."

The hero was humanity's faint ray of hope. And he was already in danger right from the start.

No one in the car objected to my statement.

## 2

There existed a state of checkmate so obvious that anyone could tell at a glance. For example, there'd be no escaping if the king was immediately surrounded by enemy pieces right after a game of chess started. And you'd basically already lost at old maid when you had two cards left, one of which was the joker, and it was your turn to pull a card from your opponent, who only had one card left.

A lot of old RPGs started off with a scene where your mom woke you up from bed. But if the one waking you up was the demon lord in a full set of equipment with his army in tow, then all the player could really do at that point was throw away the controller and quit.

Basically, this was just such a situation. It hadn't actually happened yet, but if I were to leave things alone, it definitely would end with the hero's head being lopped off.

My statement that the hero would die was met with nods and other gestures of agreement. However, the atmosphere was not one of sadness.

It might be rude to say this, but the hero was basically a stranger to the Twelve Heavenly Stars in the first place. They had no real reason to care. But I was different. If this world moved as game scenarios dictated, then the hero would have to be the one to defeat the Devil King.

*I can't just let the hero die.*

That was why I tried to make it as obvious as possible that we were facing a serious situation. But...Aries and the others were rather blasé in their agreement. They probably only figured I was making small talk or something.

If I were to give an example, it was like if a baseball-fanatic dad told his son, “Oh no, my favorite team’s gonna lose!” But his son, who cared nothing for baseball, just replied, “I see.”

“As expected, Miss Lufas. You’re correct. The devilfolk will most likely send one of the Seven Luminaries after the hero whenever he departs on his journey—today or tomorrow.”

Dina nodded in agreement to Aigokeros’ prediction before dissing classic RPG tropes. “Well, that would be the right move. There’s no reason to wait for the hero to get stronger, after all. It’s not like they’ll do something so nice as to politely adjust the placement of their forces according to the hero’s strengths or something like that.”

*Like, it’s necessary, right? If the final boss just charged in right from the beginning, it wouldn’t even be a game. Final bosses are there to let the player have fun. Don’t you get it?*

*Also, the timing of the hero’s departure is actually really convenient. Really convenient...*

*Wait, no.*

Dina was the one who got us started on this topic. Meaning she brought this up at exactly the right time. *It seems like Dina doesn’t want the hero to die, either.*

“...Didn’t Laevateinn have that Sword Saint or whatever? And they call themselves the country of swords, so the strength of their soldiers shouldn’t be that bad. Even supposing that one of the Seven Luminaries attacks...how well would they be able to fight?” I asked Aigokeros, who probably knew just as much as Dina did about how powerful the devilfolk were.

After a moment of thought, Aigokeros replied, “Let’s see... That country has a sword—”

He was forcefully cut off by Dina for some reason. “It has a barrier that the

Sword King Alioth erected, so the Seven Luminaries will probably be repelled, Miss Lufas.”

*Like... Hmm... Do you actually enjoy explaining things or something? Or were you afraid of having your role of expositioner taken away from you?*

Aigokeros glared at Dina, but she shrugged it off with a smug expression.

In contrast to the two of them, who were battling over some weird position, Aries and Libra were both at peace. Aries had started on a second ear of corn, and Libra was simply observing everything that was going on.

“Barrier?”

“Yes. Made using the hero skill ‘Soul Succession.’ As you should know—”

“It’s exactly as you expect!” This time, Aigokeros was the one to interrupt Dina.

*What the hell are you doing?*

For now, I purposefully ignored what was going on between the two of them and instead tried to recall the skill they’d brought up.

“Soul Succession.”

*...Its effect should be...*

“...Ah, right.”

Its effect was to put up a wide-area barrier to considerably buff the abilities of all player characters in a set area while also debuffing the abilities of any enemies in the same area by the same amount. That would normally just make it a combined buff/debuff skill. The ridiculous part of the skill was that it lasted until the battle was over.

But there were also large demerits to the skill. The hero who used the skill instantly died and was respawned in town immediately, with no time allowed for resurrection. In the game, Alioth played a prank by making a full dash back to battle after using the skill, confusing people into yelling, “Weren’t you dead?!” To which he replied, “Nope, too bad! It was a trick!”

*But in this world, using it equals death... Probably... There’d be nothing so*

pleasant as having the user just run back from town.

“No wonder why they managed to last so long without a hero. ...No, that’s technically wrong. Alioth is protecting that place even now.”

Svel had Megrez and Levia.

Gjallar had Merak and his Pressure.

And Laevateinn had the barrier.

Each place had its own method to protect itself.

Hrotti, the country that that idiot Scorpius destroyed, had probably had no defenses like that. But Phecda should have had the Monster Tamer class. It wouldn’t have been strange for there to be at least one strong monster defending the place.

*...Could they all have been killed in the fight with the Devil King?*

At any rate, it was probably safe to assume all the countries that still existed had at least some way to defend themselves.

“Understood. Then they should be safe within the country’s borders.”

“Exactly. Even if Aigokeros or I managed to infiltrate inside the barrier, I think we’d have a tough time. Though we’d still manage to do considerable damage, of course,” Aries declared.

I was impressed. *So the barrier is strong enough for even the Twelve Heavenly Stars to be cautious.*

The divide between humanity and the Twelve Heavenly Stars in this world was like heaven and earth. But even with this gap in power, Aries hesitated to say he could do it. The power of the barrier was truly unfathomable.

Of course, he was still confident that they could take that buff/debuff combo and still half-destroy the country and basically decimate all its knights. But at the very least, that meant that someone on the level of the Seven Luminaries wouldn’t be able to deal with its effects.

This was predicated on the assumption that there were no other level 1000s mixed into the Seven Luminaries like Dina, though. That meant this also served

as proof that there were no others like Dina. After all, if there were others at Dina's level, they could just toss in meteors from outside the barriers.

Although there was probably some difference in power levels between the Seven Luminaries, there basically shouldn't be any other outliers like Dina. *I feel guilty saying this about other people, but they're really just a collection of small-fry.*

However, I hadn't really felt any of the effects when I'd been there. Was there really a barrier? Did the barrier just not affect me because I was a player? Or was it actually affecting me, and I was just too stupid to notice?

*I'm a little curious.*

"Master, I would be able to destroy Laevateinn with a 98% chance of success."

"Don't."

I stopped Libra, who sounded very proud of what she'd said, in her tracks while holding back my desire to sigh.

*...Every time Libra says something like this, I'm reminded that I should be grateful she decided to hole up in that grave, especially since she can just ignore the barrier and fire Brachium.* Buffs and debuffs had no meaning in the face of fixed damage.

"Returning to the subject at hand, you're saying that they won't make a move as long as he stays within the country and its barrier?"

"It should be safe as long as the one attacking isn't Scorpius, the Devil King himself, or one of his direct descendants. However, if you flip that around, that means that as long as one of those people move, then the hero and country will definitely perish. And all this is out the window anyway if he leaves."

"Which means?"

"They'll wait for the moment the hero leaves on his journey. As soon as the hero leaves the capital, he'll encounter one of the Seven Luminaries." Dina spoke confidently.

*I see. In other words, it'll be a blitz as soon as he leaves the capital. In which*

case, the episode title would be: *“Ah! A Wild Seven Luminary Appeared!”*

*Yep, that’d be checkmate for the hero. Like, don’t let the boss go all that way to assault the main character. That’s a forbidden tactic in RPGs. Bosses should quietly and faithfully wait in the back of their castles and dungeons so they can practice being cool and saying things like, “Well met, Hero!”*

The fact that Dina, a member of the Seven Luminaries, could say all this with such confidence also meant that this had already been decided. *I see.*

That rumored Sword Saint would probably be accompanying the hero. But even so, he wouldn’t be enough against a member of the Seven Luminaries.

“One of the Seven Luminaries will definitely attack when the hero leaves. Which means it is also the perfect chance to take down another one. All of you, wait here. We will go back to Laevateinn briefly.”

My real objective was to protect the hero, but Aries and the others wouldn’t be satisfied with just that. So for now, I just made a decent excuse.

It wouldn’t be necessary to bring anyone with me for just one of the Seven Luminaries. If I were to fly at my fastest, the only one who could keep pace with me would be Dina in the first place. Libra would be able to catch up in a little bit, but I didn’t feel the need to bring such a dangerous weapon with me all the way to Laevateinn. *If she used Brachium, then there might be some damage to the capital, after all.*

Dina was... *No, that’s not a good idea.* She herself said that the Seven Luminaries knew that Dina was Venus. If she were with me and clearly taking hostile action, then they would assume that she had betrayed them. If that happened, I’d lose the double agent I’d taken all this trouble to gain. I needed them to continue believing that Venus was their ally, at least for now.

“Are you planning to go alone, Master?” Libra spoke worriedly, but I didn’t think there was any need for it.

“It won’t be a problem. We can easily win against the rest of the Seven Luminaries, even if they all attacked us at once.”

It might be a little conceited, but I wasn’t worried about anybody from the Seven Luminaries if they were only as strong as Mars or Jupiter. Even if there

were a hundred of them, I could probably sweep them in one AoE attack.

*That's just what happens when the gap in levels is that big.*

*And if in the worst-case scenario it turns out I actually need a friendly, I can always just make a golem on the spot. Anyway, as long as I don't let my guard down... No, I probably couldn't lose even if I did that.*

Even if I just took a break from fighting for a while to read a light novel or something, they wouldn't even shave off 10% of my HP by the time I was finished. In fact, if I just made a golem instead, there was actually a possibility that they'd all be dead by the time I was done reading.

*That's just how wide the gap between our power levels is.* It was harder to lose.

"We shall return tomorrow. There is no need to worry," I told Aries and the others before leaving Tanaka.

*At any rate, I should take any opportunity to eliminate the Seven Luminaries I can, considering the state of the world right now.*

*I don't know what the Devil King is thinking, but he doesn't seem to be doing anything for himself.* The only ones actually fighting were the Seven Luminaries and the Twelve Heavenly Stars.

*As for the Seven Luminaries, I have killed two so far. Dina was a spy, so that leaves four more. If I took one out here, that would make three, which would help humanity out a lot.*

While continuing to ponder on all that, I opened my wings and took to the sky.

*The feeling of being freed from gravity is really nice. I don't think I'll ever get tired of it. Every time I experience this feeling I'm glad that I am heaven-winged.*

Cutting through the air, I crossed huge distances in a single flap. *I love the fact that I can travel distances that Tanaka would need a couple days to travel in a scant ten or so minutes.*

*Still though, I wonder what's up with these wings?*

A human would need a wingspan of over 20 meters to fly, or so I remembered

reading somewhere. But my wings were nowhere near that big. They certainly were large, but each one was only about a meter long. Even so, I could fly quite easily.

*This world really is a fantasy.*

I flew for some time. I was currently in the airspace above Laevateinn, the country which once called me to this world. It wasn't far back enough for me to feel nostalgic about it, though. In actuality, it had only been a couple of weeks. But I still felt quite thankful to this country as a whole.

I was here because the country had made a mistake. And thanks to that, I had managed to meet Aries and the others. I was fully aware that this was probably a strange way of thinking about things. I imagined most people would've been angry at having been ripped away from life in modern Japan, which was peaceful and safe.

*I suppose the right mindset would be wanting to return as fast as possible.*

*But... I don't think that way at all. I wonder why? It's as if I'm immune to homesickness. I don't even feel nostalgic for my homeland.*

Japan provided a peaceful life, guaranteed safety, well-built housing, and the ability to easily get clothes and food. Not to mention the large number of activities and amusements.

...This place was a huge jump from that.

There was literally a world of difference between here and Japan, since this world was being threatened by the devilfolk. It'd be a unanimous decision when it came to deciding which world was more fortunate.

*But still. I wonder why?*

*I feel like the other world is the unfamiliar one...as if I were viewing it in a dream or from the other side of a screen.* That place didn't feel real. It just didn't.

Even though I certainly remembered having grown up and living there all the way into adulthood, it all still felt as if it had happened to someone else... It was like I was peeking into some unknown person's life in the form of a TV drama.

*I just feel like that life had nothing to do with me.*

*It seems as if I'm integrating with "Lufas" in a pretty unfavorable way.*

*No, wait. Or maybe from the start...*

...

*Let's stop. I don't have the time to be going down that road right now. Or rather, I just lost the leeway to do so.*

I twisted my neck and looked around the country of Laevateinn once again. After taking a closer look, I really did find something like a barrier covering the entire capital.

Normally no skill would cover this wide a range, but that just meant there was yet another difference from the game. Either that, or this was a show of Alioth's willpower.

"We see... No wonder the Seven Luminaries would not be able to get close. You think so, too, no?" I muttered, talking to someone behind me.

When I'd started to look around the city a moment ago, I felt a presence suddenly appear behind me. I never confirmed what the figure looked like. It stayed behind me, and I could clearly feel it just standing there, not doing anything in particular.

The fact that the presence appeared so suddenly meant that the first thing to suspect was teleportation through Exgate. I'd confirmed with Dina already that there was no other method of teleportation other than the Exgate spell.

And there were conditions to be able to use Exgate as well. One had to be able to use both heaven-arts and magic. That was why vampires, who could only use magic, and heaven-winged, who could only use heaven-arts, were barred from using it. The beastfolk could also probably be counted out in this day and age, since they'd always been bad at using magic.

That meant there was a limited selection of people who could use Exgate.

...It wasn't Dina. This feeling of pressure and hostility didn't belong to her. But it wasn't some other member of the Seven Luminaries, either. This presence was too strong to be one of them.

Then...

There were very few others it could be. And I already knew the answer. I was almost certain. I'd never actually met that person before, but I knew them well.

I'd always known we would meet eventually. My premonition resonated. It was even the exact same as how I'd felt two hundred years ago. I remembered both fearing and looking forward to this.

"Right, Devil King?"

For some reason, We (I) had a smile on, an expression that could only be described as warlike.

The one behind me, *he*, spoke.

### 3

Minamijuuji Sei was a completely normal boy attending a Japanese high school in the year 2015. He was 17 years old, 170 cm tall, weighed 60 kg, and had a very average build. There was nothing he was especially good at, but nothing he was especially bad at, either.

His grades were on the upper end of average. He was pretty good at PE, but he wasn't one of the best in his class. Both in studies and athletics, he was slightly above average, but that was it.

His looks were quite good, and in the 'clean and nice' category. However, he was a far cry from someone who could be an idol or model. He was simply in the higher tier in his class.

This boy who didn't have much of anything special about him was currently far from Japan. Rather, he wasn't even on Earth anymore. He had stepped foot into an entirely different world—the world of Mizgarz.

It all started when a voice calling for help suddenly rang in his head. He responded to the call by searching around for the owner of the voice. If someone was hurt, he would apply first aid before calling for an ambulance. If the person was being attacked, he would find some people to help to stop the attack with numbers.

Either way, the boy responded that he wanted to help, since he'd been asked.

However, his worry was all for naught. By the time he'd noticed, he was in another world and being asked to please defeat the Devil King and the Great Conqueror.

*What...?*

He was bewildered and was stuck on one thought. *Just what kind of joke is this?*

It had been over forty years since the great undertaking that was the Apollo 11 moon landing. Since then, science and technology had taken great leaps and bounds, but humanity had yet to leave the solar system.

Even so, a human who wasn't even wearing a spacesuit just made the jump to another world by himself using some occultish power that was being referred to as magic. Any scientists who were currently doing research in the desperate hope of one day going to space could go ahead and weep.

Such was the ridiculous situation that the boy was thrown into, but for some reason, he was very quick to adapt.

Either that, or he was simply an idiot.

At any rate, the boy who had just been thrust into an unknown situation in an entirely different world didn't shout, flail around, or make a fuss demanding to be sent back. Instead, he remained calm the entire time in order to listen to the people around him as to why he'd been called and what he should do. One such person was a young elf (although he was actually over two hundred years old) who was apparently the one who'd summoned him. After hearing all that, he easily accepted all that new information, too.

It wasn't as if he wasn't scared of fighting. But he had always had a dream, one that he'd had since a much earlier age, a reckless drive towards a future filled with ideals.

When he was much younger, he wanted to be a cop. He admired the modern heroes who helped people. It was a plan for the future drawn up by a child who still didn't know anything about corruption or how tough the world was.

He'd been raised watching the figure of his dad, who was a cop, from behind. He was always proud of how people relied on his father. That was why he'd wanted to be the same. He'd admired that and set it as his goal. And even now, that desire hadn't faded.

Sei never imagined he would be fighting a Devil King or the Great Conqueror or whatever they were called in another world. Rather, there was no way he could have.

Even now, he still didn't want to kill anybody. He wasn't planning to, either. But he also couldn't just snub the people who were asking for his help. If he were to leave the people who wanted his help now, he felt that he would never manage to achieve his dream.

That was exactly why Sei agreed to help these people from another world. He did so because he felt that his own personal hero, the image of his father inside his heart, would never refuse to help.

"...No matter how much enthusiasm I have, my skills need to be able to keep up..."

Sei was currently in a training area taking sword lessons from his mentor, Friedrich, when he muttered that to himself.

However, diverting attention elsewhere in the training area was akin to suicide. This was especially true when one was facing a superior opponent—the Sword Saint in this case, the strongest swordsman in the world.

Friedrich parried, knocking Sei's sword out of his hands and pointing the end of it at Sei's throat.

The match was decided.

Sei raised his hands to signal surrender, once again looking up at his mentor.

At first, Sei had been imagining an awesome, handsome knight given the cool title of Sword Saint and the name Friedrich. But when he'd actually met his mentor for the first time, he found that the real thing couldn't have been further from his imagination.

If Friedrich were to be summed up in one word, it would be...tiger.

That wasn't a metaphor. His head was literally that of a tiger's.

No, it wasn't just his head. Friedrich's entire body was covered in fur colored a tiger's exact shade of orange with black stripes.

Sei had an over-2-meter-tall tiger-man wearing armor coming at him with a sword. Everybody expected him to drop to the floor with his legs like jelly. In fact, Sei actually *had* done that.

On top of that, Friedrich had all the tendencies and flexibility of a feline and would often climb inside boxes that were smaller than him for no reason other than to be in them. In fact, Friedrich would often try to squeeze himself into tight gaps or small boxes whenever he had the free time, often then finding himself unable to get out.

However, it was forbidden to refer to him as just a bipedal cat. He was a proud tiger.

Regardless of whether or not he reacted to waving foxtails, he was a great tiger beastfolk. He was still a tiger, even if he would sometimes come back with a dead mouse in his mouth.

"GGRRWWOOOAAARRRR!" The Sword Saint roared.

*It might not really matter in the grand scheme of things, but at least speak an actual language,* Sei found himself thinking.

It wasn't as if the beastfolk were a race that didn't understand normal, human speech. In fact, they could talk quite well. However, the Sword Saint insisted on roaring. It sounded exactly like a tiger's. He could probably actually speak if he ever felt like it. At least, that was what the elf man said, but Sei had yet to see that happen.

"It seems the captain is angry that you were distracted in the middle of your mock battle." The one who translated for the Sword Saint was the woman who served as the vice-captain of the knight brigade.

The trope was for female knights to all be beautiful...or at least it should have been. The vice-captain herself wasn't really all that much. In fact, her rough features likened her more to a female gorilla.

She was muscular, had pitch-black skin, and her hair was done up in dreadlocks. That, along with her huge nostrils and thick lips, shattered Sei's image of a female knight.

*Isn't she more like an Amazon warrior?* Sei thought.

Also, when Sei looked closer, he could see hairs sticking out of her huge nostrils. That was just how reality was.

"Grrr..."

"The captain says he wants chicken today."

"What? Even if you tell me that..."

"Graagh!"

"It seems the captain wants to go out, so that's it for training today."

"...Isn't this Sword Saint a little too true to his whims?"

Friedrich was a very whimsical person. Just a little while ago, he'd been playing with a ball, entranced, when he suddenly got tired and went off somewhere.

*Like, is everyone sure he isn't just a huge cat?* Sei desperately fought the urge to ask that out loud.

Because even through all that, he was still the world's only swordmaster and Sword Saint. His figure as a swordsman was like the symbol of the country. That was why Sei couldn't badmouth him.

"Sir Sei!"

"Oh, Kross. What's wrong?"

Sei wondered what was going on while watching the Sword Saint leave when the young-looking elf ran over. He was the one who had summoned Sei to this world, and unlike what his outward appearance suggested, he was already two hundred years old and the king's advisor.

*His full name should be, uhh...Kross Nozan?*

"It seems we've finally gathered all the members necessary for our travels. Please take Friedrich and meet up with the king at his palace."

Having heard that, Sei's expression grew tense. *So it's finally time*, he thought.

Even if he was called the hero, Sei was still just a civilian who'd lived in the peaceful country of Japan until recently. It didn't matter that he'd started training with the sword. Sending him out on a journey was akin to killing him.

That was why the kingdom had to prepare the best comrades and equipment for him.

The king had said that Sei had to put all his effort into learning the sword until then.

The time had finally come. The kingdom had everything and everyone at the ready, and preparations were complete.

And that meant that the day Sei would depart on his journey was close at hand.

"...All right."

\*       \*

"Oh, hero. It is time to set out on your journey."

"Understood!"

Sei and Friedrich were knelt in front of the king with bowed heads. There were several unfamiliar faces on standby next to the king's throne. Sei figured that they were most likely the people who were going to become his companions.

"Manpower and weapons. We have gathered everything you will need to the best of our abilities. First, there is the pride of our nation, Friedrich the Sword Saint."

"GWOAARRRR!" The Sword Saint answered the king with a roar.

*Oh, come on. At least talk in front of the king.*

Sei wondered if this would be counted as an insult. But apparently, this wasn't unusual, and no one reacted.

The elf man was next on the list.

"This here is Kross the Acolyte, a master of heaven-arts and my advisor."

“On my life, I swear I will be of service.”

*He must be pretty strong to have his name called so early. They told me that he's one of the few survivors from the fight with Lufas two hundred years ago, so this might actually be a smart choice.*

“This is Alfie. She is a promising new star who graduated at the top of her class from Svel's magic academy. She knows some swordsmanship as well, since she was taught by her father, the mercenary Gantz. She will surely support you well during your journey.”

“It is such an honor to have been chosen for this, Your Majesty.”

The one who replied was one of the people who had been waiting by the king's side, a stubborn-looking girl who had her brown hair in a side ponytail. She was the spitting image of a conventional mage with her black mantle over a white shirt and red skirt.

*I kinda feel like her skirt is a little short. Whatever, though. Is she trying to invite me or something?*

“From the same country, Svel, we have steel golems that were made and sent to us by the Wise King Megrez himself. It seems that almost all the golems had been destroyed by Aries of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, but they still sent us these posthaste after hearing that the hero was about to depart on his journey.”

Some inelegant-looking golems stepped forward with a clank. Judging from the feeling of pressure they gave off, they were just as strong as the Sword Saint.

“And just in case, there will always be ten Rangers from our covert ops units following you and supporting you from the shadows. They are all elite agents over level 50.”

That was when Sei noticed a group of people in all black who had appeared by the king's side at some point. Their faces were hidden as well. When they noticed Sei's gaze, they gave him a thumbs up.

“And then there are the Great Conqueror's treasures, brought back from the Grave of the Black-Winged King by the four members of Falcon's Eye. You all

may choose from the best of these, and take them with you.”

After hearing the king’s proclamation, the Sword Saint, Kross, and Alfie’s eyes all widened, sparkling with interest. Sei didn’t understand why, but he could tell that whatever he was being given was apparently worth quite a lot.

*At least I won’t be sent out with just a wooden stick or something.*

Weapons were brought out and presented to Sei and the others. Alfie, Kross, and the tiger seemed truly happy as they looked upon the weapons. Unfortunately, Sei wasn’t very knowledgeable about weapons, but the ones in front of him gave off such a powerful feeling that even he could tell they were strong at a glance.

*I see. No wonder why these people seemed so happy. They’re pure warriors and mages who are true inhabitants of this world.*

“Now, the time has come for you to set off. Hero, and all your companions, listen well! Make sure you defeat the evil Devil King and the revived Great Conqueror, and clear the dark skies hanging over us all!” the king declared.

At the same time, everyone stood up. All their gazes focused on Sei, who hadn’t been keeping up with what was going on, causing him to panic and stand. As soon as he did, trumpets sounded around him, playing an unfamiliar melody. Added to that were the cheers of the people gathered outside the castle. They were so loud it almost hurt.

“Now go, Hero!”

This was when it finally hit Sei that it was time for him to go. Right now.

*Huh? Isn’t this too fast? Wouldn’t you normally discuss this with me beforehand or give me a day or something?* But it was already too late. Everyone’s gazes concentrated on Sei, as if telling him to go already.

With no other choice, Sei resigned himself and started walking, half in desperation. He was followed by a retinue, as if he were leading some sort of parade. When he got out of the castle, people crowded around to get a look at him as they cheered.

*Oh no. This is really embarrassing.* Sei’s face turned red, and he started

walking faster. *I just need to get out of the capital for now. I can think after that.*

After that, the parade that was basically a public execution continued for a few minutes before Sei finally reached the gates.

*Now, this is when it starts—my adventure to save the world.*

*This is a heroic saga, one that I thought was only ever possible in games, that I'd be looking at from the safety of the other side of the screen. But right now, I'm living one. I am the main character. The only difference is that I don't get continues.*

Sei couldn't stop himself from getting nervous, and he started to sweat.

*Don't be afraid. Just don't.*

*Now then, I need to face forward and go. But to be honest, I don't think I'm suited for this. There's gotta be people way more fitting for this than me. Like, wouldn't a soldier with an anti-tank gun or something be way stronger and more reliable than some Japanese student?*

*But in the end, I am the hero. So let's go.*

So as to not worry his companions, Sei took a step forward. At that instant, black feathers entered his vision. Right afterwards, a black angel descended.

She had a crimson mantle on over a pure-white dress. The ominous black wings which were her symbol were on full display, spreading out from behind her. Her golden hair had red mixed in, as if it were on fire. And her looks could only be described as unparalleled.

However, the ground crumbled beneath her simply from her touching down. Just the absolute power of her presence caused the ranger unit behind Sei to have their legs give out from under them.

"Huh? No way. That's..."

"L-L-L-L-Lu-Lufas Maphaahlllll?!!" Alfie muttered, scared, while Kross out-and-out screamed.

*Thought so. It's obvious. I can feel my legs giving out just from looking at her. My body is just giving in to fear on its own. There's no doubt. That's "her."*

*She's the Black-Winged Conqueror!*

*—A wild Lufas Maphaahl appeared!*

Even while imagining such a dumb notice popping up, Sei couldn't allay his fear.

Fear. Exactly. Right now, Sei was experiencing an unprecedented level of fear. His teeth were chattering and everything.

*Oh, no. I can't fight that. There's no way. I can't do it. That's a monster in human skin. I'm not even in the same dimension that would be required to attempt to face that.*

*But...aagghh... Why is reality so cruel?*

To Sei, just encountering the Great Conqueror on the first step of his journey was a nightmare, but the nightmare continued.

Lufas looked up into the sky. Lured in by that action, Sei also looked up...and there he found yet another monster.

...It was a man with inhuman blue skin but good looks. His black hair fluttered in the wind, and his eyes were golden. A pitch-black mantle covered his entire body, and the air around him warped as if he were just a mirage. And, horror of horrors...the strength of his presence didn't fall behind that of the black-winged girl. Sei didn't even want to think about it. He wished he hadn't noticed.

The man touched down at a slow, leisurely pace.

He stood opposite Lufas with Sei and the others sandwiched between them. He faced off against the Black-Winged Conqueror, who happened to be on their other side.

*Hey, stop that, goddammit. Don't put us between you.* Sei wanted to scream.

*"Wha— Ah... No way... Wha— ...Oh Goddess, no..."*

Kross looked so pale Sei was worried he would die right then and there. His eyes were tearing up, and his face was twisted in despair. Apparently Kross knew the man as well. He knew the man and feared him.

*"Devil..."*

“Huh?”

“Devil King...! Why is the Devil King here...?!”

—A wild Devil King appeared!

On the first step...

Having been suddenly pincered by a double-last-boss encounter with the Great Conqueror and the Devil King, the hero party had one thought: *What kind of punishment is this?*

And Sei thought something else: *...Are we just dead now?*



The space there warped. The scenery twisted like an infant's drawing, and things lost their base form. The sight, which was far too unreal, was not actually real, of course. It was an illusion. Sei and the others in his party were just hallucinating from being exposed to the absolute presences of Lufas and the Devil King. Space hadn't actually warped. However, the hallucination might as well have been reality, since everyone there saw the same thing.

Meanwhile, in that warped world, the Black-Winged Conqueror and the Devil King faced off. The heroes weren't even worth noticing to them. The both of them only saw each other. In their world, they were already alone. Even the hero unfortunately stuck between them was likely nothing but a pebble on the side of the road to these two pinnacles of strength. That was why the two of them continued to stare at each other as if Sei and the others weren't even there.

Eventually, the man spoke, breaking the silence. "...I have been waiting for this moment." His voice was low and sounded calm. Strangely, his voice held no hostility. It was kind, as if he were a boy speaking to the object of his passionate, one-sided love. With the hero and his party still between them, the man spoke again. "It's strange. This is the first time we have met. Even so, we know each other well. I don't feel like this is our first meeting at all."

The Devil King—the leader of all the devilfolk, who were the biggest enemies of collective humanity—was the definition of a threat to the world. He was the manifestation of death and fear. He was the king of devils whom even the Seven Heroes couldn't match.

Yet, in front of the girl with black wings, he continued to talk calmly. "However, I will still say this... Pleased to meet you, Alcor. I am Orm...the one you all call the Devil King."

"Alcor?"

"It is our name for you. Any who meet you die. So, with fear in their hearts, they have named you 'Alcor, the Star that Invites Death.'" He narrowed his

eyes, which had vertical-slit pupils like a snake's, looking affectionately at his fated enemy whom he had never ended up fighting two hundred years ago.

In response to that gaze, Lufas never wavered, donning a fearless smile. If the king of devils was a monster, then Lufas was right there with him. Because they lived in the same dimension, they faced each other as equals. So there was no reason to fear him. Lufas' expression was tinged with the composure of someone strong.

*So I'm definitely not scared. There's no way I'm actually thinking, "What the hell is this pressure? I can only laugh..." or anything like that.*

"It seems there's no need for us to name ourselves, but it would be rude not to. We are Lufas Maphaahl, the one whom you all apparently call the Star that Invites Death."

They knew one another, even though this was their first meeting. They already knew each other's names, but they introduced themselves anyway.

It was a strange, comical scene. On the surface, they were talking peacefully, but the fight had already started. The Devil King, Orm, was using a mental interference skill, and Lufas had her equipment that gave her status-ailment invulnerability to defend against it. Meanwhile, Orm was getting through Lufas' Pressure with his pure levels.

Each one of their attacks would have decided the match if the opponent were anyone else. However, all this was just sport to these two. They knew the attacks wouldn't work. The moves were meant as a simple greeting.

The pitiful ones were the hero party, who, thanks to the AoE of Lufas' and Orm's skills, were being beaten down with the "Fear" status effect (attack power down) and Pressure (unable to move).

"We never expected you to come yourself. Are you that scared of the hero?"

"Don't play dumb. There are and have always been only two people I am afraid of. One is the omniscient and omnipotent Goddess. The other is right in front of me and is hailed as Alcor, the Star that Invites Death. Everyone other than that is as dust to me."

"Then are you saying this situation was unexpected?"

“No. This was within my expectations. I have come here to meet you.”

*That’s a contradiction. He said he was afraid of me, but he came to meet me?*

Lufas silently motioned for him to continue, and Orm did.

“Yes. I will tell you honestly. I have been afraid of you. I avoided fighting you, Alcor, the Star that Invites Death, and your Twelve Heavenly Stars. I felt fear at the prospect of fighting the great warriors who were united under your leadership as well. I was afraid, shivering, and I thought of you both while I was awake and in my dreams. I have no intention of denying my cowardice back then. It is all true.”

“For all that fear you talk of, you showed yourself quite easily this time.”

“I only noticed after I lost you. You were the only one who stepped outside of the Goddess’ scenario. In other words, you are necessary for me and this world. Losing you was a mistake.”

Lufas narrowed her eyes after hearing Orm’s explanation. He was clearly holding something back and not speaking plainly. Her face betrayed her thoughts. *I have no idea what he’s talking about.*

It wasn’t just her. Sei and the others couldn’t figure out what the Devil King was getting at, either.

“...What do you mean?”

“Do you want to know? Then force me to tell you with all that simple, direct power that was so like you two hundred years ago. Well, even if you refuse, I will fight you anyway.” Orm cracked his knuckles.

Lufas slowly formed fists as well.

*—It’s starting.*

Sei and the others felt shivers run through their entire bodies, and they knew a fight was starting. Right here, right now. The fight between the Great Conqueror and the Devil King that never happened two hundred years ago was about to start. A confrontation was going to happen, an unprecedented one for the top of the world.

“—How bold! Then We shall comply with your wishes!”

“—Show me your power, Alcor! I will see if you’ve gotten rusty these past two hundred years!”

The air exploded.

The explosion happened above Sei and the others’ heads, but the two combatants were already nowhere to be seen. This was the definition of ‘too fast for the eyes to follow.’

The two kings flew about at a speed that Sei and the others couldn’t follow. They clashed above Sei and the others’ heads before separating again. The battle had already moved into the sky. It was unknown just when the two of them had moved into the air, but they were already exchanging countless punches up on that stage.

Each one of the blows unleashed by the two of them were upper-tier skills that had the potency to kill. Neither of them bothered with feints or jabs. Each and every blow exchanged between them was a rain of haymakers that aimed to instantly end the fight. However, the techniques they were throwing out were as easy to pull off as breathing for the both of them. This fight was only able to happen because the pair stood at the pinnacle of the world.

Of course, neither of them stood still as they exchanged blows. They were always moving, flying around, and trying to get in their opponent’s blind spot. The two of them flew at speeds invisible to a normal person. The two transcendent fighters looked like two flashes of light as they clashed, went around to their opponent’s blind spot, rotated, and otherwise attempted to find a gap in the other’s defenses, all the while ignoring the laws of physics.

*They’re like light...* Sei thought.

Two sources of light, shining black and red, were pulling ridiculous maneuvers in the air as if they were in a dogfight out of an old mecha anime. That was all it looked like to the hero and his party.

“Hah!!”

Lufas’ fist slipped past Orm’s guard and hit him square on. The punch produced a sound that shouldn’t have been produced just from one person punching another. It sounded like a large-caliber cannon being fired. However,

by the time the hero and his party heard the sound, the fight had already moved on. Orm, who was blown all the way up to the stratosphere, was overtaken by Lufas.

This time it was a kick.

Once again, a huge noise ripped through the air, and Orm smashed into the ground like a cannonball. Thanks to that, a huge fissure in the earth was formed, and it was unclear how far it ran. The earth also shook greatly and caved in in places.

Following after her enemy, Lufas dropped from the sky. But Orm rose up out of the ground and countered with a kick. This time it was Lufas' turn to go flying. Lufas busted through several mountains, trees, and other things, destroying them as she was sent flying to the ends of the earth.

—Right afterwards, Lufas came back even more ridiculously fast—faster than the speed she'd been sent flying at—and charged at Orm.

Orm tried to counter again with his fist, but Lufas leaped and spun around, carrying herself to Orm's back before she struck with her elbow. But her attack failed.

With the same timing as Lufas' attack, Orm stuck out his own elbow to meet Lufas'. After a delay, a thunderous roar ripped through the area along with a shockwave rippling out with the two of them as the epicenter.

The aftereffects didn't stop there. The ground around them was hollowed out to form a huge crater, and just the aftershocks alone uprooted trees and sent them flying. Sei and the others were protected by the golems that shielded them reactively, as well as Kross' own shield spell. But even just the wind stirred up by the aftereffects of the fight was a deadly disaster to them.

The defense barrier set up by Kross creaked unreliably, and his face distorted in unease. Meanwhile, several of the golems that'd been defending them outside were pulverized.

“...As expected. I suppose the last time I had a fight this worthwhile was two hundred years ago with the Seven Heroes.”

“...You have strength worthy of being called the Devil King as well.”

The two of them laughed and turned to face each other. At the same time, they separated from each other.

Were they running from the fight? No, they needed space to build momentum.

After opening up some space between them, they kicked off with even more power than before, explosively launching themselves forward. Since both of them had taken the time to create some momentum, their clash created even greater shockwaves than before, causing larger quakes as the aftershocks changed the shape of the terrain around them.

But the two causes of all that were no longer there. They'd launched themselves high into the air. Sounds of explosions, like cannons going off, resounded several times along with corresponding shockwaves, like an explosion had actually happened. The sounds and shockwaves, which had been left behind in the fight since they were so slow, desperately acted to inform others that there'd been a clash here just a little while ago. The effort was actually quite touching.

An explosion.

Lufas' kick had sent Orm off to the ends of the ocean, turning several golems that had been in the way to dust and splitting the ocean in two as he flew off and disappeared past the horizon. But the next instant, the fight had already recommenced.

An explosion.

Orm fired magic back along the same path, turning several more golems that were in the way to ash. The beam of magic continued along its path, mowing down anything in its way and swallowing up Lufas. Eventually, the spell left Mizgarz itself, breaking through the atmosphere and into the void of space before disappearing. But Lufas, who should have been swallowed by the spell, stood unfazed.

An explosion.

Lufas missed with a knife-hand strike, which cut a furrow in the ground all the way past the horizon. Orm also missed with his return punch, and the wind

pressure from that attack alone split the ocean all the way past the horizon as well.

However, the only ones who could witness these effects were the two fighters themselves. The spectators of this fight could only notice the leftover vestiges of their actions and the aftermath that they brought. There were no fighters the onlookers could see. All they could catch were the sounds and aftershocks, which let them know where the fight was.

The sky above them exploded several times, destroying any pitiful golems which had gotten caught up in it. Trees also suddenly got uprooted and blasted away, and the ground and ocean were split.

Their power was supernatural. This was the power of those at the peak of their strength. It was abnormal, monstrous, bizarre, and powerful. It wasn't something any regular person could do. In the first place, they wouldn't even be able to follow the aftermath of this fight. They were probably busting out countless numbers of high-level skills like rain, not holding anything back. But Sei and the others had no way of knowing what they were using.

It was a fight between two monsters. There were no other words to describe it.

Last Bosses A and B had just suddenly popped up in the beginner area of the hero's journey for some reason and had started to fight with each other. It was nonsensical. It was like they were telling Sei and the others that they weren't worth their attention. It made Sei feel incredibly pathetic.

"...What the hell...?" Alfie muttered, pale as a sheet. Her teeth chattered loudly, and her eyes were swimming in their sockets. "...What the hell *are* they...?" She said what everyone else was thinking.

And none of them had any answer but, "I wonder..."

They existed outside of reason. And they defied understanding. The two combatants were ignoring everything the hero party held as common sense. Because of that, there was no one who could answer Alfie's question. The only answer they had—which was, "What is that, I wonder?"—was no answer at all.

"There's nothing we can do...against that... They want us to beat them...?"

How...? Th-There's no way for us to win against those...those monsters... Right? Hey...?"

When Sei looked back, he saw that Alfie was crying. Even though she'd been so full of confidence before the journey, she was now nothing more than a little girl drowning in fear. Her heart had been completely broken.

However, no one present could blame her for that. Just how would anyone keep their heart from breaking with this ridiculous battle unfolding before them?

"Just what...what do they even think...we can do against those two monsteeerrrrsss!!" Alfie screamed, teary-eyed. However, her cry was drowned out by another explosion in the sky.

The fight had been occurring at supersonic speeds, leaving sound behind. The two of them were attacking and defending so fast exchanges lasted mere instants. The two combatants alone were experiencing extremely dilated time, almost as if time itself had stopped for them. Of course, they weren't using skills to achieve that. However, if a person was able to move around at their speed even in extremely small segments of time, it would be no different than if time had stopped for them. Basically, to reach this plateau one just had to move around fast enough for time to stop.

For them, sound had long since disappeared. They were in a silent world where even time had been left behind. Even then, they continued their exchange of attack and defense.

They dodged and were dodged, defended and were defended against, punched and got punched, kicked and got kicked, and shot and got shot at. Perfect defenses were met with defense-piercing skills, 100% accuracy skills were met with guaranteed-dodge skills, and damage buffs were met with damage reduction. There were single-hit, multi-hit, and multi-hit area aimed skills flying about.

They threw out heaven-arts and magic, accelerated and decelerated, and used attack reflection and skill piercing. They cast attack buffs, defense buffs, and speed buffs as well as attack, defense, and speed debuffs, threw around other buffs and debuffs, and even stun effects which were blocked with stun

negation.

All manner of passive, active, and reactive skills were used, invalidated, pierced through, defended against, dodged, and countered. Even then, neither of them could land a decisive blow, as the two continued to throw haymakers one after the other.

“Hhaaaaaaaaaaahh!!”

Lufas twisted her body. She buffed her attack power to pierce through his defense, stacked as many skills as she could on her strike, and wound up. If all the attacks up until now had been stupid-huge cannons, then the attack Lufas was trying to land was even stupider and huger. It was still a cannon. She was just using even more pure force.

“Mnnrrraaaaaaaaggghhh!!”

Orm also twisted around, concentrating all his power in his right fist.

His all-out punch most likely had as many skills stacked on it as Lufas', if not more. Orm couldn't tell how this would affect the surroundings, but he didn't care. It didn't matter. What was important to him was nothing but this moment in this fight right now.

—They clashed. And time started again.

The two of them, who were most likely the strongest fighters in the world in this day and age, unleashed the most powerful attacks available to them with no weapons. Neither of them hesitated to clash with the other's attack. And right afterwards the world itself shook.

At the same time, all the aftereffects and sounds from the attacks they'd made in compressed time caught up and went into effect. Forests a long ways away from the fight shook furiously, causing the animals in them to panic. The ocean raged about, and all living things in the world could sense the vibrations of the air. The earth split in various places, and several mountains experienced landslides and avalanches. Just the aftereffects caused storms to whip up with gale-force winds like a typhoon's ravaging across the world.

The last of the golems served as a wall for the hero's party, and they, too, were destroyed.

The castle shook like there was an earthquake. While the usually fearless vampires made a fuss, the little girl who was their queen was calm and steadfast. She elegantly sat down on her throne and tipped a glass of blood between her waiting lips. She was surrounded by monster corpses. They had been underlings of that annoying lion that'd come to take her head. But they'd been unable to fulfill their mission, becoming food instead.

"...They're making me jealous."

The world shook as if to inform Benetnasch that her enemy was alive and well. She could feel the shockwaves of her power. Benetnasch had already been sure of her existence after hearing the report, but now she felt her enemy's presence directly.

At the same time, Benetnasch was experiencing an emotion similar to annoyance. She was experiencing one-sided jealousy.

*Just who are you playing with while leaving me here alone? Joy and jealousy... It's as if I'm some little girl who's experiencing her first love...*

With those thoughts running through her mind, Benetnasch looked out of her window. She was imagining just what kind of fight her hated but also beloved enemy was having right now.

"I can't wait."

In the middle of the wilderness, a single man muttered to himself, his voice filled with joy. He was surrounded by dead vampires. The vampires should have been nearly immortal, but they had been ripped apart so thoroughly they couldn't even regenerate. The cause of all that was the giant lion sitting in the middle of all of them.

"I might just get hard... You're really making it difficult to resist, Lufas..."

He was over 150 m tall, taller than Aries in his true form. The lion's eyes looked ferocious, and he had the arrogance to designate everything around him as food. His muscular body had the suppleness belonging to one of the feline family, but at the same time, his body was harder than steel. His fur was a burning crimson color.

The giant, dark-red lion drooled as he vulgarly lusted after what he considered the best prey, who wasn't there right now.

*This shaking earth feels nice.*

To him, the power he could feel behind the shaking was the best form of invitation, and his desire to fight only grew stronger and stronger. But the opponent he wanted wasn't here. *Aghh, this is killing me. I might go crazy!*

With no way to satisfy his animal desires and violent impulses, he—Leon, the Lion King—continued to enjoy the aftershocks of a faraway battle.

Meanwhile, Sei shivered while being tossed around by the same aftershocks.

*This isn't funny! They want us to beat these two monsters? That's just the worst kind of joke.*

*No, they aren't even monsters. They're natural disasters. They're just human-shaped natural disasters. Look, the tiger's already hiding, scared beyond his wits. He's got his ears down flat and his tail between his legs.*

Nearby Sei and the others, the two fighters who'd just clashed touched down to the ground, standing there unchanged from how they had been before the fight.

## 5

The attack-enhancing skill, "Iron Fist."

The defense-piercing skill, "Weak-Point Strike."

"Revenge," a skill that raises the power of attacks proportionately to how much HP has been lost.

"Meteor Kick," which cancels an opponent's flight and deals damage.

The absolute-accuracy skill, "Shine Blow."

The absolute-evasion skill, "Flash."

The two-hit skill, "Double Blow."

The four-hit skill, "Force Blow."

“Ex-Counter,” which negates physical damage and deals double damage back.

“Sonic Fist,” which boosts attack frequency proportionate to the user’s class level.

“Smash,” which will always land a critical hit.

“Armor Break,” which lowers the target’s defense for a set time while doing damage.

“Power Break,” which lowers the target’s attack for a set time while doing damage.

“Speed Break,” which lowers the target’s speed for a set time while doing damage.

“Buster Impact,” a skill which deals extremely large amounts of damage and can only be used once every 24 hours.

The high-speed movement skill, “Flash Step.”

As well as other skills, buff and debuff heaven-arts, recovery heaven-arts, and defense shields. I hadn’t held back on anything.

Just seeing this list, I don’t think anyone would understand what was going on. They might wonder what was with the list. I’d think the same.

*Can you believe it...?* The list was only a small portion of all the skills I’d used while fighting the Devil King.

*Yeah, uhh...* I already knew he was strong. He’d beaten the Seven Heroes who’d beaten me (*though Benetnasch didn’t participate, so it’s really more like the Six Heroes*), so it was obvious to anyone that he was strong.

But I’d just directly experienced how strong he was.

*Honestly, I want to apologize as hard as I can for ever referring to him as “the Devil King (lol).” ...The Devil King’s too strong. It’s not funny.*

I’d already lost around 50,000 HP. He’d probably lost a lot of HP as well, but he was the official Last Boss. He definitely had over a million HP. This was just my estimation, but I figured he had around 3-6 million HP. I’d like to think he didn’t quite have over 10 million HP.

In other words, what I wanted to say was that I was in trouble. If we were to keep fighting like this, I'd probably lose.

We were even in actual combat, but the difference in HP values meant that I couldn't win just by being even. But in this player vs. boss scenario, I was barely breaking even, even while the threat of being trampled over was always present. My healing and other abilities weren't keeping up at all. I had natural regeneration and heaven-arts, but those took time to fully heal me.

*If only I'd brought a weapon...*

If I had a weapon, I'd be able to bring my swordmaster skills to bear as well, and I'd be faring at least a little better. Any weapon I transmuted out of what was just lying around wouldn't be good enough to do anything, though.

At any rate, the Devil King still wasn't someone I could beat one-on-one.

"Hm, as I expected, Alcor. Even after being sealed for two hundred years, you are stronger than the hero Alioth. But you seem to be holding back quite a bit, no? Or are you saying that I'm not worth getting serious against?"

"...?"

"Your strength should be greater than this, right? The strength of the Great Conqueror who faced off alone against Seven Heroes, hundreds of great warriors, and multitudes of golems and monsters at the same time and still fought evenly with all of them should be more than this. The Lufas Maphaahl that I feared...she should be more vividly strong, enough for me to yearn for it."

I almost reflexively responded aloud to the Devil King's speech with dumb confusion.

*Huh? What? No, no, I'm not that much stronger than Alioth and the others.*

In the game, I couldn't use all of the skills I'd learned in battle. I had to decide what skills to use beforehand and set them, and in battle I could only use the skills I'd set. So actually, I was a little stronger now, since I wasn't limited in that way.

It was true that my total stats had been higher than the members of the Seven Heroes but only a little. I still lost against them in their respective

specialties. It was obvious that I couldn't hope to match all seven of them at once. If I were able to do that, then I'd be the real last boss rather than a wild last boss.

"...Do you really believe that this is your limit?"

"We don't understand what you're talking about."

"No... Just what... ..No, wait. I see. It's like that. Damn you, Goddess. So you've already played your hand."

I didn't understand what was going on, but the Devil King got visibly angry, and he clicked his tongue.

*Could it be? Lufas was actually even stronger before I possessed her? No. No way. Just how much stat boosting would she have had to do? How many tens of times the playtime would she have had to log to do that?*

"I see. So I was a bit too impatient. It's not yet time."

For some reason, the Devil King was acting as if he'd come to some conclusion that only he was aware of.

*Is he some sort of loner? Talking to yourself is one of the signs of being a loner.*

"Just what have you been going on about all this time? Why don't you let us in on whatever it is you've figured out on your own?"

When I spoke, the Devil King finally looked up at me, as if he'd just noticed I was still here. "No, it is nothing. I only learned that it was too early for me to fight you. Like this, we cannot surpass the Goddess' scenario."

"The Goddess' scenario?"

"Correct. This world moves according to the scenario written by the all-powerful Goddess. The devilfolk are no exception to that... In fact, you can say that the devilfolk are jesters that are puppeted to liven up the scenario. The Goddess created them for that purpose alone."

*I still haven't beaten him, but I guess he decided I passed anyway?*

Even though the winner hadn't been decided, the Devil King was talking easily, leaking all sorts of information. *What happened to, "then force me to tell*

*you?” Well, if he’ll talk, then I’ll listen, though. Whatever.*

“Why do you think the devilfolk attack people and kill them?”

“Isn’t it to expand your territory?”

“That is a part of it, but it’s also only the surface reason. The real reason is that...they *have* to kill people. It is like how humans cannot live without eating or stay sane without sleeping. For devilfolk, it is the same type of instinctive need. You see, the devilfolk...they are flawed creatures that disappear if they don’t kill humans. Like that, the devilfolk disappear and scatter throughout the world. Those scattered fragments of their bodies are what you call ‘mana.’”

That was something I didn’t know. It was true that game lore didn’t cover why mana existed in the world at all. I never questioned it, though. I just figured that it was natural, since it was a fantasy setting.

“Their bodies are recycled and reused. That is proof that they are nothing but a magic spell. Without the devilfolk, none of you would be able to use the convenient power of magic. But because they exist, you are forced into a fruitless war that will continue on forever. The Goddess made the devilfolk to be this way and left their management to me.”

“...Management? You mean, you are different?”

I felt that there was something out of place with what the Devil King had said. Ever since he’d started talking about the devilfolk, the Devil King had always used ‘they’ and hadn’t included himself in that group. It was as if he were implying that he wasn’t one of the devilfolk.

I was about to put that doubt into words when someone from the hero party wedged in with a raised shout of, “Wait, please!”

*He’s, uhh... Isn’t he the elf guy who was there when I was summoned?*

“Wh-What does that mean?! It sounds like you’re saying the Goddess herself wishes to plunge this world into despair! Are you saying that the Goddess...the most kind Goddess Alovenus wishes for our deaths?!” he shouted towards the Devil King, his expression full of unease.

“That is correct, weak one. The Goddess does not wish for this world to be

saved. That was why the war two hundred years ago occurred.”

“?!”

“Did you not find it strange? You’ve realized that it was unnatural, right? True, Lufas Maphaahl was frightening back then, but...there was no need to defeat her before she’d finished her fight with us. ...Why not wait until after she’d made war with the devilfolk? The best course of action would have been to have Lufas defeat me before overthrowing her. Even so, the Seven Heroes didn’t wait for the best time. Instead, they incited a rebellion beforehand and sealed Lufas.

“...I ask you, isn’t that strange? Even Megrez, who is hailed as the Wise King, was there. Such imprudence would be strange. It was as if none of you were thinking of the future at all. Even an infant would’ve been able to tell what was going to happen if you deposed Lufas at that time. But you all still abandoned rational thought and deposed her anyway. Even if it made sense for Benetnasch, who has always been attached to Lufas, to do such a foolish thing, it was extremely strange for the other six to follow suit.”

I couldn’t argue against the points that the Devil King lined up. It seemed the elf guy was the same. Nobody else spoke up, either.

*It’s true that it’s strange.*

I don’t know just how severe Lufas was, but she should still have been on humanity’s side, at least. Even if she did rule through fear, it was written in books that her rule was not bad. Even conceding that she should’ve been deposed at some point, waiting until after the devilfolk had been defeated should have been all right.

In fact, aiming for when she was still weak from that fight might have been a better choice that led to fewer casualties.

But still, the heroes persisted in attacking Lufas. And in the ensuing fight, the number of great warriors humanity had was reduced, eventually leading to regret, with the heroes saying that they’d made a terrible mistake.

*Now that I think about it, that was a really dumb move.*

“Alcor, I expected that you had reached the truth before anyone else. That

was why you attempted to completely eradicate the devilfolk and unite the world, something no one else could ever do. It was an effort to end the Goddess' Scenario, although forceful."

"..."

"However—"

"Exgate! Evening Venus!!"

Suddenly, a gate opened up in the space next to the Devil King, unleashing a golden flash.

Having been completely blindsided by the attack, the Devil King couldn't react in time and was blown away. On top of that, a golem in a maid's outfit flew out of the gate as if to follow up the attack.

"Program Selection! Zuben El Genubi!!"

Libra slammed a cannon round into the Devil King, who was flying off into the distance. A beam of light with sparks running through it carved a straight line at him. As soon as it hit the ground, the area exploded.

Libra, with her arm still transformed, came over to me and grabbed me by my clothing before deploying her Sky Jets.

"H-Hey, Libra?"

"Master, I believe retreating from this battlefield would be the best choice at the moment. Fighting the Devil King right now is not a wise decision."

"No, wait a second. He was saying something very important just now..."

"Retreat!"

"Listen to us!"

Libra ignored me and flew off.

*Is this thing really loyal to me? It seems to ignore my orders a lot...*

The Devil King hurriedly emerged from the smoke, not seeming to have taken that much damage. Then he was rammed into by Tanaka and sent spinning away.

Tanaka quickly pulled a U-turn and went right back through the Exgate.

*Hey, Dina, you brought Tanaka over, too? Tanaka's low level. What if he gets one-shotted?*

"Let us go, Libra. The heroes are still there."

"That is not a problem. I do not understand why you care so much, but it is clear that you are the Devil King's target. If we retreat here, he will most likely not bother with those mice."

"...Were you listening to our conversation? It should have been far outside your range of perception."

"Dina opened a small gate. We have been listening the entire time."

*Ahh, that makes sense.*

*So Dina had been eavesdropping the entire time? Once she figured I wouldn't be able to win, she stepped in to help me beat a hasty retreat. So she probably attacked with that timing because the Devil King was preoccupied with the conversation and full of openings. If she'd tried that during our fight, I might have been hit, too, after all.*

*No, wait. It sounded as if he were going to say something pretty important. He was clearly going to reveal some sort of hidden background lore or past that I didn't know about. And it seems that past me's goals were pretty different from what I remember. I wanted to listen until the end, if I could...*

*Still. Alovenus, huh?*

*Now that I think about it, I don't know much about her, either. I only know that she's the creator of the world of Exgate and a loving Goddess, as well as the representation of the online game's admin. Also, she probably had something to do with me coming here.*

In fact, the last memory I had before arriving in Mizgarz was of me saying "Yes" to Alovenus' proposal. There was no way she wasn't involved.

They said she was a loving Goddess. But she'd made the devilfolk, and if what the Devil King said was true, then she'd purposefully created them to be humanity's enemies. If this were a game, it could've been explained away by

saying that enemies were needed to liven things up. But this was reality, and this was clearly strange.

*Just what merit is there in doing something like that? She's more like an evil Goddess than a loving Goddess.*

On top of that, if mana really were just the bodies of devilfolk, that would mean more than half of humanity evolved thanks to the devilfolk. Elves, beastfolk, dwarves, halflings, and vampires—all five of these races should have evolved from humans through mana.

If this theory was correct, that would mean the heaven-winged weren't humanity. After all, our race's compatibility with mana was far too awful. In other words, the heaven-winged had nothing to do with mana and were just a separate branch of humanity that popped up from somewhere...

*That gives credence to the theory that we're descendants of angels, doesn't it? And the color of our wings is affected by mana, so... Huh? Is that like monsterification or something? Wouldn't my black wings mean that I've seriously become some sort of other race?*

*...Now that I think about it, I felt nothing when entering Svel, a place that most heaven-winged won't go near. In fact, it felt kind of nice...*

*Could it be? Could I (Lufas) not even be a heaven-winged...?*

\*       \*

Orm got up from the ground and muttered, "...That was a mistake," sounding bored. He wasn't talking to himself. He was talking to the woman wearing a thin smile behind him...Dina.

She was receiving the full force of the Devil King's anger, but she didn't move a muscle.

"Speak. I have already set up a barrier surrounding us. That golem will not be able to hear us. Of course, the heroes are outside the barrier as well."

"Heehee... As expected, Your Excellency. Nothing escapes you."

"Nonsense. What were you planning with that, Venus...? No, Dina?"

Dina giggled. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips drew a curve as she spoke,

sounding aloof. “It was an act to gain trust, of course. The doll was watching me.”

“For an act, your attack certainly seemed pretty serious.”

“Oh? But an attack of that level wouldn’t matter to you, would it, Your Excellency? I did it because I believe in your power.”

“You certainly know how to talk.” Orm gave a short laugh. Then, he turned around to face Dina and spoke assertively. “Alcor...Lufas Maphaahl has gotten weaker. Did you know about that?”

“Of course.”

“That was not your doing, was it? It couldn’t be.”

“Of course not. As if I could do something like that. Only the omnipotent Goddess could pull that off.”

“You really do know just what to say.”

Dina let out another giggle. Then, she got closer to Orm and whispered into his ear.

“\_\_”

“...I see. A place like that exists? Then I will prepare to make my attack.”

“I will keep her occupied in Blutgang for a while. I pray for your fortune, Your Excellency.”

“What a strange thing to say. Just who would you be praying to?”

Dina had no reply for Orm’s question. She simply passed by him silently as a gust of wind blew. Once the wind settled...neither of them were there any longer, leaving the hero and his party with no idea of what had happened.

## 6

After the fight with the Devil King, I pondered over what he’d said while inside Tanaka, whom Dina had returned to our original location.

*Apparently this world is more removed from the game than I originally*

*thought. I keep finding new pieces of lore one after the other. Then I learn that the Goddess is actually evil.*

*My head might actually just explode.*

But now that I thought about it, this world itself was pretty strange.

This was reality. As long as I didn't suddenly wake up and realize I was just having a uselessly realistic dream, there was no doubt that this world actually existed and I was in it. But for all this realism, a weirdly large amount also seemed like a game. It was weird for there to be stat values and levels that were clearly visible and acknowledgeable in the first place.

Firstly, a lot of this world would be impossible in nature, so it made sense that the game-like elements had been implemented by the Goddess on purpose. But if that were the case, the question was just where she had gotten the idea. It made no sense unless the Goddess knew of the game and had made this world to match.

*Oh, yeah. Wasn't there a game like that way back when? One that had a huge and magnificent story, but the ending turned into a case of "None of this was real, since this world was just a game world." And wasn't there another one with, like, a way too advanced digital world, where programs lived and monsters evolved and stuff?*

*Surprisingly enough, if this world were similar, it would explain... No, nevermind. It wouldn't.*

If that were true, then why would this world be so different from *Exgate Online*?

If this were some sort of digital world or something emulating *Exgate Online*, then there'd be no reason for there to be a two hundred year gap since my defeat, either. After all, the passage of days didn't matter in the game. Sure, there was a morning/day/night cycle, but the dates never changed.

When I started playing, the 'world' was in the year 2800 of the Mizgarz calendar. And even after six years of playing, the year never changed. It didn't become 2806 or anything. The game repeated the same year over and over, or in other words, it was the world of Sazae-san.

The game was clearly different from the world I was in right now. So that theory didn't hold water.

*...Damn. I can't come to any conclusions. I just don't know enough.*

I really should have stayed and listened to the Devil King until the very end. He was just about to talk and get me closer to the core truth of this world.

"There it is, Miss Lufas! It's Vanaheim!" Dina called my name, bringing me back to reality.

When I looked out the window, I saw a towering mountain with a forest at its base. Apparently we'd reached the residence of the next of the Twelve Heavenly Stars.

I was still concerned about this world and what the Devil King had been going to say next, but thinking about it wouldn't yield anything for now. I just had to leave it for later.

*I need to concentrate on the problems right in front of me first.*

*But still, Parthenos the "Maiden," huh? Dina says she's still alive and well, but I wonder if that's really true.*

I didn't actually doubt Dina, per se. But Parthenos still being alive after two hundred years seemed impossible. I mean, she was a human, after all.

I believe I already covered the fact that as long as a player encountered something as an enemy, it didn't matter if they were human. They were treated as a monster by the system. It wasn't a rare occurrence or anything. In fact, it was common in most RPGs for human enemies to show up the same way monsters did, with names like "so-and-so soldier," or "so-and-so priest."

I remember that in the 8th installment of a certain nationally famous RPG series, there was an 'eat' skill that was particularly nasty, since it 'ate' the enemy to recover the user's HP. It was fully usable on human soldiers who were enemies. The sight of the main heroine dashing towards the soldiers and the ensuing awful sounds of her munching down were quite frightening.

This was basically the same.

Parthenos was originally a human NPC who'd featured the name "Maiden in

Service to the Goddess.” She was a troublesome enemy who appeared in a high-difficulty, level 1000 dungeon. She would form a party with other human NPCs and endlessly heal and support them. But if she were on your side, those healing and support abilities were very useful.

So, wanting at least one person like her, I’d tamed her.

I did train her up a little, just in case, but I had no intention of using her in battle in the first place. I’d just tamed her because I wanted someone who could heal and support, so her combat ability was really low.

The dungeon she appeared in was of a really high difficulty. She was as strong as a level 800 back line specialist, but that was it. If she were forced to actually fight, she would probably be the weakest out of all the Twelve Heavenly Stars.

But it was okay that she was weak. She had high INT and MND stats to go with her abundance of SP. As long as she could provide shields and heals from the back, she was plenty useful. For wading into combat from the front, I had people like Leon, anyway. Although Leon was now outside of my control.

Anyway, the point was that Parthenos was a true-blue human, so her lifespan was correspondingly short.

So as to the question of whether she was still alive after two hundred years... Well, it was impossible lifespan-wise, right? Even if she were still alive, she’d be really old and decrepit. I found it impossible to believe she’d be in any state to travel.

If what I was thinking was right, then she was definitely now a “Maiden (old).” It would probably be better to just have her stop occupying Vanaheim, the heaven-winged’s home, but not take her with us.

I had Dina around to take care of the back line anyway... Most importantly, she’d probably die if we made her walk.

\*            \*

As we approached the forest, we found a large barrier covering the entire thing, as expected. However, we must not have been designated as enemies, as we were able to enter easily.

*Hm. So we really are still comrades, even after two hundred years. I guess this means we won't be attacked suddenly, at least for now, since the fact that we're able to enter means we're counted as allies.*

As we walked into the forest, we found a place that was the perfect definition of "sanctuary." Sunlight filtered through the trees, and the animals all ran around freely, showing no fear. There were many animals that seemed like squirrels and rabbits, which only made the impression stronger.

It seemed that Libra was unmoved, but this place probably felt comforting to Aries, who was a sheep. As for Aigokeros...he was in human form right now, but his original one probably wouldn't fit in with this view, either. He would stand out like a sore thumb. Seeing a demon lord standing in the middle of a bunch of playing animals would be way too surreal.

Well, Aries would be the same with his 100 m size, but he was just big. He still looked exactly like a fancy, rainbow-colored sheep, so he was probably barely in the safe zone.

After some more walking, we eventually came upon a small cabin that was built in the woods.

*Is this where Parthenos lives?* There shouldn't have been anyone around this area thanks to Parthenos, so she was the only candidate.

I stood in front of the door and knocked lightly.

"...! Huh? A knock?! N-No way?! Why?!"

I heard the voice of a sincerely surprised young girl from inside.

She may have been surprised, but so was I. I had totally been expecting an old person on the other side of the door, so a young girl was shocking.

*Could it be? Did Parthenos find a way to rejuvenate her youth?*

After waiting for a while, the door slowly swung open a crack, and I could see a girl peeking out. At first glance, she looked like a lovely girl. Her hair was a light pink, and she seemed to be around 15 years of age.

*No, but... She doesn't seem like Parthenos...*

As far as I remembered, Parthenos' hair was green, not pink. *Or did she dye*

it?

While I considered that, Aigokeros stuck his hand through the crack in the door and forced it fully open. Then, for some reason, he returned to his demon form and crossed his arms in front of the girl.

“Girl, your attitude in front of my great master is nothing short of the highest insolence...”

“Fool. You’re the one being insolent.”

I grabbed Aigokeros by the head and used my pure strength to throw him backwards.

*How do I fix this? Now our first impression is just terrible. She was so scared of that idiot who just showed up that she’s backed up all that way.*

While her expression didn’t show any fear, her face was frozen in shock and surprise, and the white wings growing out of her back flapped restlessly.

...

*...Wings? Huh? This girl is heaven-winged? Then she’s definitely not Parthenos. Parthenos was human, so she wouldn’t have wings.*

*Who the hell is this girl?*

“Ahh... We apologize. Our subordinate was rude to you. We are not suspicious... Well, We *are*, but We do not intend to harm you in any way. We came here looking for an acquaintance. Girl, do you know of someone named Parthenos?”

“...Huh? Are you friends of Gran’s?”

*Gran?*

That meant there were two possibilities for who this girl was. The first was Parthenos’ descendant by blood. A half-human, half-heaven-winged was possible. That would mean Parthenos married a heaven-winged and had a child, who then had another child. It wasn’t a far-fetched idea. But in that case, where were Parthenos’ husband and son (or daughter), and that person’s spouse?

The other possibility was that she’d been adopted. If Parthenos had just

picked this girl up for some reason or another, everything would be explained.

*For now, I should check her stats. This should be cleared up by seeing what her race is.*

**【Virgo】**

**【Level】**: 320

**【Race】**: Heaven-Winged

**【Class Levels】**

▪ Acolyte: 100

▪ Priest: 200

▪ Bard: 20

**【HP】**: 21000

**【SP】**: 3301

**【STR (Strength)】**: 1200

**【DEX (Dexterity)】**: 990

**【VIT (Vitality)】**: 1390

**【INT (Intelligence)】**: 1800

**【AGI (Agility)】**: 1270

**【MND (Mind)】**: 3102

**【LUK (Luck)】**: 1505

*...I think she's adopted? Judging from the fact that she isn't half-anything, she doesn't seem related to Parthenos by blood.*

*As for her levels, she's quite strong for this day and age. She was probably trained by Parthenos.*

"Ah. Those black wings... Could you be Lufas? Gran told me about you."

"Indeed. We certainly are Lufas Maphaahl. Behind us are members of the

Twelve Heavenly Stars, Aries and Libra. The fool on the floor there is Aigokeros. And the blue-haired one is Dina.”

As I introduced them, Libra, Aries, and Dina all politely bowed. The girl returned each gesture.

*Yeah. She seems like a good, polite girl.*

*...Aren't I the rudest of the bunch?* After all, I couldn't use formal language even if I really concentrated on it. There was no way I could change my speech pattern.

“Umm, please, call me Virgo. Gran will be happy to know that you came, Lufas. Would you like to go visit Gran now?”

“Would that be all right? We would like that.”

Apparently she wasn't too wary of us.

*What a nice and honest girl,* was my sincere impression. I couldn't stop a smile. She probably didn't feel the need to be on guard since we'd passed through the barrier.

As I was lost in thought, Dina pulled on my sleeve.

“Hm? What's wrong, Dina?”

“This is bad, Miss Lufas. Her character overlaps with mine a little.”

“...Really?”

“As it is, I'll lose my individuality and stop standing out.”

I'd been wondering what had her looking so serious, but it was nothing to be concerned about.

“That's been the case from the start.”

I left Dina, who looked stricken, to her own devices and followed the girl as she walked, leading us to Parthenos. Aries and Libra followed after me. Aigokeros, who had been literally eating some grass that was on the side of the road, stood up and returned to my shadow.

*...He really is just a goat, despite how he looks.*

*Come on, Aries. Don't look so jealous. I'll give you some corn later.*

We walked through the forest for a while. Eventually, the girl led us to an open area. Light shone down into the clearing, making it seem as if the trees were avoiding the area, giving this spot in the forest an even more wondrous feel.

In the center stood a gravestone made of marble.

...The stone had Parthenos' name marked on it.

"My Gran is there."

"..."

"She'd been waiting tenaciously, always believing in your revival, Lufas. But last year, she choked on some fruit..."

"..."

I silently looked over at Dina. She turned away and refused to meet my gaze, and I could see cold sweat on her.

*Hey, what the hell... Parthenos is dead?!*

## 7

"So, what is the meaning of this, Dina? Didn't you tell us that all the Twelve Heavenly Stars were alive and well?"

"U-Uhh... Well, um... I mean, the barrier was still up, so I totally figured she was still alive. Actually, why *is* the barrier still here if Parthenos isn't alive?"

Dina responded to my interrogation with some uncomfortable excuses before bringing up the question of why the barrier was still up. I had the feeling that she was just trying to get out from under my scrutiny, but her question was a good one.

Alioth's barrier was the type to activate upon his death, but this barrier was the type with a time limit. It should have disappeared after a while. Even so, it was still going strong a year after Parthenos' death. It was clearly strange. I had thought that something like this might've been possible at high levels, but that

wasn't the case judging from Dina's reaction.

So, we arrived at Dina's question.

"That is... After Gran died, she still had lingering attachments to this world... Right now, she's wandering the forest as a ghost."

"...What the hell?"

Somehow, after two hundred years, Parthenos had become something really absurd... Rather than Parthenos the Maiden, she was Parthenos the Ghost.

"Ahh... Hm. We understand, for now."

Basically, this was all just due to Dina's misunderstanding. And the biggest contributing factor to that understanding was the fact that the barrier still existed. Knowing that, Dina had thought Parthenos was still alive. But in actuality, Parthenos was dead and maintaining the barrier as a ghost.

*I can't blame her for a lack of research on this one, can I?* It was much more ridiculous to expect her to have predicted this.

"For now, We must meet her and send her to the afterlife."

Knowing that the one who held the title of "Maiden" had fallen and become a ghost was just too sad. I couldn't just let this go on. I was honestly happy, since she'd done this out of loyalty to me (Lufas), but I also felt sorry. *I should hurry and release her.*

"You said you were Virgo? Do you know where Parthenos' ghost is?"

Virgo shook her head no. "No, I don't... There's no doubt she's somewhere nearby, though."

Given that the barrier was still there, she was definitely somewhere near. But since she was a ghost, it was hard to grasp her location. Even Virgo, her granddaughter, didn't know.

"Um, then how do you know that she's become a ghost?"

"Ah, well. That's because Gran occasionally shows herself and recasts the barrier. I saw her then." Virgo easily answered Aries' astute question.

*This is a dumb thing to notice, but their speech patterns are eerily similar.*

Dina was talking nonsense about how Virgo overlapped with her, but if anything, she overlapped with Aries. Formal speech was for one's superiors... It seemed she only used it with me. This was probably how she usually talked. She really was a far cry from Dina, who constantly used formal speech and went all the way to sounding suspicious.

"Which means we need to wait until the barrier weakens..."

"She just fixed it earlier, so it probably won't happen for a while."

"..."

I thought we could just take it easy and wait a little bit, but Virgo poked holes all over that plan. If it was recently fixed, then Parthenos probably wouldn't have to attend to it for a long while. If we waited for several months, she would come back out, but that really would be too much trouble.

...Well, we weren't in any real hurry. Maybe we could just wait?

I was just about to suggest that when I felt Aigokeros' magic swell. I hurried to turn around.

"Then we simply need to break the barrier. You may count on me for that!"

"Huh? Wai— Aigokeros?!"

"Please be at ease, my Master! I will quickly destroy this barrier and drag Parthenos out from wherever she is hiding!"

"No. Wai—"

"Invisible Break!"

That fool Aigokeros ignored my calls and activated his spell. He used a high-tier Moon-element spell, "Invisible Break." Its effect was to cancel any long-lasting, wide-area magic.

Given that there was defensive and support magic, of course there would also be magic to counter that. Getting rid of annoying spells like that was Aigokeros' role in the Twelve Heavenly Stars, and I valued him quite a lot for it. But I hadn't said a single word about using it now.

The anticlimactic sound of glass breaking reverberated through the forest. At

the same time, I clearly felt something that had been protecting this forest disappear.

*That dumbass goat. He really did it.*

*Why are all the Twelve Heavenly Stars people who refuse to listen?*

I understood that Aigokeros was excited, since this would be the first time he had something to do in a while, but that was way too forceful.

*What'll you do if Parthenos thinks you're an enemy?*

"How was that, my Master?"

"We now understand well that you are a rash fool. Make sure you think before you act next time."

"?!"

I lightly scolded the goat that was looking at me smugly before surveying the forest.

I didn't care that Aigokeros looked like a kicked puppy. I didn't think Parthenos would consider us enemies, at least, since I was here. But who knew if that were true?

"..."

I crossed my arms, and we waited in silence for a few minutes for Parthenos to show herself. Now that it'd come to this, she should have had no choice but to come out and reapply the barrier.

Then there was the problem of whether or not she'd think we were enemies, since we'd broken the barrier. She might come attacking. I figured she'd recognize me, at least, but she was a ghost. In the worst case, she might have forgotten me.

*...Still, a ghost, huh?*

I normally didn't believe in the occult, but I'd sure accepted this whole situation really easily.

*Well, given the ridiculous situation I'm in, I guess ghosts are pretty tame by now.*

All I thought was, *Ah, so ghosts exist*. So I was confident I wouldn't be surprised whether a ghost or a zombie or anything else of that nature popped up in front of me. I was so used to weird things that I was numb to shock.

But no matter how long we waited, nothing ghost-like appeared. Time simply continued to pass.

"...She isn't coming," I muttered.

Dina, who was next to me, agreed, sounding mystified. "No, she isn't."

I'd been convinced that Parthenos would show herself immediately, so this was a bit of a letdown.

Could she have already passed on? Or did she just appear at regular intervals to repair the barrier and was otherwise resting? We continued to wait a while for Parthenos the Ghost to show up, but the day ended without her appearance.

*...What the hell is going on?*

\*            \*

"Sorry for what happened last time, hero. I thought we had prepared for every possibility, but it looks like I was too naive."

After being thrust into an unusual situation and being made to witness the fight between Lufas and the Devil King, the hero party had turned back to Laevateinn. There had been people who'd derided and insulted them for that decision, which made Sei want to tell them to try standing in front of both Lufas and the Devil King.

*There's no way. I don't think we'll be able to win even if we get several hundred or even thousands of people.*

The king said that he'd been naive before, but by Sei's reckoning that hadn't been fixed.

*Yeah, the king's understanding of the situation is naive.*

"If we gather all our elite troops... If we get enough numbers... If we get good enough weapons..."

The king seemed to think that those small tricks would change things, but that was a complete mistake.

*There's no way he can understand... Only the people who saw that fight know this feeling of fear and despair.*

Alfie, who should have been in the party, had completely succumbed to fear and declined to continue on the journey. But Sei couldn't blame her for that decision. Even he wanted to go back to Japan right now if he could...

"Alfie's withdrawal is a huge blow. But do not fret. I have already found someone even more skilled than her." The king spread his arms in an exaggerated motion before introducing the people who were waiting beside him. "First, is the one rumored to be the strongest mercenary, nicknamed the fearful 'Ogre,' Alfie's father, Gantz!"

Having been introduced by the king, a bald and muscular middle-aged man stepped forward. He had a giant, person-sized battle ax equipped on his back, as well as a one-handed sword at his waist. His shiny new armor didn't seem to fit him, strangely. He'd most likely received the new armor from the king, and it didn't seem like it was comfortable to wear.

Seeing his face, Sei couldn't help but think, *he looks nothing like his daughter*. But that was only natural. Such were the mysterious ways of genetics.

"Next is the adventurer party that conquered the Grave of the Black-Winged King, Hawk's Eye! We are all counting on you, Jean!"

"We humbly accept your royal order, Your Majesty! Leave the young hero to us!"

The one who spoke looked like the dictionary definition of an adventurer and replied in a way that was both full of confidence and borderline rude. His brown hair was spiked upwards, and his sharp-looking eyes glinted with motivation. Sei could feel the force of his vigor and spirit, as if he wasn't afraid of anything. It was making him think that the man might actually charge at an enemy regardless of how large the gap in their power was.

The three people behind him were nodding in agreement with Jean, also full of confidence.

“And...I was mistaken. I forced the young warriors that carry the future with them as well as that young man from another world to fight while I sat safely on my throne... Yes, it should have been obvious to me. How can I claim to be trying to save the world if I don’t jump into the fire myself?”

Hearing the king blame himself, everyone who was listening reflexively raised their heads.

Sei felt a sense of dread. *I can’t shake the feeling that this king’s gonna say something absurd.*

Sei’s premonition proved correct. The king started shouting something utterly insane.

“I will be going with you, hero! Let us save the world together!”

“MY LIIEEEEGGEEEE!?!”

The king had stood up from his throne as he started to spout his insane idea, causing his retainers to shout while looking like the world was ending around them. However, the king didn’t seem to mind and continued to speak.

“I may be old, but I fought on the front lines in my youth! I feel no regrets over offering up my life for this cause. I shall sacrifice myself and become the foundation for my people’s future! How can I call myself the descendant of the Sword King if I refuse to brave danger myself?! Soldiers, bring me my sword! I, the descendant of the Sword King, Alioth VI, will show you my skills—”

“The king’s gone mad! Restrain him!”

“What are you bastards doing—?!”

At Kross’ order, the soldiers sprung into action and restrained the king.

The king resisted, swinging his arm with unthinkable strength for someone his age. The struggle unfolded with a cycle of soldiers grabbing onto the king and the king throwing them to the side. However, he couldn’t win against their numbers in the end and was restrained before being dragged away.

*Huh? Is that really okay? What happened to lèse-majesté?* Sei thought absentmindedly.

“...Um, was that really okay to do?”

“There won’t be any problems. The king has simply taken ill.”

“No, but, isn’t that a crime?”

“This happens a lot, and the king doesn’t mind this sort of thing. If he did, Friedrich would have been arrested long ago.”

“...But doesn’t a king need, like...to preserve his dignity or appearance or something...?”

“We’ve already given up on that.”

It seemed that Kross had his fair share of hardships in dealing with the king.

*Oh, yeah. He’s the advisor to the king, isn’t he? The fact was impressed upon Sei once more. I see. It seems dealing with the king is quite the feat.*

In fact, Sei went as far as to think, *Actually, given how muscle-brained the king is, I wouldn’t be surprised if Kross handled the political side of things entirely by himself.*

*Still...* Sei looked back over the people who would accompany him on his journey.

Friedrich the Sword Saint.

The Amazonian vice-captain who served as Friedrich’s assistant (Sei didn’t know her real name).

Kross, the back line specialist.

Gantz the mercenary.

Jean the adventurer.

The other members of the party Hawk’s Eye—Richard, Nick, and Shuu.

And then there was Sei himself.

“...”

—*Why is everyone so...full of personality...?*

Sei couldn’t stop himself from becoming incredibly sad.

In the end, we waited the entire night, but Parthenos didn't show herself.

*Is it as I thought? Did she actually move on a long time ago?*

*I don't know if there is an afterlife, but if other worlds and magic exist, then I don't see why an afterlife wouldn't.*

Gods existed in this world, too, after all. Apparitions and vengeful spirits actually did appear in the game as monsters, so the existence of a heaven and hell wouldn't be that far of a stretch.

*Actually, wasn't hell Aigokeros' birthplace?*

But this was a problem...

With Parthenos dead, that turned the Twelve Heavenly Stars into the Eleven Heavenly Stars instead. Even I wouldn't disturb the dead and force a spirit to keep working for me, which meant the "Maiden" seat was now open. In fact, Parthenos had been doing her best all this time. I actually wanted her to rest.

But then that left me with only two choices: either search for the next "Maiden," or just give up and change the name to Eleven Heavenly Stars.

For some reason Dina was pointing to herself and really trying to get herself noticed. I ignored that and looked off into the distance.

*Should I find another decent humanoid monster and train them from scratch? Or maybe I'll just make a golem...?*

*Either way, the replacement probably won't be as good...*

"It seems like Parthenos is not around. There is no more reason to stay, so let's leave."

I declared that we would be leaving the forest. Dina and the rest of them nodded.

I wanted to talk to Parthenos a little bit, at least. But we couldn't stay too long, or we'd cause trouble for Virgo. I didn't know whether Parthenos had already moved on or if she was just mad that Aigokeros had broken her barrier, but it should've been all right to just come back later. After all, there wasn't

anything bad happening here, unlike Svel, which had been invaded, or Gjallar, which suffered from civil unrest.

I felt sorry for the heaven-winged who had gotten chased out of their homes, but I personally felt like this could be left for later.

“Ah...but...are you sure?”

“About what, Aries?”

“Isn’t this your birthplace? So wouldn’t your mother’s grave be up there on top of the mountain? You told me about it before.”

I froze and looked up at the mountain.

*My mother...*

*Oh, yeah. She made an appearance in the dream memories I saw back in Gjallar, didn’t she?*

It seemed like Lufas had hated her father quite a lot and was hated in return, but she’d had a good relationship with her mother. In fact, she wanted to crush the unfairness of the world for her mother. But her grave was up there; she was already long-dead, which might have influenced Lufas’ actions.

“I remember that two hundred years ago, you would always come here once a year to offer prayers to your deceased mother, Master. We have come all this way, so might I suggest visiting your mother’s grave, since it’s been so long?”

*Hm. It sounds like a good idea from Libra’s explanation, but the act seems to carry a lot of weight for Lufas. And to me, it’s the grave of a stranger. But right now, I’m Lufas. So in that sense, Lufas’ mother isn’t a stranger at all.*

“...Yes. If this place has been secluded for two hundred years, then it has probably gone unmaintained. It’s not a bad idea to stop by.”

Lufas’ mother probably wouldn’t want some random person like me to visit her. But, well, there was no other option. Even I was questioning why it’d come to this, and I hadn’t come up with an answer. But there might be some sort of hint to all my questions up there. *I can’t help but hope.*

If I were to believe the Devil King’s words, then Lufas did some things that I didn’t know about, had her own experiences, and noticed something I hadn’t.

The “Goddess’ Scenario” ...No doubt this would be the key word from now on. As long as I figured out what that was, I might come to understand why this happened to me. And the key to understanding was none other than Lufas.

Before being sealed, Lufas noticed something and tried to take action. If I could figure out those two points, that would most likely lead to me solving the mystery.

“A grave visit? Aren’t there more pressing matters we should attend to?”

“...? How unexpected, Dina. I never thought you would object.”

“Ah, no! I’m not objecting per se, but I just don’t think staying too long would be a good idea.”

It was a little unexpected that Dina spoke against visiting the grave. I figured she’d just aloofly say, “Then let’s go.” But I understood after hearing her explanation.

“I mean, aren’t mountains really tall? I don’t want to climb all that.”

“...Ahh, understood.” I nodded, looking up once again at the mountain.

“Idiots and the heaven-winged both love high places,” wasn’t an aphorism that actually existed, but it was true that the heaven-winged love heights. The higher up a person went, the thinner the mana got, so to heaven-winged, it grew far more comfortable higher up. They could also fly, so they didn’t have a problem navigating at those heights.

Take a 500 m tall mountain for example. Since heaven-winged could fly, ascending that 500 m was no different to them than a human walking 500 m on flat ground. *Or is it 700 m to account for slight horizontal progression?* It didn’t feel that tiring.

Mountains made for natural fortresses as well. It made the heaven-winged harder to attack just by living on them, allowing them to also obtain peace of mind.

So when it came to Vanaheim... *Uhh, how tall is that mountain? I’m not great at estimating measurements by eye, but it seems incredibly huge to me.*

“Libra, do you know how tall that mountain is?”

“Yes. It is estimated to be 3807 m tall.”

*Ah, it's taller than Mt. Fuji.*

That was certainly too tall to just climb up without any plan. But for a heaven-winged, it was no different than walking four or five kilometers. It was noted in official lore that an adult could fly faster than a bike, so it wasn't that difficult a distance. Many people back in Japan commuted that distance to school or work by bike, so it should've been easy to do, even every day. If Libra and I were to fly at full speed, it'd only take a minute... No, not even thirty seconds.

“True, that height is troublesome. Still, it wouldn't be impossible to carry you up.”

“I can carry Aries and Aigokeros, and there should be no problem for you to carry Dina, Master. However, I believe it will be necessary to secure some method of transporting larger numbers through the skies in the future.”

Libra was correct. We were fine right now, because there were so few of us, but since our numbers would only grow, things couldn't stay as they were. Other than Libra and I, the only other person who could fly was one of the “Twins” from the Twelve Heavenly Stars. That also meant that the other Twin couldn't fly. So the more people I gathered, the harder it would be to move around.

More than anything, having both hands occupied carrying people meant that it would be harder to react if something attacked.

“Wait, Aigokeros can't fly? He has wings.”

“Master, I may be able to fly, but I cannot go very high. Did you forget?”

“Oh, is that so?”

“It is so.”

Aigokeros did have wings, but apparently he couldn't climb too high. *I see. So like first-gen Charizard before it could learn Fly.* That meant the only ones who could actually fly were Libra and I.

“Hm... Then... Why not have that thing fly?”

We needed a method to carry everyone who couldn't fly by air, but also one

that didn't occupy Libra's or my hands. So that left one option—have something that could carry everyone and fly. It was simple.

“Right. We're all going back to the forest for a little while. Also, Dina, weren't there alchemy materials in what we recovered from the grave? Bring back the floating stone and whatever else you think would be useful, please.”

*Now, then. Let's get to remodeling.*

In the game, there was no way to change something once it had been made. If a player really wanted to redo something, they'd just have to start over from scratch. But we weren't in the game, so I should be able to remodel things. *I should at least try this out once, to confirm things for the future.*

—And that was why I decided to remodel Tanaka.

The outside look didn't change, but in order to accommodate future passengers, I increased its size and made it much taller. Of course, I didn't make Tanaka ridiculously tall, but I did add a second floor. I also added a deployable roof so that we could enjoy a terrace at any time.

But that was only the beginning. The big change came next.

“Right. Tanaka, Transform.”

“Y E S, B O S S.”

Following my orders, Tanaka illuminated itself. Then, the car floated upwards as if it had suddenly been picked up by a gust of wind from below, and its tires rotated to become horizontal. Then, jet exhaust flames flared out from the hubcaps of the horizontal tires, pushing Tanaka even higher. Steel wings also deployed out of the car's sides while emitting a loud sound.

This was Tanaka's new, remodeled form. Its name was...

.....

*...I can't think of a good name.*

*Oh, whatever. It can just be “Tanaka Jet.”*

**【Tanaka】**

【Level】: 350

【Race】: Artificial Life Form

【HP】: 18000

【SP】: 0

【STR (Strength)】: 862

【DEX (Dexterity)】: 120

【VIT (Vitality)】: 987

【INT (Intelligence)】: 9

【AGI (Agility)】: 1530

【MND (Mind)】: 78

【LUK (Luck)】: 100

*I see. So by remodeling and adding better materials, its stats and max level can also rise.*

I suddenly thought of remodeling Libra, but she was already far past the limit of most golems. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to make her any stronger. Mizar might have been able to, but there was no use asking the deceased.

Still, the thought of a flying RV was really surreal, even though I'd done this myself.

"What do you think, Dina? We can move everyone with this."

"Y-Yeah... You're right."

It seemed like Dina was a bit creeped out by the flying car; her reply didn't sound very positive. In contrast, Aries and Virgo looked at Tanaka like they were excited children.

As for why Virgo came with us, she was performing double duty as our guide and watchperson. This was the forest that her grandmother had worked to protect for most of her life, so it seemed she was accompanying us just in case we were going to try something weird.

I couldn't exactly refute that suspicion, either, given what that fool Aigokeros did earlier.

"Would you like to get on, too?" I offered to Virgo, who looked incredibly interested.

She happily accepted. "Huh? Really? Then yes, please!"

*Thought so. Flying vehicles really are cool everywhere.*

*It looks a little...uhh...not cool, but I don't hate it.*

"There is a problem, Master Lufas."

"What's wrong, Libra?"

"Tanaka is not equipped with weapons for aerial combat. I believe you should give it gun emplacements, at the very least. A main cannon and anti-air capability wouldn't go amiss, either, and explosives for bombing would—"

"Just what are you going on about?" I retorted.

After I entered, Aries, Aigokeros, Dina, and Libra followed. Virgo, still seeming hesitant and reserved, brought up the rear.

After confirming that everyone was inside, I gave Tanaka an order. "Right. Now, Tanaka."

"Y E S, B O S S," Tanaka replied before flying upwards.

While this was normal since this was another world, it would be beyond surreal in Japan. But flying cars were a subject of wonder, and they were basically fixtures in fiction. The fact that such a thing had been realized in such a way impressed upon me that anything really can happen.

*Now, then. We're going to Lufas' hometown. It'd be nice if we find a good clue there.*

## 9

Déjà vu was a strange phenomenon where a person felt as if they'd seen or experienced something before, even though they hadn't. The term originated in France and had since turned into a popular expression in stories.

Right now, I was being hit with the strongest sense of déjà vu I had ever felt.

We had ridden Tanaka and arrived at the place that must have been the heaven-winged's ancestral home, where Lufas had been born and raised...Vanaheim.

Up on top of the mountain, both the air and mana were sparse. Thanks to the geography, it was hard to walk anywhere. Liking places such as this must have been instinctual for heaven-winged, given how Gjallarhorn was similar.

*How strange. I feel nostalgic. I've never been here before, but I feel both nostalgia and revulsion for such an unfamiliar place.*

I noticed a crumbling bakery. I had been kicked by the owner there, as he'd refused to sell me anything.

I saw another building, half destroyed. I had stones thrown at me by the brats who'd lived there.

There was a large mansion which had once been quite splendid. Merak had lived there, and I'd always looked at the building with envy.

*... None of these memories are good...*

*It seems that this town stirs up a lot of memories in a bad way, ones that my inner self never knew about.*

Even though I'd never experienced any of these memories, I was beset by the urge to hit these ruins with an AoE attack and destroy them even further.

"Umm... Miss Lufas...? Are you okay? You look pale."

"Yes, We're fine. Let's go. First, We should head to our house."

I realized that my expression had stiffened up when Aries pointed it out.

*This won't do. The number of times I've started to become affected by "Lufas" has increased recently, and being here in this town is only making it worse. If this keeps happening, I may lose sense of who I am soon.*

*Wait. Has it already been lost? It's already terrible that I can't say for sure. And I'm not really feeling any discomfort about it, either. I might actually be going crazy.*

*...Anyway, let's go see Lufas' house first.*

Parthenos' ghost might be there, and it might hold a hint to Lufas' actions before she had been sealed as well.

"So this is where Master Lufas was born? This place is nice."

"Though it seems this place holds a lot of bitter memories for us. There are too many memories of neighborhood children throwing stones at us," I replied lightly to Libra's statement. But as soon as I did so, the house I was gazing at suddenly disappeared in time with an explosion.

I saw that Libra, Aries, and Aigokeros all had their fists pointing at the house, and I came to the painful realization that they had all attacked it.

*Hey, what the hell? What do you guys think you're doing?*

"I rescind my earlier remark. This town is the worst cesspool possible." Libra spat out words that showed her 180 degree attitude shift while spinning her hand around like a drill. That turnaround was so stark I could only be impressed.

Aries and Aigokeros also nodded in agreement, taking away anything I had left to say.

As I was busy feeling exasperated, Dina, who had walked up next to me, started writing in the air. It looked like she was gathering magic in her fingers to actually write in the air. It showed how dexterous she was.

"Do you have your avatar's memories?"

I nodded silently in response. The reason why I didn't speak was because Libra would hear me if I did. Of course, that was only if she were paying attention, seeing as how she was shooting lasers from her eyes at Merak's house.

*Actually, Libra, just stop already.*

*You, too, Aries. Stop trampling everything in your monster form.*

*Aigokeros, stop smashing everything you can get your hands on. You're all scaring Virgo.*

"It's not good to be so affected by your avatar. Your sense of self might disappear. If you feel that it's dangerous, please consider leaving this place

immediately.”

I nodded once again in agreement after reading Dina’s advice. *I’d certainly like to pass on losing myself. She suggested retreating. I should probably keep that in mind.*

“Hey, now. Stop, all of you. We haven’t come here to break this place.”

I clapped loudly to get the trio of fools to stop what they were doing. If I’d left them to their own devices, they might have broken something important with all their fervor.

After scolding the three berserkers, I walked through the town that had been rendered into a huge set of ruins. Strangely enough, I knew exactly where to go. It was as if I’d been living here until just yesterday. My legs took me where I wanted. I moved as the memories of “Lufas” instructed, and I eventually arrived at a certain house.

It had fallen into heavy disrepair, but it was still clear that it used to be a splendid house.

“Oh? What a nice building. This used to be your house, Master Lufas?”

“Hm... Yeah, you could say that. Though, We can count on our hands how many times We’ve actually been inside,” I replied lightly to Aigokeros and passed by the mansion.

It was true that this had been my family’s house. Lufas’ father and mother had lived here. My memories told me that much. But this wasn’t “Lufas’” house. My (Lufas’) house was... It was a small shack off to the side.

“Th-This is...”

“It’s just what you think. Looks like a storage shed, right? Well, it really *was* a storage shed.”

It seemed that this place, which used to be a storage shack, was where Lufas had actually been raised. The tiny shack was infested with cobwebs. Even a doghouse would have been better.

Of course, there was no way I knew of this backstory, and the reason I had Lufas wear this dress was just for its effects and fashion. To be honest, I

wouldn't hesitate to put Lufas in a string bikini if its stats were stronger than anything else.

*...Thank goodness a swimsuit wasn't the best equipment, I thought to myself, way too late.*

At any rate, the point was that I wasn't really thinking anything when I put the dress on Lufas. But the Lufas in this world...she might have worn this outfit as a reaction to her poor circumstances during her childhood. Like, she admired the upper crust. So, she constantly looked upward, craving and envying the good life. As soon as she gained power, she started collecting glamorous clothing and shiny things like she was fulfilling her childhood dreams...

*...No, I'm probably just reading too far into things.*

"Our father despised us for being born with black wings. He probably even wanted to kill us, if possible. However, he was stopped from doing so by his need to keep up appearances because of his status and our mother's desperate pleas. Because of that, he instead chose the option to isolate us in this shack."

I started talking about a past I had no actual clue about, as if I'd actually experienced it. I'd heard somewhere that memories never truly disappeared, and that they simply got stored somewhere deep and were hard for a person to access. In other words, memories that had been forgotten could come back all at once due to some sort of stimulus.

Since this body was Lufas', there were memories left deep inside. *I guess these memories have been coming up and overflowing due to us coming to this town.*

"...Master, please give me permission to slaughter your father."

I thought about my father, and the knowledge that he was dead just floated up in my mind. "That would be impossible. He is already dead."

*I feel like it's becoming easier to pull out Lufas' memories.*

At any rate, I calmed Libra down from her dangerous state and stopped Aries, who was trying to set fire to the mansion. *There might be some important clue in there. Please don't break it.*

“If Parthenos is still around, she’d most likely be nearby.”

*I don’t remember if I ever told her where my house was, but she probably found out over these past two hundred years.*

*Also, there might be more of Lufas’ past buried here that I don’t know about. Well, even if there isn’t, I’ll be happy as long as we find some clue.*

*As long as we find a clue, I should be able to bring out Lufas’ memories.*

I stepped into the shack. *What an awful place.*

I couldn’t believe this place had been livable. There was only a single small bed and a bunch of junk, the purpose of which I couldn’t even begin to guess.

*I guess they stored things here, since this was a storage shack.*

That wasn’t a mistake. But all this junk was clearly just trash my father threw in here to punish Lufas and make himself feel better.

*Well, whatever.*

The important thing was to find something that could connect to the Goddess’ Scenario which Lufas found out about two hundred years ago. But I didn’t find anything of the sort, and I felt a little disappointed.

*...Well, thinking about this more carefully, Lufas did only spend her early childhood here.*

She only started aiming for the eradication of the devilfolk after she’d become an adventurer and had gotten to level 1000. No matter how I considered things, she wouldn’t have figured anything out as a child. Meaning, there was no way there’d be any hints about the Goddess’ Scenario here...

*I just did all this for nothing.*

“...The Goddess’ Scenario, huh?” I muttered to myself.

Everyone other than Dina looked at me with confused expressions. They were simply reacting to what I said. It didn’t look like they had any idea of what I was talking about. On the other hand, Dina didn’t react at all. I thought she might have known something, but apparently she didn’t, either.

“Miss Lufas, what is the Goddess’ Scenario?”

“Oh. It was something the Devil King talked about the other day. He claimed that this world was moving according to the ‘Goddess’ Scenario.’ Have you all never heard of it?”

Everyone shook their heads in response, indicating that they didn’t know.

Lufas must have played it really close to the chest two hundred years ago if even the Twelve Heavenly Stars didn’t know. *What the hell were you thinking, Lufas? Tell Libra, at the very least.*

*There’s no one who knows.*

As soon as I thought that, I heard the voice of a young girl from the entrance of the shack.

“Let me answer that question.”

But the voice sounded strange. It was as if it were reverberating directly inside my head. It was hard to describe exactly how it sounded. If I were to compare it to something, it would be like putting on some cheap earphones and hearing a really heavily clipped voice... At the very least, it wasn’t how a flesh-and-blood person would sound.

A half-transparent girl stood in the entrance. I could see through her body to the other side. She clearly wasn’t corporeal. *She’s...young.* At the very least, she looked no older than 12 years old. Her green hair which reached down to her knees was braided, and she wore priest’s robes, which drew all of our attention.

“It’s been a long time, Miss Lufas. You haven’t changed in two hundred years. You’ve given this old woman some relief. My my, I’m still so jealous of the heaven-winged’s lifespan, even though I’ve passed through being old and am a ghost now! *Cackle! Cackle!!*”

In contrast to her young appearance, her speech patterns were calm and slow, like that of a grandma.

“My oh my. These past two hundred years have been long, you know. I’ve been doing as you asked all this time, keeping Vanaheim exactly as it used to be, believing your word that you’d return one day. But just the other day, I choked on some fruit and met my unceremonious end.”

The ghost stood in front of me, laughing dryly, to which I could only respond with a dumbstruck, “Huh?”

*Wait. Just...wait a second.*

*What did she just say? Is she seriously claiming she was over two hundred years old?* And she also said that she’d been maintaining Vanaheim. Putting that all together, that meant...

“Oh? What’s wrong, Miss? You couldn’t have forgotten this old grandma’s face, could you? I even rushed to recreate how I used to look since I learned that you’d revived.”



“W-Wait a second! That speech pattern... And two hundred years...? ...Is that you, Gran?” Virgo asked before I could respond, while pointing at the ghost with a trembling finger. The fact that Virgo didn’t recognize her meant that she’d probably aged normally when she was alive.

The girl who talked like an old lady cackled before answering. “What’s wrong, my grandchild? Did you not recognize me just because I changed my appearance a little?”

“N-No, this isn’t just a little...”

Virgo’s expression was stiff as the ghostly girl in front of her puffed out her chest. Then, the ends of the ghost’s mouth curled upwards as she looked at all of us and boldly introduced herself.

Her name was exactly as I expected. She was exactly the person we’d been looking for—

“I am Parthenos the Maiden, one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, those who stand next to the Black-Winged Conqueror. In order to once again be of service to Miss Lufas, I refused to ascend to heaven and instead stayed here.”

## 10

Parthenos was once a member of a clan that served the Goddess. They were agents of the Goddess who supported her from the shadows and kept the world in balance. Parthenos felt pride over the role they had been given, a role that they had probably kept ever since humanity had been born.

*We’re different from other people. We have been singled out by the Goddess. We are her servants who give her all our love and loyalty.*

To her, the clueless clergy who blindly offered the Goddess faith without even knowing what kind of being she was were nothing short of laughable, an opinion that only furthered her sense of superiority.

*I know the secrets of the world. I know the Goddess’ true goal. I know the real meaning of her true and unwavering love of humanity.*

*All things are as the Goddess wills. Monsters, devilfolk, humans, and even*

*animals—all are nothing more than pieces on a board, and only we are allowed to stand outside of the game.*

The first human was named Aeneas. That was also the name of Parthenos' ancestor, the first of their clan. He was the child of god, who was said to have been the first created by Alovenus when she conceived of humanity. His direct descendants would become agents of the divine. They were the only people in all of humanity who knew the Goddess' true objective and had an obligation to support it.

Parthenos never thought to doubt their purpose. In fact, she felt pride from the bottom of her heart. She had unwavering faith in and love for the Goddess. At least, she believed that it was unwavering...

Parthenos met the Black-Winged Conqueror at the end of her conquest.

The place was named "The Goddess' Sanctuary," a location that up until then had been deemed inviolable, and no devilfolk, nor any of history's many tyrants, had set foot in it. And she, of all people, had invaded the sanctuary with the four heroes—Megrez, Alioth, Mizar, and Dubhe—in tow, as if they didn't care how sacred it was.

The strongest guardian, the Scales of Selection, had been captured by Lufas, and all of the Goddess' vanguards that stood against them had been thoroughly defeated. And finally, they managed to drag Parthenos, the current head of the Descendants of Aeneas, out into the open.

"Leave, intruders. This is a sanctified realm where the Goddess resides. This is not a place where those of low birth can enter freely."

"Well now, that's unfortunate. We seem to be of low birth. It's impossible for us to understand what someone of high birth is saying."

The supreme ruler of the human world laughed as she flapped her ominous pitch-black wings. She smiled belligerently, her eyes sharp like blades. And her hair, which turned red around the base of her neck, looked like fire.

Normally, the heaven-winged were born with pure-white wings. But by coming into contact and mixing with mana, those wings were defiled and gradually got closer to black. And if those wings became pitch black, well, they'd

basically be a monster at that point.

She wasn't a heaven-winged. She was a humanoid monster...or at least some sort of completely new, 8th race of humanity. She'd branched off from the heaven-winged into something completely different, just like how humans had branched off into elves, beastfolk, and halflings in the past.

"Much less those who cause people pain and drive them to despair. Have you ever heard of noblesse oblige? That those of higher standing have a corresponding duty to those of lesser? We believe in it. ...If anything puts despair into the hearts of our people, We don't care if they're a Goddess. We shall simply drag her off her throne and take that seat for ourselves."

*This woman is dangerous.* Parthenos could tell with a single look.

*This entire world moves as the Goddess wishes. All is according to her Scenario. The devilfolk decrease the number of humans and become mana, their source of power, once they die. This balancing act is part of the providence of this world. It's not like the Devil King escaped from the Goddess' Scenario and did all this.*

*It's impossible for the Devil King to go against the Goddess' will in the first place... But Lufas Mapphaahl is different. The Goddess never expected a mutated variant of the heaven-winged, much less one with unequaled power who united the world and drove the devilfolk to the point of extinction. She's completely outside of the Goddess' Scenario.*

"Fool. You should be ashamed of your level of conceit."

"Hah! We've been living in disgrace for a long time now. You're 270 years too late to say that, girl."

Parthenos readied her staff. Lufas brought her favorite whip sword to her shoulder.

In response, tens—no, hundreds—of divine guards surrounded Lufas. Each and every one of them were skilled warriors chosen by the Goddess herself, and their average level exceeded 600. Of course, they could withstand Lufas' Pressure. The strongest of them even reached level 1000, like Lufas.

No matter how strong Lufas was as a level 1000 elite, she was nothing but

prey when faced with the net that surrounded her. But she continued to smile fearlessly, and her burning crimson eyes shone even stronger.

“—How laughable! Do you really believe you can stop us like this?! You should have at least brought a dragon with you!”

“...N-No way... This is...”

An hour later, the victor of the fight was clear to see.

All of the elite guardians who protected the sanctuary lay defeated, as did Parthenos. In the center stood only the black-winged fallen angel. Her dress was still immaculate, as were her face and skin. It was like she'd never fought.

*Wrong... This one's just...different. This can't be explained just by being level 1000. It doesn't matter how many monsters a person eats or how far they raise their abilities. It'd be impossible for them to become a monster like this just with that. In fact, those she brought with her and the monsters she has under her aren't that strong.*

“Y-You... What are...?”

“Why are you so surprised? We are attempting to bring down a Goddess. That would be impossible if we couldn't at least pull off something like this.”

The invader spoke as if it were only natural, as she came to stand in front of Parthenos.

While Parthenos could no longer stand up on her own, Lufas seemed to be untouched. There was no way for Parthenos to turn things around; she could only wait to be finished off.

“J-Just do it. I've offered my life to the Goddess... I'm not afraid of death. This soul, festooned by duty, will not allow me to lose myself, even after death. I will continue to be the Goddess' servant. Even if you kill me here, it will be meaningless.”

“Oh? Your life is the Goddess'?”

Lufas' smile mysteriously deepened as she grabbed Parthenos' neck. Lufas lifted Parthenos up so their eyes were level, and she stared into Parthenos' eyes.

“Then stealing that life would be fun, wouldn’t it?”

“Wh-What are...?!”

“Killing you would be too easy. So We shall give you a choice. ...You seem to be too ignorant for your position,” Lufas said, before switching her grip on Parthenos, holding on to her under her arm like one would a barrel.

Then, she called out to her comrades that had come in with her...the other heroes.

“We’re going back, Pasta Nose. We’ve got what we came for.”

“How many times have I told you to stop calling me thaaaaat?!”

“Bear’ing back home already...? Weren’t we going to bear witness to the Goddess?”

“Oh, yeah. That isn’t necessary anymore, Dubhe. This one will have all the information we want.”

Lufas started walking, and Alioth in his full plate and helmet, Mizar in his heavy armor, and Dubhe the polar bear beastfolk followed after her. If one looked closer, they could see that Dubhe was also dragging Megrez along, who was unconscious. It was clear to see that they hadn’t come this far unscathed. They’d probably been hit by the gate guard’s Brachium.

“P-Please wait! Just where are you going to take me?!”

“We told you already that you are far too ignorant. First, We will show you the world.”

That was how Parthenos left the sanctuary for the first time and got a look at the world below. It was a world that should have been overflowing with the Goddess’ love, even though they were suffering through her trials. But Parthenos was forced to realize that that wasn’t the case at all. She saw the world as it was with her own eyes. People were being attacked by the devilfolk. There were crying children who had lost their parents and similarly wailing mothers who had lost their children.

The world wasn’t a paradise by any stretch. It was replete with fear and despair.

That was when a crack appeared in Parthenos' supposedly absolute faith in her Goddess.

\*            \*

I was feeling just a little confused. First, there was the girl in front of me. From the words of the girl herself and Virgo's reaction, there was no doubt that she was Parthenos. And in fact, her clothing and hair color were the same as in the game. Aries and the others also weren't indicating anything to the contrary.

The problem was what Parthenos had said.

She'd said, "I've been doing as you asked, keeping Vanaheim exactly as it used to be all this time."

...What did she mean by that? I thought sealing off Vanaheim like this had been her decision. I figured it was the same pattern as with Aries and Aigokeros, something ridiculous done out of loyalty. Yet from her words, it seemed that I (Lufas) was the one who'd ordered her to do so.

But for what purpose? Why did this need to happen? Why did this place, full of horrible memories, have to be preserved?

"Parthenos?"

"Yes!"

"First, let us apologize for making you wait so long. Sorry. We have put quite a burden on you."

"Those words are wasted on one such as me."

For now, I decided to praise her efforts. *Before getting into the subject I actually want to broach, I'll need to grease the wheels a bit, won't I?*

"So...getting to the point, will you tell us what you know of the Goddess' Scenario?"

"Of course. But before that, Miss Lufas... How much of your memories are you missing right now?"

"...!"

I couldn't stop myself from showing real surprise in response to Parthenos'

question. It wasn't just me, though. Aries, Aigokeros, and the others also looked surprised. Could she have noticed that I wasn't actually Lufas...? It didn't seem like it. But she did know that I didn't have Lufas' memories. That threw me for a loop.

"So you know about that."

"Of course. It was none other than you who told me that the Goddess would probably erase your memories when you were revived, after all."

Parthenos' answer to my question was, once again, something I hadn't expected.

So it was Lufas herself who predicted that I (Lufas) would lose my memories? Then did that mean everything was going according to her predictions?

Dina was also looking uncharacteristically grim, and I could see a trail of sweat going down her face. It seemed that she, who knew who I was inside, didn't expect the Lufas from two hundred years ago to have done this, either.

"Huh? Uh, umm... Miss Lufas, are you missing your memories?!"

"Wh-What?! Something like that..."

Unlike Aries and Aigokeros, who were surprised, Libra was calm. "As I thought." I looked towards Libra and waited for her to continue. "Your speech and the way you acted sometimes made it seem like you didn't remember your past. Also, not only did you not react to Parthenos' form, but your reaction to coming here was more reminiscent of a person regaining their memories than one feeling nostalgia. I have concluded that you most likely were missing parts of your memory, just like I am."

*Huh? This dumb golem's really sharp today for some reason. Is that really Libra?*

At any rate, it seemed like I had no other choice than to admit to memory loss.

"If you understand that much already, then there's no need for pretense. For what reason did We order you to seal off this town two hundred years ago?"

"It would be faster to simply show you instead of tell you. The shock might

actually reawaken your memories.”

*Showing would be faster? I suppose the reason is because it's something that would be easy to discern on sight.* On top of that, Parthenos implied that it would be quite shocking.

Parthenos stood (or rather, floated) in front of us and headed off towards our next destination. We followed after her.

After leaving my home (the storehouse), we walked through the streets of the town—which were even more ruined thanks to Aries and the others—before approaching the exit. There, Parthenos stopped and turned back to face us.

“I’d like for only Miss Lufas to follow me from here on. Everyone else, please wait here. ...Also, make sure you don’t fly into a rampage again. If you do, it might awaken.”

“?”

Everyone agreed while not really understanding Parthenos’ warning. I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by ‘awaken,’ but I agreed with them not going on a rampage.

Leaving Dina and the others behind, Parthenos floated up into the sky. I flew off a little ways behind her.

It seemed like our destination was the top of the mountain. An elevation of 3807 m was nothing to us, since we were able to fly. Well, if you thought of it as walking 4 km, then it might still be quite a distance, but at our speed, it was nothing. It took us less than half a minute to reach the top, and I set down on a spot that looked good.

Vanaheim’s peak had a crater in it, as if something had pierced through it. It resembled a volcano’s mouth. But there was no magma at the bottom, just a huge hole.

“The answer is here. Please look inside.”

“What? Is there something packed insi—”

I looked inside and froze mid-sentence. I was speechless.

*Yeah, uhh... This is amazing. Being filled with magma might have been better.*

This left a bigger impact than when I'd first seen Aries' giant form. It couldn't even be compared.

"...It's huge."

There was something that seemed to be living at the bottom of the crater. *Wait, is it actually alive? If it is, then we're really off track now.*

I already knew that this place was a fantasy world, and common sense didn't apply here. At least, that was what I'd thought. But even so, this ridiculous thing shouldn't have been alive.

What I saw was the head of something that looked like a lizard. Its eyes were closed, and it didn't even twitch, but its nose flared every once in a while like it was breathing. Whenever that happened, a warm wind blew up over the summit.

It seemed as if just its head might far outstrip Aries' monstrous size. I couldn't tell whether it had folded its body and fit into the mountain that way or if it had been buried... *Just how many tens—no, hundreds or even thousands—of kilometers long would it be? I can't even imagine.*

At any rate, if that thing started moving, Vanaheim would be crushed easily.

*No, wait. If things go badly, could it even wreck the world...?*

"It's one of the Goddess' soldiers and an arbitrator of this world. It's one of the five dragons of this world, and it presides over the element of Sun. This is the Ouroboros of Heaven."

I shivered as Parthenos named it.

## 11

Dragons existed in this world. They were largely split into two camps: dragons and the Ouroboros. Split further, there were four categories, including the previous ones: wyverns, dragons, dinosaurs, and the Ouroboros.

In order of strength, the weakest would be wyverns. In strict terms, they weren't actually even dragons. They were simply lizards and snakes that'd mutated to be more dragon-like. It was a really misleading name.

Earth also had dragon-like lizards, like the komodo dragon and armored lizard. Basically, anything that had been mutated by mana to look like a dragon, such as those lizards, was deemed a wyvern. The wyverns that Mars had kept with him also fell into this category, of course. (By the way, before they mutated, they had been draco lizards.)

Also, snakes that had mutated the same way were called Wyrms. *It's truly confusing.*

As for why something like that existed, the story started with the original console RPG, where a weak, dragon-like monster would appear. After that, whenever dragons appeared in the story, the players would go, "Didn't dragons show up in the first game, too?"

This caused the admin side to panic. They'd totally forgotten that a weakling dragon appeared in the first work. At the end of all that worrying, one of the producers made an excuse that it wasn't a dragon but a fake dragon that'd mutated from a snake.

And thus the confusing dragon lineage was born. That was how all this came to be.

Of course, wyverns and wyrms were just reptiles that had been mutated when they turned into monsters. They were in no way dragons. So they weren't very strong. They just looked that way. Well, even if they were fake, they still looked cool, so they were pretty popular with Tamers.

Next would be dinosaurs. Dinosaurs had been around on Mizgarz since the beginning and, for some reason, had yet to die out. They were literally dinosaurs. That also meant they were animals and not monsters. But they were still very strong, able to easily predate on the weaker monsters, devilfolk, and adventurers. At the very least, they were far and away scarier and stronger than wyverns and wyrms.

Recent studies on Earth revealed that dinosaurs used to be feathered, so these were probably quite a ways removed from Earth's dinosaurs. *I mean, these dinosaurs are totally what you'd see in a dinosaur encyclopedia from the 20th century.*

The next strongest were dragons. Whenever someone in this world

referenced dragons, this was usually what they meant. Of course, these were also monsters that had been mutated with mana, but they were on a whole other level of dangerousness. It might surprise you, but dragons were dinosaurs that had been mutated and turned into monsters by mana.

Dragons were dinosaurs, which were already strong, made stronger by mana. So of course they were just ridiculously strong at that point. There was a movie about a dinosaur being exposed to radiation and mutating. This was basically that movie in real life. Dragons were huge, tough, and breathed fire, so mid-level players needed to team up to even barely manage to beat one. The ones that mutated from large carnivore-type dinosaurs were especially bad. Even the Seven Luminaries wouldn't stand a chance. Ten Marses might lose against one of them.

But there existed a type of monster that made those dragons look like small-fry in comparison. And one of those was right in front of me—an ouroboros.

**【Ouroboros of Heaven】**

- 【Level】: 1000
- 【Race】: Ouroboros
- 【Attribute】: Sun
- 【HP】: 10000000/10000000
- 【SP】: ∞
- 【STR (Strength)】: ????
- 【DEX (Dexterity)】: ????
- 【VIT (Vitality)】: ????
- 【INT (Intelligence)】: ????
- 【AGI (Agility)】: ????
- 【MND (Mind)】: ????
- 【LUK (Luck)】: ????

Using the skill Observing Eye, I tried to check its stats, but honestly, I wished I hadn't.

Its HP was higher than anything I'd ever seen before, and its SP was literally infinite. In other words, this was one of those tropes that happened in games where only the enemy got to infinitely use skills. This was probably because they were the guardians of this world. Like, the reason was that they could use as much of the world's power as they wanted or something.

"The Five Dragons... So they actually exist."

I knew of them. They only existed in lore, and I had read about them. But actually seeing one in front of me... *This is really bad.* This was a monster that must never be allowed to awaken. It was on a whole other level.

*I'll say this clearly. Even if its stats are similar to Lufas', I don't think I can win.*

I might be able to put up a good fight, but I'd lose just because of the stark difference in HP. Even supposing every hit I dealt caused the maximum amount of damage allowed by the system, I'd still have to land 101 hits. *Maybe it'd work if I teamed up with all the Seven Heroes in their prime...?*

Even though it was only sleeping, I could feel just how bad fighting it would be. I felt tingling and goosebumps on my skin just from watching it sleep.

"Normally, they'd sleep like this forever. But they will awaken if they sense that the world is truly threatened and carry out their duty as guardians."

"So the reason We sealed this place off was to seal this one?"

"In actuality, my barrier doesn't have the power to contain it. However, by maintaining the surroundings as they are, I can prevent it from sensing anything that goes on outside and make it believe that everything is still peaceful, thus preventing it from awakening. The reason why I drove out the members of Vanaheim was to prevent them from getting mixed up on the off chance it does awaken."

"...Aries and the others did quite a number on the town earlier..."

"I panicked when that happened. It's all right, since this one didn't wake up, but if it had, then my two hundred years of effort would have gone up in

smoke.”

“S-Sorry.” I wiped off some cold sweat with the back of my hand and thanked my lucky stars.

I never expected there to be a monster like this here. If that earlier commotion had woken it up, it would have been game over for all of us. *No, wait. Maybe we could have managed to escape?*

“Do Merak and the others know of this thing?”

“Only a rare few among the heaven-winged should know about this, and Merak should be one of them. They called this one their holy guardian deity and worshiped it.”

“Guardian deity...? Right, so Levia in Svel is an imitation of this?”

“Yes. Megrez used the ouroboros as a model and made an imitation god. That’s Levia in a nutshell.”

A guardian deity... *I see.*

It was true that Levia had an appearance fitting of being called a guardian deity. But if you took that form too far, then it’d become a god of destruction that broke things just by moving. At the very least, I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to worship these ouroboroses as guardian deities after hearing that there were four more of these around somewhere. *I mean, wouldn’t anyone feel the same?*

If the Goddess ever woke all five of them up on a whim and had them take a walk, the world would be destroyed. These ouroboroses could kill people and destroy the surroundings just by moving. This thing was way too huge to be calling itself something like that. There was no way something like this could be called a guardian deity. They were gods of destruction.

“Once upon a time, you plotted to dismantle the Goddess’ Scenario. But no matter how strong you were, you had no chance of victory if you had to face the Goddess and all five of her ouroboroses at once. So you took the initiative and sealed all five of the ouroboroses across the world. Once you’d taken care of the Devil King, you planned on gathering all the fighting power in Mizgarz and waging a war of independence against the Goddess.”

“...You said that these things will awaken if they sense that the world is in danger, yes? What would be the standard for judging that? Why doesn’t this current state of affairs, where the devilfolk endanger the continued survival of humanity, count?”

“I don’t know the answer to that. But the Goddess is probably the one who set the standard. If they haven’t woken up because of the devilfolk, then that would be because the Goddess doesn’t think of them as a threat...”

“Or she actually approves of them and their actions?”

“Exactly.”

*Approval, huh? Well, that would still be on the better side of things.*

The worst case would be that she commanded them herself. If the Goddess herself had command over the devilfolk, that would be awful. And everything that I knew right now pointed that out as a very real possibility.

*Still though, I don’t know if I should call past Lufas reckless or what... She was reaching way too far. And in the end, she was done in by the Seven Heroes. She didn’t even make it to the Goddess, her ouroboroses, or even the Devil King.*

*Like, what the hell?*

“So the others are sealed, too?”

“Indeed. Under your orders, the Ouroboros of Earth is being taken care of by Tauros the Ox. The Ouroboros of Fire is being sealed by Aquarius the Water Bearer. I took on the Ouroboros of Heaven. And the Ouroboros of Wood is being sealed by one of Gemini of the Twins. She’s chased off—or rather, evacuated—the locals.”

“What about the Ouroboros of the Moon?”

“We still don’t know where that one is. It should be somewhere within this world, though.”

*The Ouroboros of the Moon, huh?*

*It couldn’t actually be on the moon, like its name suggests, could it? I considered it for a moment before dismissing the idea. There was no way.*

If the Sun element ouroboros was actually on Mizgarz instead of on the sun, then the Moon element ouroboros should have been here somewhere, too. So that meant it was in a position to move at any time the Goddess wanted it to.

*No, wait. Maybe it's already moving, but no one's noticed?*

"Thank you for telling us. Let's return, Parthenos."

"As you wish!"

*Seriously though, just what was past Lufas thinking, picking a fight with a goddess? I keep learning new stuff one thing after the other. It's getting hard to make sense of anything.*

*But there is one thing I know.*

*There's "the Goddess' Scenario," "my rebellion," and "a trick played by the Goddess." I might be stupid, but even I can figure this out. And by 'this' I mean the question of why I'm here.*

Lufas Maphaahl was probably a big thorn in the Goddess' side. In fact, she might have been a straight-up pain in the ass. And of course she was. Someone who was rebelling against you in a world you created would be nothing less.

So the Goddess did something when Lufas revived and sealed her memories. And that something was me.

*Goddammit... Agghh, fuck. This is seriously messed up.*

*I'm seriously just an extra burden here. I'm just a lid to suppress the real Lufas and stop her from completing her objective.* That was the 'new role' the Goddess was talking about! She used an outsider like me to cover and seal away the real Lufas, causing her to forget what she'd been after in the first place.

*But I don't get it... Why me?* If Lufas really did need to be dealt with like this, then there should have been someone better, someone who'd much more willingly follow the Goddess.

Anyway, I now had more things to do on this journey. I needed to figure out a way to see the Goddess and ask why she'd involved me.

*...No, that's wrong.* The things I had to do didn't increase. I'd just found one.

Up until now, I'd just been going along with the flow of things. I didn't really have an actual goal. I didn't really feel grounded in this world. That was probably the doing of the Goddess as well. She was the one who'd picked an irresponsible person that just went with the flow. Someone who was optimistic and didn't think too deeply and allowed themselves to be swept along without a worry... There was no doubt she'd chosen someone like that on purpose.

*In other words, someone like me.*

I wanted to go on a journey because I was so excited that I'd been summoned to another world. I wanted to gather the Twelve Heavenly Stars because they were doing stupid things. And since I couldn't find the motivation to act without some sort of goal, I just found whatever seemed appropriate and went with that.

*But this time it's different.*

*I want to know. I want to know why the Goddess put me here.*

*And why was it me?*

There was no way I could ignore this burning question. More than anything, it made me sick to think that I was being used, made to dance to someone else's tune. The reason the Goddess put me in Lufas was because Lufas was a thorn in her side. So she used me to hide her real personality away.

*Then... Right. If that's something the Goddess doesn't want, then let's do that. I'll find out what Lufas' original goal was, and do everything she wanted to do.*

There was no way the Goddess could just stay silent if I did that. She'd definitely try to pull something down the line, and I'd be able to come in contact with her.

*So from now on, I'll seriously try and become Lufas. I'll retrace her steps and chase her goals.*

*This isn't out of some sense of justice, bravery, or concern over this world's future.*

*This is personal.*

*I'll be making a counterattack against the Goddess that got me involved.*

After reuniting with Dina and the others, we decided to leave Vanaheim. Given the reason why Vanaheim was sealed off, there was nothing more to do here.

Luckily, Parthenos told me where the other Twelve Heavenly Stars who were sealing the other ouroboroses were, so if I ran out of places to go, I could just visit them. We didn't know where the Goddess could be hiding, according to Parthenos, which was why she simply told me all this instead of writing it down or anything.

"Be careful, Miss Lufas. The Goddess has a special power called 'Avatar.' The Goddess herself won't move. But she can make a puppet that will move as she desires and manipulate people. It's possible for a random towns person whom you consider to be powerless to actually be the Goddess," Parthenos told me.

There were three other places where ouroboroses were being sealed.

First, the Ouroboros of Earth was being sealed in the underground realm of Helheim, otherwise known as Hell. As the name Hell implied, it was the birthplace of Aigokeros, and it was a high-difficulty dungeon that mass-spawned demon-type monsters.

This hadn't been verified, but it was also said that the souls of evil people circulated through here before being reborn. In fact, there were evil spirit-type monsters that appeared there. And it seemed that Tauros the Ox was taking care of the seal there.

Next was the Ouroboros of Fire. That one was sealed far south in a scorching-hot area called Muspelheim... It was currently considered devilfolk territory. The protector of that seal was Aquarius the Water Bearer. She was an essential source of Water magic.

*So that's where she is.* Well, luckily, Dina could use Water magic, too.

Lastly was the Ouroboros of Wood. This one was sealed in the fairies' homeland, Alfheim. It was a forest of light where all fairies originated from. Any enemy you met there would always be a fairy or a spirit.

The one keeping the ouroboros sealed there was Gemini, the Twins. As their

name suggested, the Twins were a strange star that included two people. Thanks to that, some idiots had opined that it should be the Thirteen Stars instead.

*At any rate, I'll be leaving meeting up with these people until later. I can't just easily pop up where the others are sealed, and they're not causing any trouble, anyway.*

For now, I decided to keep to searching for the Twelve Heavenly Stars that were active within humanity's sphere of influence. Still, Alfheim was just barely within that territory looking at a map, so it might be nice to stop by.

"Excuse me, Miss Lufas. I really do want to go with you, but as you can see, I'm dead. I won't be of any use to you like this."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. We are thankful for your loyalty, which persists even after death."

"Those words are wasted on me. But please, be at ease. While I might not be able to go, Virgo will go in my place."

"Wha—?!" Virgo sounded surprised at Parthenos' sudden announcement.

It seemed this was the first she'd heard of it.

*Hey, Parthenos. Is it really okay to make her come with me without talking about it with her at all?*

"She's still immature, but I've pounded the basics into her. She will surely aid you."

"Um, Gran... I still..."

It was obvious that Virgo seemed against it, but Parthenos pushed her into Tanaka and concluded the conversation herself.

"Virgo, my granddaughter, I won't allow you to stay holed up in this forest. Understand? It's all right. Go out and see the world already. It'll be good for you."

"Whaaa...?"

Well, it was true that I was glad she was coming with us. With Parthenos

dead, I'd need a new 'Maiden' anyway, and since Virgo's already over level 300, she was really strong for this day and age. Also, if I trained her, she could actually get to level 1000, since she wasn't a monster. It might be possible for her to actually become the strongest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. She'd probably get there once I power leveled her by stopping the enemy and making her deliver the finishing blow. She was heaven-winged, so she'd most likely be great at heaven-arts, and her base stats would be high, too. And she could fly.

*Yep, she's perfect.*

"Well, if she herself is okay with it, that would be great... Are you sure, Virgo?"

"Urgh... Well, with what Gran said, even if I don't go with you, I'll just be chased out of the forest anyway... P-Please take care of me from now on."

And just like that, Virgo joined us as the second-generation 'Maiden,' and we left Vanaheim.

Seeing Parthenos continue waving to us until she disappeared into the distance left quite the impression.

*Like, some people are just energetic even when they're dead, huh?*

*It might be nice to come back and visit if we're ever in the area again.*

## 12

*This might come off as sudden, but let's go over my goal and what's happened so far once again.* Reviewing things like this every once in a while was pretty important. If you didn't, then you might wander off course without realizing it, and you'd find yourself eventually trying to do something completely different.

Starting off, my first goal was to take a trip around the world and see the sights. But I couldn't say that anymore, given my current circumstances. I was already on a journey and seeing the world in a sense, so this was no longer a goal anyway.

Next was gathering the Twelve Heavenly Stars and meeting the Seven Heroes. Currently, I had Aries, Libra, Aigokeros, and Parthenos...had stayed in the forest,

so I now had Virgo instead. That made four I'd gathered so far.

When we'd first started, Dina had been aware of the locations of six members of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. That meant there were still two more we could find using her information. But she had also said that out of the six she knew of, two had gone over to the devilfolk. The two who defected were the Goat and the Scorpion, so that meant we already knew where five out of the six members Dina knew of were. This also meant that there was only one more member for us to find with her current information.

But with Parthenos' new info, we now knew where the Twins, the Water Bearer, and the Ox were. *And the Lion is in the middle of a fight with Benetnasch, I believe.* In other words, with four Stars already with me, I now knew the locations of a further five Stars.

*I suppose if I listed it, it'd look like this?*

Retrieval complete: Sheep, Scales, Goat, Maiden

Location known: Twins, Water Bearer, Ox, Scorpion, Lion

Location unknown: Archer, Fish, Crab

*This is going to be a long process...*

As for the Seven Heroes, I'd met Megrez and Merak already, so that only left Benetnasch. But Benetnasch would be a real problem. Apparently, she'd retained her peak strength, and I also heard that she hadn't participated in the fight against the Devil King. On top of that, she seemed to completely see me as an enemy. She was extremely dangerous.

*Well, it's not like I didn't expect this.*

The Seven Heroes once defeated me in the first place, so of course they'd be starting from the standpoint of an enemy. Being friendly would actually be more unnatural.

The first two heroes were quite friendly to me, so I'd let my guard down. But in a sense, Benetnasch would be more 'correct' in her attitude towards me than

they were. At the very least, she was much easier to understand than someone who regretted defeating me after the fact. She was easier to understand...but still dangerous. She was probably the most troublesome enemy so far.

The fact that she'd retained her strength meant that she was still level 1000, and that meant something different for one of the Seven Heroes compared to your regular level 1000 character. She was part of the stat-boosting faction, who'd forced their stats higher by eating bits and pieces of monsters. Also, Benetnasch's stats had been a close second to mine in the game, so along with the advantages that came from being a vampire, she was exceptionally strong. If we were to fight during the morning or daytime, I'd win almost every time, but she'd probably come out on top during the night.

On top of that, the fact that she was aiming for my neck probably meant she wasn't a player. The ruling was only tentative, but that meant that it was probably safe to assume that all of the Seven Heroes were residents of this world. That meant Dina and I were the only people from the 'other side.'

*So, that brings us to the one Benetnasch is currently waging war with—Leon of the Twelve Heavenly Stars.*

The worst part about this situation was the fact that he viewed me as an enemy, too. If I carelessly got too close, I'd be double attacked by both Leon and Benetnasch.

Of course, that'd be impossible to deal with. *No joke.*

*...For now, let's stay far away from Benetnasch.*

Next: the hero.

I had gone back to Laevateinn once, since I'd thought the hero would be killed. But actually, the Devil King didn't even think the hero was worth thinking about. He was aiming for me, which had been a surprise. *So leaving the hero alone for a while should be fine.*

There was still a possibility of him being targeted by the Seven Luminaries, but he had a tiger beastfolk at over level 100 with him, along with another two who were decently strong. There had also been several others hiding in the shadows who seemed to be Rangers. As long as multiple Luminaries didn't gang

up on the hero and his party, then they should be able to fight through it.

*Well, it still might be a good idea to make some security golems and send them over.*

Then, lastly, there was the main dish, that being to look into the original Lufas' goals and intentions and put a crack in the 'Scenario' of the Goddess who selfishly involved me in all this. Then, I'd drag that Goddess out into the open and ask why she'd grabbed me.

I didn't know just what the Goddess had been thinking when she put me inside Lufas. And what she wanted me to do was still a mystery. But... *Yeah, that's why I want to know.* I needed to know. If I didn't find out, I'd never be able to move on. I'd just be stuck here. I was tired of having no foothold in this world. I was tired of not being attached to anything and just wandering around without a destination.

*So first, I'll fall to the ground. And I'll be at the starting line.*

*That's why I'm rebelling against the Goddess.*

I was now grateful that I'd resonated with Lufas so strongly ever since I arrived in this world. If I was still just 'me,' I'd certainly never have reached this conclusion. If I'd stayed as just myself—all optimistic, foolish, thoughtless, and aloof—I'd surely still just be thinking something like *Woohoo! I'm in a game world!* I wouldn't have had a doubt in the world, and I'd have just been enjoying the place for what it was.

Even though I had just been dropped into an MMO world all of a sudden, I had still been delighted, even while being bewildered. And even though I clearly possessed someone else's body, I'd accepted that without any sense of guilt. It might have seemed as if I were facing reality, but I had just been running away. I hadn't even tried to find a way to go back.

If I were to do anything, I'd just put myself on display. And if I were to set anything as my goal, I'd just surround myself with convenient people. I'd happily stick my nose into trouble while claiming I didn't like to be involved with anything troublesome, and even while complaining about it, I'd still wish for trouble deep down. I'd basically been waiting for a stage to look cool on. I'd wanted to be praised, acknowledged, revered, worshiped, put on a pedestal,

and respected... I'd wanted to be drunk and heady with how cool I was and hang around in this dream world for as long as I'd wanted.

*Aghh, how preposterous.*

It was crazy to think I'd rather be in a game world than boring Japan when modern Japan would be the stuff of dreams to the people of Mizgarz. It was peaceful, all your needs were met, and you even had the leeway to play games. It was as if I wasn't even looking at what was right in front of me. I was just such a person.

*Yeah, I'll admit it.* I was a convenient, easy-to-manipulate person for the Goddess. So I was probably pretty suitable to act as a lid for Lufas.

But too bad that lid (me) was a little too weak to hold Lufas in.

Well, that was only natural. After all, Lufas had been fighting night and day in Mizgarz while I spent my days playing games without any hardship. The strength of our egos and the tenacity of our wills would naturally be completely different. You didn't even have to think about it that much to come to that conclusion.

The lid was already open. I could tell. *I guess that means this situation won't be continuing for much longer.*

*...Wow, I'm going to have to find the Goddess quickly, get her to take me out of Lufas, and send me back to my world, or this time, Lufas is going to be my lid.*

*That would be... Yeah, I'm going to take a hard pass on that.*

*Right. That's the end of the review.*

Thinking about all of that again like this, it really did drive home how hopeless I was. The fact that Lufas and I had been resonating with each other for so long, and I'd only realized I was in trouble when things had gotten this far, was really bad.

But thanks to that, I was finally looking forward. *It's kind of hilarious how ironic that is. I'm actually smiling right now.*

"...Miss Lufas?" Aries, who was sitting next to me, called out to me hesitantly.

*I know this isn't a huge thing, but stop looking at me with those upturned*

eyes. Even though I know you're a guy, that look is pretty devastating. With those thoughts running through my head, I turned to look at Aries.

"What is it?"

"No, uhh... Were you thinking of something?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Your uhh...face..."

"Face?"

"Yes. ...Umm...recently, you've been much calmer and gentler than you used to be, Miss Lufas. It's like you've been more carefree and at peace or something. But the expression you were making just now looked like the old you."

"...We see."

*Huh. So now 'Lufas' is showing up in my expressions as well. I really am in trouble. I can still feel my own consciousness, but I might actually disappear soon.*

I didn't know just how much time I had left, but there was no doubt that I'd shortened that time greatly by visiting Vanaheim. My sense of self would most likely only continue to fade as I delved into Lufas' memories and desires.

But, if I didn't do that, I'd never be able to discover the clues I needed in order to find the one who'd involved me in all this. By fearing disappearing and not doing anything, I'd be doing exactly what the Goddess wanted, too. That was probably what I'd been meant to do originally.

*Why is this such a shitty game? The closer I get to completing it, the closer I get to the game over screen, too. And I might stay and enjoy the game for a long time, but that would only be for the mastermind's benefit.*

*This game really is shitty.*

At any rate, I needed to concentrate on getting the remaining Twelve Heavenly Stars back right now...especially the Scorpion.

*...I guess what I need to do didn't really change all that much in the end.*

“Aigokeros, which country do you think Scorpius will target next?”

“Right! She has told me she plans to destroy Blutgang next.”

Blutgang...the country that Mizar founded.

That country was missing its founder, one of the Seven Heroes, of course, so it would probably be easier to attack compared to Svel or Gjallarhorn. It was also known as the country that many craftsmen took up residence in, as well as the country that handled most of the world’s industrial needs. It was quite an important target.

Given that she’d already brought down Hrotti, which had been founded by the deceased Phecda, it seemed that Scorpius was attacking her targets in ascending order of difficulty.

“Dina, what about the last of the Twelve Heavenly Stars which you know of?”

“That would be Karkinos the Crab.”

*Karkinos, huh?* He was the one with the best defensive abilities in the Twelve Heavenly Stars. His endurance was stupidly high, his defense incredibly rock-solid, and he had the “Covering” skill to defend allies. He was a complete defense-type, made to become a shield for others.

But on the other hand, he only had one skill for attacking, and even that one was a counter ability, so he was terribly inefficient. His singular attack skill, “Acubens,” returned half the damage an enemy had dealt to him back to the enemy, so it was quite strong. For example, if he were to activate Acubens in response to Brachium, he’d then be dealing over 50,000 damage in return. It dealt more damage the stronger the user’s enemies were. *Putting it like that, it might be a really strong skill.*

But its compatibility with the Scorpion was awful. Damage from the poison status didn’t count as damage from the enemy, so Karkinos’ counter wouldn’t work. He’d just be one-sidedly shaved away. Of course, poison damage also didn’t care about a person’s defenses, so Karkinos wouldn’t be able to stop it.

For better or worse, Karkinos was a really polarizing fighter.

“Where is he?”

“In Blutgang.”

“So they’ve overlapped. We suppose this is good fortune.”

“It might also be bad fortune.”

Karkinos and Scorpius were both in the same place. *No, Scorpius is only targeting Blutgang, so they aren’t yet, but they will be.*

It could be said that this was a great chance for me to sweep up two Stars without having to move anywhere. But I’d also be dealing with two Stars at the same time, so it would be too optimistic to assume that nothing would happen.

Even just by considering what happened with the previous Stars, Parthenos was the only one who wasn’t stirring up trouble. Aries and Aigokeros caused lots of trouble, and they’d started a fight as soon as they’d met each other, too. In other words, even seeing another member of the Twelve Heavenly Stars might end in a bloodbath instead of a simple exchange of pleasantries.

No. In this case, it would also be terrible if they hit it off. If the Scorpion and Crab both teamed up, they might take Blutgang down in a single day. With the Crab who wouldn’t let any damage from the enemy through, and the Scorpion who would then be free to spread as much poison as she wanted...

*Just imagining this awful combo gives me the shivers.*

*We’re going to need to hurry to Blutgang, aren’t we?*

## 13

A small part of Mizgarz’ architectural technology surpassed that of Earth’s. It was all thanks to the fact that, unlike the people of Earth, the people of Mizgarz possessed a fantastic power by the name of alchemy, which allowed them to build things that would normally be impossible. Take my ridiculously big grave for example; it was thanks to alchemy that the thing only took ten years to build. If people had tried to build it on Earth, it would have taken much longer.

Still, there was a limit to everything. Even alchemy wasn’t omnipotent; there should be an upper limit to what it could do. However, sometimes geniuses were born who could cause disaster, and people like that always ignored the

path laid out by common sense in order to forge their own way, going places that no one could foresee.

So, what I meant was... That the man named Mizar was one of those people and...I have only now realized just how far off course he'd been.

We'd been traveling for a few days in Tanaka. The place we arrived at was a huge—no, incredibly huge—castle-like structure. It towered up into the sky, and it was over 1 km long.

*Wait, is this thing a castle? Really?*

*There's ports for cannons here and there; it's more like a battleship.*

While I stared at it in wonder, Dina called out to me. "There it is. That's our next destination, the 'Mobile Capital Blutgang.'"

"...Mobile...Capital?"

"Yes. The Blacksmith King Mizar's last and greatest creation was Blutgang itself—300 m tall, 1100 m long, and 400 m wide. It's a golem made completely out of Orichalcum, and it's level 770. To date, it has repelled all attacks from the devilfolk. Inside, it is split into 15 floors with sections for residential and industrial areas, or so I've heard."

*So the entire capital is a weapon? What the hell? That's frightening.*

Just who would expect to see an entire city that was supposed to be their target get up and attack them? On top of that, it's level 770, which meant that he used paid items to boost its power.

*Hey, who was it that said that Blutgang was a weak country? It's ridiculously strong! The capital, that is.*

*...Whoops. It was me.*

*Hey, actually, Mizar, why are you the only one with a different sense of reality? This golem looks way more appropriate for a mecha anime with war in space and stuff like that. Why the hell did you make a gigantic battleship in a fantasy setting...? Think of people's immersion!*

"So he made the capital itself a golem... Levia, Svel's guardian deity, surprised us, but this surpasses even that. We suppose it should be expected of the

Blacksmith King, though.”

“*yawn* ...W-Wow, it’s huge.”

Beside me, Virgo was awestruck. Her pure-white wings fluttered restlessly, and I could tell just how excited she was. Aries and Aigokeros were unmoved, so they’d probably already known about it. And Libra seemed overtly proud.

*Ah, oh right. Mizar’s kind of like Libra’s father, isn’t he?*

“Well, it’s a golem, as you can see. So it’s basically proof against physical attacks.”

“Makes sense. It would probably be tough for Aries or Libra to take down.”

“Apparently it transforms into a humanoid shape in emergencies and can punch enemies out.”

“Anything goes, huh?”

“Yes. So against Scorpius, it’s...”

“The worst matchup.”

Blutgang itself was a golem, so poison wouldn’t work against it. In that sense, it had an advantage over Scorpius. But there were still citizens inside. It didn’t matter how strong Blutgang itself was. If the people inside all died, then it would still be a loss for them. In fact, since there was no place to escape within the enclosed space of the golem, it would be easier to fill the inside with poison.

It seemed I’d made the right choice to hurry here.

“Master Lufas, what will you do about your appearance?”

“Dwarves shouldn’t be that long-lived, correct? So it should be all right as long as We hide our wings. Let’s go with the outfit We got from Megrez this time.”

I selected the outfit that Megrez had gifted me in response to Libra’s question. My only two choices when appearing in public were either to go full suspicious-person-mode and cover myself with my cloak or to wear the bandages I’d gotten from Megrez. The first choice did make it nearly impossible to see my wings, but in exchange, I clearly looked very suspicious. The latter

didn't make me look as suspicious, but my face was still visible to anyone who could recognize me.

Both had their advantages and disadvantages, so I needed to carefully choose which I would use. But if no one would recognize me anyway, then it was better to avoid looking so suspicious. *People who sneak around actually seem more suspicious, so being bold and acting like I belong is the right choice.*

I had Aigokeros turn around before I started to change. Aries also turned around in a hurry after he noticed what I was doing.

*Oh, crap. Aries is also a dude. He's so indistinguishable from a girl that I completely forgot.*

Virgo looked confused, so Libra explained. "That one's male."

"Ah, Miss Lufas. We can just keep going in Tanaka. Blutgang has a loading dock for golems."

"Oh? How convenient."

I decided to do as Dina suggested, so we approached without getting off Tanaka first. As we got closer, a walking armor came out from the castle accompanied by clanking noises. It was probably a security golem employed by Blutgang.

*It looks to be around level 50 at first glance. This one isn't Mizar's, is it?*

"STOP. PLEASE SHOW YOUR PASSPORT AND STATE YOUR REASON FOR TRAVEL."

"I am Dina, a free merchant. We came to do business. Here are our passports."

Dina held up our passports to the golem's eye part. When she did so, the golem's eye shined blue and beeped.

*Is it scanning the passport?*

"PASSPORT: CONFIRMED. NEXT, I WILL INSPECT THE INSIDE OF YOUR GOLEM."

Dina got out of Tanaka and beckoned to us.

*I guess we'll have to wait outside until they're done with their inspection.*

Since I had no reason to object, we all obediently stepped outside and joined Dina.

“They’re going to inspect the inside of the golem to make sure we aren’t bringing in anything dangerous. Blutgang is famous for its solid defenses, and the thing it’s most careful of are the devilfolk and other similar enemies sneaking inside. Also, people who disguise themselves like Jupiter did generally get stopped here.”

“We see. But if that’s the case, won’t Libra be noticed?”

Libra looked like a maid, but inside, she was basically a walking weapons warehouse. Even leaving aside her machine guns, all the other weapons Libra stored within her should easily strike her out. She was basically a mobile safety hazard. *There’s no way they’ll let her in.*

Or so I thought, but the security golems didn’t say anything about Libra at all.

“Please be at ease, Master. I am of much better quality than them. No defective golem that can only scan the surface of something will be able to detect my weapons.”

“O-Oh.”

*Yep. A mobile safety hazard.* The fact that she wouldn’t get caught in checks like this made her even scarier.

Libra wasn’t the only one who might get detected, either. Aigokeros was hiding in my shadow, so there was no worry about him. The problem was Aries. But the security golems didn’t say anything about Aries, either, and eventually, we were given permission to pass. While it felt mysterious to me, I noticed that Dina was looking smug.

“You hid his status?”

“Exactly!”

Apparently Dina used her cheat abilities to trick the golems. *She really is insanely reliable in times like this.*

We got back into Tanaka and passed through the gate, with the golems seeing

us off. After we passed through the gates that were surrounded by steel, we were signaled to by a dwarf who was probably something like a guide.

“Hold on there. You’re going to have to leave your golem with us. It’s forbidden to travel by golem inside the capital.”

“Understood. We’re going to be walking from here, everyone.”

After leaving Tanaka to the dwarf, we stood in front of a giant door that probably led to the actual capital. The dwarf activated a switch next to the door, and it opened ponderously with all the noise one would expect. The giant door split into a left and right side as it opened, exposing the innards of Blutgang to us.

The inside did, in fact, look like a regular city. The ceiling was painted to look like a real sky, complete with artificial light. The total size of the city wasn’t large, with only around 1100 x 400 m to work with, but there were many buildings packed tightly together, making full use of the space available. There were large roads, parks, and places that seemed like stores as well.

The ceiling was quite high. From what I could tell, it stood about 15 m up, so the space didn’t feel very cramped or enclosed. In fact, I could see apartment buildings, condos, and other housing complexes. This place certainly didn’t feel like it was inside a golem.

I couldn’t restrain my curiosity; I looked around everywhere. In a rare turn of events, it was Libra and not Dina who started explaining things after seeing how I was acting.

“Among Blutgang’s fifteen total floors, the first eight are designated as residential areas. Each floor’s city is named simply, following the convention of First Floor Town, Second Floor Town, and so on. The ninth and tenth floors are the commercial floors, containing many different shops. The eleventh to thirteenth floors are the office area. All of Blutgang’s various companies are concentrated there, which are mostly workshops and warehouses. The fourteenth floor is for the royal family. Only they and the people they specifically give permission to are allowed to enter that floor. And the fifteenth floor is Blutgang’s brain, its control center. Only a select few are allowed onto that floor as well. The high-level golems that Mizar made himself are also stored

there.”

“You’re awfully knowledgeable.”

“Blutgang is kind of like my little brother.”

*That’s a huge little brother you’ve got there, Libra.*

I stopped myself from saying that out loud as I took a peek at the usually inexpressive Libra’s face from the side. Even though their sizes were completely different, both Libra and Blutgang had been made by Mizar. She probably felt some attachment because of that.

“So, Karkinos is somewhere in here... Correct?”

“Yes. For sure.” For some reason, Dina went as far as to add ‘for sure’ to her reply. Dina was probably bothered by the fact that last time, she’d said that Parthenos was alive and well only for us to find out that she was actually dead.

*Personally, I actually feel closer to Dina knowing that she’s not infallible, but I guess there’s no real need for me to tell her that.*

“Hm... Then why not grab a meal for now? Luckily, there seem to be several eateries in the residential area as well.”

“Apparently they were actually placed in the commercial area, but complaints were raised about how annoying it was to travel that far to eat. So now, the restaurants and some general stores have moved to the residential areas.”

While listening to Libra’s explanation, I continued walking through the city. Compared to the other cities I’d seen so far, this one seemed much more modern. Of course, it still felt old and outdated compared to modern Japan, but it certainly didn’t feel like a city from the Middle Ages.

*Let’s see... Maybe the Early Modern Era? I suppose the closest analogy would be...London in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

Of course, this wasn’t actually the case. This was simply the closest comparison I could make using the knowledge I had on hand.

Unlike London, there weren’t bridges crisscrossing the landscape or anything like that. In the first place, Blutgang wasn’t big enough nor did it have the lakes or even ponds that would necessitate bridges, although there were small ones

for pedestrian traffic. There was also a limit to the height of buildings due to the ceiling, so everything ended up a little shorter as well. That was all right, though.

At any rate, I wanted something to eat. It wasn't as if I hadn't had anything to eat today, but since we were traveling, pretty much all the food we had were things that could be preserved for a long time. Tanaka did have a mock refrigerator, but it wasn't nearly as effective as the real deal. I didn't really know how a refrigerator worked in the first place. I'd just made a hermetically sealed box and thrown ice that Dina had made inside. So it was less a refrigerator and more a cooler. It was better than nothing, but it still wasn't quite right. It just didn't feel proper. Given that, it was always better to enjoy food as much as you could while you were in a town or village. *Having good food helps alleviate stress. That's just obvious.*

"Ah, Miss Lufas. Doesn't this place look nice?"

"Hm... We would prefer that one across the street with the crab sign, though."

Virgo pointed to a stylish-looking restaurant built out of wood, which was rare for this place. There were pots lined up in front of the store, giving it a nice accent. But I was more interested in the place that advertised seafood even though we were inside a golem.

*Still though, Virgo's actually asserting herself. She just joined us, so I guess I should fold here. We can just try the crab place next time.*

"However, this restaurant does certainly have a good sense of style. Let's eat here."

"Yay!"

Virgo was like Aries in that they shared some childlike aspects, but unlike Aries, she had a much brighter personality. She was energetic, and it was heartwarming to see. *Actually, Aries is a little too introverted. It'd be great if she rubbed off on him.*

With that thought, I opened the door to the restaurant and stepped inside.

*Now, then. What kind of food do they serve?*

“Welcome. Party of six?” As we entered, a small girl wearing an apron greeted us. At first glance, she seemed to be no older than twelve, but she most likely looked younger than she actually was.

Dwarves were basically very short humans, so it was hard to tell their age from looks. In game lore, they were referred to as ‘shadow halflings,’ since it was said that they had originally been the same race as the halflings. According to the lore, the halflings had been split between wandering freely and living in caves at some point, which eventually divided the race into halflings and shadow halflings.

Halflings were basically something like *homo floresiensis* (or like grassrunners from Sword World RPG, or the halflings from DnD) but not quite. More accurately, dwarves were also a member of the halfling race.

*That being said, all this is just from lore, and no one actually cares. I also think that halflings are simply halflings, and dwarves are dwarves. So from now on, I’ll ignore their scientific names and just refer to the floresiensis of the pair as halflings and dwarves as dwarves.*

Names and classifications were just like that sometimes, though. Even on Earth there were examples of this. Like hedgehogs, for example, which were much closer to moles than hogs. But no one cared about that, and everyone called them hedgehogs anyway. This was a similar case.

It was pretty standard in fantasy settings to make dwarves into short people with huge beards, and this was no different in Mizgarz. Their short stature was a racial trait, and all the men grew magnificent beards. But other than that, they weren’t too different from humans. They didn’t age any slower or faster. Dwarves aged at a similar rate to humans. Honestly, they just didn’t shave.

But, I had heard that dwarves grew muscle easier, probably in order to handle manual labor. It must have been a racial difference. The men probably burst with male hormones, since they got ripped with only a little work. Their eyebrows grew thick and bushy, and they started to look much rougher in general. Of course, their beards grew at an incredible rate as well.

Finely chiseled features—basically what was commonly referred to as “the mature man face”—were also considered the most attractive among dwarves. That was why every single man basically looked like Santa Claus once they passed thirty.

And as expected, humans with no beards or cool looks weren’t popular at all among dwarf women. *Dwarf women are all basically legal lolis who stan older men. Well, they all age normally, though, so once they get old enough, they just look like really short grandmas.*

“Your order?”

So I looked at the menu and answered, “Barometz soup.”

I’d been wanting to try barometz since I came to Mizgarz. In the game, food was treated as a healing item, and barometz was included in that.

Barometz was a kind of a monster, but it’d mutated in a very interesting way. Its true nature (probably) was that of a plant. The plant resembled a gourd plant, but for some reason, it sprouted a lamb. If left alone, the lamb matured into a sheep as it ate all the grass and plants around it, until finally starving to death when it ran out of food. The whole thing was unfathomable. It was clearly a failure of a species as far as survival was concerned. But it was still quite useful. Even the lamb’s hooves were made out of wool, so the whole thing could be turned into materials for use in something else.

Barometzes were a reliable early game companion for Alchemists. It was fundamental knowledge that low-level Alchemists started off by farming barometzes until they’d gathered a full set of wool armor. I’d gone through several front line classes before starting Alchemist, though, so at that point, I was just hunting monsters and dinosaurs without batting an eye. On top of that, I’d already had Aries, who produced rainbow wool—the highest tier of all sheep-based materials—by then. Honestly, barometzes were nothing to me.

Anyway, barometzes were delicious...apparently. I’d been told that their meat tasted like crab. I could only think of that as a joke now. *Well, it probably was a joke in the game. That was most likely what the game’s writers were aiming for.*

*Still though, to think that they’ve been copied over directly to this world... How*

*pitiful.*

*I'll still eat it, though.*

Or so I thought, but then I noticed Aries leveling a steady stare at me.

“.....”

Noticing my gaffe, I hurriedly changed my order. “Ah, no... On second thought, We will have the mushroom soup.”

I was careless. I shouldn't have tried to order mutton in front of Aries, who was a sheep. Though, I'm not sure if barometz counts as a sheep. Of course, Aries probably wouldn't hold it against me. But I was scared that he would try to cut off a piece of himself, because he thought something like *'so Miss Lufas likes mutton...'*

*Damn. I guess I need to stay away from any animals that resemble one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars.*

“I'll have a salad.”

“Me too.”

“Same here.”

“I would like barometz soup.”

While Dina, Aries, and Aigokeros all ordered a salad, Virgo didn't hesitate to go for the barometz soup. She didn't mind Aries' stare at all. Actually, she didn't even notice. Then she ordered goat next.

“Oh, and some goat milk porridge, too.”

Aigokeros' stare was now added to the mix, but she still didn't care. *She's incredible, in a sense.*

“It's amazing how you get ingredients in a golem, though.”

“Well, you see... Inside the golem—” Dina started to explain, but was cut off by Libra.

“There are agricultural production plants inside the golem. They mainly raise barometzes, simple ale fruits, tubers, and a variety of other vegetables. That being said, almost all of their food is imported.”

Dina ground her teeth after having her role as expounder of knowledge taken away from her, but as always, Libra didn't seem to mind.

*Why is it that all of you want to explain things so much?*

*Well, whatever. Food's more important right now.*

The soup that was brought out to me had a variety of sliced mushrooms in it and looked really inviting. There were some strains I didn't recognize, but I wasn't that knowledgeable on mushrooms in the first place. I couldn't even tell the difference between matsutake and shimeji mushrooms. As long as they weren't poisonous, I was fine with whatever mushroom was put in front of me.

The soup's taste was...good. Perfectly salted.

The fact that the last bit of land humanity had managed to hold on to while the devilfolk took over most of the world was coastal was a small silver lining. There was that place where I'd fought with the Devil King...near Laevateinn. I remembered that place was near the ocean. Salt was important for health. If the devilfolk had ended up taking all the coastal land, then humanity would probably have crumbled without a fight.

As I expected, though, this world's culinary techniques weren't as advanced as those on Earth. It felt like they just kind of boiled up this soup and put in whatever amount of salt felt appropriate.

*Well, I guess that's only natural. I mean, all of Mizgarz is in a state of war, after all.* Nutritional value and amount was valued more than taste. People didn't have the leeway to experiment for taste, nor did they have the spare ingredients. So it was inevitable that food culture hadn't progressed. Experimenting to create delicious food was great. Nobody would object to good food. But the world just wasn't in a state that would allow that.

This world also lacked seasonings. That was probably one of the things preventing the growth of food culture as well. It was a staple of the fantasy genre for even pepper to be a rare and valuable item, and in the game, pepper actually was something that sold for a high price. *I think it was because places that can produce it are limited?*

Still, it wasn't as precious as it had been on Earth in the Middle Ages. During

that time on Earth, pepper was worth its weight in gold. It was during the Age of Exploration, too, so refrigeration technology hadn't been invented yet. Pepper was indispensable in helping preserve food over long periods.

But this world wasn't in any sort of Age of Exploration, and Water magic existed. If a person wanted to preserve food, they could just use Water magic to put it on ice, and there were several other ways to preserve food on top of that. Of course, magic ice would still go back to being mana eventually, but that just meant you'd have to cast it again. In terms of preserving food, there was basically no need for pepper. Though, pepper was still valuable, even without that use.

*If there was even a slightly larger variety of spices, this soup would be much tastier... Oh well.*

I wouldn't say I felt satisfied by the meal, but I'd finally managed to have something that wasn't travel rations. So with a full belly, I paid the bill, and we left.

*The next thing on the list should be finding Karkinos.* Given the fact that I had no idea where he could be, there was no other choice but to turn over every stone in our search. But with how large Blutgang was, doing so would take too much time. Plus, a lot of this place was made up of residences, so we wouldn't be able to search everywhere anyway. We weren't the heroes of some RPG, so we couldn't just barge into people's homes and start breaking pots.

"Libra, can you find Karkinos?"

"Like I said earlier, I will be able to commit all the citizen's breathing patterns to memory with enough time and use that to find him. Please wait a while."

"Then We guess we should just wait until Libra is done."

Libra should be able to take care of the search for Karkinos. She said it would take time, but it would probably still be much faster than having us physically search everywhere.

That was when Dina made a suggestion. "Ah, then would it be okay for me to do some shopping? I should restock our food and water."

"Then I will serve as your guard."

Surprisingly, Libra volunteered to keep Dina safe as she shopped. Dina would probably be fine by herself, but she'd be doubly safe with Libra. In fact, I would have asked Libra to do that if she hadn't volunteered.

I wasn't terribly concerned for Dina's safety. She was level 1000, so she should have been able to deal with almost everything herself. But I was concerned, since I had no idea what Dina might get up to if she were left alone. She was a double agent for us, after all, so I already wasn't quite sure what she was doing in the background. Despite all the danger, though, I'd still asked for her to join me.

But with Libra nearby, even Dina shouldn't be able to do anything too strange.

*But Libra is still searching for Karkinos. Will she be able to multitask?*

"Please be at ease. I will be able to continue searching while guarding Dina. In fact, it will be much more effective for me to get closer to the center anyway, since each floor of this golem is soundproof."

"Understood. Then We will leave it to you."

"You can count on me."

Dina and Libra left to go and restock our food and water, and I was finally left with nothing to do.

*What should I do until they come back? We just ate, and there aren't convenience stores or anything similar around to kill time at. So I guess there's nothing other than taking a walk?*

"All right. It's free time until Dina and Libra come back. All of you, make sure you don't cause trouble."

"What will you be doing, Miss Lufas?"

"We will be taking a walk."

"Then I'll come with you."

"Me too."

"Ah, then I'll come too."

"..."

As soon as I told them that I'd be taking a walk, the sheep, goat, and maiden all attached themselves to me.

*Like, what? Is this like that thing that happens in RPGs, where the party just lines up single file behind the hero for some reason?*

*This is making it really hard to walk, though...*

"...You know, you're all free to do as you like?"

"I like being with you, Miss Lufas."

"Me too."

"Uhh, if I do something by myself, I'll probably get lost."

I tried to hint at them to go away, but they showed no signs of doing so. While Virgo's concern was understandable, Aries' loyalty was...heavy. And was I imagining it? All Aigokeros had been saying for a while now was, "Me too."

*Wow. It's looking like I won't get any actual free time for a while, huh? Ah, well. It's not like I hate this. Being with them, that is.*

## 15

On a plain that led to Svel, eight men were facing off against a crowd of over thirty monsters. The black-haired young man, Sei, swung his katana—a sword gifted to him by the king—cutting down a beast that jumped at him.

It was a monster that looked a lot like a hyena from Earth, only with poisonous-looking purple and cherry-blossom-pink fur. The monster, called a 'hur,' tended to be around level 20 and wasn't too hard for a trained knight or warrior to defeat. But that was only when there were small numbers of them. With a pack this large, they were undoubtedly a troublesome foe.

"Yah!"

But Sei didn't feel any significant amount of fear, and he swung his sword calmly. Having already witnessed the two most feared people in the world gave him some resistance to it. No matter what enemy or monster Sei was faced with, he just ended up thinking, *This is still better than those two last bosses.*

On top of that, Sei's weapon was strong. The weapon, which had been found in the Grave of the Black-Winged King, was fearsomely sharp and made up for Sei's inexperience.

Sei glanced around and saw that Kross was skillfully supporting people with heaven-arts. Jean and the others were each using their own weapons to wildly attack the monsters. Gantz took a single swing with his war ax and cleaved through several monsters at once. Friedrich stomped on a hur with movements like a wild animal before tearing it apart with his claws and biting into it.

*...What? Use your sword, you Sword Saint!*

"GWOAAAARRRR!!" The Sword Saint roared, scaring the monsters.

Wild animals were sensitive to strength, so they probably sensed the difference in strength between themselves and Friedrich. The monsters scattered, and the fight waned into stillness.

"...Urp..."

Once the fight ended, so did the sense of tension. As his tension eased off, Sei was assaulted with an intense nausea. Sei quickly covered his mouth with his hand and somehow fought through the urge to hurl.

He'd gotten much more used to it, but Sei still felt some resistance to killing living things. Even if he was a hero now, he'd lived in peaceful Japan just a little while ago, where even the food he ate had been processed and was readily available in stores. The only things Sei could remember killing himself had been bugs. He hadn't really thought anything of squashing mosquitoes in the summer, but Sei felt it was only natural to feel resistance towards killing something like a dog or a cat.

This was the same thing. But no matter how natural it was, Sei still didn't want to show other people such an unsightly scene as him throwing up.

*I already know I'm a joke of a hero. To those two, I'm probably just a bug, something so small it's not even worth paying attention to. But I still have some dignity to preserve. No matter how weak or unworthy of the title 'hero' I am, that doesn't change anything. I've already answered the call, so I have a duty to act as the hero.*

*There are people who look at me with expectation and call me a hero. So I can't let them down. They all have hope, a hope so faint I could just blow it all away. But there's no way I can do that. I can't show them how weak I really am, even if it means putting on a paper-thin mask.*

*At the very least, I'll keep putting up this front. I have a responsibility to do at least that much, as the person who answered their call.*

Sei forcibly swallowed the contents of his stomach back down.

"Hey, now. You're still not used to it, Sei? You gotta at least be able to cut down a monster or two without throwing up, or you won't last."

"...You...might be right."

Sei inwardly rejected what Jean, one of his allies, said even while outwardly agreeing. There was a part of him that thought, *I'm fine like this.*

*True, I won't last if I keep hesitating to fight monsters. I know that. I know that I need to get used to it. It's selfish to not want to get used to it. I know that, too.*

*But, still. I don't want to be the kind of person who kills things and feels nothing.*

*I'm contradicting myself. I don't want to look shameful by throwing up. But I also don't want to become so used to killing I feel nothing.*

Sei continued to hold on to both opposing feelings. He never wanted to stop feeling the weight of taking a life. If he did, he would be going against his own sense of justice.

Japan, the place which Sei would eventually return to, was a constitutional state. That meant its laws were there for the people. There were morals and common sense. Sei didn't want to return there having lost his resistance to killing.

The police arrested bad people. And it was true that sometimes they had to shoot and kill them. But no police officer would happily point their gun at someone and pull the trigger nor would a police officer feel joy over having killed someone. Anyone who did that would just be a murderer who hid behind the law, using it as a shield.

But in this world, that was considered justice. Those who could bravely stand on the battlefield and reap the lives of monsters without a second thought were great warriors and heroes. While it was close to the image of his father's back which Sei had set as his goal, it was also far off the mark.

*It's obvious, but I'm really not suited to being the hero in a game, am I...? I know I'm naive. Not just kind. Naive.*

*I haven't resolved to do what I need to, nor am I prepared to try. Even though I answered their call for help, I'm still not quite here.*

While his body was in Mizgarz, Sei still felt as if his heart was left in peaceful Japan. That was why he kept causing trouble for his friends; he couldn't help but prioritize his morals and common sense from Japan.

It would be simple to just charge forward recklessly. Sei could just move as his sense of justice dictated. But he lacked the power to make that course of action possible. He wasn't mentally prepared to follow through with that, either. Sei wasn't brave, but rash. It hadn't even really sunk in that he was the hero.

*I just don't think, do I? As I am now...*

Sei had been asked to defeat both the Devil King and Lufas. But such a feat would be impossible for him right now. *Actually, are they even people who can be fought by normal living things?*

Even though Sei knew it was impossible for him at the moment, he still kept going forward with his journey. That was the definition of recklessness.

*I'm not a hero. I'm not worthy of being called one.*

But people still called him a hero and pinned their hopes on him. Sei couldn't betray their expectations, so the first thing Sei had on his to-do list was to become a worthy hero. The first step to doing so was to fix his backwards attitude. Sei wanted to go from being reckless to heroic, at least.

Instead of trying to ignore the fear and keep walking, Sei wanted to keep walking while accepting it. If he didn't, Sei was sure that he'd become unable to tell right from wrong. Would a person who simply ignored everything inconvenient to them be able to make good, correct decisions? Of course not.

*We're all afraid... We don't even try to look at other possibilities. Lufas Mapphaahl is too strong and too fearsome. That's why people decided she was evil. They wanted to defeat her. They wanted to make her go away.*

*...I'm the same. If possible, I don't want to see her ever again.*

*But... But still...*

Sei held a single bit of doubt. It was something he couldn't discuss with his allies, something that he could only keep to himself. Sei had a theory, one that only he could come up with because he was originally from another world and thus had no preconceived notions about anything.

*—Is Lufas Mapphaahl really an enemy?*

*It's almost strange how much everyone dislikes her. Even the conversation between her and the Devil King was just taken as some random exchange between two villains. They didn't dig into it at all. But that conversation sounded different to me. The Devil King even said that the fight two hundred years ago was something plotted by the Goddess.*

*...Then wouldn't this one be a plot, too?*

*There's also the unnaturalness of the fact that the Seven Heroes, who should have been Lufas' friends, all betrayed her. Were they mind-controlled? Did the Goddess heighten their feelings of fear? I don't know how she did it, but wouldn't it make sense for her to be doing the same right now?*

The reason why Sei and the others were traveling to Svel was to meet the Wise King Megrez and try to gain some hint towards defeating the Devil King and the Great Conqueror. There was also the hope that he would know of some method for strengthening the hero. After all, he'd once managed to reach the peak, level 1000, himself. It was likely that he knew of some way to train that'd been lost to the people of this age.

But Sei alone had a different objective. He only wanted to see Megrez to find out just what had happened two hundred years ago, not for some way to defeat the Great Conqueror. He wanted to listen to a firsthand account from the Wise King himself about those events and build a more complete picture of Lufas' circumstances.

*I won't be able to move forward if I don't know. I won't be able to fight.*

*It's not good to simply narrow your vision and be ignorant of everything. You can't just say, "Whoops, sorry. I was wrong," after shooting someone.*

That was what Sei's father, who was a cop, used to tell him. More specifically, he used to say, "Make sure you never point your gun at the wrong person."

The police were backed by the law. They had the authority to arrest criminals. That was why the police needed to look at everyone fairly and not just listen to one side of the story. They had a responsibility to consider both sides and all the facts before making a fair and correct decision.

"Your dad made a mistake... I arrested someone innocent and took away fifteen years of their life, and in the end, that person committed suicide. Listen, Sei. Your father isn't an ally of justice anymore. So... don't become like me. Never become a man who charges forward with only their sense of justice and ends up making a mistake."

That was what Sei's father had said while drowning himself in alcohol after the feelings of guilt and stress had turned his hair white.

Sei's father used to be on the side of justice. He'd wanted to help the weak, and he'd wished for the happiness of kind people. For that purpose, Sei's father had gone to work every day. Sei himself had been very proud of his father back then.

Sei wanted to become like his father some day. Sei admired him. And those feelings hadn't changed.

*I'm okay, Dad... I'm still calm.*

*No, actually, I'm panicking quite a bit. But I still think I'm all right. Definitely. Probably. Yeah.*

*I just have to figure out the right person, right? I know that. I can't decide things just off of one side's story. And I can't point my gun at the wrong person.*

*...Uhh, I'm using a katana right now, though. Actually, I have no idea what this katana is doing in this world. It's a complete mystery. But that's all right.*

*...I'll never point my gun at the wrong person,* resolved the young man who

was called a hero but was aware that he had yet to become one. He desired to never become a merciless reaper of justice.

*I know I'm not powerful enough to become the hero this world wants. But the pillar I've built in my heart will never waver. The justice I've inherited from my father still lives. So I'll find it. I'll find my own brand of heroism. I won't just become the hero that everyone wants, someone who only defeats their enemies for them. I have a weapon called justice within me, as well as just cause and the backing of a country. So I won't make a mistake. I can't make one.*

*A hero isn't someone who just blindly fulfills justice as dictated by someone else, but someone who bravely pushes forward to come to the correct answer. I think that's the true form of a hero.*

*The problem is...*

Sei peeked behind him.

There, a tiger continued to chase down the monsters that had lost all will to fight as he roared. There was no justice or evil there, just the instinct to alleviate hunger. He had prey in front of him. And the prey was running.

*'Then I just have to chase and eat them! All of them!'* he must have been thinking. The tiger didn't care about the other's feelings. He was hungry, so he ate. As if there were good or evil involved in that. The wild didn't need to put on airs or make up reasons!!

*...All my party members seem like they'll charge full force down the wrong path, though...*

While watching the tiger stuff his face with the remains of the monsters, Sei sunk into thought.

*You know you're part of humanity, at least in name. You could at least cook them before you eat.*

## 16

"Thank you for coming all this way. We welcome you."

They were in the great country of magic, Svel. The Wise King Megrez lived a

little ways away from the castle situated in the center of the country. The residence was Sei and the others' first stop on their journey, as well as a place they needed to visit in order to bring the hero closer to the power levels of the Devil King and the Great Conqueror.

The Wise King Megrez, who was both the master of the residence and a living legend, was forced to use a wheelchair due to the consequences of losing his fight against the Devil King two hundred years ago. Even so, Sei could feel power radiating from him even as he simply sat in his chair.

Sei and the others were led to the living room and urged to take a seat on some chairs that looked simple but were clearly made by a skilled Alchemist. In front of a living legend, even Sei's party with all their abundant personality couldn't hide their nervousness, and everyone attempted to make as little noise as possible as they sat down.

For some reason, only the Sword Saint curled up on the floor. He didn't care about manners or etiquette. After all, being self-centered and capricious was the trademark of the cat family.

Sei and Kross facepalmed in exasperation seeing Friedrich's cat-like actions, but luckily, Megrez was tolerant and forgiving, so he simply laughed. It seemed that Megrez didn't much care about the tiger's impudent attitude, which would have gotten him arrested nearly anywhere else.

"Ahh, that's all right. Make yourselves at home. There's no need to be so nervous. I may be called the Wise King, but I retired from my position long ago."

*I guess I can only hand it to a real hero here. He seems used to dealing with weird and eccentric people.*

In fact, the Seven Heroes were an even bigger gathering of weirdos and eccentrics, so Sei figured that the tiger might actually be on the low end.

"Now then. You all have come to seek a way to get stronger, yes?"

Kross answered Megrez's question. "Indeed. Sei here is a hero that has arrived from another world. We've come seeking a method to bring him to level 1000. Since you, the Wise King, have reached this peak yourself, we thought you might be able to enlighten us." Kross still sounded very nervous, and that

probably had to do with Megrez also being an elf.

“Hm. It’s true that I was once level 1000 myself. Rather, there were many who reached that peak two hundred years ago... Now that I think about it, that really was the golden age of humanity. Back then, humanity as a whole was stronger than it had ever been in the past or even is in the present.”

“We would like to learn your secret and use it for our hero.”

“Secret, huh...? May I ask why you assume something like that exists?”

The method that Megrez and the others had once used to reach level 1000 was what Kross referred to as a secret. However, he wasn’t saying that Megrez had definitely used any such method. Kross was speaking entirely out of speculation, so reading between the lines, it was almost as if he were saying that Megrez had cheated somehow. But even so, Kross was still convinced that such a shortcut existed, and Sei agreed. After all, there was pretty much no way to reach level 1000 in a lifetime if there wasn’t such a method.

The method for getting stronger in this world was very simple. All a person had to do was kill other living things. According to a book Megrez put out in the past, all living things had at least some amount of mana stored inside them. That very same mana was also the source of mutations in living things, so the stronger an individual was, the more mana they had in them.

By killing living things with a lot of mana inside them and stealing said mana, a person could make themselves stronger. That was the phenomenon known as ‘leveling up.’ In other words, mutating and leveling up were the same thing. The only difference was whether the subject changed into a different species entirely or stayed the same, only stronger.

At the end of the book, Megrez himself wrote: “Those who level up repeatedly store that mana within them, and a piece of said mana is inherited by their offspring. The repetition of this is how humanity evolves.”

Boiling it all down into the simplest of terms, all a person had to do was fight. By continuing to kill monsters and devilfolk, people would get stronger even if they didn’t want to. But, there was a huge problem with that.

“Leveling up normally creates an insurmountable amount of required mana at

a certain point.”

All one had to do to level up was increase the amount of mana inside them, but the amount of mana needed to reach the next level wasn't fixed.

For example, let's say that a person needed to defeat one monster to get to level 2. But a person at level 10 would have to defeat dozens of that very same monster to get to level 11. If charted out on a graph, the amount needed to reach the next level exponentially rose as a person's level went up. Once someone got into the triple digits in level, the amount of mana required was insane.

Two hundred years ago...before Lufas rose to power, the Vampire Princess Benetnasch was hailed as the world's strongest being. She spent over one hundred years conquering one of the continents, killing every single living being there and literally creating a mountain of corpses. If killing monsters was the standard method of leveling, there was no one in history who'd worked harder than her.

A vampire's long life brought about an irrefutable amount of power. Using that allowed Benetnasch to wipe out an entire continent's worth of monsters. But even she could only reach level 600 by doing that. The plateau of level 1000 was still a far-off goal.

A layman might wonder why she didn't just wipe out another continent. But things weren't that simple. As was explained before, the amount of mana required to reach the next level grew exponentially as one progressed, so by doing the same to another continent, she probably still wouldn't have even reached level 700.

Level 1000 was simply the limit as imposed by divinity and the entrance to godhood. But the road to reaching that was long, dangerous, and definitely not something any sane person could do. If a person attempted to reach that level by using the standard method, then they would probably have to wipe out every single living thing on Mizgarz.

And looking back at the fight between Lufas and the Devil King, it was very clear. Those at level 1000 were no longer strictly mortal. They had transcended to a level that would allow them to easily destroy the world. They could take on

the entire world by their lonesome. So it only stood to reason that in order to get there, a person would have to eat the entire world.

Leveling up wasn't as simple as Lufas currently thought. Her opinion came from the thought that monsters respawned infinitely, so you could just hunt as much as you liked. But this world didn't work like that.

Even so, the impossible had happened two hundred years ago. Even normal humans with their short lifespans had managed to reach level 1000. It was clearly strange. It was stranger to assume that they managed to get there the standard way.

"There should be some special method, like a shortcut laid out by god, as a shortcut to bring humanity out of their despair."

"...One does technically exist. But before that, I'd like you to answer a question. What do you all think of the Goddess who created this world?" Megrez sounded calm, but his look was terrifyingly sharp.

None of the people he asked could discern the meaning behind that question immediately. Sei barely managed to arrive at the answer a couple moments later. And at the same time, Sei figured out why Megrez had sent them the golems.

*...I see...*

*This person...*

Megrez noticed Sei's change in expression. Silently, his impression of the boy from another world rose.

"O-Of course, she's the Great Creator and a mother to us all. She is the infallible symbol of justice... She is this world's law and divine providence itself."

"Hm. A perfect answer from an acolyte of her faith. I understand. Then let us say that there is, in fact, some secret method for you to follow. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you of that method."

"?! Wh-Why not?!"

"It's because you don't understand. ...Just as we didn't back then."

Megrez's speech was as kind and calm as ever. However, the expression on

his face and look in his eyes were reminiscent of a sharp blade and clearly conveyed that there was nothing more to say in this conversation.

Sei's party never expected the hero to reject them. Kross showed clear despair, and Gantz's face was frozen stiff. Meanwhile, Friedrich yawned, clearly in his own little world.

*Come on, you tiger. At least pay attention to what's going on.*

"N-No way..."

"However... You there. Sei, was it? I would like to talk to you a little while longer. Sorry, but could you all please excuse yourselves?"

If Megrez had instead told them all to get out, Kross and the others might have resisted. But he allowed Sei to stay, so even if it was only one of them, Kross and the others still had hope, which stopped them from fighting back. They felt like they hadn't yet been completely abandoned by the Wise King. And in fact, they felt they might actually ruin their chances for good if they begged to stay.

After some thought, Kross gave Sei a look as if to say that they were counting on him.

"Understood... We'll leave. Let's go, everyone."

Kross and the others didn't understand what had gone wrong. But what they did know was that in the end, they hadn't matched up to the Wise King's standards.

Everyone other than Sei reluctantly left, with the vice-captain of the knights dragging along the tiger. That left only Sei and Megrez in the room.

"Now then, Sei... I will ask you again. What do you think of the Goddess?"

"...I don't really know. I know far too little about this world to be able to answer that. The only thing I can say is: something about her is suspicious."

Sei had an impression of the Goddess that was beyond disrespectful, something that would be impossible for anyone from this world. It was a point of view he could only have because he was from another world.

Megrez narrowed his eyes, interested, and waited for Sei to continue.

“When we set out on our journey, the Devil King said something. He claimed that the reason why the Seven Heroes acted so unnaturally and fought against Lufas two hundred years ago was because of the Goddess’ interference. Of course, the Devil King isn’t exactly trustworthy, but... It’s true that your actions back then were unnatural, at least to me. That’s why I came here. Because I wanted to ask you something. In that fight two hundred years ago, did you really act out of your own will?”

“So you encountered the Devil King... Good job staying alive.”

“It seemed like we weren’t even worth paying attention to.”

Megrez crossed his arms and sank into thought.

Sei’s words might have sparked some sort of memory. But the look on Megrez’s face didn’t seem good to Sei.

“I don’t intend to make excuses at this point. Two hundred years ago, I betrayed a friend. That’s the truth. And it’s also true that doing so then was imprudent. I admit that freely. The loss of the devilfolk’s greatest threat, Lufas, allowed them to rise in power as a result, leading to the world as it is today. However...I still can’t say for sure, even though I should know myself best. Two hundred years ago, I feared Lufas, which was something triggered by being near her. But I can’t tell whether that feeling was from my own heart...or if it was a result of another’s interference. At the very least, I was in full control of my own will, and I didn’t feel as if I were being controlled by someone else.”

Megrez continued on. His expression was filled with bitterness, as if he were a criminal made to face the crimes he’d committed. “Now that I think about it, it’s true that all of us were acting strange. Mizar, Alioth, Phecda, Dubhe, and Merak... All of them had their own opinions on Lufas. Whether that was one of envy, jealousy, fear, or a sense of rivalry...it’s probably true that all of them had some sort of negative emotion regarding her. But back then, it was way too clear and powerful. It was as if those emotions were being amplified. They were overflowing with those negative feelings. Now that I think about it, I might have been the same. ...Only Benetnasch never changed...”

*So there might be memory manipulation, amplification of emotions, or maybe some sort of manipulation of will?*

*Either way, the fact that the person themselves can't tell they're being controlled is terrifying in and of itself.*

But Sei was already convinced. He was convinced of the fact that not only Megrez but the entire world was having their thoughts controlled by the Goddess.

After all, wasn't it strange?

Not only did stats and levels exist, but there was a level cap. There were monsters and devilfolk to fight, and even though humanity was suffering, the Goddess did nothing... Why did no one feel that something was off with that?

Also, the fact that the devilfolk still didn't just end humanity with the situation like this only lent credence to Sei's conviction. If the devilfolk were actually serious, humanity should have long been destroyed. The Devil King certainly had that power, even by himself. But humanity continued on. In fact, the average level of the devilfolk had lowered in accordance with humanity's levels.

Wasn't the past filled with level 1000 fighters? And weren't the monsters and devilfolk strong enough to oppose them? But for some reason, none of those powerful enemies were around. Why did monsters become weak enough to be ripped to shreds by a level 120 Sword Saint? And from what Sei heard, even the devilfolk's Seven Luminaries were only around level 300... They'd clearly gotten weaker.

It was as if the devilfolk were a cat playing with a mouse. They were torturing humanity while keeping a perfect balance so that humanity wasn't wiped out completely. That was the impression of the world that Sei had at the moment.

"I'd like to hear this from you directly, Wise King. Lufas Maphaahl isn't...she isn't an enemy, is she? That's why you sent us those golems. So that they could stop us on the off chance that we managed to corner her. It's something that should never happen given the difference in our abilities, but it might still happen with the Goddess' assistance."

"...You're absolutely correct. I no longer think of her as an enemy. No, I didn't think of her as an enemy back then, either. Her methods may have been rather severe, but she acted out of a desire for freedom and peace for all humanity. She was our friend... She was....."

“Wise King...” Seeing Megrez looking like he was about to cry, Sei came forward and tried to comfort him.

*I’m sure the reason I was called to this world was to defeat Lufas and the Devil King. But I can no longer accomplish that. I don’t want to, either.*

*I know that killing one of them—Lufas, at least—will only be tightening the noose around my neck. So there’s got to be something else I need to do. There’s got to be some way or path that I need to find to solve this.*

“Please fight with us. I’m still weak, and I don’t know anything about this world. I know I’m not even totally prepared to fight, but... Still, I want to stop all of this. Not stop the people that everyone tells me to but stop the one who’s forcing them to say all that. So please, I need your help.”



*There's someone else I need to fight. There's no way I'll mistake who to point my gun at.*

*Yeah. The person I should fight isn't Lufas Maphaahl!*

## 17

I went on a walk around Blutgang, since I needed to wait for Dina and Libra, and the only thing I could say about the city was that it was amazing. This man-made place that existed inside a golem was so well constructed that even the ceiling wasn't readily noticeable as fake as long as you didn't stare at it.

*I'll be honest here. I'm in awe.*

I never expected the dwarves to have come this far from living in caves. The townscape may have seemed old-fashioned to me, since I was from modern Japan, but the fact that they'd managed to construct an entire city in limited space like this reminded me of space colonies from a mecha anime I saw a long time ago.

*The dwarves really are the farthest removed from this world's fantasy setting. There's no doubt they're getting closer and closer to the Modern Era.*

*Maybe after another hundred years Blutgang won't look too different from the cityscapes I remember. Maybe soon we'll end up getting cars and traffic lights or something.*

*Oh, wait. There's already a car in this world. I made it.*

I continued thinking on that subject as I wandered around when I heard the heavy footsteps of a number of people coming my way. *They're about...300 m away?*

While it wasn't nearly as good as Libra's, my hearing was still strong. Compared to a human, the footsteps were a little narrow in stride and slower than normal. *They're probably all dwarves.*

As if the world wanted to prove me right, five dwarves in work clothes rounded the corner at that moment.

*...They look like older construction or warehouse workers.*

I could feel my internal image of dwarves in armor crumbling to pieces.

“Oh, there she is!”

“Are you sure it’s that lovely lass there?”

“No doubt! You don’t see a beauty like that every day!”

The group of dwarves looked over at me and their expressions changed, so my caution grew.

From their conversation, it was clear that they were looking for me. They even said that there was no mistaking my looks.

*...Could this be something bad?* I was currently wearing the outfit Megrez gave me. I also had changed my hairstyle and had my wings hidden. I was even wearing glasses. But I wasn’t completely hiding my face, and Lufas’ face really stood out.

The dwarves didn’t have long life spans, and since this world didn’t have photos or anything, there shouldn’t have been any dwarves who remembered how I looked. Or so I assumed, but... I’d messed up. With technology this advanced it would make sense for them to have cameras.

I didn’t like covering myself in my cloak since restraining my entire body like that felt like some sort of weird sex fetish, so I’d gone with my current outfit. I guess that’d been too careless.

*...Well, whatever. With my combat ability I should be able to manage something.*

I cracked my knuckles and used my Observing Eye on the group of dwarves.

*Their levels are only around 20~40. I can easily knock them all out in an instant.*

I slipped into battle mode, and as my perception of time changed, the dwarves started moving slower.

I concentrated and slowed down my perceived time even further, making it possible to launch an attack in but a small moment in time... It was something

I'd realized I could do after my recent fight with the Devil King.

*I should be able to knock them out without them realizing what happened. That's just how different our specs are.*

*If they give off even the slightest hint of attacking, I'll make my move.*

"W-Wait a second, Miss Lufas! They don't seem like enemies!"

I was brought back from combat mode by Virgo. My head instantly cooled when she said that, and my experience of time returned to normal. Then, the dwarves arrived with full-faced smiles and not a hint of hostility between them.

"Yo! We were looking for you. You're the girl who came in that golem that looks like a metal box, right? Look, it's me. I'm the one you left your golem with at the entrance." The older-looking dwarf pointed at himself as he spoke, but to be honest, I couldn't tell any of the dwarves apart.

"...Huh? Ahhh... Excuse us, We did not know it was you."

*Well, that's not completely accurate. If I look closely I can tell that their faces are different. But these five... Actually, are all dwarven men like this? Everything on their face that can be used to tell a person apart is covered by hair.*

They all had thick eyebrows, large noses, and extremely long hair. They also all had rough features.

*As if I could tell these people apart. On top of all that, all their work clothes were even the same color. You gotta at least wear different-colored clothes. Like, if M○rio and Lu○gi wore the same colors nobody would be able to tell them apart, either.*

"Agghh! That's someone from the outside for you! Look closely! I'm the most handsome out of everyone here!"

"Hah! More like you're the oldest-looking here!"

"Yeah, yeah! I'm the most handsome!"

*...I can't tell them apart at all... They might have been able to tell each other apart, but to me, it just looked like five of the same person arguing with each other. I bet I'd at least be able to tell their faces apart if they'd just shave off all that hair, though...*

“Ahh, well... Anyway, we should get to the point.”

“Ohh, right. It’s about that golem that you were riding in. That thing’s awesome! We’ve already started using rideable golems as transport in Blutgang, but this is the first time I’ve ever seen something that well-made! On top of that, the inside is a perfect living space, which is great for long journeys! That thing is revolutionary! Could you tell me who made that and where they are?”

Apparently they had neither realized who I was nor were they hostile in any way. Their spirits as craftsmen were just fired up by Tanaka, so they’d come looking for me.

*This is kinda embarrassing. Considering how I was just acting a moment ago, I kind of just want to curl up and disappear...*

*Imagine if I said something like, “If they give off even the slightest hint of attacking, I’ll make my move. Flash!!” Luckily, I didn’t say any of that out loud, but if I did, that moment would’ve put a black mark on my personal history. Thank god Virgo stopped me.*

*...Actually, wait. Now that I think about it, haven’t I been a bit too aggressive as well? I get the feeling that my inner thoughts have been getting more and more violent recently.*

“Oh, if that’s what you want, We made it. But, is it really that surprising? Don’t you all have the ultimate in rideable golems, Blutgang?”

“Well, of course. Blutgang is the highest peak of alchemy. Nothing beats it. But Blutgang is the masterpiece of the Blacksmith King. It’s not something we could imitate at all. It’s way out of our league. By comparison, the golem you were riding on seems like something we could make ourselves if we understood how it worked. That’s why I said it’d be revolutionary,” the dwarf replied proudly.

There was no doubt that Blutgang was the ultimate rideable golem. Blutgang was 300 m tall and 1100 m long. It was just absurdly huge. Added to that, it was able to house several tens of thousands of people, possibly even hundreds of thousands if pushed. Its extraordinary qualities were clear for everyone to see. It’d be easy to say it was the greatest piece of alchemy in the world.

But it was impossible to mass produce. Such a ridiculous masterpiece was only possible because Mizar had been the one building it, and no dwarf of this era could imitate that feat. But Tanaka was easy to copy as long as the person knew how it worked. At the very least, it was easy for Alchemists.

Autonomous, rideable golems already existed in this world, of course, but Tanaka was made to imitate modern cars, so the comfort and shock absorption it provided were on another level. I'd bet that the autonomous golems here were something more like a carriage's cabin that moved without horses.

"So I'd like to ask you a favor. Would you mind letting us examine it? We'll pay you back. We can even put your name in as a developer when we manage to mass produce it. You see, in Blutgang, there's this thing called a 'patent.' Unlike other countries, the ones who invent something get corresponding rights and money for their invention. Those who want to make their own copy need to have permission, and if they do, they have to pay a fee to the inventor. How about it? Sounds like a good deal, right?"

"Hmmm..."

I considered the man's proposition for a while. I didn't have anything in Tanaka that I didn't want copied. If Tanaka were an actual car, there'd be things like gasoline and engines that would be clearly too advanced for this world, but Tanaka was just a golem that looked like a car on the outside.

While it did have rubber tires and modern suspension, it wouldn't be too far a leap to give those to the dwarves, given their current level of technology. There weren't any items left inside I didn't want them seeing, either. In the worst case, I'd be able to put Tanaka back together even if they completely took it apart.

Also, if I were to improve the dwarves' technology, that would only be an advantage for humanity as a whole. *I guess it's not a bad deal then?*

"Yes... We don't mind. Examine it all you like. However, We will need to be there to watch over you."

"Sure, that's just perfect. It'd be better for us if you were there, since you made it."

For the moment, I agreed as long as I was there with them. While I was confident that I'd be able to repair Tanaka, there was still the possibility that they would break it down so far that Tanaka would be irreparable. If they were to get close to doing that, I needed to be there to stop them, so I figured it would be much better if I were there.

But more than that, I just wanted to see the current technology level of the dwarves up close.

"Great. Now that that's all decided, let's go."

And so I ended up going back to Blutgang's entrance along with the five dwarves.

Aries and the others tagged along as if it were only natural, so we ended up walking along the streets in a snaking group of nine people. We were an odd assortment, but nobody seemed to mind.

Having reached the gate through which we'd first entered, we returned to the loading dock.

"Ohh, right. I haven't introduced myself yet. My name's Howell."

"I'm Kurta."

"I'm Gebelseight."

"Kreldight. Nice to meet you."

"My name is Gelsdorf."

*Right. I now understand that I have no intention of memorizing any of their names. As if I could do that if you all name yourselves at once while looking exactly the same.*

For now, I just remembered Howell, since he was the first one to talk to me. I designated the others Dwarves B~E. I couldn't even tell which one was B and which one was C and such, though.

"Oh, right. Howell...was it? If possible, could you sell us some raw materials that We can only get here?"

"I'm Gelsdorf. Howell is on the opposite side."

“.....”

*Crap. Maybe I should take a paintbrush to their hair now... Damn all of them and their black hair. You gotta at least have some variation in hair color...*

*It's making me want to yell. Like, did you just give them all the same model to save on graphics load? No, even background villagers get different colors, at least.*

“Ahhh. At any rate, Howell—”

“I'm Gebelseight. Howell's here next to me.”

“It's me.”

“Either way, it would be great if you would consider our request.”

I believe I've explained before that the basics of being an Alchemist were transmuting base materials into something different. For example, transmuting a rock to make iron and using that iron to make a golem.

In the game, the possible combinations were limited. There was a very defined set of things that were possible. But now, things were different. If I felt like it, I could make any number of alloys or steels. And right now, we were in the country of dwarves, which was the most friendly for Alchemists. There was no way they hadn't developed some sort of new material.

So there might be some new material that didn't exist on Earth. At least, that was what I was hoping for.

“Materials only found in this country, you say... I'll gather them up, and bring them over later.”

“Thank you.” I smiled when Howell (...*This one's Howell, right?*) replied favorably.

To be honest, the materials I used to make Tanaka were far too cheap and low level, so I wanted to remodel it using better materials. While I did have materials stored away in my tower, all of them were treasures as Mizgarz currently was.

There was the super-rare orichalcum, then adamantite, damascus, mithril, and hihi'irokane. They were all very powerful, but there wasn't too much of any

of them, so I was hesitant to use them so nonchalantly.

I don't know what'll happen in the future. I might need to make a powerful golem for my eventual fight with the Devil King and the Goddess. It'd be terrible if I used too much of my materials before then on Tanaka, who was just a method of transport. Moreover, I'd already used Wootz steel when remodeling Tanaka to have jets.

It was a fairly strong metal, but it wasn't all that precious in the game. It was fairly cheap to obtain, but for all that, its maximum level was fairly high. It was basically a metal to make decently strong, mass-produced golems.

*Now, then. I guess I'll just be watching the dwarves examine Tanaka for a while. They seem honest in their intellectual curiosity, but they still might not know when to stop.*

## 18

The dwarves' examination of Tanaka took around three hours. Some might say it was short, but that was all thanks to the power of alchemy.

While the dwarves were working, Dina and Libra returned from shopping and looked exasperated after seeing me and the newly improved Tanaka.

*That's right. Improved...*

The dwarves got all excited and didn't stop at just examining Tanaka. At first, the dwarves were simply taking it apart and examining it, so it was my mistake for joining in since I was bored. The only excuse I could make was that all this had happened because the materials I had been given by the dwarves were far better than I'd expected.

They gave me something called "Mizar steel," which was something they'd developed over the past one hundred years and named after their country's great founder. It was hard, light, and superbly flexible. Also, the maximum possible level when making golems with it was a shockingly high 400.

The only regrettable thing was that no high-level Alchemist existed in Blutgang who could take advantage of that maximum level. If there were, this country would be well-protected with level 400 golems. It was such a waste.

Of course, I'd be able to make full use of the metal, and since I thought it would make great material for golems, I bought a lot of it. I wanted to eventually make a battalion of mid-level golems to go with the golems I'd retrieved from my grave.

I also reinforced Tanaka with Mizar steel, but things went a little too far.

I ended up teaching the dwarves a lot, sharing a smattering of my knowledge from modern Japan, so we teamed up to remodel Tanaka. But we probably shouldn't have. While it hardly changed at all in general looks, Tanaka got even bigger and went from its originally large size to being a full 15 m long and 2.8 m tall. It was far too big to be able to drive on Japanese streets, and the insides became as luxurious as a high-class hotel.

In other words, it was now incredibly extravagant by this world's standards.

The floor was now porcelain tile. We went out of our way to use wood for the walls and cabinets and even coated them with varnish. Apparently varnish wasn't anything special in this country and could be found at any store it would make sense in. I didn't have to make it myself, so it was a happy miscalculation. I bought cloth, too, so I could make new carpets, sofas, and beds.

We could probably charge a decent amount of money to be able to stay in Tanaka now. I wouldn't, though.

"It turned out great, didn't it!"

"Hahahaha! That was satisfying!" The dwarves laughed as they looked up at Tanaka.

At any rate, they now thoroughly understood how the tires and suspension and stuff worked, so modern, car-like rideable golems should be making their appearance in Blutgang fairly soon.

*This is off topic, but they sold me Mizar steel and cloth real cheap.* I was told it was as thanks for letting them take a look at Tanaka. The dwarves themselves said that I could take them for free, but that made me feel too guilty, so we settled on making them cheap.

"By the way, Libra, have you found Karkinos?"

“I have been waiting for you to ask that. I have ascertained his location.”

“Great. Then let’s go.”

I’d almost forgotten, but the reason we’d come here was to meet up with Karkinos as well as to stop Scorpius. Now that Libra had located Karkinos, we should be able to go see him immediately.

I said my goodbyes to the dwarves and followed after Libra.

Once again passing through the gate, we returned to the capital. Then, after walking for several minutes, we eventually found ourselves at a familiar store. It was the restaurant that I’d wanted to visit when we’d first come here, the one with the crab sign.

“.....”

*Wow. So Karkinos was right under our noses the whole time. He even boldly put up a huge crab sign.*

Uhh, well... If I were to give an excuse, I’d blame the fact that people tend to have pretty narrow fields of view. The more a person tried to look for something, the less they were able to notice something right in front of them.

*Have you ever heard this saying? The one that says that rather than trying to hide badly, it’s better to be bold and act natural if you don’t want to be noticed?*

*This proved that point exactly. It’s like that one saying: ‘It’s darkest under the lighthouse.’ Like, you wouldn’t expect it, right? That one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars was running a store like this?*

“It was right in front of us...”

“Right in front of us...” Dina and Aigokeros both muttered, dealing a final blow.

*Hey, come on. You guys didn’t notice, either!*

“A-At any rate. We should go inside.” I hurried everyone inside in an attempt to change the subject.

The walls and tables were made of wood. But it didn’t seem like bare wood; the surfaces all had a gloss as if they’d been coated in varnish.

The entire store exuded a quiet air. The tables were covered with a red tablecloth, and the weak lighting actually improved the atmosphere of the place.

And lastly, there was a man wearing glasses standing behind a counter.

His glossy black hair was cut to the nape of his neck, and he had sharply pointed eyes that were reminiscent of blades behind his glasses. The bridge of his nose was high up on his face. Overall, he was a handsome man. He was very slender and tall, and he had a necktie on top of his white shirt. On top of the shirt, he wore a red vest, and both his shoes and slacks were black.

*How should I describe it? He felt like the image of a “capable man.”*

As soon as the man saw me, he suddenly leapt into the air and flipped before crashing into the ceiling and bouncing off it. The sound of him smashing against the ceiling concerned me as he fell, crumpled in front of me, but he immediately got back up and grabbed my hands in his.

“Oh ! Iwassurprised ! Miss Lufas! I see Lufas Maphaahl, my most beloved master, right in front of my eeeeyyyeeessss!” the man shouted, partially using stilted English for some reason.

*Ah, I see. The no-good type.*

*This is sudden, but I want to take back my impression. He’s an “incompetent man.”*

Karkinos started to spin on the spot, and for some reason, he was scattering flower petals everywhere.

“Ahh, just how long... How long have I waited for this day? Ever since I, Karkinos, lost you, I have never been able to live down the shame and regret of that day! Unable to sleep at night, I resorted to taking naps! Neither was I able to eat, for I believed that I would be able to see you again one day!”

*Huh. Maybe he’s actually okay?*

I felt exasperated, and suddenly the shop went dark. But it was only so something like a spotlight could light up Karkinos.

“But M E has always believed! Believed that you would never go out like that!

I was certain that I would see you again one day!” Karkinos said as he wrapped an arm around my waist and grasped my hand. Then, he did that thing where a man supports his female partner by the waist, like in a formal dance. What was it called...? Drop Overstay?



But while I was still processing what had just happened to me, I was returned to my former position, and Karkinos ended things off by kneeling before me, taking my hand, and kissing the back of it while I was still reeling from what he'd just done to me.

*Having that done to me by a man feels kinda creepy...*

"Thank you for coming home, my beautiful master. My gratitude for this wonderful reunion. And once again, I offer you my undying love and loyalty, which hasn't changed even after two hundred yea—" Karkinos continued to speak, but his speech was suddenly cut off.

The reason for that was simple. Libra had expressionlessly pointed her blade of light at Karkinos' throat.

"...H-Heyyy... So Y O U were here, too, Libra..."

"It has been a long time, Karkinos. Excuse me for setting aside the pleasantries, but I will have your defense for putting your arm around Master's waist without permission."

"Umm, well, you see... M E and Y O U are comrades, no? So why not overlook this one instance..."

"So those are your last words? Understood."

"NOOOOOOOOOO?!"

Libra didn't hesitate to swing her sword, but Karkinos dodged it by doing a bridge. He then opened up some distance by moving in that position like a crab.

Karkinos quickly stood back up once he got away, but Libra was already on him and attacking.

I heaved a sigh as I watched Karkinos run around avoiding Libra while shouting, "Help ! "

*...Why are none of the Twelve Heavenly Stars normal...?*

\* \*

**【Twelve Heavenly Stars: Karkinos】**

**【Level】: 800**

【Race】: King Crab

【Attribute】: Earth

【HP】: 105000

【SP】: 4500

【STR (Strength)】: 4850

【DEX (Dexterity)】: 2228

【VIT (Vitality)】: 10503

【INT (Intelligence)】: 1180

【AGI (Agility)】: 2134

【MND (Mind)】: 4160

【LUK (Luck)】: 4050

*Yep. He's tough.*

Seeing Karkinos' stats, I was once again impressed by his toughness. The VIT stat was a measure of how much of an enemy's attacks a person could withstand, according to the game. Basically, it was the defense stat. High VIT = a tough body = hard to kill.

So, Karkinos had the toughest defense among all of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, and these were his stats. His VIT stat alone matched mine, as a stat-boosting level 1000 player. He had a huge amount of HP, too.

Karkinos and Libra's game of tag had settled down for the moment, so I took the chance to ask Karkinos, "So, what were you doing in a place like this?"

All of us were sitting in front of the counter with crab soup that Karkinos had made in front of us.

*Yep. It tastes like crab. I wonder just how he managed to get crab in a place like this...*

*No way. Did he actually serve up parts of himself?*

Karkinos looked like a human at the moment, but he followed the trend of the

Twelve Heavenly Stars and was a monster. His real form was that of a giant crab. His species name was king crab. King crabs were the strongest monsters that crabs were able to mutate into. They had stupidly tough defenses and annoying counter abilities which had made many a player suffer.

*It's impossible for him to cut off pieces of himself...*

But Virgo said, "Ah. This is barometz."

I looked to my side and saw Aries looking pale, since he'd already started eating.

*Hey now, Karkinos. What're you thinking, committing fraud like this?! Don't pretend barometz is crab!*

"Nicely spotted! After Miss Lufas was defeated, M E started to travel around the different countries to gather information, believing that the day would come when my master revived. But at some point, I realized that it would be better to make a place where information gathers rather than go around gathering information myself."

"And thus the restaurant?"

"Yes, That's right. Sometimes in Hrotti, other times in Ydalir or possibly Svel. And right now, in Blutgang. I've gone around every country, set up shops, and collected information, believing that one day, I would hear something that would lead to Miss Lufas' revival."

"And while you were doing that, We came in."

"Yes, Yes, Yes ! M E felt destiny in our encounter! It proves that M E and Miss Lufas are bound by a red string as master and servant!"

*Hmm... Well, the idea itself isn't bad, I think...*

His mistake lay in setting up shop in Blutgang, a capital that was literally enclosed and separated from the outside world. For example, if he'd stayed in the trade city of Ydalir, where merchants and travelers from every country visited, then he probably would have heard of my revival much earlier, and we'd probably have reunited much faster. The idea itself wasn't bad. He'd just made a critical mistake in his choice of location. *If I told him that, he'd probably*

*get depressed, though, so I won't.*

“You’ve completely failed in your location selection. If you were going to open up a shop, you should have done so in Ydalir.”

As soon as I’d finished processing my thoughts, Libra went and said exactly what I hadn’t been going to. Karkinos froze in shock, and just like that, he fell to the floor.

“...To tell you the truth, M E was beginning to notice my mistake already... M E thought, ‘I’m really getting no information here...’”

“Come on, you should have noticed a long time ago. You’re as stupid as always, Karkinos.” Aries mercilessly dealt a follow-up blow to Karkinos, who was already down for the count. Aries was always honest, or rather, he’d always spit out harsh truths without hesitation. But his words were sharper than usual this time. He was probably mad about being tricked and fed barometz as crab.

At any rate, we’d now managed to link up with Karkinos.

I’d started getting used to the pattern of every single one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars stirring up some sort of trouble, but this time, it’d gone surprisingly smoothly.

*...It’d be great if the rest of them aren’t weird as well, though...*

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Apparently Karkinos’ communication skills ranked pretty highly among the Twelve Heavenly Stars. After that, he started a friendly (?) conversation with Aries, Libra, and Aigokeros, and even though Libra took several swings at him, the atmosphere was lively.

But Virgo, the new member, was unable to force herself into the circle, so she just watched from the sidelines. She might have only been holding back so as not to ruin a reunion between comrades, but to me, it looked like she wasn’t quite blending in as the only normal person with common sense in a group of people with...colorful...personalities.

Leaving the others alone to their revels, I sat down next to Virgo. “Not going

to join them?”

“Ah, Miss Lufas.”

Virgo had been half-forced by Parthenos into coming with us. In other words, she hadn't quite come of her own free will, unlike everyone else. We'd basically dragged her out of her peaceful life, so I was a little worried about her. I didn't want this trip to be a painful experience for her.

“No, I'm fine over here... They're all such amazing people, after all. I don't think someone as low leveled as me will be any use. And as for skills, I'm basically a worse version of Dina...”

Virgo was right. Although their attributes were different, Virgo and Dina's roles overlapped. They were both back line supporters, but while Dina could use both magic and heaven-arts, Virgo could only use heaven-arts. On top of that, Dina had both the Water and Metal attributes, and she was INT specialized, with her INT stat being over 1000. She could even use the broken skill Exgate, so she could not only negate long-range attacks by herself, she could keep her distance from attackers very easily, so she didn't really need much protection from front-liners.

*What the hell? Now that I think about it, Dina's basically cheating. Get nerfed, dammit.*

But anyway, Virgo should actually have been able to rival Dina depending on how she was trained. While the heaven-winged couldn't use magic, their base stats were high, so it was easy to become a tough back-liner, which was a really good role. From that perspective, Virgo had more than enough potential to rival Dina.

“There's no need to be in such a hurry. You're the successor chosen by Parthenos herself. You'll be able to match up to them in time.”

“Do you really think so?”

“She's right, little lady. You should stop looking so down.”

An incredibly nice, masculine voice butted into my conversation with Virgo. I didn't recognize the voice, either. Wondering just who that voice came from, I turned towards it and saw a barometz awaiting cooking. The plant was growing

in a flowerpot, and a sheep's head poked out of the too-large bud to talk.

"...Can monsters talk?"

"Hey now, black-winged lady. You're saying some strange things there. Of course monsters can talk. Even orcs babble like brooks, don't they?"

*...Yeah, fine. They do talk, don't they? Actually, now that I think about it, Aries and Aigokeros and the others are monsters, and they talk, too.*

The barometz sounded like a really masculine dandy for no reason. He continued to talk. "Don't think about it too hard, little lady. No one's useless. Everybody's good at something. They all have one area where they shine. You will definitely find what makes you sparkle, even if you're not sparkling now. So stop talking yourself down. It doesn't suit your cute face."

*Why the hell is food waiting to be cooked making so much sense? Why is it that he's making so much sense, but it makes me mad?*

"I'm the same. I may be an impractical monster that can't even move, but by being cooked and eaten, I can bring smiles to people's faces. I shine on top of a dining table."

"M-Mr. Barometz..."

"Are you really okay with that?"

*Oh no. I don't even know where to begin...*

I looked at the barometz without saying anything. When Karkinos finished his conversation with Aries and the others, he came over and gripped it by the head.

"Miss Lufas, M E will now be going to smoke all the barometzes in preparation to join your journey. Please, wait a little while for me," Karkinos said before walking back to the kitchen. Apparently he was going to be making preserved food for our journey.

The barometz said, "Lass, believe in your own potential!" as he was taken away, and eventually, we heard him no longer.

*He'll surely become some delicious food and help us in the future. ...He was a good guy. Yeah.*

*At any rate, Dina's being awfully well-behaved today, isn't she? It's like she's preparing for something...so that she'll be able to move immediately when it comes. She seems like she's waiting for something to come...or rather, to occur.*

*...Or am I just being too suspicious of her?*

\*            \*

A single girl walked through the wasteland. She was a beautiful girl with an attractive figure, and her looks suggested she was only in her early 20s. She wore black bondage gear that exposed a lot of skin. On top of that was a black coat with fur trimming, which she wore without using the sleeves. Her lips were coated with purple lipstick, and on her left cheek was a tattoo of a black wing on top of a deep-crimson heart. Her hair was tied up into a tail on top of her head, but it still reached all the way down to her feet anyway, and the tip looked like a scorpion's tail. Actually, it didn't just look like one. It actually *was* a scorpion's tail. Somehow, the soft hair hardened as it got closer to the end. And by the tip, it was completely a scorpion's tail.

Described in one word, she would be a “maneater.” She would use her enticing body to attract men before poisoning and consuming them. And she walked around without even trying to conceal that.

Her name was Scorpius. She was the poison specialist of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. And her gaze was pointed directly at the steel city built by one of her most heinous enemies, the Seven Heroes, who had once betrayed her master.

“Oh my, I've never seen a more tasteless capital. No elegance at all. You all think so, too, right?” She spoke in a clingy, treacly voice, almost like she was drunk.

The question was directed at the several thousand—no, tens of thousands—of monsters waiting behind her. These monsters weren't weaklings borrowed from the devilfolk, either. They were an army of scorpions that were loyal to Scorpius herself.

Her race was: Emperor Berserk Scorpion. And the ‘Emperor’ in her name wasn't just for show. She was the ruler of all scorpions, the ultimate monster among all scorpion monsters that lived in the desert. Thus, the scorpion monsters were her children, her subordinates, and her limbs.

Added to that was her own incredibly large fighting power. Her army had both quantity and quality. It was because she had both that she'd been able to fell Hrotti, which had been founded by the Adventurer King.

Lufas misunderstood one thing. She thought that Hrotti hadn't had much in the way of defenses. She wrongly believed that Hrotti hadn't had something protecting it like Svel's Levia, Laevateinn's barrier, or Blutgang's iron defenses.

But she was wrong. Very wrong.

Hrotti *had* had something protecting it. Something that had rivaled Levia.

It would have been stranger for Phecda the Monster Tamer to not have left something behind. Before Phecda had passed away, he had chosen his four best monsters and left them as the country's guardians. But they had been defeated, too. Scorpius had chewed through the defenses the Adventurer King had left behind, and her scorpion army had trampled through the rest of the country.

And now she was after her next victim.

"But what a perfect target Blutgang makes! I bet the poison will circulate fast trapped in a narrow space like that. Ahh...aahh... I'm so looking forward to it... I wonder how those dwarves will look as they die painfully? I bet they'll die in despair after trying to run out of that cramped coffin, leaking blood from every orifice... Ahh, I can't stand it! I think I'm getting wet."

Scorpius licked her lips seductively with her wet tongue.

*It's only natural for humanity to suffer, she thought. In fact, they have a responsibility to suffer as they die. If they don't, it won't be any recompense for my master.*

Scorpius' master had met her end due to betrayal by the very humanity that she had worked so hard for.

*I'll never forgive them. Never!*

That was why Scorpius had gone berserk with rage. She'd thrown away her reason, morals, self-control, and any sense of order out of her own free will and had become a massacring fanatic.

*Struggle in agony as you drown in a pool of blood. Scream for me. Despair!*

*Scream and wail so that your voices reach my most beloved master in the afterlife!*

This desire was all that motivated Scorpius now. To Scorpius, her master was everything. Her entire world consisted of being beside Lufas. Now that she'd lost that, she'd also lost all her goals and all meaning in living. Her only goal now was to avenge her fallen master, to make all the people who'd stolen Lufas' life away die painfully. So Scorpius never hesitated and never pitied her victims.

*Women? Children? Babies? The elderly? Who cares?*

*All of you can die in pain as equals.*

Her desire was so strong that she willingly fell into madness in order to plunge humanity into the depths of despair.

Of course, her advance was noticed by Blutgang. She'd never had any intention to hide in the first place. It was only natural to be noticed if you were marching on a city with several tens of thousands of scorpions following you.

On Blutgang's highest floor, the 15th, the admiral entrusted with Blutgang's control made a grim expression as he looked through the monitor at the scenery outside.

Admiral... This was the highest rank in Blutgang's military, and the one who had it was able to issue orders to the soldiers of all fifteen floors of Blutgang, making the admiral the city's de facto leader. Of course, the royal family ranked higher in name. But all combat and travel decisions were left to the admiral. In effect, he held all the power and could be referred to as the leader.

"So she's here...that poisonous witch."

The admiral had white hair and was large for a dwarf. He was basically human-sized. He wore a blue military uniform, and his hat had five stars on it. He had a pipe in his mouth, and he sat unmoving in his chair. The admiral's name was Jenner. While it was faint, he had royal blood running in him, and he was said to be the spitting image of Mizar from the olden days.

Jenner was tense. But he wasn't nervous. Ever since the day Hrotti had been destroyed, Jenner had expected this day to come. The 15th floor had already gone to stage one battle stations, and all his staff were ready and waiting.

“Emergency announcement to all floors of Blutgang! We will now be engaging in battle with Scorpius the Scorpion of the Twelve Heavenly Stars!”

“Emergency announcement received!”

Obedying Jenner’s orders, one of his staff quickly took a mic in hand and repeated the message. The mic relayed the message to all areas of Blutgang, reaching the ears of everyone in the capital.

None of the dwarves actually knew how the system worked. Since the skills of Mizar, the dwarves’ great ancestor, were far too advanced, almost all the technology used in Blutgang was like a black box. Even after two hundred years, not all of it was understood.

“We’ll be making the first strike! Ready the cannons!”

“Cannons ready!”

“Cannons aimed!”

“FIIIIRRRRRRREEEEEEEE!!!”

With Jenner’s order as the trigger, all of Blutgang’s cannon ports opened fire at once. Many explosive sounds overlapped as the cannons fired in quick succession, pounding the scorpion army. But Scorpius, the most important target, didn’t seem fazed at all. She simply kept walking forward gracefully.

*It didn’t work?* the admiral thought. *No, she’s manipulating her hair like a tail and striking down the cannon rounds before they hit her!*

“No good! They’re not affecting her!”

“I don’t care. Keep firing! Reduce their numbers!”

“Admiral, the golem units are ready for deployment!”

“Good. Send them out!”

The gates of Blutgang opened, and a battalion of golems charged out with the accompanying metallic noises.

Of course, the dwarves didn’t hold back and sent out not only their recently made golems, but even the high-level golems that Mizar had made himself two hundred years ago. There were rideable golems that dwarves piloted like suits

of armor as well, and they all advanced fearlessly.

“Chaarrggee!!” the dwarf in charge of the deployed forces shouted.

The battalion of golems accelerated forward. The dwarves’ steel guardians knew no emotion such as fear as they gouged out the earth in their advance and charged into the monsters.

“Strike them down!”

On the other side, Scorpius ordered her subordinate scorpion monsters forward, and the two sides met in the middle.

The battle looked to be evenly matched. Because both sides could not feel fear, neither side faltered or flinched. The fighters from both armies only thought of destroying their opponent and put their all into achieving just that. They stepped over their comrade’s corpses or wreckages to fight, and the numbers of both the golems and the monsters continued to dwindle.

“Charge complete!”

“Aim!”

“Aimed and ready!”

“Bombardment area confirmed!”

“There are six hundred of them and only one hundred of us! All of our units are golems, and only one of them is made by Mizar!”

“All right... Cannons, FIIRRRRREEEE!!”

The dwarves didn’t mind sacrificing some of their own forces in order to shave away a large amount of the enemy’s power, as long as no living dwarves were among those sacrificed. Golems could just be made again. And while Mizar-made golems couldn’t be remade, there was still no room to hesitate. They couldn’t allow the chance to trade one hundred for six hundred to pass them by.

Their aim was true, and while many golems were destroyed, even more monsters were reaped as payment.

“Oh my. They involved their own army, too? How naughty.”

With that move, the battle tilted slightly in Blutgang's favor. No matter how strong monsters were, they knew neither strategy nor tactics. They were just a grouping of individual fighters. If both quantity and quality were equal, then the advantage went to the one with superior strategies. In war, strategy always carried great weight.

However, Scorpius couldn't be underestimated, since she had the power to turn the battle around by herself. That was why part of her group's title was "Conquering." It was the *raison d'être* of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. And because she knew that, Scorpius wasn't affected by what had just happened.

"Then maybe I should play a little, too!"

Scorpius' expression was dyed in madness. With her eyes wide open, she smiled so wide the edges of her mouth reached her ears, warping her good looks into something ugly and terrifying as she leapt at the golem forces.

As soon as the golems could register her hair—no, her tail—moving, they'd already been mowed down.

Scorpius specialized in poison, but that didn't mean her physical stats were low. This was especially true now that she had given herself to madness; the Berserk status was her normal state, which meant she was constantly buffed, and her attack power was boosted tremendously. Not even level 300 or 400 golems could withstand her attacks, much less lower-leveled ones.

"Hey, how about this?! Or this?! Or this?!"

Scorpius swung her tail at a speed that the eye couldn't follow, turning golem after golem into mere wreckage. Even though she was being rushed by golems trying to stop her rampage, the numbers didn't matter to her. Every attempt to slow her down ended the same way. Her fierce attack turned many high-level golems into scrap, and that loss instantly put Blutgang at a disadvantage.

With the delicate balance of the battlefield crumbled, the avalanche of advancing monsters couldn't be stopped, causing more and more golem losses. Anyone watching could instantly tell who would win the battle.

"A-Admiral! We should transform Blutgang into assault mode!"

"No! Don't forget, she uses poison! If we get close, our citizens will die, even if

we win! And that's the same as losing!"

"But, then what should we do?!"

"Send in the Scales Corps! They're our only hope!"

"...! Roger! Deploying the Scales Corps!"

Using Blutgang itself to attack was Blutgang's final trump card. But the dwarves couldn't use it in this fight. If they got close, they'd be poisoned, which would mean the death of their citizens.

But Blutgang didn't have only one trump card. There was one other: the Scales Corps.

Four dolls bearing that title deployed from Blutgang, taking formation in the air.

"Hm?" Scorpius looked up as if she felt no tension in this battle and saw the form of a nostalgic comrade. She saw Libra, the killer maid who belonged to the Twelve Heavenly Stars under the title "Scales." Only, there were four Libras, and they were looking down at the monsters from the sky.

"What? What is...? That's not Libra."

"Target Acquired... Eliminating."

When Scorpius looked over, she noticed that they were colored differently. While Libra's hair was brown, all four of the Libras Scorpius saw had white hair. But there were no other differences to Scorpius' old comrade-in-arms. Furthermore, two of the Libras had a familiar weapon equipped.

"Zuben El Genubi... Fire!"

"Damn!!"

They were using Libra's primary long-range weapon, the right scale, Zuben El Genubi. Scorpius knew its power well.

Two beams of light stabbed into the earth, flaring with sparks and instantly killing a large number of monsters.

Scorpius managed to react in time and dodged. The other two Libras took advantage of the opening that created, approaching Scorpius through the

smokescreen created by the first two.

“Zuben Es Chamali.”

The blades on their left arms could cut straight through steel and were another weapon familiar to Scorpius.

Scorpius intercepted their attacks with her tail. But the two Libras quickly went around to the side and attempted another slash. One of the Libras' blades managed to scratch Scorpius' cheek, though it was close. However, they had definitely managed to wound her.

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“...!”

Scorpius showed a faint, miniscule amount of surprise and internally praised her enemy.

Ever since that battle two hundred years ago, the average level of the world had declined an unnatural amount. So in this day and age, powerful fighters that could actually damage Scorpius were the rarest of the rare. Not even powerful monsters nor the devilfolk were worthy opponents for her. The only ones who would be able to wound Scorpius that she could think of were the other Twelve Heavenly Stars, the Vampire Princess, and the Devil King and his offspring.

But somehow, some defective copy-Libras had managed to scratch her cheek. It was truly a surprise to Scorpius. She finally felt threatened by an enemy, something she hadn't felt for a long time. And the enemy was on this battlefield, of all places.

“Enemy has suffered light wounds. No change in fighting power. Continuing attack.”

Having said that, both Libras jumped to either side of Scorpius. Right afterward, a beam of light pierced through the center.

Scorpius once again dodged the beam. A second beam followed up the first attack, causing some of her composure to crumble away. But she was still one

of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. Scorpius used her tail to deflect the beam, recovering her air of composure.

“Oh...? So you aren’t just all looks. I’m a little surprised. You’re pretty good to be able to hurt me.” Scorpius wiped the blood flowing down her cheek with a finger and licked it off as she laughed.

*I see. So this is Blutgang’s trump card. They’re probably just imitations that Mizar made of the original Libra using the know-how he’d gotten from creating Libra.*

Even though they were imitations, they’d still been made by Mizar, so the weapons they used were ‘real.’ While they might have fallen somewhat short of the original, the weapons used just now were undoubtedly Libra’s right and left scales.

*It’s probably safe to assume they’re all at least level 700. How extravagant.*

The Libra copies were a legacy from two hundred years ago, one that could repel attacks from the devilfolk. Scorpius now understood how Blutgang hadn’t fallen until now.

“But too bad... The original would have used Brachium by now, you know. How mysterious. How strange! Why wouldn’t you use it at this perfect opportunity, I wonder?”

“.....”

“Heeheehee. You don’t have it, do you? You’re missing her most important weapon, aren’t you?”

Brachium was most of Libra’s value and an incredibly terrifying weapon. It ignored resistances, attributes, and everything else as it delivered the maximum amount of damage to everyone trapped in its range. It was the best possible weapon of mass extermination. But that was only possible because the Goddess’ Scale had been used as material for Libra. There was no other way to give anyone that skill. These Libra imitations were as close to the original as possible, but they were missing the all-important base material. While they were well-made, they were still just imitations...and like all imitations, they fell short of the original.

“You fools! Libra without her Brachium doesn’t even match up to one of my pincers!”

The Libra copies were slightly troublesome enemies. But they weren’t threatening.

Scorpius, not doubting her inevitable victory for even a second, stabbed at one of the mass-produced Libras with her tail faster than the speed of sound, skewering it.

“This is bad! Support the Scales Corps!”

Blutgang’s control room was currently wrapped in an unprecedented atmosphere of unease. They had experienced many monster attacks. They’d even seen attacks from the devilfolk more than once. But Blutgang had lasted through all of it. Most importantly, they had always had their trump card, the Scales Corps: four mass-produced versions of Libra of the Scales, one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. While they didn’t have Brachium and could only equip one of Libra’s scale weapons, they were still level 700 and the highest class of golem. As long as they defended Blutgang, everyone felt a sense of security.

But now, one of the Scales Corps had been pierced through before it could react. Since the Libra imitations were golems, the wound Scorpius dealt wasn’t fatal. In fact, the one she’d pierced through was still trying to attack, paying no heed to the hole in its body.

The fight was steadily leaning towards the Scorpion.

“No. If we make a mistake, we might shoot one of the mass-produced Libras!”

“Dammit! ...Why? Why are they being dominated...? Even though they’re mass-produced, they’re still level 700! And there’s even four of them. They should have the advantage!”

Judging based on their levels, the mass-produced Libras weren’t at a disadvantage. The dwarves had no way of knowing that the Scorpion had shattered her limits and reached level 900, but the fight still shouldn’t have been unwinnable for them.

But in reality, the mass-produced Libras were being dominated. The Scorpion’s fierce attacks were pushing the Scales Corps back. The reason was

their attribute matchup.

The Scales corps—or rather, all golems—had their attributes determined by whatever materials were used in their construction. And most powerful golems were made of some sort of metal, which made their attribute Metal. On the other hand, the Scorpion’s attribute was Fire.

During the past invasion of Svel, the guardian deity Levia had leveraged its attribute advantage to fight evenly with Aries, who should have been stronger. (Although given the materials used for Levia, it’d basically been able to cheat anyway and had exhibited more strength than its level suggested.) But now, the situation was the exact opposite. The superior fighter also had the attribute advantage. So the Scales Corps were gradually growing in their disadvantage.

But, it didn’t stop there.

“A-Admiral!”

“What!”

“T-Trouble! Several high magic responses in Blutgang’s First Floor Town... The devilfolk have infiltrated Blutgang!”

“What?!”

\* \* \*

“It’s gotten quite noisy, hasn’t it?”

I opened the door of Karkinos’ eatery and looked around. An incredible noise had been coming from outside for a while now, and it sounded like cannons...

*Wait. It probably is cannons.*

The sound of explosions never stopped.

Luckily, I knew what was happening already. A huge announcement had been broadcast through all of Blutgang, so there was no way I didn’t know. Apparently Scorpius was attacking Blutgang, and Blutgang was retaliating in force. But that wasn’t the only reason for the noise outside the restaurant.

“Yes. They really appear just everywhere, don’t they?” Dina agreed with me, directing her gaze into the distance.

At the other end, a bunch of humanoid figures with either blue or green skin were flying in... Basically, a lot of devilfolk had gotten inside.

I knew that Scorpius had teamed up with the devilfolk, so this wasn't especially surprising. But the fact that they'd managed to get in so easily was not a good sign.

"They probably hid, waited for the golems to be deployed, and got in through the opening that made."

"This Moon-element magic power... It's Luna."

Libra deduced their point of entry, and Aigokeros mentioned an unfamiliar name. He seemed to be acquaintances with whomever he'd mentioned, but I'd never met that person.

"Luna?"

"The member of the Seven Luminaries who holds the Moon seat. She mainly excels in stealth, assassinations, and sowing confusion."

"From the name, Luna seems like a girl."

"You're most likely correct. Luna dresses like a man, but from what I can tell, she's a woman."

What Aigokeros said caused me to scrunch up my face.

*A woman, huh...? Not someone I really want to actively attack... Still, it's not like I can just let her do whatever she wants... If she really was good at assassinations, then she was more troublesome than the other Seven Luminaries I'd met, in a sense.*

No matter the level difference, there were other ways to defeat a target. A person could simply avoid any strong opponents while they killed off important targets and show great worth that way. It was all right to simply overpower people, like that dumbass Mars, who just wandered around so completely overconfident in their own levels that they charged headfirst at anything. Even having overwhelmingly higher stats and levels wouldn't necessarily save you from those who hid and moved in the shadows.

*So our first priority has to be dealing with Luna, whether that be catching her,*

*defeating her, or whatever.*

“If you can single her out by her magic, does that mean you can find her, Aigokeros?”

“Easily.”

“Good. Then you will chase Luna. If possible, take her in alive. However, I forbid you from involving bystanders or causing unnecessary destruction. Don’t trouble Blutgang’s citizens.”

“Understood!”

Having acknowledged my order, Aigokeros disappeared from the spot like mist.

*That should take care of the member of the Seven Luminaries. There’s no way Aigokeros loses.*

The real problem was who to send against the devilfolk who’d gotten into Blutgang. I’d also need to decide who to send out against Scorpius.

*Should I go fight her myself? I should be able to stop her. I guess I’ll take Dina with me, too? She’s a double agent, after all. It should be easier for her to fight outside where there aren’t devilfolk.*

*And Aries and Libra should be enough for the rest of the devilfolk that managed to get inside.*

*As for Virgo... I guess she can stay with me for now. It’s a good opportunity to powerlevel her using the huge army of monsters outside. And I should probably take Karkinos with me, too.*

“Dina, Virgo, Karkinos, you’re with us. We are going to stop Scorpius. Aries and Libra will stay inside and clean up the devilfolk.”

I gave the rest of them their roles and immediately leapt into action.

Dina and the others followed right after me, while Libra and Aries ran in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

Luna was one of the devilfolk’s Seven Luminaries, holding the seat of the

Moon element. Luna was a boy—no, a girl—who had her race’s characteristic pale-blue skin, shining golden eyes with vertically slit pupils, and pale, honey-colored hair. Among the Seven Luminaries, she was the most adept at covert operations. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t fight directly. But she had been ordered to avoid direct confrontation by her boss...the Devil King’s son.

But Luna herself was unsatisfied with that role. She took it to mean that she wasn’t trusted, and that her abilities were being looked down upon. So Luna wanted to show him just how capable she was. That was when Venus, another one of the Seven Luminaries, said to her, “Then let’s show him.”

If things continued as they were, Luna would never be able to stand equally with him. She would continue to just be the weak subordinate and nothing more. Venus told Luna that if she wanted to be recognized, she’d have to accomplish something bigger, more significant. Then, Venus made an example...saying that she could get the achievement of having taken down Blutgang under her belt. And if Luna didn’t manage that, she’d spend her entire life chasing after him.

So Luna resolved to change her mission to infiltrate Blutgang to one of assaulting it.

*I’m not weak. I can do things other than covert missions.*

Luna wanted to prove that. But just looking at the results, she was probably being reckless. At the very least, she should have been much more cautious with Lufas Maphaahl back in the world of the living.

The reason why Mars and Jupiter were dead was because they hadn’t been more cautious. Luna should have learned to be careful from those two. She should have realized that the preconception that the devilfolk were strong enough not to have to worry was no longer true.

*Am I being followed?* Luna had successfully managed to use Scorpius as bait to get inside, but ever since she’d gotten inside, she’d had an uncomfortable feeling as if she were being watched.

*Is it Blutgang’s command? No, they shouldn’t have the leeway.*

*The mass-produced Libras? No, those annoying things were all sent after*

*Scorpius.*

*Then who is it? What's emitting this horrible feeling, like the dread is just sticking onto me...? Even though I can feel someone watching me, I don't see anyone anywhere. I don't even see anyone's shadows.*

But Luna could clearly feel whatever it was getting closer.

*Wait... Shadows?! Luna had noticed that she didn't see anyone's shadows. But what if that's the point? What if the shadows themselves are watching me?* At the same time that she reached that conclusion, Luna's shadow, which had been moving along with her, suddenly warped.

Luna could feel her insides instantly freeze as an irrational fear forced its way into her heart. Her shadow formed a literal demon. It had two horns, a goat's head, a person's torso, and two bat wings growing out of its back. The creature was a template "demon from legend."

"!!"

Luna dodged suddenly as the shadow launched a black beam of light. It was pure luck that she managed to barely dodge the attack.

But the demon wasn't so easily dealt with that a single bout of luck could stop it. An atmosphere as if it contained all the ill omens in the world overflowed from the shadows. It warped the surrounding scenery, making everything seem darker to Luna.

"So you dodged it... How pitiful. If only you'd lost consciousness while still unaware of anything, you would have at least avoided feeling fear."

Luna desperately fought her body, which suddenly wanted to fall to the ground.

*All he did was speak. To think just that would disturb me this much and weigh so heavily on my spirit.*

The voice caused discomfort akin to nails being raked across a chalkboard. It was as if the words themselves were laced with curses. The demon itself was like a walking pillar of discomfort. Luna felt disgusted. The demon was basically a human's fear that had been forced into physical shape. That was why it was a

demon.

“Aigo...keros.....”

“Luna...weak one. I give you two choices.” His eyes were like empty caverns which glowed maliciously. Just that caused Luna’s knees to shamefully shake like a fawn’s. “The first is sweet submission. If you don’t resist, I will not harm you, and you will be taken to meet my great master as an offering.”

“Ha...haha. How nice. So instead I get to be murdered by Lufas Maphaahl?”

“Exactly. Someone like you, who is as significant as a bug, will be able to meet your end at my master’s hands. What an honor it will be for you.”

Lufas Maphaahl showed no mercy to the devilfolk. Even a child knew that. The second she noticed you, you were finished. No matter if you were a woman, elderly, or whatever, she would chase you to the ends of the earth and take your head. That was the reputation of the Black-Winged Conqueror.

In other words, if Luna surrendered it would directly translate to her death.

“The other choice is cruel domination. I will tear your limbs off and drag you, covered in blood, to be an offering to my master.”

“...Aren’t both choices the same?”

“Indeed. You may either surrender and die, or resist and die painfully and miserably. —Choose, weak one.”

The demon mercilessly proclaimed her death sentence. That alone indicated the difference in their strength.

## 21

“I refuse both options!” Luna roared, squeezing out all her pride and self-respect to do so in the face of the proclamation of her death.

Her opponent was one of the Great Conqueror’s Twelve Heavenly Stars—Aigokeros the Goat. On top of that, he was a demon and hailed as the cruelest and most ruthless among them. But Luna was one of the Seven Luminaries, the pride of the devilfolk. And in a stroke of odd coincidence, she was also the one

in the Moon element seat, the same as Aigokeros.

Since they both had the same elemental attribute, Luna knew Aigokeros' strengths and weaknesses like the back of her hand. She was confident that she was one of the few people who could resist his mental interference spells at the very least, which was better than any of the other Seven Luminaries could claim.

"Yaahh!!" Luna concentrated mana to make a black sword and leaped forward to slash at her enemy.

Aigokeros showed no signs of even attempting to dodge or defend against her attack. With his arms still folded together, he cleanly accepted the blow from Luna of the Seven Luminaries.

The result: he wasn't hurt in the slightest. The sword Luna attacked him with dispersed, leaving Aigokeros without a scratch. But Aigokeros hadn't used any sort of special magic. The simple difference in their stats was just so huge she couldn't hurt a hair on his body. That was it.

"How slow. How brittle. And how *weak*," Aigokeros spat out, filled with disdain.

He flicked his middle finger, blasting Luna away. The move was more commonly referred to as a forehead flick on Earth. That was all it took for Luna to be blown away, flying and tumbling for over 100 m while gouging out chunks of earth.

Aigokeros dove towards the ground, trying to chase after Luna. After a moment, he appeared from Luna's shadow. No, he didn't just appear. He was clearly larger than he'd been previously. His head almost scraped the ceiling of Blutgang's first floor, and Luna only barely managed to reflexively dodge the attacks from Aigokeros' larger arms.

"G-Gigantification by concentrating mana?!"

"Oh? So you can tell."

This form of Aigokeros' wasn't real. It was simply a body created by gathered mana. In other words, it was a type of spell. Magic was just a skill used to change mana into a physical phenomenon. For example, Metal elemental magic

could even produce metals and ores. Aigokeros' spell worked off of the same principle. By using mana, Aigokeros managed to create a duplicate of himself. It was a phantom body that would disappear as soon as the spell was over... But until it did, it had real, physical properties.

"You monster...!"

*So this is the strength of the Twelve Heavenly Stars! This is how a dweller of Helheim fights!* Luna felt the gap between her and her opponent strongly, and she immediately threw away all thoughts of opposing him head-on.

Luna jumped, attempting to create some distance. Aigokeros gave her a look which was hard to discern the meaning of.

"Capture her."

Black tentacles sprouted from the gigantic Aigokeros' body. But they weren't just tentacles. Each one of them ended in fangs. The tentacles surged at Luna, along with a hard-to-bear noise, a harder-to-bear smell, and a general feeling of physical disgust.

If Aigokeros had brought all his strength to bear at that point without minding his surroundings, Luna would probably not have been able to avoid the attack. Aigokeros would surely have gone after Luna, involving entire houses in his rampage and not minding any amount of collateral damage or wounded civilians in his mission. As a result, he would have easily captured Luna. But Aigokeros had received a certain order from his master to not involve his surroundings. That caused his fierce attacks to dull significantly. Since the town was packed so tightly together, it was even harder to attack while avoiding the buildings. Ironically, Blutgang itself was protecting Luna, who was here to destroy it.

But that still didn't mean Luna had the advantage. No attack Luna could make would work on Aigokeros in the first place. In fact, it was obvious to Luna that if she even tried to attack, Aigokeros would take advantage of the opening to instantly capture her.

*Should I retreat...?* Feelings of inferiority crept into Luna's heart, gradually strangling her perceived options. *I don't stand a chance against this demon.*

Luna wasn't stupid enough not to be able to realize that, especially since she knew what had happened to that idiot Mars when he decided to jump in without thinking. *But... I can't. If I retreat now, I'll be damaging his reputation! I can't keep putting more weight on his shoulders just because we're incompetent...!*

Luna chose not to retreat. She had a reason not to.

The Seven Luminaries had done nothing but fail recently. Mars had failed to conquer Svel and had lost Aries. Libra had disappeared, and someone had taken most of the treasure that'd been kept in the King's Grave. Jupiter had died in Gjallarhorn. Aigokeros had betrayed the devilfolk. And finally, Lufas Maphaahl's revival had been confirmed.

It could be surmised from all these events that the Twelve Heavenly Stars were once again gathering under Lufas. It was unknown to the devilfolk just how many had returned to Lufas' side at the moment, but no matter the number, it was terrible news. Rumors that the Seven Luminaries weren't worth much had already started circulating among the devilfolk, and their subordinates had begun to lose faith in them.

*That's fine, though. I don't mind being underestimated. But if this keeps going on, our failures will become his, since he founded the Seven Luminaries.* Luna couldn't bear the thought of that happening.

*I... I'm...not weak!*

The Seven Luminaries were just a collection of individuals, not a unified group. Two hundred years ago, almost all the powerful devilfolk had disappeared. The Seven Luminaries were a group of commanders brought together to temporarily stabilize the devilfolk, who had descended into chaos after the loss of their most powerful individuals. Saying that they had been chosen for their strength was nice, but that really just meant that they were comparatively strong among the devilfolk who had degraded far too much in strength. They were basically straw dummies.

Originally, a level 300 devilfolk would never have been in a leadership position. In fact, they wouldn't even have been in a leader's entourage. The devilfolk had been overflowing with level 1000s two hundred years ago, after

all.

A devilfolk's strength was decided the moment they were born. Strong devilfolk would always be strong, the weak always weak, and the half-assed always half-assed... There was no way to change the level they were born with and no way for those in the lower ranks to rise.

Luna, who was born at level 300, was not considered to have a bright future among this race who had their roles decided from birth. Her death was basically inevitable if she ever ran into Lufas Maphaahl or her subordinates, so Luna could only desperately try to avoid doing so. She had no choice but to look on from the sidelines as the stronger devilfolk all died, even while envying those with high levels.

*I don't want to die. I want to keep living.*

The instinct telling Luna to attack humans didn't matter to her one bit. She just fervently wanted to keep living. And at some point after having continued to live, she found herself among the most powerful of living devilfolk. Luna hadn't become stronger. Everyone stronger than her had simply died, so she'd automatically risen to the top.

The stage she was currently standing on was originally so high up she would never have been able to reach it. But the Seven Luminaries had been brought up in a hurry, since all the people on that stage had gone. That was why the Seven Luminaries existed, and Luna was one of them.

For the first time since she was born, Luna was in a seat of power meant for the strong. She knew she was utterly unfit for the role, but she still didn't want to leave it. She hated being looked down upon and scorned while having to keep running her whole life. That was more than enough reason for her to want to stay. So Luna desperately acted strong. She crossdressed, tried to speak like a man, and hid her actual, weak self. But a bluff was just a bluff. And masks were just masks. Every time she faced someone who actually was strong, Luna was made to realize her own insignificance.

"You're a woman. Stop pushing yourself to put up such a strong facade."

The man who'd chided Luna like that in the past was exactly what she was trying to seem like—someone actually strong from birth. He was born in the

same generation as Luna, and they had been together since childhood. He was a man who had been destined to be strong since the very beginning. He was the Devil King's son, Terra. He was the lord that Luna and the others served and the founder of the Seven Luminaries.

“Don't underestimate me, Lord Terra! I am one of the Seven Luminaries!”

“Don't be so full of yourself. The Seven Luminaries are just a temporary set of commanders chosen because there is no one else. It doesn't mean that you all are strong.”

“...!”

“So don't feel the need to push yourself so hard. Just do whatever you can. Don't push yourself too far, and concentrate on covert operations and sowing confusion.”

Luna had admired Terra since childhood. He was always strong, at a level someone weak like Luna could never reach. But she was always looking at his back. She knew that that didn't make a good match. She'd been told that over and over. But nevertheless, she wanted to be near him. Even if no one else would accept it, she at least wanted him to recognize her. She wanted him to talk to her. She wanted him to turn around for her. Luna wanted to show him that she was someone useful. That was Luna's one, true wish, hidden beneath the facade she showed to the world.

\*            \*

“Target Locked. Commencing attack.”

Libra was wielding a sniper rifle, shooting down the devilfolk flying inside Blutgang one after the other. Every shot she made was a kill, bursting devilfolk heads like watermelons and causing their pitiful corpses to pile up on the ground. She worked indifferently and accurately. Without a single ounce of emotion, the killer doll simply continued her mission of killing devilfolk, as handed to her by her master.

In contrast to Libra's quiet style of cleaning up the town, Aries was hopping around the city acrobatically. Aries leaped into the air over and over, jumping off Blutgang's houses as he grabbed the devilfolk in midair and incinerated

them. He kept his momentum and never stopped jumping, eventually reaching the sky-ceiling of Blutgang itself and jumping off of that.

Aries passed a small group of devilfolk, finishing them off bare-handed as he went by before jumping into the air again as soon as he landed. He didn't care that the devilfolk had already lost all will to fight and were turning around to run. Aries grabbed onto the nearest devilfolk and, after turning him into a fireball, tossed his victim into a group of his comrades. This caused the other devilfolk to catch fire, too, and in a mere moment, they'd all turned to ashes. But those flames never touched the houses or surrounding buildings, since the fire itself went out as soon as Aries snapped his fingers.

"Aries, several of these mice have run to the other floors. We're going after them."

"Got it."

Libra and Aries speedily moved up the stairs that led to the next floor.

It was almost unthinkable that they had both just been wreaking havoc in Gjallarhorn. If Merak were to see how they treated Blutgang, he'd probably angrily shout, "If you could do that, why did Gjallarhorn turn out like this?!"

"Found them."

Libra's rifle spat fire as she shot down a faraway enemy.

If Libra used her right scale inside Blutgang, it would pierce right through the walls to the outside, so she couldn't use it. Likewise, Brachium was also sealed. With the buildings this packed together, there would always be some amount of collateral damage, no matter how accurate she tried to be. But Libra had a whole selection of stored weapons, outside of those she'd been automatically fitted with, to use in different situations. At the very least, she was able to kill devilfolk with ease, no matter how many there were or how fast they ran.

"Hey, is it just me or did we get the easiest role this time?"

"No. Considering their numbers, Aigokeros has the easiest job, since he only has to take care of one of these small-fry."

"Right."

Aries took off again, ripping apart five devilfolk who were in his trajectory. Then, he kicked the wall, turned around, and was back at Libra's side in an instant.

"By the way, Libra. This is just between us, but what do you think of Miss Lufas as she is now? I get the feeling that she's gotten softer."

"I believe she has started taking more mercy on her enemies than before. But that doesn't change the fact that she is our master and deserves our respect and devotion."

Some devilfolk charged them in desperation, only to be cut apart by Libra's blade of light or burned by Aries' fists. On top of that, Libra's rifle immediately took down another several enemies who weren't even part of the charge. Libra didn't need to look through her scope; her eyes were better than any scope.

"I have only heard this from Mizar, but according to him, Master was not originally a cold and merciless person. You should be more knowledgeable about this than I am, but...from what I can gather, Master's cruelty and ruthlessness were things she gained later in life due to her situation. She was probably a calm, peaceful person originally. I never knew Master before she became coldhearted, but I believe that Master seems more natural as she is now."

"True... Miss Lufas used to be strict, but she wasn't that merciless. If she were, I'd have been killed the moment we met."

Aries and Libra continued to massacre the devilfolk one by one as they talked. As soon as they cleared one floor, they moved on to the next. By repeating that process, the number of devilfolk in Blutgang quickly lessened.

"But that's exactly why I'm starting to think... Would getting Miss Lufas' memories back really be good for her? I can't help but wonder if not doing so would make Miss Lufas happier."

"You don't want her memories to come back?"

"No, I *do* want them to come back. Even though they're just a part of her memories, I can't stand the fact that she doesn't remember the days we've spent together. But I also don't want Miss Lufas to remember all her painful

memories, either.”

Libra gave chase and fired.

Aries gave chase and crushed them.

They continued their conversation, but they never stopped killing devilfolk. While faithfully carrying out the order given to them by their master, they finally managed to bring the number of devilfolk in Blutgang down to single digits.

“At any rate, I’m sure the one who holds the key to all this is that person...Dina. Her actions have been far too unnatural.”

“Huh? Really?”

“...You didn’t notice? No, wait. This might be one of the effects of her mental interference ability,” Libra said to Aries as they destroyed the last enemy. Libra’s statement was something only she could make as a golem that wasn’t affected by mental control abilities. “I surmise that several of you—or at worst, all of you—have been affected by it. Dina’s memory manipulation or thought induction, I mean. You must never let your guard down around that woman.”

## 22

Two of the mass-produced Libras had their left arms changed into blades as they charged at Scorpius. Their speed was worthy of a level 700, and any normal enemy wouldn’t have been able to deal with their onslaught. But Scorpius easily grabbed both blades with her bare hands, sneering as she did so. The mass-produced Libras were stuck.

“Too easy, fools!”

Using sheer brawn, Scorpius threw the Libras away by their swords.

The Libras’ joints creaked audibly, and it was clear that there was a crack in their shoulders. But the mass-produced Libras managed to avoid the worst outcome by turning their blades off before they’d broken, and they quickly resumed their battle stances. The two other Libras that had been waiting in the back fired their right scales directly afterwards.

But Scorpius didn't back down in front of the two beams of light. She simply dodged their fire while running forward. Scorpius returned fire, extending her tail out to attack. Her tail pierced the right arm of one of the mass-produced Libras bombarding her, completely decimating that arm from the shoulder down.

"I get it now. I'm on to all of you. Not only do none of you have Brachium, but each of you only has one of Libra's scales equipped. Which means I've just made one of you useless, doesn't it?"

Next, Scorpius took aim at the other bombardment-type Libra that had been hounding her.

The mass-produced Libra noticed she had gotten Scorpius' attention. The bombardment-type suddenly deployed her steel wings and retreated into the sky. But Scorpius simply jumped into the air and easily caught up.

"Ha! Idiot! Did you really think I'd let you get away?!" Scorpius laughed derisively and swiped at the Libra with her nails.

That was all it took to take away the bombardment-type's right arm. Scorpius quickly followed up with her tail, piercing through the imitation golem's chest. The attack scattered whatever parts had been kept inside of her, and the mass-produced Libra started to tremble and shake, as if it had broken.

Well, it pretty much *was* broken at this point. The Libra emitted meaningless noise from its mouth; it was no longer in a state to even speak properly. But it was still a weapon, a steel doll made to protect Blutgang. Its face betrayed no fear nor any other emotion. It existed with an ironclad will to fulfill its mission. The mass-produced Libra had lost its weapon and was heavily damaged. It understood that it no longer had anything to offer to the battle, and that if it stayed, it would only get in the way. So there was only one option for it to take.

The half-destroyed mass-produced Libra used its remaining arm to grab hold of the tail piercing it. Then, in a surprise move, it lurched forward, driving the tail deeper until Scorpius was close enough to kiss.

"Start...ing.....self...destruct.....sequence..."

"?!"

The mass-produced Libra started to shine. Sparks of electricity flew off of it. The golem's glass-like eyes cracked, and a fissure widened on its face.

Scorpius knew what the Libra was trying to do.

*This damn doll. She's trying to take me with her!*

But Scorpius couldn't get free no matter how hard she tried. Her tail was stuck too far inside the Libra, not to mention the fact that the golem was grasping onto the tail as well. She would normally be able to get free of something like this in a matter of seconds, but she didn't even have that long until the golem blew up.

There was a flash. For a moment, the sky was lit up, shining brightly, and was accompanied by a loud, explosive sound. A pillar of fire rose high into the sky, high enough to disperse the clouds.

Even just the aftershocks of the explosions caused more casualties among the golem army, lowering their numbers even more. In Blutgang's control room, the admiral was convinced of Scorpius' death, judging from the aftermath of the explosion.

*Our losses this time were far too great,* he thought.

They'd lost almost all their treasured high-level golems and even one of their prized mass-produced Libras. The remaining three weren't exactly untouched, either. One of them had a hole in its stomach, and another had lost its weapon. Since they couldn't repair the Libras on their own, it was basically as if they'd lost three of their mass-produced Libras in this fight.

But somehow, they'd still managed to win. They might have paid an immense price, but Blutgang had finally managed to take down one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars.

...Well, not quite. If they *had* managed to do it, that would still have only offered some cold comfort.

"...Impossible..." The smoke had cleared, and what the admiral saw drew those words of despair out of him. The rest of the bridge crew probably felt similarly.

They looked down at the results of the Libras' sacrifice with expressions saying that none of them could believe—no, that they didn't want to believe—what they were seeing.

“—That was close... Even I panicked a bit there. You really need to warn a girl before you do that.”

Scorpius didn't seem to have been affected at all by the blast. Well, she did show some signs of having taken it. Something black and scissor-like flickered over both her arms. It was most likely a weapon manifested by condensing mana, and there were several bits and pieces of mass-produced Libra sticking to it.

Having seen that, the admiral figured out what had happened. She'd... In that moment right before the explosion, she'd taken apart the Libra and made her escape!

“Well, that's over. I may have been surprised by that once, but it won't work again. Now, then. Out of those left, there's a half-broken one with a hole in it and a useless one with no weapon. Only one of you is in perfect shape, I see... Heehee, looks like it's my win?”

“...!”

Scorpius, convinced of her victory, kicked into the air and flew at the remaining Libras.

The mass-produced Libras were only barely able to give a good fight when all of them had been in perfect condition. They had no chance of winning now. None at all. The best they could aim for would be mutual destruction. Their only hope was to somehow catch Scorpius in another self-destruct blast.

In other words, no matter what happened, Blutgang had lost their trump card.

\* \* \*

*Ohhh, there's so many of them. All the scorpion monsters are like a wriggling carpet.*

Having left the interior of Blutgang to Libra and the others, I was currently

outside surveying the army of scorpion monsters that were several hundred meters ahead. I couldn't help but smile. From what I could tell, the monsters had some substance to them. While there were definitely some small-fry that were there just to bolster numbers, most of them were over level 100 or 200. But what was really surprising was the fact that Blutgang was managing to go toe-to-toe with the scorpions.

The golem forces battled it out with the monsters without giving an inch, and the supporting fire from Blutgang itself was very well-placed and effective. What interested me the most was the woman in black off in the distance who was a way higher level than everything else.

*I bet that's Scorpius. The 'Lufas' inside me is telling me so.*

The golems were giving her a good fight, although it wasn't quite even. They were amazing, to say the least. The golems, which looked just like Libra, used dazzling teamwork to get at Scorpius. But a good fight was nowhere near winning. They weren't fighting evenly. While the Libras were trying their best, Scorpius would still win if nothing changed, at least in my opinion. One was already half-broken with a hole in its torso, and another two were also in horrible shape.

"That's too bad," I muttered without meaning to.

Dina looked up at me and responded, "What is?"

"Just those Libra lookalikes. From what we can tell, they're level 700. In this era, they're masterpieces. It's a waste to see them broken like this. ...By the way, you said that our level 100 golem was worth a million el. So how much would something like those be worth?"

"They're national treasures."

"Huh?"

"They're super-valuable golems that have been deemed national treasures."

*...So calling it a waste was underselling it.*

Well, it made sense if level 100 was already a million el. A level 700 golem was something no person, including me, could make today in the first place. So the

fact that Blutgang deployed them at all showed just how far they were backed into a corner. Just how heavy would their loss be...?

“There’s no other choice. Let’s hurry and end this. Dina, a weapon.”

“Which one would you like?”

“The whip sword,” I said, extending my right hand. Matching my movement, an Exgate opened up, and I was now gripping my favorite sword.

In the game, the properties of a whip sword were that its attack animation was a little slow, but in exchange, its attack range was very large. It was quite convenient for sweeping through large numbers of weak enemies, and it was my favorite weapon to use. I tended to use something different against bosses, but this would have to be my choice for my most used, favorite weapon. But as things stood, I couldn’t bring this weapon to bear.

“Dina, pave the way.”

“Leave it to me.”

If I were to simply wade in now, I’d end up hitting the golems in my path as well. That would be a huge waste. While it would have been possible for me to remake them, I didn’t want to have to try, since it would be troublesome and tiring, given their numbers. So, I decided that taking measures not to destroy them would be best. And my measure was right next to me.

“Exgate!”

Dina’s magic and heaven-arts combined to form a gate. Its location? Encompassing the entire battlefield.

It was a little funny seeing all the golems fall over backwards when the hole suddenly opened up. But the only ones that fell were the golems. All the scorpion monsters stayed where they were.

An Exgate couldn’t be passed through by beings with a will without complete consent. By that rule, golems, which didn’t have a will, all passed through unilaterally. The monsters, which were living beings, didn’t. That made Exgate the best spell for separating these two forces.

Now I could attack without restraint.

“Now, then. Let’s get to it.”

I swung, sweeping my sword in a great, wide arc. When I did, the sword unwound, and the blade extended into the distance. I used that length to mow down everything on the battlefield! I did make sure to hold back a little. But I wouldn’t weep for anything that was killed in my attack.

While it was true that all these monsters were Scorpius’ followers, that didn’t mean they were *my* followers. These scorpions only followed Scorpius by instinct in the first place, since she was a stronger monster of the same type as them. All of them were fundamentally murderous monsters with no intelligence that only acted based on instinct. Summed up, I had no need to hesitate.

Still though, I held back so at least the strongest wouldn’t die, since the higher-leveled ones could be useful. That way, I could capture them for use later. Anything that was killed during my attack wasn’t worth capturing in the first place.

After all, I wanted to level Virgo up, too.

Once my attack was over, the battlefield had undergone a drastic change. There were no longer any golems, and the scorpion monsters were almost completely decimated outside of a small number of high-leveled ones. Then, the radiance of mana spilled out from the dead monsters, and it attempted to enter my body.

*Is this what EXP looks like? It wasn’t visible like this before, but... Maybe I can see it now, since I’m resonating with Lufas? No. More importantly, this is bad. All the experience is coming to me. Come on. There’s no point in me getting the EXP. I’m already level 1000! If this keeps up, Virgo won’t level.*

*I concentrated and tried to will the mana to not get absorbed into me. Not this way. Go to Virgo! She was in my party and participated in battle (?) so she should get at least some of the EXP! Lemme powerlevel her!*

As I kept concentrating my will, the mana started to gather on my palm instead of inside me. I noticed Dina holding her breath and looking surprised, but I didn’t have the leeway to care at the moment.

*Keep gathering... Keep gathering...* Eventually, the concentrated mana shined

gold and settled into the shape of a fruit that I was very familiar with—an apple.

“...What the hell?” I couldn’t help but mutter.

*The EXP became an apple. I don’t get it. So should I give this to one of my friends to powerlevel them?*

I looked towards Dina, and found her making a grim expression, her eyes glued on me—no, on the apple in my hand.

\*            \*

“A golden apple?”

“Yes, a golden apple.”

Sei was still in the Wise King’s mansion in Svel. Megrez was entertaining Sei, the hero, in his parlor, telling him a Mizgarz myth.

The credibility of the story Megrez was telling him was considered to be incredibly low, but Megrez still insisted on sharing the story with the hero. After all, Megrez was sure this myth was closer to the truth than any other myth in existence, no matter what anyone else claimed.

“There used to be no mana in Mizgarz. This was because the white-winged folk who lived on top of the tallest mountain in the world, Vanaheim, cleaned up the impurities, or mana, of the world by gathering it up. That is the true form of the golden apple. And people were forbidden from touching the fruit.”

“Forbidden...fruit...”

“But someone among the winged people broke that taboo and ate one. That person angered the Goddess and was exiled from the mountain. Having lost his wings, he became a human. You could say that this person who ate a fruit on a whim is the link between the heaven-winged and the rest of humanity. After this incident, the heaven-winged lost their ability to gather mana, causing the world to overflow with it.”

Megrez turned the page in the book he was reading from. The title of the book was *History of Mizgarz Part 1: The Secret of the Birth of the Seven Races*.

“But...this is just a story, right?”

“Yes. It is. I’m sure no one believes in this story. Even I would have considered this tale ridiculous if I hadn’t met her. But the thing is, it exists.” Megrez smiled gently as he looked over at Sei. Then, he spoke of the one thing that the hero party wanted to know about the most. “You all called it a ‘secret method,’ a way of quickly raising a person’s level... Well, that method is golden apples... And as far as I know, the only person in the world who can create them is Lufas Maphaahl.”

## 23

After ruminating on what Megrez had told him, Sei had an incredible urge to facepalm.

*We’re screwed. Actually, we’ve been screwed from the start.*

Sei no longer thought of Lufas as an enemy. Rather than defeating her, he wanted to find a way for them to join forces. *If I still thought of her as an enemy, I’d be running straight into an unwinnable battle...*

In order to get to level 1000 to be able to stand against Lufas and the Devil King, golden apples were the key. But Lufas was the only one who could make them. No one would help if someone came up to them and said, “I want to beat you. Please help me.”

Sei once again realized just how correct the path he’d chosen was. *We really shouldn’t be enemies with her.*

“Why is she the only one?”

“That’s a good question. Still, I can only speculate about it, since I wasn’t alive back then. Do you still want to know what I think?”

“Please.”

Megrez nodded after hearing Sei’s unhesitating response. Once again turning the pages in the book, Megrez started to speak.

“Hmm... The first heaven-winged were able to gather up impurities, or mana, and turn them into golden apples in this mythical age. This power has undoubtedly been inherited by Lufas. The question is, why did that happen?

The criminal who ate the golden apple was exiled, while the rest of the heaven-winged had the ability taken away from them. Thinking logically, there's no way anyone would be left with this ability. But just by looking at the results, it's clear that the ability remained in the world. The Goddess probably overlooked someone. But...unluckily, that person had eaten the forbidden fruit." Megrez then muttered an aside, saying, "At least, that's how I see it," before continuing on.

"That person's children must have been lucky enough to be born with white wings. And, luck upon luck, they'd managed to hide their family's crimes. But their secrets came to light. The person's descendants probably exhibited stronger ancestral blood after a few generations, and the power to gather mana that should have been lost was lost no longer. That's probably the reason for her black wings, as well as the reason why black wings are hated for being taboo. And of course they are. Black wings are proof of guilt. They're a brand revealing to the world that the person ate the forbidden fruit."

"So that's why...Lufas Maphaahl..."

"Yes. At least, that's what I believe. ...It's all speculation on my part."

Sei sunk into thought with an appreciative hum.

*I see. It makes sense at a glance. There's pretty much no proof, so it's hard to say this is all correct, but it should be all right to consider this a good theory. At the very least, it's easier to believe than someone just randomly being born with pitch-black wings and amazing strength.*

"At any rate, it's true that Lufas has the ability to produce golden apples. All of us, including Lufas, used them to absorb far more mana than usual in order to become this strong."

"Umm, the Sky King of Gjallarhorn is heaven-winged, right? Was he okay eating what's basically lumps of mana?"

"You can probably figure it out from the fact that the person got exiled, but the fruit itself doesn't affect the heaven-winged in any way. Their hatred of mana is probably from the Goddess manipulating them. She most likely imprinted the knowledge of the exiled one's cardinal sin in their subconscious, which causes them to feel unwell just by being near mana. ...The reason why

their wing colors change so much must be because of that subconscious knowledge, too.”

Megrez finished speaking and closed the book. Everything he’d said was mere speculation without any proof. But given the current situation and the knowledge at hand, there was no other conclusion to draw.

“Now, how do you feel after hearing all that? I believe you understand why I separated you from your friends.”

“Yeah... There’s no way I can talk about this stuff. It’s just too shocking.”

Even though they’d come all this way to find a method to get stronger, it turned out Lufas was the only one who could execute that method. On top of that, the apples were a symbol of sin. It’d be really hard to accept. It’d be totally impossible for Kross, at least, since he was an acolyte with strong faith in the Goddess.

“But you’ll have to tell them eventually. And they’ll have to accept it, too. I’ll leave the timing to you, but I’m sure their worlds will be turned upside down no matter when you choose to tell them. Those are the consequences of this thorny road you chose.”

“...!!”

“They’ll probably look at you coldly. They might treat you like a crazy person. They might even consider you a traitor and turn on you. So, do you still want to walk down the path that leads to the truth?”

*I’m being tested.* Sei felt that instinctively. The Wise King was trying to get a measure of Sei.

*If he backs down now, then that’s all he’s worth,* Megrez thought. *Even if he went down the path of truth, he wouldn’t make it all the way. So make me believe. Make me believe that you’ll be all right.*

Megrez was trying to secretly bring out Sei’s resolve.

In response to Megrez’s question, Sei decided to stay true to his beliefs and answered firmly.

*I’ve never been that skillful at this kind of stuff. I’m just not smart enough for*

*it. So all I have to show is the sense of justice I've inherited from my father. I believe that's the best answer to show who I am.*

"My father used to be a police officer. In this world, I guess the closest thing would be a knight? Anyway, it was a job where you investigate crimes and catch criminals."

"I see."

"I was really proud of my father. He was like a hero to me when I was a kid. But one day, my dad arrested an innocent person. While there was physical evidence and sufficient testimony, it was all fake... No one doubted it, though."

Even now, when Sei thought back, all he could remember was his father's expression, drowning in regret. Sei vividly remembered how worn out his father, who used to be so strong, had looked that day.

"My father...he actually already had an inkling that something was wrong. He thought that they should have re-launched the investigation. But he couldn't win against his surroundings. Everyone else thought the case was closed and that it was weird for him to be objecting like that, so he ended up going with the flow. He...pointed his gun at the wrong person."

"May I ask what happened to the person who was arrested?"

"...He killed himself. My father drove an innocent person to suicide."

Megrez closed his eyes as he thought of Sei's father, a person he'd never seen before. *A wrongful arrest... That's something that happens often in this world.*

The crime rate of Mizgarz couldn't be compared to that of Earth. Since people were freely allowed to carry weapons in Mizgarz, it was easy for crimes to turn deadly. Quick arrests were essential, and there were a lot of cases where it would've been too late if those in authority had tried to gather all the necessary evidence first. The standard practice was to arrest anyone who was a suspect. Then they could take their time gathering evidence. That was why it wasn't rare for innocent people to go to jail. But even if it wasn't rare, it wasn't something that people should've gotten used to.

"My father told me many times to never point your gun at the wrong person. He also said that no matter what everyone around you says, always choose the

right option, even if they hate you for it.”

“.....I see.” Megrez thought back to his own past and let out a small sigh.

*Those are fine words, but that's all they are,* he thought. Anyone would pick the correct path if they could. But it's also common for people to not know what's correct and what isn't. They only find out after the fact.

*But still. If back then... If two hundred years ago, I myself was able to choose the correct path... If I'd just been able to believe in my friend, I'm sure the world would be very different. Lufas might just be the one who can defeat the Goddess and win true freedom.*

“Hero...huh?”

*I was a coward. I feared Lufas. I didn't even try to face her head on. That's what led to the fight two hundred years ago.*

*But while this boy may be immature, he's fully prepared and willing to go down the thorny path instead of the easy one. His beliefs might only be borrowed, and his bravery may just be an imaginary feeling pushed forward by his regret for his father, but he's still trying to move forward.*

“I see... I understand why you were chosen. You certainly can become a ‘Hero’ to Mizgarz.”

*Right now, Sei is weak. Instead of proactively charging into monsters like the heroes from tales, he's trying to find a way not to fight. But the kind of bravery this world needs right now is one that's not afraid of Lufas; it's one that can look straight at her.*

*Someone needs to stand against the doubt and apathy from the wider world and the Goddess' control over our hearts, while still managing to find the just path. What we need isn't the courage to face enemies. It's the courage to empathize with them and reach out our hand in peace. And this boy certainly has it.*

“So, does your ‘correct path’ mean joining hands with Lufas?”

Surprisingly, Sei shook his head in response to Megrez's question. “No.”

From how things were going, a person might think that joining hands with

Lufas would be the way to go, but Sei and the others were missing one thing.

“I still know far too little about Lufas Maphaahl. So first, I need to meet her.”

“Heh. So you want to meet and talk to the Black-Winged Conqueror, feared over all of Mizgarz? It’s common sense in this world that talking doesn’t work with Lufas.”

“But that’s not true, right?”

“Yeah, it’s not. She’s quite willing to talk. In fact, she’s rather magnanimous. While she shows no mercy to her enemies, you shouldn’t be attacked on sight at the very least, as long as you don’t do something especially rude.”

“Then it’s decided.” Sei nodded firmly as he declared his intention to Megrez. “First, I’ll go talk to her. Then I’ll come back here once I’ve decided what to do.”

“Okay. Then when you get to that step, attach a letter to this and send it to me.”

Megrez snapped his fingers. When he did, a wooden bird that had been left in the corner of the room took flight and landed on Sei’s shoulder.

“What’s this?”

“A golem I made on a whim. If you give it a letter, it’ll deliver it to me.”

“Uhhh, how is this flying? It should be too heavy for those wings to carry it.”

While flying golems were rare, they did exist—for example, Libra of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. But unlike her and her large jetpack, this bird had nothing but its wings, and it should have been too heavy for those to give enough lift. Sei wasn’t especially knowledgeable about golems, so he didn’t know about Libra, either. But he did at least know that there was no way for the bird golem to fly unless there was some trick involved.

“It has a mana engine implanted inside it. Mana engines are something I’ve invented. They take the mana from the air and use that to power themselves. Anyway, just think of this as a cutting-edge prototype golem. The plan is to eventually make a golem that can use magic.”

Even Sei, who was rather dull on the subject of golems, could tell that a project like that wasn’t on the level of a whim, but he didn’t say anything. Being

given something this amazing was basically a show of Megrez's expectations.

That was the way Sei chose to interpret it, so he gave his thanks. "Th-Thank you very much."

"Once I receive the letter, I'll summon you with an Exgate. Got it?"

"Yes. Thank you for everything."

"Don't worry about it. This conversation has been beneficial to me, too. I'll pray for your safe travels. Not to the Goddess, but to your father."

Sei's plan was to figure out the path he should take first. In order to do that, he had to meet Lufas and talk to her. Hardening his resolve, Sei bid the Wise King's mansion farewell.

*Honestly, I'm scared,* Sei thought.

Actually, both the Great Conqueror and the Devil King had become a source of light trauma for him rather than simple fear. As a living being, Lufas was on a whole other plane of existence than Sei. Lufas could wipe out Sei's entire party on just a simple whim or for even the slightest offense. Even if she just playfully said something like, "Let's test the hero's strength!" and threw a light jab, Sei would probably be turned into chunks of meat. She could kill Sei without even meaning to. That was just how wide the gap between Sei and Lufas was.

*But I've already decided. I'm going to talk to her in order to find the path that I won't regret taking.*

After that, the tiger immediately tried to run when Sei declared that he'd go to meet Lufas...

Well, it was charming, in a way.

## 24

I observed the golden apple from various angles. *Well now. What weird thing did I just do?*

Mana gathering and solidifying wasn't especially rare, since Earth and Metal elemental magic did that exact thing. But I'd never heard of any magic that

created an apple. Anyway, I was heaven-winged, so I couldn't use magic in the first place. *Like, what use would a spell that creates an apple even be?*

"Dina, do you know what this is?"

"....."

"Dina?"

When I asked Dina about the apple, she brought out a strange name after some hesitation. "O-Oh, right. I believe this would be the 'forbidden fruit.'"

*Forbidden fruit? Like that whole thing with Adam and Eve and getting kicked out of paradise? Then I guess this thing makes you smarter? I should ask about it.*

"So this is an INT-boosting item? We don't recognize it."

"Well, it will boost INT for sure, but...it's not exactly a stat-boosting item. Rather, it's an EXP item."

"Oh?"

"Ummm... I believe you've realized this, Lufas, but unlike in the game, you don't absorb mana and get EXP just by participating in battle here. All the mana goes to the one who landed the last blow. On top of that, the efficiency is really bad. A person only ends up getting around 1/10th the mana of the opponent they killed."

"So that is why the average level has gone down so unnaturally these last two hundred years..."

*All the strong people who were there two hundred years ago died. But I guess that wasn't all. There was another factor of it being hard to level up in the first place.*

*Actually, I probably should have noticed this sooner. Like, I should have started to figure things out when Jean and the others didn't level at all while we were going up the King's Grave.*

But Dina continued on to deny my comment. "No, that's how it originally was. The entire system of the world didn't just suddenly change two hundred years ago. It's always been like this. This world wasn't meant to have several level

1000 people in it in the first place. It was that era two hundred years ago that was weird.”

“Meaning that the average level right now is actually normal?”

“Yes. Two hundred years ago, the average level wasn’t much different from what it is now...until a certain event, that is. As far as I’ve been able to find out, it was said that humanity was doing well if at least ten or so people rose to over level 100.”

“A certain event?”

“The rise of Lufas Maphaahl... Basically, when you rose to power. That golden apple is the result of gathering up all the released mana without any loss. It gives an incomparable amount of EXP, or mana, over normal leveling. From what I can gather, you used this ability to raise humanity’s levels all at once.”

*...I see. So I’ve misunderstood something fundamental again.*

*I’d always thought that the average level of this world dropped unnaturally. But it’s the opposite. Two hundred years ago, the average level rose unnaturally. And I’m the cause of it all, which was why everything went back to normal when I disappeared.*

*Still, though. A forbidden fruit? That doesn’t sound too good.*

“According to legends, there used to be no mana in the world. The people of heaven descended upon Vanaheim, the mountain closest to heaven. They watched over the world, gathering up and cleaning all of its impurities. By concentrating the impurities, or mana, together, they created the forbidden fruit—a golden apple. One day, someone ate the forbidden fruit on a whim, causing that person’s body to be suffused with mana. This led to their exile from Vanaheim and eventual transformation into a human...”

“? What does *that* mean?”

“It’s a myth that’s told in this world. If you ask anyone, they’ll tell you it’s just a story, but it might actually be true,” Dina said, giving a pointed look down at the apple in my hand.

*Oh. Yeah. Right. I have the apple right here.*

“This apple, which pushes people up to levels they would normally never reach, is truly a forbidden fruit. There’s probably no more troublesome ability for the Goddess than this. And you even used it to mass-produce powerful people, starting with the Seven Heroes.”

“...Hm...”

I tossed around the apple in my hand as I sunk into thought.

*I guess it’s finally time to admit it. My game knowledge isn’t reliable. Well, I already knew that there would be some differences between the game and real life, but I still thought my knowledge would be pretty useful. But it never works when it counts the most. In fact, the more important the knowledge is, the further away my knowledge is from the truth. I feel like it’s causing some really big misunderstandings. I’m sure I’m wrong about other things, too, as it is.*

*Well, I know one thing at least... There was a drink in the game you could buy with real money that would boost stats, and that certainly doesn’t exist here.*

“At any rate, this definitely isn’t poisonous, right?”

“It’s a lump of mana, so it’s the most fearsome poison in the world to the heaven-winged, given the chance that their child would be born with black wings.”

*Well, at least it’s not actual poison, so eating it won’t make you sick. But it’s a powerful poison to the White Wings Faction, huh? I wonder how Virgo feels about it.*

Virgo’s wings were amazingly white. Even I thought they were pretty, and I didn’t care about the color almost at all. They were such a surprisingly pure white that she could probably be the symbol of the entire White Wings Faction. Luckily, eating it wouldn’t affect your own wings, just possibly your children’s. Still though, I was hesitant to make her eat it. Even though it was just bits and pieces, I remembered parts of Lufas’ past, and I could definitely say that I didn’t want to recreate that for someone else.

Instead of giving the apple to Virgo, I stored it within my cloak. *I’ll just hold on to it for now. I’m sure Virgo would want to avoid the possibility of her children being bullied, too.* To be honest, I wanted to level her up if I could, but I didn’t

want to do it at the cost of her future.

“Capture!”

I captured the scorpion monsters that had survived my attack all at once. By doing so, I became their master, so their loyalty changed over to me. Monsters with high intelligence might still rebel, but as noted before, the scorpion monsters here were just killers that acted on instinct. As long as they were properly captured, they’d never doubt their orders.

Like that, the monsters became loyal to me and were obediently whisked away to the tower by Dina and her Exgate. In exchange, the golems that had been teleported to safety before were returned to the battlefield.

*Now all that’s left is Scorpius.*

I started walking in the direction of Scorpius, who was simply standing there staring at me.

“It’s been a while, Scorpius. Have you forgotten us?”

“Lady...Lufas.....”

The outfit I had on right now was the light disguise given to me by Megrez. It didn’t hide my face, and I had even made a grand entrance with the attack that had wiped out her scorpions. There was no way she wouldn’t recognize me.

Scorpius was staring at me as if all the emotions had been drained out of her. But after a while, her purple lips tilted upwards, and her cherry-red tongue peeked out.

“There’s no way I would. I’ve never forgotten you for a single second of a single minute of a single hour of a single day! I’ve been waiting and wishing to meet you again ever since I heard that you were alive. I’ve been waiting for this exact moment!”

“!”

Scorpius howled as she sent her tail-like braid at me. While I was surprised by the sudden attack, I managed to sway my upper body to the side and dodged.

“What is the meaning of this, Scorpius?”

“Heehee... Hahaha... Ever since that time... Ever since I lost you, I’ve regretted it. I thought, ‘Ahh, why didn’t I stop you? Why did I just let you head out onto such a dangerous battlefield?’ I’ve always always  
alwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalways  
alwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalwaysalways always regretted it! So I decided something.”



Scorpius' cheeks flushed, and her eyes opened wide like those of a prostitute at her climax when she looked at me.

“If I ever got to see you again, I’d keep you for myself! Just for myself! I swore that I, Scorpius, would protect you alone! I’d catch you and tie you up and restrain you and shut you inside and hug you and keep you and protect you so that no one other than me could ever touch or hurt you! No one will touch you or wound you or look at you or even hear your voice. They’d never even hear from you. You’d be next to me and only me!

“That’s right. That’s the best way to do things. Right? I mean, it’s a mistake to let other trash even be near you, the world’s most valuable treasure, in the first place. Just thinking about trash being able to lay eyes on you drives me crazy! I won’t forgive them for being able to hear your voice, and I won’t settle down until those who didn’t know their place as they yearned for you die ten thousand times! I’ll never show mercy to that trash that abused you, either! So I’ll be the one to kill all your enemies, and I’ll be the one to protect you from everything!

“It’ll all be fine, my dear Lady Lufas. You might feel inconvenienced at first, but I’ll provide you with everything you need. You won’t even need to lift a finger. I will watch over your food, sleep, exercise, entertainment, and provide everything you want. I won’t let anyone take you away from me, and I won’t let you fight anymore. I will pluck anything that would dare harm you from this world, whether that be the Seven Heroes or the Devil King or the Goddess or humanity or the devilfolk or dragons or the ouroboroses! So please, wait in the love nest I’ve prepared for you until my work is done. Please, make your smile only for me—”

.....

*—Holy hell that’s scary.*

I turned away from Scorpius, who was even now spitting out words like a machine gun, screaming out her love for me, and looked over at Dina.

*Huh? Hey, was Scorpius always like this?* I didn’t really care if she was homosexual. While I did think it was a biologically counterproductive thing, love was different for everyone.

*But, like... Yeah, this is just creepy.*

Dina looked pale, too, and she was giving me a look like she was demanding that I do something about Scorpius quickly. Virgo was spaced out, as if her soul had flown right out of her. She probably couldn't even process Scorpius' words anymore.

"—So... Please, come leap into my arms!" Scorpius finished her speech.

*Ah, oh no.*

She once again launched her hair that was bound together like a tail (*whatever, let's just call it a tail from now on*), and I managed to dodge it. But she sent a second strike right away.

Somehow, Scorpius managed to grow more hair, so now she had several tails attacking me.

*Wai— What the hell is up with that hair?*

"Grr!"

If I were alone, it'd be easy to dodge her attacks. Actually, I'd even be able to slip past her tails and close in without a problem. But I had Virgo, Dina, and Karkinos with me. While Karkinos was tough and I could leave him to his own devices, Dina and especially Virgo were very vulnerable.

I grabbed Dina and Virgo's hands and leapt away, avoiding the attacks from all of Scorpius' tails. But that wasn't the end of it. Another attack came towards us...

"Acubens!"

Karkinos suddenly came in swinging, which caused Scorpius' attack to miss as she went flying off into the distance. Looking down, I noticed that at some point, Karkinos had equipped himself with half of a pair of scissors in each hand. He approached and stood over Scorpius.

"H A H A H A, Y O U are as C r a z y as ever. It's actually comforting! But you know, Scorpius, M E, the shield of the Zodiac, won't allow you to attack Miss Lufas in my presence, even if Y O U are one of us. S t a n d u p! M E will be the one to straighten out your personality that's so twisted anyone else would

throw in the towel!”

“Karkinoss... You’re just the Crab. Don’t stand in the way of me, the Scorpion!”

Scorpius stood back up and concentrated mana in both her arms. The mana solidified and became a pair of black scissors. Karkinos’ weapons were also scissors, so I guessed this would be a showdown between two people wielding the same weapon.

Scorpius kicked off the ground and charged at Karkinos with her scissors aimed at his neck.

Karkinos didn’t even try to dodge. I reflexively raised my voice in worry while Virgo looked away. But he wasn’t hurt. He wasn’t even fazed!

“...!”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Did you forget how tough M E is after two hundred years apart?” Karkinos smiled, full of composure, as he kicked Scorpius. But this was no normal kick. It was a counter, powered by Scorpius’ own attack stat.

As Scorpius went tumbling across the ground, I had a thought. *Huh? Isn’t Karkinos really strong for a dumbass?*

## 25

Scorpius and Karkinos’ fighting styles were complete opposites. Scorpius moved and attacked at high speeds with high mobility, while Karkinos barely moved at all and waited for counter opportunities.

I followed Scorpius’ movements while shielding Virgo behind me, so she wouldn’t get caught in the aftershocks of their fight.

While Scorpius didn’t match up to the Devil King, she was plenty fast. But Karkinos never lost sight of her. Scorpius weaved feints into her attack pattern to try to catch Karkinos from behind. But Karkinos saw through those, too, and rammed Acubens at her, so they both hit each other simultaneously.

“Karkinos is pushing her back at the moment, isn’t he?”

“Indeed. Karkinos always has the advantage in an upfront engagement.”

Scorpius seemed to have finally understood that she was at a disadvantage, as she leapt backwards to create some distance.

Karkinos certainly was strong, but his strength was based on fights with parties, not one-on-one fights. Karkinos shined the most as a solid wall to protect his friends in a fight. He wasn't suited for going on the attack at all. So Scorpius' actions were correct. If I were in Scorpius' position, trying to brute force my way past his defenses while being prepared for a counter would be possible. But with Scorpius' firepower, that line of action would be suicide.

This time, Karkinos went on the offensive to try to capitalize on the weakness she'd shown.

“Ah, he charged in.”

“Oh? So he chose to go on the attack even though he won't be able to use Acubens? Very decisive.”

In the game, Acubens was a skill that forced you into a stance to wait for the enemy's attack. So in a one-on-one fight, people saw the stance and aimed to attack when the stance timed out. On top of that peculiarity, Acubens couldn't be activated while the user was on the attack. It was a powerful skill but very hard to use.

“U-Umm, it's really amazing that you can see all that. I can't keep up at all...”

Dina and I were able to follow Karkinos' fight, so we were nonchalantly commenting on it. However, it seemed like Virgo couldn't. Her eyes were desperately swimming as she tried to follow the fight by any means possible.

At the moment, Karkinos and Scorpius were before us, wielding the same weapons and clashing blades hundreds of times. But Virgo probably didn't know that. While Scorpius boasted more force and could send out more blows, Karkinos was stupidly tough. On top of that, he would read Scorpius' attacks, and after receiving them, he'd quickly strike back with Acubens.

“He's good.”

“He's certainly fighting better than I'd have expected.”

“Yeah. But...a good fight is all it is.”

Karkinos was putting up a good fight. If things kept proceeding like this, he'd most likely win eventually. But it probably wouldn't go past being a good fight. It was impossible for nothing to happen and the fight to just continue in the same pattern as it was now.

I noted this before, but the way Karkinos' and Scorpius' affinities matched up had already dictated the outcome of this battle. If Scorpius were to get serious, Karkinos would have no chance of victory. That was why a good fight was all it was.

*I need to get in and end this before Scorpius decides to get serious.* Having come to that decision, I moved a step towards Scorpius, who seemed about to spray poison at any moment. I grabbed her arm.

“Huh?”

“Sorry. We're going to need you to sleep for a while.”

I hit her with a knife-hand strike incorporated with the Blunted-Sword Strike skill. While I hadn't gone all out with my strike, Scorpius was still blown away, flashily bouncing and rolling across the ground.

*...Weird. Has my attack power gone up?*

*No, it hasn't. I'm just “remembering” how to move this body.* When we'd visited Vanaheim, my fusion with Lufas became much stronger, and it seemed that it had affected me physically as well as mentally. At any rate, I could move much better than I had before. *I wonder if I should just accept this as a good thing?*

“A m a z i n g ! As expected of you, Miss Lufas. What a wonderful strike! I'm falling for you all over again!”

“Heh... Sorry about that, Karkinos. We interrupted your fight.”

“N o P r o b l e m. Honestly, even if we continued to fight, M E would have lost. I appreciate your good decision.” Karkinos laughed dryly, and I smiled to myself.

While he was a bit too energetic most of the time, Karkinos was a really good-

natured guy. With him here, it should prevent the other Twelve Heavenly Stars from clashing together too much. Plus, he was plenty good in a fight.

*He's a really reliable party member, isn't he?* I thought sincerely.

*The only problem is...Scorpius.* I'd knocked her out for now, but there was no guarantee she wouldn't go wild again when she woke up.

*Well, I guess I should go ahead and tie her up while she's asleep.* As I considered that, I was snapped back to the present by an ominous feeling from behind me.

*...Did I go too light? No matter how high leveled she is, she should still have been knocked out after taking a surprise hit like that to the head, though.*

"...hy..."

"Hm? You got up? We seem to have underestimated you a little."

"Why... Why, Lady Lufas?! Why won't you return these burning feelings of miiiiine!?!"

"!!"

Scorpius howled, and I thought that her eyes glowed red, though that might have just been a figment of my imagination. A firm but sinister conviction seemed to well up from deep within her. And inversely, Scorpius started to glow a holy white. It wasn't magic power. In fact, it was the opposite. It was the power behind heaven-arts, classified as the shine of life...as well as a miracle of god.

*...No. Wait just a second. Scorpius shouldn't be able to use that power, right?*

"No way... Heaven's power? We never heard anything about Scorpius being able to use heaven-arts."

This mysterious sight was my first experience with something like this. But it seemed that wasn't the case for Karkinos, as his expression turned grim.

"Th-This is the first time M E has seen this, too... But, this is..."

"You recognize this?"

He nodded firmly. "Y e s! Miss Lufas, this is the same as back then!"

“Back then?”

“Did you forget? Back then, two hundred years ago... This is the same thing that happened to the Seven Heroes!”

I gasped, and the words that the Devil King had spoken to me came bubbling up in my mind. He'd said that the rebellion two hundred years ago had been unnatural and imprudent. And behind all that, there was a goddess that wanted conflict.

Right now, Scorpius was overflowing with heaven's power, and Karkinós said that this had happened before. *Which means that...right now, Scorpius is...being controlled by the Goddess?* —Instantly, I remembered something that I shouldn't have known, but I did.

The scene was a battlefield. We were in the middle of a fierce fight where I was being cornered. I was fighting against my former friends, the comrades who'd aimed for the same goal as me. Each one of them probably had their own feelings about Lufas, whether that was envy, fear, or rivalry... Each one of their feelings were unnaturally amplified, and the heavenly power of the Goddess' blessing was pouring out of them as they attacked me. Their faces were twisted in pain rather than filled with the joy of victory, even though they'd finally pushed me to the edge... Alioth was even weeping tears of blood.

“ ”

.....

—It seems that I've gained more memories in this situation.

It was a really interesting image, but how to deal with Scorpius was more pressing at the moment.

"Why... Why.....! WhyWhyWhyWhyWhyWhyWhy!  
WhyWhyWHYWhyWhyWhyWHYWHYWHYWHYWHYWHYWHYWHYWHYYYYYYY  
Y!"

Scorpius, having gone mad, continued to repeat herself as the pressure she gave off only increased. This wasn't a figment of my imagination. She was undoubtedly getting stronger, as if something was pushing her evolution forward. She was exhibiting more power than her original stats allowed.

It was something that happened a lot in stories. Like, the kind of event where

the main character, whose power paled in comparison to the enemy's, started spouting a speech about getting through it together or not giving up or something and kept charging at the enemy. And then by the time anyone noticed, they were suddenly fighting evenly, even though there was no reason for the gap in power to have been bridged. And a moment later, the main character's made a comeback and won.

Sometimes people labeled stuff like this as "plot convenience," but that probably just meant that the author—or in other words, the god of the story—was buffing the main character and making them stronger himself. So this must have been the same thing. Alovenus, the Goddess (author) of this world, was giving Scorpius her support, allowing her to power up with no prior effort or setup.

*...No wonder Lufas lost two hundred years ago.*

"We see. We had heard that Scorpius breached her limits and reached level 900 because of her feelings for us... So she was placed under the Goddess' control back then."

"Miss Lufas!"

"Stay back, Dina. We must be the one to stop her."

Resting the whip sword on my shoulder, I stood and squared off against Scorpius. She most likely wasn't even really registering what she was doing any more as she kept shouting "Why!" There probably wasn't any meaning in answering her.

The ends of my mouth unconsciously turned upwards into a smile, and I closed the distance between Scorpius and I by a step.

*Geez, who knew affection could be this heavy? She loved me so much that she got manipulated by the Goddess? Even if it were a joke, it wouldn't be funny. But, well, I still only have one thing to say.*

*Hey, Goddess, that's my subordinate you're manipulating there! I'm gonna have you return her to me, Alovenus.*

"Hah!!"

With a light grunt, I slashed at Scorpius with my whip sword in a scythe-like motion. While I was still too far away for a normal sword to reach her, that didn't matter with this weapon. The blade extended and undulated like a snake flying towards its prey.



Scorpius quickly dodged the blade, but I'd already closed the distance and planted a kick into her soft belly.

"Grk! Guhah...!"

"What's wrong, Scorpius? You're full of openings."

"Ah, AAAAAAAHHHH!"

Even while Scorpius was being carried away by the force of my hit, she used her tail to attack in return.

We (I) reflexively tilted our (my) head away from the blow, but the tip of her stinger managed to scratch our (my) cheek, leaving a line of trickling blood.

*Hm. So she managed to wound us (me)... Then We (I) suppose this'll be a decent fight.*

*Oh, and We (I) were poisoned from that, weren't We (I)?*

It wasn't our (my) cloak but our (my) dress that negated status effects. We (I) would get poisoned easily as We (I) were right now. Still, it was an easy fix with heaven-arts.

We (I) traced the scratch with our finger and erased the poison before licking the blood that stuck to our (my) hands.

"Good. Well done with that attack. We're going to raise the speed, then."

We (I) didn't feel any anger at being hurt. In fact, We (I) were happy about it. It was moving how Scorpius had managed to get so strong. While it was unfortunate and disappointing that she became the Goddess' puppet to do so, We (I) could just tell her that once she'd been returned to normal.

"Transmute—Sword of Winter!"

We (I) stabbed our whip sword into the ground and started transmuting. Countless whip sword blades sprouted out of the ground and attacked Scorpius all at once.

The skill We (I) used was an AoE skill that attacked the entire enemy group with blades from the ground. By mixing in our (my) real blade among the transmuted blades, it also turned into a good feint, since it became hard to tell

which one of the blades was real. Of course, the transmuted blades weren't harmless, but it would be much better to be hit by them than by the real one.

But it seemed as if Scorpius couldn't differentiate the real from the fake. She took a deep slash to her leg and fell to the ground. She still didn't give up, though, and she sprayed poison mist at us (me).

"...Hmph."

If We (I) were hit by the mist, it would result in the deadly poison status. But there was no need to fret. While the mist was certainly a strong move, its weak point was that it also hid the enemy.

So We (I) leapt inside the mist! Cutting through the poison, We (I) grabbed Scorpius by the head, her face still twisted in shock, and slammed it to the ground.

While the poison hurt, it wasn't anywhere near lethal. In fact, the pain was actually comforting, in a way. It proved our (my) subordinate's growth directly to our (my) senses.

*Now, what will you do next? What move will you display for us (me)? You haven't been slacking off and playing for the last two hundred years, have you? No way. So show us (me) all you've got.*

*We've finally reunited. Let us (me) enjoy this more—.*

...

*—No. Wait a second.*

*I need to calm down. I'm just acting like a battle junkie like this.*

*Cool down a bit.*

I got too fired up... Actually, I was about to go too far, so I reprimanded myself and barely managed to stop.

*What the hell does 'let me enjoy this' even mean...? What's the point of losing sight of the objective like this? Getting Scorpius to behave was the most important thing right now. Hurting her more than necessary served no purpose.*

*Geez. What is wrong with me? Fighting is just a means to an end, not the end*

*itself. ...What's even the point of liking fighting this much... Damn...*

## 26

*Be calm. Be calm. Don't overdo things,* I told myself while facing off against Scorpius, who was still going wild.

If fighting was all that mattered, then staying as I was before would probably have been better. In that state, where I was being overtaken by 'Lufas,' my body had felt so light. Well, rather than light, it was more like I'd suddenly remembered the best way to move.

I noted this before in the fight with the Devil King, but it seemed like I'd yet to bring out my own full power. I'd felt like I was already fighting at full capacity, but now I understood the Devil King's words. Lufas' true strength was probably way higher than I thought. But thanks to me and my function as a lid, it couldn't be used at all.

The Seven Heroes weren't the only ones who'd gotten weaker. Lufas herself had also gotten weaker thanks to me. While my stats hadn't changed from what I remembered, I had clearly just been exhibiting more power than my stats would suggest.

*Are my stats being concealed or overwritten?* ...It seemed that my own stats couldn't be trusted.

Still, that could be left for later. It didn't matter right now. My current objective was to retrieve Scorpius, not to kill her. So to make sure I didn't go too far, staying as I currently was would be best.

"Aaaaaaahhh! AAAAAAGGHHH!" Scorpius screamed, and her body was enveloped by a pitch-black miasma.

Her body clearly started to expand, and she eventually settled at a size where a normal person would look like trash. The bewitching woman who had been in front of me a little while ago was no longer there. Instead, there was a giant scorpion monster, equal in size to Aries in his monstrous sheep form.

*I see. This is where things get serious then... So that's what she actually looks like.*

Scorpius advanced, stomping on Karkinos, who was in her way, as she swung her pincer down at me.

“!!”

I reflexively flew to the side to dodge and turned back to look at Virgo and Dina, who were on the ground.

Dina was managing to defend against the aftershocks with a shield, but if they were to be attacked where they stood, they wouldn't stand a chance. Luckily, Scorpius was only paying attention to me. Dina could simply stay and give light support while I took on the brunt of the work.

Scorpius stabbed at me with her tail, and I refused to avoid it. Instead, I caught it with both hands and pulled her forward with all my might.

“Haaagghh!”

Then, I punched Scorpius with as much power as I could muster in an attempt to try to move her away from Dina and Virgo. *Laws of physics? Never heard of 'em.*

I took to the skies and looked down at Scorpius from above while pondering what to do next. Right now, Scorpius was in the same state the Seven Heroes had been two hundred years ago. In other words, the Goddess was both controlling her mind and powering her up. Given that she was moving under the Goddess' power, I couldn't just decimate her to stop all this.

But I had no way of dealing with this situation... *I think I really am going to have to have her work her hardest... Well, I'll still need to render Scorpius unconscious or something first.*

“SHAAAAAAHHH!!”

Scorpius let out a cry as she sent a scything pincer at me, but I blocked it with a single arm.

That was a bad decision, though, since I was still in the air, where I couldn't brace myself. I got thrown away like I'd bounced off her pincer myself, making an emergency landing on the ground. While I didn't take much damage, I could still tell that Scorpius was seriously packing a punch. Even though I was in

midair, I'd never expected to be thrown back this far.

I dodged her second swing, and I closed the distance between me and Scorpius in one step.

*For now, I guess I'll just attack and try to calculate when would be best to stop. First up, the Grappler skill "Power Break!" Let's lower her attack while putting in some damage.*

Then, I readied my right fist near my waist and leapt. When I reached Scorpius' face, I unleashed a 100% crit rate skill, "Smash."

Scorpius' huge scorpion body got blown away. I got in front of her trajectory and drove an axe kick into her, forcing her into the ground. From the side, it must have looked like I'd teleported.

*Okay. That's three hits for now. I know she won't die from just this, but I have to be careful. I can't have her dying by accident.* Having to fight while watching your enemy's HP was far more troublesome than simply fighting to kill or defeat.

Scorpius got back up immediately and started unleashing her trademark poison mist.

I didn't have any skills that could prevent poison... But, in this game-like but very real world, there was no need to rely on skills. I flapped my wings, which were being hidden by the stealth bandages, using the wind they kicked up to create a wall of wind. Of course, the poison mist was pushed back, heading towards Scorpius herself. ...*Well, poison doesn't even work on her, so there's no point, though.*

I dodged her follow-up pincer attack, but her other pincer slammed into my flank. I guarded against the blow, of course, but was it just me or was Scorpius' reaction speed getting faster? This hit was also a little heavier than the one I'd taken before.

*...I see. As time goes on, she gets stronger. So it's the type of setup where we're fighting equally by the time anyone notices, and eventually, I'll be overtaken, huh? A truly ridiculous buff befitting the main character of a story. I bet the Goddess just loves these template plot points.*

*But I've figured out your game.* The solution was really simple. I just had to beat Scorpius down before she got strong enough to match me.

"This'll hurt a little... Bear with it."

I cracked my knuckles and dashed forward. Then, having reached Scorpius, I dealt her a blow. I punched and launched her upwards. I followed her and put in a second blow. I punched her in midair and knocked her even farther upwards.

Three, four, five blows!

I unleashed a flurry of fists, pushing Scorpius' giant body up above the clouds. I overtook Scorpius, reaching the edge of the stratosphere all at once before rapidly going back down! Helped along by gravity, I accelerated more and more, with fire sprouting up around me from the friction.

Finally, I hit Scorpius, who was still flying ever upwards, with a Meteor Kick incorporated with Blunted-Sword Strike. The upward force of the previous blows + my falling speed + gravity + the height of Scorpius' fall led to huge damage. Even Scorpius wouldn't be able to withstand it.

She fell quite a ways away from Blutgang, so instead of following her immediately, I went back to where everyone else was for a moment.

There was no doubt that combo just now took away at least some of her ability to fight, but there was still a possibility that she would get back up and continue on.

I had to somehow undo her mind control... And *she* was probably the only one who could do so.

"Wha—?!" Dina shouted, surprised by the fact that I'd just picked her up by the nape of her neck. But I ignored her.

*Why the hell are you just sitting here watching like this is someone else's fight? You even started snacking on dried fruits at some point. It's like you don't want to stand in the spotlight at all.*

*So. I'll give you a spotlight to stand in. You don't get to refuse.*

"W-Wai— Wait, Miss Lufas?! S-So fast! My neck!!?"

“You’ll be fine. This won’t even count as damage.”

“That might be true, but come on! Can’t you at least carry me like a princess or the heroine in a light novel?!”

“What?”

I carried Dina over to where Scorpius had fallen.

The landing sight was... *Yeah. I’m glad I dropped her away from Blutgang.* It was like a meteor had struck. The ground was cracked, and there was a ridiculously huge crater. Scorpius showed no signs of getting up. She only twitched every once in a while.

“Karkinos has already said this, but Scorpius is in a similar state to what the Seven Heroes were put under two hundred years ago. Basically, it seems she’s being controlled by the Goddess. She probably did something to her.”

“Yes, she does seem to be welling up with heavenly power.”

“So now, it’s your turn to shine.”

“You want me to undo the Goddess’ control?”

“You can, right?”

Dina looked around before replying hesitantly. “Well, sure, it’s possible... I have a similar skill, after all. ...If I do this, won’t the Goddess totally identify us as enemies from now on?”

“Maybe.”

“Hey, come on! Shouldn’t you have said something like, ‘Don’t worry, We will protect you,’ there, even if it was a lie?!”

“Do—Not—Worry. We—Will—Protect—You.”

“You didn’t mean that, did you?!”

It seemed Dina was afraid of being deemed an enemy by the Goddess.

But whether that was true or not...

Judging from all the information I had so far, Dina shouldn’t be unrelated to the Goddess. They were aligned to the exact same elements, and Dina also had

the ability to manipulate memories. Plus, Dina often made suspicious moves, as if she were just asking me to doubt her. More than anything, all the incidents that had happened so far had way too perfect timing. There was Aries' invasion of Svel, Aigokeros appearing in Gjallarhorn, and Scorpius' current assault on Blutgang. All of them happened while I was around, almost like they'd been waiting for me. On top of that, all three of those members of the Twelve Heavenly Stars had contact with the devilfolk, who'd had some control over their movements.

So it was simple. Someone on the devilfolk's side who knew what I was doing was controlling how the Twelve Heavenly Stars under their influence acted. And there was only one person like that.

But the most decisive evidence was the fact that Dina was able to easily pass through Vanaheim's barrier. Dina was never my subordinate. She had only self-proclaimed her position as my advisor. She hadn't been around two hundred years ago, but she'd still managed to enter the forest along with me. She had passed through Parthenos' barrier, which was only supposed to let allies inside. This meant that something about Dina had caused Parthenos to recognize her as an ally at the very least. And that made me recall Parthenos' original title —“Maiden in Service to the Goddess.”

Parthenos had originally served the Goddess. It wouldn't be strange for her to at least subconsciously register the Goddess and those affiliated with her as allies. *Or she may still have faith deep in her heart...*

At any rate, Dina had been able to pass through the barrier, even though we weren't real allies. So, at least in my headcanon, she was basically confirmed to have some sort of connection to the Goddess. Which meant that if my guess was correct, Dina would most likely not actually be marked as an enemy of the Goddess.

In fact, Dina might even be the Goddess' avatar, in the worst case.

“Hmph. Fine. I'm just a newcomer with no sense of presence, after all. Even if I make the Goddess angry and get punished, I'm just gonna die alone anyway. Ahhh, why am I so pitiful?”

“Okay, okay. If you were to actually anger the Goddess, We would protect you

with all our power. So hurry up and do something about Scorpius.”

“Really? It’s a promise, okay? A promise. You gotta protect me for real. Got it?”

“Yes, of course. We will promise or do whatever you want.”

As always, I wasn’t really sure if she was faking it or not. But I would have protected her even if I hadn’t promised. That was if Dina really was someone who could earn the anger of the Goddess...or in other words, someone unrelated to her.

“Then please wait a little. This will take some time.”

Dina walked over to where Scorpius was and stood in front of her giant face. Then, she silently stared at Scorpius.

*I see, so she uses her power by staring into a person’s eyes like that. ...Ahh, yeah. She’s done that several times before, hasn’t she?*

“Uhh, hm... Her control is pretty light. It’s mostly Scorpius’ desire to monopolize you that’s been forcefully amplified. It seems she’s normally a fairly conscientious yandere who would never touch a hair on her loved one’s head.”

“Conscientious? A yandere? As if.”

“What? It’s totally possible. It’s actually awful that there have been so many criminals waving around blades, disguising themselves as yanderes to make excuses for their violence. Originally, yanderes were people who liked someone so much they fell ill, not these crazy stalkers! Oh, and by the way, I hate men who think that tsunderes can say whatever they want because they’re tsunderes just as much.”

“Why are you talking so much about something so silly? ...We never asked you for your preferences.”

While I’d managed to learn what Dina liked in terms of light novels or manga, it wasn’t really worth knowing in the first place.

At pretty much the exact same time as the conclusion of Lufas and Scorpius' fight, the battle inside Blutgang was also decided. Well, to be fair, the battle had been decided from the start. Technically, the fighting was just over. That was how large the gap between the two fighters, Aigokeros and Luna, was. The only reason Luna was able to drag the fight out this long was because of how persistent she was and the fact that she had the terrain advantage. But in the end, holding on was all it was. She never changed the inevitable outcome.

Aigokeros had Luna's slender body in his grasp, and the pained screams coming out of her echoed in the enclosed space.

"Ah! AAAGGHHHHH!!!"

"It is over, Luna of the Seven Luminaries, you foolish bug who dares defy my great master. Now then, what should I do with you? ...Should I tear off your arms? Rip off your legs? Disembowel you while you're still alive? Or maybe all three?"

Aigokeros' true nature was that of a cruel demon who reveled in blood, fear, and death. Since he was so attracted to his master, Lufas, and her ideal of world unification, he normally hid his true personality. However, once it was out, there would be no mercy from him. He would kill his enemy. He would kill using any means available, and kill cruelly. He would kill the opponent, utterly humiliating them. Such was his instinct and his very reason for living.

*Come, weakling. Raise a scream of fear for me. Dye your expression with despair and repentance as you painfully welcome death.*

Aigokeros, the Ram of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, hadn't been invited into the group because of his strength. It had been because he was dangerous. Lufas needed to manage and control him; otherwise Aigokeros would become a larger source of fear than the devilfolk as he reaped casualties amongst humanity. He had that potential. He naturally liked causing pain in others. He lived to create expressions of despair. He loved seeing puny and pathetic weaklings spout lines about bravery or hope and come at him, only to be brought to their knees. He loved seeing their warped faces streaked with tears and snot as they begged for their lives before dying.

He'd loved that from birth. Aigokeros didn't need any reason to prefer

darkness. He didn't need any sort of pompous reasoning to love death. He'd just been born that way and stayed that way.

To him, death was beautiful and despair sweeter than any confection. That was exactly why Lufas had welcomed him into her fold in order to manage and keep tabs on him, as a demon who was far too dangerous.

Most importantly, Aigokeros had the pride of someone truly infused with mana. And that only furthered his brutal nature towards the devilfolk.

"Foolish false demon... How could you have thought that a created devil could fight a true demon?"

"F-False...?!"

"Indeed. You are nothing but a pet of divinity, a fake created to imitate demons."

"Wh-What do you...?!"

Aigokeros was a genuine demon who was birthed in Helheim, so his understanding of mana and demons surpassed even Lufas. Another way of putting it was that he had a talent for sniffing out those who were like him. He understood. He knew what dense mana was like; that was why he obeyed Lufas without question. He instinctively understood how dense her mana was, and that made her a true demon. She deserved to rule over all those who lived in mana. And that talent was also why he realized the warped nature of the devilfolk. He instinctively knew that they were different.

*More than anything, I can feel that awful power from them. God's power! Heaven's power! Yes, these things aren't true demons. They're simply imitations made to be similar to us true demons, us true beings infused with mana. They're simply failures—failures that imitate us in form!*

That was why Aigokeros hated them. He couldn't stand the fact that they were proclaiming themselves as beings loved by mana by using a name that invoked hell.

"Haven't you ever felt any doubt? Haven't you ever asked yourself why you devilfolk never leave a body behind after death?"

“...! Th-That’s...because we break apart into mana after death...”

“And why does that happen? Even us demons don’t do that. Why is it that you devilfolk disappear as if you’ve never existed in the first place? Do you truly not remember any phenomenon similar to that? Something that returns to mana after completing its mission? I believe you should all see this happening almost daily, no?”

After Aigokeros went that far, Luna finally gasped in realization. *I know this. I know what mana forms and gives birth to before finishing what it’s made to do and returning to mana.* Luna knew exactly what he was talking about.

“No...way.....”

“Exactly. The true form of you devilfolk is—”

Aigokeros was about to give her the ultimate despair; he was about to reveal their true form. But just before he could give shape to the words, something happened. A blade flashed blue through the walls of Blutgang, and something flew towards Aigokeros while skillfully avoiding the buildings.

While the sudden appearance had caught Aigokeros off guard, he wasn’t slow enough for it to have made a difference. When whatever it was attacked him, he easily dodged the blow. The one who’d released that blade flew down to the ground.

The first blow had been a feint. It was something done to distract Aigokeros while the figure touched down and hid among the buildings to disguise their approach.

Once again, a blue flash from a sword shined, and this time, it severed Aigokeros’ arm. The figure retrieved Luna, who’d been caught in that arm, in a princess carry and landed.

“Wh—... You are...!”

The arm that was severed was only solidified mana, so Aigokeros himself was unhurt. But even though it wasn’t real, severing it was still a difficult feat for most, speaking to the attacker’s high level.

The figure had short-cut, deep-blue hair. His pure-white mantle fluttered in the breeze, and he was covered in similar pure-white armor. His skin was a faint

orange color and looked similar to a human's, while his eyes were a deep crimson. No fangs protruded from his mouth, but the mana that swelled out of him said that he was a devilfolk.

"You're the Devil King's son, Terra!"

"And you must be Aigokeros. You've caused my subordinate here quite a bit of pain, haven't you?"

The most dangerous of the devilfolk was the Devil King. That fact would never be overturned. But after him was another being who even the Twelve Heavenly Stars had to be careful of. This was the Devil King's son and master of the Seven Luminaries...Terra.

Aigokeros had met the man several times while he'd been siding with the devilfolk. But Terra's strength was still unknown to Aigokeros. He'd never seen Terra fight seriously. On top of that, Terra's appearance was strange. The devilfolk usually had either blue or green skin with either black or white eyes. That was a trait shared amongst all of them. But Terra looked almost human. It was too strange.

"L-Lord Terra..."

"My word. How many times have I told you not to push yourself too far?"

"...My...apologies."

"Stop making me worry so much... I'm truly glad I made it in time."

With Terra still holding on to Luna, the two of them met gazes, and the world seemed to fade away until it was just the two of them.



That was when Aigokeros, not caring, attacked. Terra dodged, his movements even looking elegant, and switched to a different roof.

No one would think that Terra's side was the devilfolk just looking at the scene. On one side, there was a giant demon. On the other, a freed girl and her knightly savior. It was very unclear which side was evil.

"Hmph, perfect. I will offer you as a sacrifice to my master as well."

"If I'm being honest, I'm so furious with you my insides are boiling over. But I have no time to face off with you right now. Sorry, but we'll be taking our leave."

Terra was confident he could win against Aigokeros one-on-one. And that wasn't just some groundless confidence like with Mars of the Seven Luminaries. It was based on proper observation and knowledge of his own abilities.

But Lufas Maphaahl was present as well. If the Black-Winged Angel of Death joined in with the Ram, the Goat, and the Scales of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, even Terra wouldn't stand a chance.

*Well, Terra thought, with Lufas weakened, I might actually be able to beat her one-on-one...*

"Do you think I'll just let you leave?"

"I do."

While still carrying Luna, Terra leaped towards the wall. He swung his one-handed sword and managed to cut open a hole in Blutgang's sturdy wall. It wasn't big enough to destroy Blutgang, but it was big enough to let one or two people through. It was enough for an escape, basically.

Terra went through the gap and escaped Blutgang. In that instant, he locked eyes with a black-winged girl.

"....."

"\_\_"

Neither of them said anything. Their interaction only lasted an instant, so there was no time for any other reaction. Just like that, the two broke eye

contact, and Terra left.

*I can't get the measure of her,* Terra thought, reinforcing his opinions.

Terra had heard from his father that the current Lufas had been meddled with and couldn't exhibit her full power. *But even so, she's like that? She's still that strong after having over half her power taken away? The instant we met each other's gazes was enough for me to hallucinate that I'd be eaten.*

To Terra, Lufas exuded that much power. Terra's belief turned into conviction; the current stance of letting people other than his father fight her was a complete mistake. A thought crossed Terra's mind. *We need to change our stance quickly. And I need to figure out her intentions, since she keeps maneuvering the Seven Luminaries and Twelve Heavenly Stars to bump into her.*

"Luna."

"Y-Yes!"

"Right now, the Seven Luminaries—no, all the devilfolk—are being controlled by someone. My father knows and isn't doing anything about it. In fact, he's being quite cooperative. And Sol has basically been turned into a complete puppet. So at the moment, there are almost no devilfolk whom I can trust."

Terra continued to kick off empty air as he held onto Luna. Whenever he did, he accelerated, and the scenery went by blindingly fast.

"You are one of the very few I can trust. Please, don't fruitlessly die in battle. I need you."

"L-Lord Terra..."

Terra's words were probably only meant for her as a subordinate. Luna knew that. But even so, she couldn't stop herself from thinking there might be a hidden meaning. In fact, she wanted there to be one. Luna wanted to believe that Terra needed her outside of their relationship as leader and subordinate.

Luna shook her head as if to free herself from her train of thought.

"What are you doing?"

"N-Nothing!"

Her superior's words, spoken with no knowledge of how she felt, were just the smallest bit infuriating to Luna.

\*            \*

*Who the hell was that hot bastard?*

I had to process what just happened after seeing off the really good-looking guy who'd suddenly burst out of Blutgang's wall.

*How should I put it...? It's like I instinctively recognized that he was an enemy to all men everywhere with his ridiculously handsome face and pure-white matching armor and mantle. Like, what the hell is with that look? It's like you're screaming, "I'm the main character!" Don't you know that the main character of this world's the hero?!*

On top of that, he had a devilfolk-looking girl in his arms in a princess carry. *Go explode and die.*

"Did you see that, Lufas? That's how you should be carrying a heroine! Flying while carrying a girl by the nape of her neck is just outrageous!"

"No, that would make us the villain then... Oh wait, We are. So, just who was that?" I asked Dina, who was still bothered by how I'd carried her, about that hot bastard.

He'd been carrying someone who looked like a devilfolk, so he was probably with them. So I figured it would be best to ask Dina, who was a double agent.

"Oh. He's the Devil King's son. So he's the prince of the devilfolk."

"So it's actually possible to be both really good-looking and a prince..."

"He'd definitely be a capture target in an otome game."

"Never played one."

Unfortunately, I was squarely in the action RPG and fighting games camp. I wasn't too fond of the adventure or dating game genres. *I mean, aren't those games basically just a light novel with a save and load function? So wouldn't it be better to just buy a book? Why do I have to buy an expensive PC or gaming system just to read a light novel?*

“...You really don’t act like a girl at all, Lufas...”

“Of course. We are a man inside, after all.”

“Huh?” Dina seemed shocked after hearing what I’d said, and she proceeded to stare straight at me.

“Hm?”

*Hm? Did I say something weird?*

“Huh? What? Um...Lufas, does that mean that the player inside you is...a man? ...Now that I think about it, you’ve been really indifferent about a lot of things that would only be natural for a girl...”

“Did We never tell you?”

“No, you didn’t! This is the first I’m hearing of it!”

“Ahh... You might be right. Well, don’t worry about it too much. Ever since We started inhabiting this body, our lust has disappeared somewhere and has yet to return. So We don’t feel anything looking at a woman’s skin or anything.”

“Why is that still frustrating?!”

I left Dina to flail about on her own as I walked towards Virgo.

*They’re probably done inside Blutgang, too. I should praise Libra and the others for their work later.*

## 28

The devilfolk’s castle was located outside of the sphere of humanity—a place commonly referred to as the Dark Continent. It was a place ruled by devilfolk. Its exact position was unknown, but it wasn’t anywhere close enough that monsters tamed by humanity could attack it. That went both ways. The devilfolk couldn’t easily attack out of it, either, except for the fact that they could teleport.

More precisely, the Devil King and Venus, one of the members of the Seven Luminaries, could teleport. And they used that to cut travel times by a great deal. Terra could only get places through his father’s Exgate, though, since he

didn't trust Venus.

Terra's suspicion was never wiped away. In fact, these last few days it'd only gotten stronger. No, not just stronger. Terra's suspicion had grown into conviction. He knew that Venus was not an ally of the devilfolk.

"Venus! Is Venus here?!" Terra shouted.

Venus was elusive. If you called her, she'd pop up out of nowhere, even if you didn't think she was around. Terra continued shouting for her for a few minutes. A tear opened in empty space, and a blonde girl popped out of it, landing lightly in front of Terra.

"Did you call for me, Lord Terra?"

"I have something I want to ask you."

"As you wish."

Venus' origins were a mystery among the devilfolk. She was simply a beautiful girl that Sol, the de facto leader of the Seven Luminaries, brought in one day. Naturally, since the devilfolk are formed fully grown, unlike most living creatures, her origins weren't questioned at all. She may have had skin and eyes that were different than most devilfolk, but Terra was the same, so she was easily accepted. Most importantly, the Devil King himself approved of her, so others lost the ability to interject. By the time anyone noticed, she'd completely blended in.

*But no matter how much I think about it, this girl is strange,* Terra thought. After all, Venus could use Exgate, an ancient technique said to only be possible by being able to use both magic and heaven-arts at the same time. The devilfolk were incarnations of mana. So there was no way for them to use heaven-arts. The only one who was able to do so was the Devil King himself.

*My father most likely knows this girl's true identity, as well as her goal.* However, Terra was sure that while her goal may benefit his father, it wouldn't benefit the devilfolk. Terra didn't know what his father wanted. And he didn't want to doubt the man. But Terra could cleanly declare that allowing Venus to do as she pleased was a mistake.

"Then here is my first question. You told Mars of Aries and used his ambition

to make him go wild, didn't you?"

"Oh my, 'used'? How horrid. I simply informed him of an easy method to bring down that annoyance of a country, Svel. Well, it failed due to the unexpected appearance of Lufas Maphaahl... But I don't think it's fair to expect me to have predicted that." Venus smiled calmly.

Terra averted his gaze from the girl, who was giving him a sidelong, flirtatious look, and went back to his questions. He knew that there was one thing you must never do when talking to her, and that was to look into her eyes. If a person were to look into her eyes, they'd start thinking things they'd normally never consider. Their will was pulled away from them. Once they'd calmed down afterwards, they'd finally realize how strange they'd been acting.

Terra was aware that Venus was most likely trying something while they were talking.

"Second: you told Jupiter of the embers waiting to be stoked in Gjallarhorn and guided him into taking Aigokeros as well, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. Unfortunately, that one also ended in failure. Ah, that was a case of a schemer being caught by her own schemes. Remembering my smug face as I saw him off is so embarrassing. I've learned from that experience. Totally."

*You're so damn shameless.* Terra couldn't stop himself from clenching his fist as the blood rushed to his head. But he calmed down when Luna, who was by his side, grasped his fist.

*Right. I can't get worked up. Getting swept up in anger in front of her is like committing suicide.*

"Third... You tempted Scorpius into attacking Blutgang in concert with Luna's infiltration, didn't you?"

"Yes. I wanted to support Luna, since she was working so hard."

"You fool... In what world is making an infiltration mission so showy helping? That's like screaming out to the world that someone has infiltrated."

Luna's mission was originally to infiltrate with only a few attendants. It was far from something that would require that many devilfolk or Scorpius to

accompany them. She was supposed to have secretly infiltrated Blutgang, famed for its solid defenses, and assassinated the leadership. That was the original plan.

But Venus was the one who completely ruined that plan. She tempted Luna, asking if it was really okay to just leave it at that and used her wanting to be acknowledged by Terra to add to and change the original mission. She added Scorpius to attack from the front and put Blutgang on a war footing. Then she added too many meaningless devilfolk reinforcements and transformed the mission into a huge operation. As a result, Aigokeros had noticed and confronted Luna, and Lufas Maphaahl had even appeared outside and captured Scorpius. The operation had turned into a huge failure.

The saying, “With friends like these, who needs enemies,” was very appropriate here. Of course plans would fail one after another with an ally who weighed them down this heavily.

“No... It’s strange that Lufas Maphaahl was summoned in the hero-summoning ritual in the first place. Was that something you did? Only you or my father could interfere with an Exgate like that.”

“.....”

“Then, you continued to guide Lufas down the path you wanted and had her clash with my father in Laevateinn. And there’s my father’s sudden expedition, too... Was that an idea you gave him as well?”

Right now, the Devil King wasn’t in the castle. Several days ago, or rather, right after he’d fought Lufas, he took some subordinates and went off on an expedition somewhere. And the subordinates he’d taken weren’t devilfolk, either. They were an elite force consisting of monsters he’d captured and raised using his powers as a Monster Tamer. From the fact that he took them it was plain to see what that meant for the rest of the devilfolk, too.

But Venus’ expression never wavered in front of Terra’s interrogation. Her smile simply got a mite deeper as she boldly continued to answer.

“I’ll answer your last question. —Yes, it is as you say. I organized that fight. His Excellency wished for it.”

Terra narrowed his eyes and quickly put his hand to his sword's hilt. In a single movement, he drew the sword and swung with godlike speed, aiming for Venus' neck. Luna couldn't even see the sword's blade; it only looked like a flash of light. But even then, Venus didn't flinch.

"You. Just what are you planning? What are you trying to achieve by using us?!"

"Hmmm... I suppose he wouldn't mind if I told you. His Excellency does care about you specifically, and I don't want to make an enemy of him. But." Venus paused and looked pointedly at Luna. "Unfortunately, I will not talk in front of her."

"Luna is the only subordinate I can trust. There is no problem. Speak."

"I cannot. The problem isn't whether she is trustworthy or not," Venus said, and a tear opened up behind Luna.

Her aim was obvious. She was threatening Terra, implying that if he were to actually attack her she would then take Luna to the grave as well.

The Seven Luminaries were basically of the same standing, but Venus was the only one who didn't fit into that structure. Terra couldn't get a read on Venus, and in order to stand against her, Luna was a chip that was too precious and couldn't be substituted.

Terra grit his teeth as he lowered his sword. When he did, the tear closed as well.

"J-Just what is wrong with me?! Why am I no good?!"

"Because you're nothing but an NPC, you sad little puppet."

"What? N...NPC? Pup...pet? Me?"

"Yes. A poor, poor puppet that doesn't even realize she is one. You aren't even aware of the fact that you are just a toy. Just as — was, until meeting that person."

Venus spoke that last sentence softly. It was hard to hear exactly what she said, but Luna still knew that it was humiliating.

Terra's expression clouded with anger, and he glared sharply at Venus.

“Venus, using my authority, I relieve you of your position in the Seven Luminaries starting today. Don’t think you’ll be able to do as you please anymore.”

“...My, that was sooner than I thought it’d be, but I suppose it was just a matter of time. Luckily, all the Twelve Heavenly Stars who were here have been retrieved, so I guess it’s all right.”

“What?”

“I’m saying that I’ve gotten tired of acting.”

Venus laughed scornfully, and her hair billowed with the motion. At the same time, several tears opened up, surrounding Terra and Luna. Venus stuck her hand into a tear that opened up by her side at the same time as the others and continuously fired magic.

The magic came out through the tears surrounding Terra and Luna, assaulting the two of them all at once.

“You?!”

“Well then, it was nice knowing the two of you. Let us meet again, as enemies next time. Please give my farewells to His Excellency.”

Venus—no, Dina—jumped through a tear in space and escaped. As soon as she did so, a golden light was unleashed from all the tears surrounding Terra and Luna at once.

This attack would amount to nothing more than some light damage for Terra, but it would be fatal for Luna. Terra quickly reacted and took Luna into his embrace, using his own body to shield her from the attack.

Venus’ attack wasn’t meant to kill either of them in the first place. She’d just used the fact that Luna would be a burden to make sure that Terra couldn’t move while she escaped.

The attack stopped, and the first thing Terra did was make sure that Luna was safe and sound in his arms. Next, he looked around for Venus, but she was already gone.

“—and that’s how I got fired from the Seven Luminaries.”

“What the hell?”

After the fight with Scorpius ended, Dina suddenly said, “I’m being called,” and disappeared for a few minutes. Once she came back, the first thing out of her mouth was that she’d gone too far and the Devil King’s son had seen through all her deeds, so she got fired.

Apparently the son had asked, “You did all that, right?” Instead of denying it, she’d taken responsibility for all his accusations with a smug face like a big shot and gotten fired for it.

*Is she an idiot?*

“Well, I kind of panicked. Or you could say that I was desperate? I was acting like I wasn’t bothered, but that situation was actually really bad. Lord Terra— Oh, I guess I don’t need the ‘lord’ anymore. Anyway, Terra’s level 1000, just like me, and his stats are weirdly high. He’s treated as a boss. He’s got more HP than you. Well, I still think you’d win if you two fought, but it’d be impossible for me. I’d be wrecked. And then I’d be caught, tied up, and made to do things that can only appear in a doujinshi! I know it!”

“No, he didn’t seem like the type to do something like that.”

“You’re too naive! All men are wolves! They’re wild beasts! All the straight-faced ones like that are just putting up a front, and they actually imagine all sorts of things. He’s totally jerked one out to Luna. Totally!”

“Hey, stop that. You’re getting into dangerous territory there!”

Dina was steering the conversation to some strange places, so I gave her a light, verbal jab to stop her.

*That sort of stuff is private for men. Don’t just casually bring that up in conversation!*

*Well, it is true that he definitely didn’t think of her as just a subordinate, judging from the way he princess carried her like she was a fragile treasure. It’s probably a crush. I bet the son likes that Luna girl. That’s not a bad thing. And in a sense, a man using the girl he likes as...material...is healthy behavior. But it*

*definitely destroys his hot main character outer-image. That's exactly why not probing into these subjects is just an unspoken rule between men.*

*Though I still think handsome guys like that should just explode.*

"Anyway, you were saying that you could no longer act as a double agent?"

"Well, I did get banned from the castle."

*I've been relying quite a bit on Dina's double agent activities to gather info from the devilfolk, but I guess that's not an option now. But now that I think about it, she's never actually told us what the devilfolk were doing, so I guess that doesn't change much.*

*Huh? Is it just me or has my double agent been completely useless?*

"So, what will you do now?"

"Hmm... For now We will try to repair those three mass-produced Libras. As for the one that got turned into scrap... Well, its parts should be usable as materials, so let's retrieve it and go back to Blutgang."

There was nothing I could do about the Libra that'd been broken to pieces, but I could repair the one that was only halfway to completely broken. The only problem would be if they decided I was an enemy and attacked me. I was confident I could easily win against three half-broken, lesser Libras that didn't even have Brachium, but I wanted to avoid having to destroy them, since that would cause Blutgang as a whole to treat me as an enemy.

I was still sunk in thought about that when I spotted one of the Libras that had taken relatively less damage walking towards me.

*Hm? She doesn't seem to have a weapon ready, so I don't think she's going to try to fight...*

"—Comparing Data... Matched. You are Miss Lufas Maphaahl, yes? We have been awaiting your arrival. Please make your way to Blutgang's royal floor. Our master awaits you."

*Hm. Master, huh?*

The only people these golems would call master would be their creator or their current owner. And Mizar was dead, so that naturally narrowed it down to

their current owner.

*It's got to be one of Blutgang's royalty*, I concluded, so I threw out a question for confirmation.

"Is this master Blutgang's king?"

"No, it is someone you know well...our creator, the Blacksmith King Mizar."

*Wha—? ...Wait. He's dead, right?* I thought, but I couldn't put that into words.

*That's impossible.*

*Huh? Wait a second... She's lying, right? Is Mizar seriously alive?*

# A Wild Dragon Appeared

This story starts all the way back in the year 2600 of the Mizgarz calendar in the Trade City of Ydalir. Originally, there was no city or anything there, but one was strongly petitioned for by the merchants and travelers who had to go on long journeys between countries and had no resting point. Since the area where Ydalir now stood was right in the middle of these different countries, each one wanted it for themselves. As a result of all of them glaring each other down, Ydalir was completed as a lawless, neutral land that didn't belong to anyone.

It was a strange, abnormal occurrence. It was unprecedented for a piece of land whose only feature was that it was surrounded by all major countries to end up as a territory that belonged to no one, even though it seemed like it could belong to anyone. By gaining that land, a country would get a leg up on its peers. In the event of war, it would serve as a forward base as well as a secure point for supply routes. That was why every country was sizing up the others, but none of them could actually take it.

Each country expressed ownership over the land, argued about it, and sometimes even came to blows. Eventually, it all became so complicated that it was impossible to sort out the resulting mess of politics. But the situation couldn't be allowed to sit. Since the land belonged to no country, the land was also beholden to no country's laws. It was lawless. There were no knights nor a vigilante corps. So obviously, the place had become most inhospitable for merchants. In fact, it was the perfect hunting ground for bandits and the like.

Merchants had to pass through terrain-wise, though. They couldn't detour around it. But even if they did, they would definitely be assaulted. This was no joke to a merchant, and there was no greater deal for ruffians, either. But then, a single merchant threw a stone in the pond.

*Let's create a neutral space here*, he thought, before using his own personal funds to found a small village and hire mercenaries.

Others thought of it as a waste of money at first, since he did it all himself, but

several more merchants agreed and helped expand the village. After a couple years, the population only grew, eventually turning the place into a city. The location was always high in foot traffic, after all. People had to pass through to get to other countries. The flow of people and goods was naturally high, so as long as it was safe, people would flood in.

Before anyone noticed, the area stopped being a buffet for bandits and became a strange city that stood neutral from all the different countries. The countries who'd noticed this tried to put the city under their thumb. It was only natural, but each country got in the way of the others, and none of their efforts bore any fruit. It was also obvious that trying to take the land by force would invite rebellion by all the merchants, so any smart king had no choice but to accept that attempting to take the city was dangerous. On the other hand, foolish kings who still attempted to do so were completely snubbed by merchants everywhere and eventually incurred the wrath of their people after a serious decline in their livelihoods.

That was how the Trade City of Ydalir grew to rival the large capitals of other countries. It was a truly ridiculous story. But history was rife with the kind of stories where your only reaction upon reading it is, "No way!"

Ydalir belonged to no country and had no king nor castle. But all goods and trade were concentrated in Ydalir. People, things, and adventures were concentrated there as well.

If anyone were to carry themselves to this bar they'd find it reminiscent of a cesspool. The place would be filled with thugs in dirty armor getting drunk, and the air would reek of body odor and could only be called unsanitary. While baths did exist in this world, the only ones who would use them regularly were the rich and affluent.

These people were adventurers. While the name might sound cool, they were the black sheep of society. They had no education, no skills, no agency, and nowhere else to go. The only place left for people like that was somewhere that would hire anyone but also not care if any of their employees died. And the job description was 'adventurer.'

But there was something off about the three adventurers sitting in a corner

table. First, there was an armored man who seemed like the picture of a warrior. He didn't differ much from other adventurers. But his looks and trained body were comparable to a knight's, and he didn't give off the impression that he was as filthy and unhygienic as the other adventurers. His armor did seem a little old and worn, but it was properly cared for and all the more beautiful for that.

To his right was a beautiful young elf man, whose race was rarely seen in places like these. Just like all elves, he had the complete set of good looks. His face was very well-proportioned, and it seemed like he'd be constantly hounded by women.

It might have been because he couldn't bear the weight, but he wasn't wearing any armor or equipped with a sword or similar weapon. He most likely didn't need any, though. All elves were specialists in magic. While magic took more time to prepare, spells were generally stronger and more effective than swords. Most importantly, they were free. If a person had heaven-arts at their disposal, they'd probably be able to put up a better defense than any armor, too.

The elf, who would normally be very coveted by governing countries, was instead laughing merrily in a garbage dump of a bar. Who knew what he was thinking?

The last member was even stranger. It was a girl who was a sight to behold. She was so beautiful she just didn't fit the atmosphere of the bar.

It wasn't like female adventurers didn't exist. While they were few and far between, they still weren't exactly hard to find. But women usually had other job options outside of being an adventurer, even without an education or training. They could always just sell their bodies. That was why most women naturally drifted that way whenever they lost all other prospects. They didn't want to sell their bodies, of course, but it was a far better option than becoming an adventurer and selling their lives for a pittance. By becoming a prostitute, they were at least guaranteed food, clothing, and housing.

Of course, becoming a prostitute still had some requirements in the looks department. In other words, women who couldn't even fulfill that became

adventurers. It wasn't nice to say, but female adventurers weren't good-looking, since good-looking women would pretty much never come to such a dump of a bar.

That was why this one was so strange. She wasn't just beautiful. She was beautiful enough that, if asked, 99% of people would say they'd never seen a woman more beautiful than her. She had pitch-black wings growing out of her back, telling the world that she was a heaven-winged. And by looking at her wings, it was also easy to understand why she had no place within the heaven-winged's society.

But Ydalir was a human town, and it was only a little ways away from a human country. There would be any number of nobles willing to employ her on the basis of her looks alone, regardless of what color her wings were. In fact, she might have been all the more sought after, since black wings were so rare. With how good she looked, she'd be able to survive anywhere and get protection from anybody. There was no need to come all the way to a place like this to sell her life for cheap.

But she was here anyway. She drank cheap swill like it was only natural and laughed along with her companions. And she looked for a request to sell her life cheaply once again today.

"What about this one? It wants us to collect a fang from a dragon that settled down in some ruins. We'll get 50,000 el. It's the best paying one recently, for sure."

It was the girl who spoke. Lufas Maphaahl casually chose a paper from among the requests and took it. The request needed them to fight the prideful dragon, the strongest monster among many species of monsters, and rip off a fang to bring back. It wasn't some wyvern that only looked like a dragon. It was a *real* dragon.

Dragons were strong. Very much so. After all, they had already been dinosaurs before being mutated, so once they had, dragons got even stronger. It was easy logic to follow. Any normal monster would run in a heartbeat when faced with a dragon, and humanity only rarely tried anything against them.

Even if humans seriously wanted to defeat one, an entire country would need

to deploy all its knights and other forces for it. If they idiotically tried to face the dragon head-on, they'd get repelled with massive losses. The dragon would build a mountain of corpses if they did that. Any country attempting the feat would need to formulate a perfect strategy complete with traps to attempt to even the gap in power. And even then, it would be hard to call the fight equal. Humanity would still be at a disadvantage. While the chances of winning weren't zero, the human side would suffer huge losses, even if they won. In fact, they'd probably lose most of the people deployed against the dragon.

That was why dragons were fundamentally allowed to go untouched. While countries would have no choice but to respond in kind if the dragon attacked, leaving it alone was by far the best choice if the dragon wasn't attacking. Dragons might burn down villages near them, but that still wouldn't even compare to the losses that would be incurred while trying to fight one. With that in mind, most countries had no choice but to allow the villages to burn. That was just what dragons were like. They were true monsters.

So the fact that a request wanted only a couple adventurers to fight one was literally like telling them to go die. That was why the request had gone unanswered. No one was willing to commit suicide like that, especially for a measly 50,000 el.

"No way. Sure, 50,000 will have us set for money for a while, but it's not enough to set us up for life. This isn't worth it. Yeah, being in some sort of epic tale where we defeat a dragon would be amazing, but our lives are more important. Right, Megrez?" The warrior-like man, Alioth, laughed at the ridiculousness of the request before turning to the elf beside him for agreement.

The elf, Megrez, also nodded. "Honestly, is the poster of this request an idiot? This kind of request should be sent to an entire country rather than adventurers. Well, most countries would just leave any dragon that wasn't actively attacking alone, though," Megrez said coldly as he took the paper from Lufas and threw it back onto the table. Then, he picked up a different request form and showed it to the others. "Setting aside Lufas' joke, how about this one? It wants us to kill a wyvern that's settled near a village. The reward for completing it is 6,000 el. It's just a wyvern, not a type of dragon. We should be

able to deal with this one cleanly.”

“It wasn’t a joke, though.”

“Just let it go. I’m begging you.”

Wyverns were monster forms of lizards, crocodiles, or something similar. They were imitation dragons that looked the part but didn’t have the corresponding strength, thus their name. Basically, they looked like tough dragons, but that was all a bluff. They still required a certain amount of strength, and there was no doubt that they were tough opponents for adventurers, but to these three, they weren’t that scary. Especially not to Lufas. To her, wyverns were probably nothing more than small-fry that could be dealt with in a single hit.

“Sure, that looks fine.”

“Well... I have no objections, I guess.”

Both Alioth and Lufas agreed to the quest, so their activity for the day was decided. All that was left was to head over to the village and take care of the wyvern real quick. But just when the party was about to set off, Alioth scrunched up his face as if he’d just remembered something.

“Ah, sorry. Let me buy a weapon first before we leave. My sword’s at its limit.”

It was only natural for adventurers to have to supply their own weapons and armor. Knights or soldiers employed at a nation’s castle would have their weapons and armor supplied to them, but adventurers provided for themselves. In order to earn money, they needed weapons. And in order to buy weapons, they needed to earn money. Almost all adventurers tripped over this vicious cycle and had to go out on requests with cheap swords or otherwise dull weapons. This was one of the reasons why so many adventurers died so quickly.

On that point, Alioth could be considered a veteran. He thoroughly understood that a good, reliable weapon would see him live through his requests.

“I don’t mind. I want a new weapon, too. Can I come with you?”

“Don’t you fight bare-handed?”

“I’ve been hooked on using all sorts of weapons recently.”

Unlike Alioth, who was faithful to his sword, Lufas was mastering fighting with both her fists and swords. As for sword skills, Lufas had exceeded Alioth in that respect, too, since she had mastered both the Warrior and Swordmaster classes, while Alioth had decided to continue with Warrior even after reaching level 100. Lufas had recently mastered the Monster Tamer class as well and was now raising levels as an Alchemist. Alioth felt she had no sense of fidelity.

“Well, that’s how it is. Please wait a little, Megrez.”

“No, I’ll go with you two. I was thinking it’s about time for me to get a new mace, anyway.”

Unlike Alioth and Lufas, Megrez was a complete back line magic specialist, so he didn’t really need a weapon. The only weapon he carried was a mace for emergency self-defense, and he had almost no occasion to use it. But that didn’t mean he would never get close to an enemy, so having a weapon was still useful.

When Megrez first became an adventurer, he’d only been level 40. But now, he had gotten all the way up to level 130, so he was feeling how insufficient his weapon was. To him, this was the perfect time to make a switch.

“Oh, then I guess we’re all going.” Alioth smiled as he left the bar.

Lufas and Megrez followed after him, and they moved through the city of Ydalir.

The street traffic was dense and moved fast, and merchants from different countries could be seen swapping information as well as goods. They were even selling travel provisions, which were a lifesaver for adventurers.

“Oh? Hey, Lufas, was there a weapons shop there before?”

It was obvious Alioth was currently aiming to go to a weapons shop. The shop he was aiming for was a place he’d frequented even before meeting Lufas and the others, and it should have been just a little ways ahead of them. However, there was also a different weapons shop that lay along their path. That wasn’t

exactly rare, though. Many people came and went in Ydalir, and it was a regular occurrence for a shop to be closed down for some reason or another, only to be acquired by someone else and turned into a different store.

“No, there wasn’t. That store should have dealt in medicinal herbs. Well, the owner probably went back to their country, and someone else bought the space.”

“Oh...? Hey, wanna go take a look?” Alioth, showing some interest, started walking towards the new weapons store.

It was just like him to ask something but take action before hearing an answer. Both Lufas and Megrez already knew what he was like, so they just shrugged and silently followed after him. What awaited them when they entered were weapons of surprisingly good make.

“Ohhh?? Hey, you two, these are amazing. I’m not that well-versed in weapons, but even I can feel the power coming off this sword.”

“You’re exaggerating. It could just be a good-looking piece of shit. Ydalir’s full of stuff like that.”

While Alioth was really excited with a sword in hand, Megrez was there to pour some cold water on his enthusiasm, though he was even more clueless about weapons than Alioth was. But what Megrez said was true. Examples of people buying weapons that looked good but quickly broke in actual use were common. That was why it was important to carefully choose the weapons shops and blacksmiths you frequented and build up trust. Alioth knew that, which was why he’d always stuck to the same shop.

But that was when Lufas stepped in.

“No... I can tell, because I’ve started down the path of an alchemist... This one is good. It’s of a much higher quality than most other weapons you’ll find around here. But this is strange. Why is it so cheap when the product is this good...?”

Lufas picked up several weapons and compared them, only to find that they were all of exceptionally high quality. They were leaps and bounds above what was offered in most weapons shops and cheaper as well.

*Even knights employed by a country may not have access to something this good...*

“The blacksmith is...Mizar? All these weapons are top-shelf, but I’ve never heard this name before. I can’t believe that someone this skilled is so unknown.”

Weapons and armor were always engraved with the name of their maker. All the weapons here were engraved with the same name, “Mizar,” which couldn’t be seen in any other shop.

*Is he a new blacksmith that just came into his own? No, this isn’t the skill of someone new. But I’ve never heard this name. Just where has this person with so much skill been all this time?*

“Khaakhaakhaa! This name’ll become famous in the future. You won’t lose out by buying it now!”

A loud and audacious voice called out from the back of the store to Lufas and the others, who were looking at the weapons. Turning around, they saw a small, middle-aged man with an exemplary black beard. He had huge muscles that were like steel, a large nose, and a beard. Those were all the signature characteristics of a dwarf. Of course, these features didn’t stand out nearly as much as an elf’s ears, a heaven-winged’s wings, or a vampire’s fangs, so it was still entirely possible that the man was just a short human.

“A...dwarf?”

“You got it! My name is Mizar. One day, I’ll be known as the man who made the world’s best sword. All the ones you see here are practice pieces that didn’t make the cut as the world’s best, so buy them if you like. I can use as much money as I can get to make weapons, after all.”

The middle-aged dwarf, who’d introduced himself as Mizar, spoke of his grand dreams before trying to sell them weapons. That was when it clicked for Lufas why he was so unknown, even though his products were so good.

Contrary to how they looked, dwarves were very dexterous and had almost otherworldly skills when it came to blacksmithing in particular. But they normally holed up in caves or somewhere similar, so it was rare for a human to

see the products of their skills. He must have been just like that, except for the part where he had a dream. So he must have come up against a wall within the narrow world in which dwarves normally lived and left for a human town.

“The world’s best sword? That’s great! I like that! I’m gonna be the world’s best swordsman, so that’s just perfect for me!”

Alioth immediately got in tune with Mizar and the size of his dreams, since he was also a man dreaming to be the world’s best at something. Their dreams were similar, so he must have felt closer.

So Lufas snuck in a jab, which caused Alioth’s face to scrunch up. “As it is now, my skill with a sword is better than yours, though.”

“Sh-Shut up... I’ll surpass you someday,” Alioth said, undaunted, before looking over the swords and picking the one that fit him best.

“Right. I’m gonna pick this one. It feels the best. Hey, old man, I’m buying this.”

“Sure, thanks. That’ll be 700 el.”

After paying for the sword and its scabbard, Alioth hung the new weapon from his waist. He’d been planning to buy a new weapon before the job, but this was a stroke of luck. Dwarven weapons were always of good quality. It would become a reliable partner for Alioth on his adventures.

“Oh, from how you look, all of you are adventurers, right? Did you come because you took my request?”

“Request? Did you put one out? What was it for?” Alioth returned the question and waited for Mizar to answer.

Since Mizar was running a weapons shop, Alioth could pretty much guess what the request would be about. It was most likely something to do with materials for weapons, something like a monster’s fangs or claws or maybe some sort of rare metal. There was no doubt in Alioth’s mind that Mizar had asked for something like that. Alioth thought it would be fine to accept if it was just something on that level. After all, this store dealt in high-quality weapons, and Alioth knew he’d come back to this shop a lot, so it wouldn’t be a bad idea to leave a good impression now. Alioth’s thought process was half calculation

and half just liking Mizar, but it was quickly blown away by what came out of the dwarf's mouth next.

“Good of you to ask. You see, there're some ruins about three days' travel by carriage from here. A dragon's settled down there, right? And I'm sure one of its fangs will make for great material.”

“...What?”

“My request was to go punch that dragon's lights out and get me a fang. How about it? I've been waiting for so long. Someone's ought to have taken it by now, right?”

“.....”

After hearing Mizar's explanation, the three of them all thought back to the request from that Lufas had been thinking of picking up.

Alioth was slack-jawed with shock, and he turned his face up to the heavens.

*Oh. I see. I get it now. This old man's an idiot. He seriously thinks someone will take that awful request. This has gotta be something like, he's been cooped up in a cave so long he doesn't know how scary dragons are or something, right?*

Alioth heaved a sigh and turned back to Mizar. “Let me ask you one question... Just what do you think dragons are?”

“Hm? Huge lizards, right?”

“Are you stupid?!”

That was when all three of them realized that while this dwarf named Mizar might be skilled, he was both ignorant and foolish. But unlike Alioth and Megrez, who were both dumbfounded and exasperated, the ends of Lufas' mouth turned upwards amusedly. *I've found someone interesting.* Even if she didn't put it into words, her expression did all the talking for her.

“Oh ho... So dragons are that strong, huh? I just thought they were like those huge lizards you see around the place...”

“Those are wyverns, old man. They look similar, but they're completely different.”

“I see. No wonder why no one ever came to ask about it, no matter how long I waited...” The dwarf nodded in understanding while stroking his beard as Alioth gave Mizar a proper explanation of what dragons were.

*It seems as if he just didn't know the difference between a dinosaur and a proper dragon, Alioth surmised. Well, it is true that they look really similar. The smaller dragons are especially easy to mistake, even by veteran adventurers. So basically, he just thought that dragons were strong lizards, that he was posting a simple request to go punch one out and take a fang, and was really confused about why no one would accept it.*

In that confusion, Mizar splurged and increased the reward, but still no one would come. He also considered that he'd made a mistake in how he posted the request and went to check, but there was nothing wrong with it.

*Hmm, I wonder why?* Mizar had thought. *This sure is strange.* Every day, he wondered why no adventurers would accept his request. But it was only natural. After all, the request was just like saying, “Hey, can you go die for me?” Leaving aside any with a death wish, people would never accept it.

Mizar finally understood that fact, nodding as he said, “So *that's* why. If that's the case, then of course no one would come to ask about the request. So, my ignorance almost sent adventurers to their deaths...”

“No, there's no one stupid enough to take it, so it's not even close to 'almost.'”

“Hmm, but this is still troubling...” Mizar muttered, once again stroking his beard.

“What is?”

“Well, I only caught a glimpse of it when I passed by the ruins, but that dragon's fang will definitely make for a good sword. That's what my instincts are telling me.” Mizar answered Megrez's question with an answer full of lingering attachment and tenacity towards the dragon's fang.

“Well of course. It's a dragon's fang. It'll totally make for a good sword, but...” Megrez, exasperated, heaved a sigh.

It was true that a dragon's fang would make great material for a weapon,

especially with Mizar's skills. That point was never in question. But in order to get that fang, someone would have to fight a dragon. It was far too risky. Still, Megrez expected Mizar would finally give up now that it had all been explained to him.

"Okay!!" Mizar exclaimed, seeming to have come to some sort of conclusion, before he went back to the back of the store.

The three adventurers were left wondering what was up for a few minutes as they waited. When Mizar showed himself again, he was wielding a large ax and wearing a steel set of armor that he'd most likely made himself.

"Huh? Hey, old man, what're you planning to do, looking like that?"

"Sorry, but the shop is closed now. I'll be out for a few days." Mizar walked to the exit, his armor clanking all the way, before shooing Alioth and the others out of his store.

Alioth got a bad feeling, seeing his gear and judging from the fact that he said he'd be out for a few days. Hesitantly, he asked, "Hey, wait a second, old man... I can't believe I'm asking this, but...are you going to go fight the dragon right now?"

"Indeed I am!"

"What do you mean 'indeed'?! Are you an idiot?! What did I just tell you?!"

"I heard what you said, and that's why I'm going out myself. No matter how long I wait, there won't be any adventurers who'll take my request. That means I have no choice but to go myself."

"What?!"

After that exclamation, Alioth was convinced that this dwarf was the type to die young chasing his dreams. Everybody who made their living through combat, not just adventurers, knew that those who couldn't accurately read their opponent's strength died first. This was something that everybody learned with a bit of experience, and Alioth was no exception.

Alioth seemed like a frank and somewhat unthinking type of guy, but he wouldn't get into a fight he had no chance of winning. Even he knew that was

suicide.

But this dwarf didn't have any of that experience. Either that or he was ignoring what experience was telling him. The ax and armor he was using were most likely first-rate. They seemed very well-made. But it would still be impossible to fight evenly with a dragon with them. However, Mizar would hear none of it, no matter how hard Alioth tried to stop him. After closing up shop, he clanked off immediately.

Alioth watched Mizar's receding form as he scratched his head. "That old man's a genuine idiot. There's no way he can win against a dragon."

"But this leaves a bad taste in my mouth. To think we'd be seeing someone we just met today off to their death... It feels like we let him die."

"There was no helping it, right? No matter what I said, that old man wouldn't listen. Even if we managed to stop him today, he's the type to push himself and die somewhere else, anyway."

There was no way Alioth and Megrez wouldn't feel anything having parted with Mizar like that. While this was the first time they'd met, both of them liked Mizar's big-hearted personality, so knowing that they would never see him again was hard on them. But there was no way to stop Mizar, since he was so gung ho about heading to his own death, and neither of them were soft-hearted enough to kill themselves along with Mizar.

*There's nothing we can do...* At least, that was the excuse they made to themselves in their hearts.

On the other hand, Lufas never stopped smiling throughout that entire exchange. "That's right. It's as Alioth says. He's a fool with a large amount of talent and enough passion to not only chase his dreams but chase them until death. Even if we managed to stop him here, he'd definitely find someplace somewhere to rush to his death."

"Yeah, that's just how he is. ...It's too bad, though. With his skills, he'd have made some really good weapons if he were still alive."

"Yeah, that's true. He has enough talent to be able to reach his dreams as long as he doesn't die early. ...What an interesting man." Lufas' grin deepened,

and she started walking.

The other two in her party were taken by surprise, and Lufas followed up on that by dropping a bomb on them with her back still turned. “Sorry, but you two take on today’s request by yourselves. I’ve got something I want to do.”

“S-Something...? Hey, you don’t mean...?!”

“I’ll go take that man’s request.”

Horried by what Lufas just said, Alioth and Megrez hurriedly ran up beside her. They tried to stop her and dissuade her from that idea, but Lufas never stopped walking. She only got closer and closer to Mizar.

“Hey, come on. That’s not funny! You know yourself how strong dragons are, right?!”

“I know. And I’m confident I can win.”

“Well, you actually might, but it’s a dragon, you know?! What if you’re not strong enough?!”

“Then that just means this is all I ever amounted to. There’s no problem with that.”

“There’s nothing *but* problems!”

Alioth and Megrez’s words had no effect. Once Lufas decided on something, the straightforward stubbornness with which she pursued it was not dissimilar to Mizar’s.

She caught up to Mizar and called out to him. “Wait a second... Uhhh, your name was Mizar, right? If you’d like, I can take on your request.”

“Hm? That’d be great, but...are you sure?”

“Indeed. But given the contents... You’re going to have to splurge on the reward.” Lufas smiled as she requested a change to her payment. It was only natural. Only 50,000 el for defeating a dragon was far too little.

Mizar understood this, but he still groaned. “Well, that’s only natural. But...damn. I don’t have that kind of money. The 50,000 is all I have.”

50,000 el was too cheap for a dragon slaying, but it was a lot of money for

normal life. It would take several years at a normal job to be able to earn 50,000 el. It was enough to buy a house. It was a lot of money, speaking from a commoner's point of view. And Mizar couldn't pay any more than that.

But Lufas seemed to have expected that, since she only laughed softly. "I don't need money. In exchange...I want the weapon you make with the dragon's fang."

"O-Ohh! That's what you're getting at! But that's... If I give you the weapon, then why would I have gone through all this trouble to get a fang...?"

"Don't worry about it. You'll get more than enough fangs."

Of course, the entire reason Mizar wanted the dragon defeated was to obtain a fang. Giving that fang away would be putting the cart before the horse. Mizar would get nothing out of it. But Lufas seemed to have expected that, and her belligerent smile deepened.

"I won't be stingy about only giving you one fang. You can have its claws and scales, too, if you'd like. I'm saying I'll give you an entire dragon's corpse... A weapon made from a single fang would be cheap in comparison, no?"

"Y-You're going to kill it? A dragon? A-Aren't they strong?"

"Yeah, they are. But not as strong as I am."

Mizar took a good look at Lufas after she said that so confidently.

Overconfident people weren't exactly rare. There were a lot of newbie adventurers who were ignorant in the ways of the world and dreamed of starring in a heroic tale about defeating a dragon. But over half of those people wouldn't be able to defeat a low-ranking monster, let alone a dragon, and they paid for that lack of knowledge. The half of those fools who survived such an experience learned how to accept reality, as well as how to accurately measure their own abilities.

But Lufas didn't fit into that category. She said that with full knowledge of how strong dragons were. In other words, she was just that confident.

"...Interesting! Well, I'd be going with or without you, so I guess it'll be all right to bet on if you're bluffing or not."

“That’d be a boring bet. You know I’m going to win, right?”

Mizar and Lufas both laughed and high fived. Then, with no hesitation, they both started walking.

Of course, both Alioth and Megrez were panicking.

“W-Wait a second! Okay already, I’m going, too! I’m going!”

“Hey, what?! Alioth?! ...Agghh, fine!”

In the end, the two of them were still adventurers. There was no way they didn’t dream of beating a dragon. Most importantly, they knew they would regret it if they left Lufas alone. If Lufas died, they would have basically killed her. If she came back, her equipment would be much better than theirs, and the gap in power between them would get even wider. So they had no choice but to follow along. Their fates were intertwined. If they died, they’d die together.

The two of them caught up to Lufas, glaring at her for her decision, but she didn’t seem to care. She was brazen to the end.

“Awww. You two didn’t need to come, you know,” Lufas spouted, wide-eyed, causing the two of them to smack her in the head. Lufas angrily shouted, “Why?!” But they needed to get back at her that much, at least.

\*            \*

A long time ago, a country stood on this spot. The country wasn’t large, but it had a splendid castle and splendid people. One day, a dragon suddenly attacked, and the country was destroyed. That was what the history books said, at least.

After the dragon had its fill of violence, it chose the castle as its nesting spot. At some point, the poor, destroyed country had devolved into ruins, but the building that had once been the castle still played host to the dragon that destroyed it.

At some point, people started fearfully calling the dragon, “Nogard,” and the ruins it settled in gained the simple name of “Nogard Ruins.” No one had approached the ruins ever since, even hundreds of years later. Well, it was

possible that adventurers dreaming of killing a dragon might have gotten close, but they must have all been turned into feed, since the dragon was still living in the ruins like it owned the place.

“Well, it’s time,” Lufas muttered while looking over at the ruins.

The other three made faces that said, “Time for what?” So Lufas explained.

“Look, the castle’s deteriorated a lot. It seems as if the dragon likes this castle quite a bit, but it’s about reached its limits. So if it can’t live here anymore, what do you think the dragon will do?”

Megrez was the first one to arrive at an answer. “It’ll...look for a place to live next?”

Lufas nodded. “That’s right. If we leave it alone, it’ll just attack another country somewhere and wreck it. Or it could even attack Ydalir. ...It’s about time that someone needs to kill it. I’m saying that we don’t have the option of leaving it alone anymore.”

The dragon could attack Ydalir. Hearing those words, Alioth and Megrez braced themselves. To them, Ydalir wasn’t just a base for their adventurer activities. It was also their second home. They couldn’t stand for it to be destroyed. So Lufas was right; it was time. The dragon Nogard had to be defeated here and now.

“Megrez, we need a greeting. Go and wake it up.”

“I thought you’d say that. I’m ready.”

At Lufas’ command, Megrez activated the spell he’d already finished preparing. The pentagram enclosed by two circles shined blue, and mana gathered in front of him before converting into a large amount of water. The spell would unleash a merciless torrent of water. It was a high-tier water spell that would crash through everything before it.

“Tidal Wave!”

There was no water in the ruins, but suddenly, there was a physical phenomenon that ignored the rules of physics and nature, causing a tsunami to appear.

Normally, manifesting water in a place like this would just make it spread everywhere, but the Tidal Wave spell was directional. The tsunami formed a typical wave shape and surged forward, as if the water itself had a will. The wave itself was actually around 20 m tall and engulfed the ruins.

Tidal waves shouldn't be underestimated just because they're water. The effect of the huge mass of water was exactly like a natural disaster. The deteriorated castle was easily smashed, crushed, and otherwise destroyed. Eventually, the water passed through, and the castle that had been just barely holding on to its form was completely turned into a pile of rubble.

"Hot damn! You're pretty good, elf!"

Mizar raised a cheer after seeing Megrez's spell, but Megrez himself stayed calm.

"Lufas already said this, but this is just a greeting. It's coming—get ready!"

The Tidal Wave spell had the highest destructive power among all the spells he could use at the moment, but Megrez still expected that it wouldn't do too much to a dragon. And in fact, the dragon that burst out of the mountain of rubble didn't seem to have any actual wounds on it.

"GOAAAAAAGGHHH!!" The dragon Nogard howled, causing the very air to shake.

Its body, covered with green scales, was over 10 m long. And its mouth, which was filled to the brim with fangs, was drooling. Its glowing, golden eyes had vertically slit pupils which were currently locked onto Lufas and the others, and it was clearly enraged.

It seemed to have taken the destruction of its favorite home personally. Carried away by those feelings of anger, Nogard swung its claws down at them.

Lufas came forward and intercepted the blow head-on. Her legs sunk into the ground from the force of the blow, but she herself took no damage. Somehow, a single person just managed to stop a dragon's full-force blow.

"GAAHH?!"

"Nice attack there!"

Lufas' eyes were open wide as she spun on the spot. Then, she threw Nogard. Alioth, who was in Nogard's path, used his sword to deflect the dragon away.

"That was dangerous. If you're going to throw it, you should have warned me first," Alioth complained, dripping composure. But he sounded more impressed than angry.

Lufas surely placed a lot of trust in Alioth, and she had probably fully believed that he'd be able to follow up on her throw. The party's bond was strong and didn't waver even when Nogard got up and opened its mouth.

As if to put that to the test, Nogard breathed fire at Lufas while her back was turned. But before it could hit, a wall of water rose up in the way, completely shutting out the fire.

"There's no time to be talking! You guys are way too relaxed!"

"Sorry, sorry."

Megrez most likely had the spell prepared for a while, expecting to have to block the dragon's fire. And Lufas believed that Megrez wouldn't fail to do so. If she didn't, there was no way she would have let her guard down like that in a fight.

"What tepid fire, though. Allow me to show you what real fire is like."

Lufas put her hands together, clashed the powers of both heaven and mana into each other, and created a tear in the fabric of space.

"I, your master, command you. Burn my foe to death with your rainbow fire—Aries!" Lufas shouted, and a sheep with rainbow-colored wool appeared out of the crack. Its size was far away from what a normal sheep should have been, though, as it rivaled Nogard.

The summoned sheep collected rainbow-colored fire in its mouth and shot it, clearing away the fire that was being released from Nogard's mouth even now in a show of brilliant, multicolored radiance. The rainbow-colored fire even melted dragon scales, which were supposed to be resistant to fire. Having fulfilled its duty to show the dragon 'real fire,' the sheep retreated back into the crack in space and disappeared. But the crack itself didn't disappear.

Lufas quickly moved on to her next action. “Next, I order you. Use your unrivaled power to crush my enemies—Come, Taurus!” From the same crack came another monster.

Its upper half was a cow’s, and its bottom half was a human’s, meaning it was a monster called a minotaur. The monster had a huge ax in hand, and it swung that ax into Nogard’s neck, even while it was still covered in flames. Having been hit by the ax, Nogard’s tough scales gave in, and a vast amount of blood shot out of the wound as broken pieces of scale scattered around.

With its role over, the minotaur went back through the crack, which finally disappeared.

But dragons were said to be strong for a reason. Nogard stood up, even though it was bleeding like a stuck pig, and glared at Lufas with seething hatred.

In response, Lufas gave Megrez a signal and drew the sword at her waist. Alioth swung the sword he’d just bought that day as easily as breathing, and Megrez swiftly completed a magic circle.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGHH!”

“Maelstrom!”

Nogard unleashed another breath attack, but the water from Megrez’s spell canceled it out. But it didn’t stop there; the raging swirl of water completely stopped Nogard from moving, and Megrez shouted, “Now, Lufas, Alioth!”

“You sure kept me waiting!”

“Thanks for the assist!”

“I can do this, too!”

Lufas, Alioth, and even Mizar, who hadn’t been called, replied to Megrez’s shout and jumped into the air. Lufas and Alioth spun in the air, using centrifugal force to aid them in cutting into Nogard’s neck. Their attacks deepened the wound in Nogard’s neck left by the minotaur...but Lufas’ weapon wasn’t fit for the job.

Unlike Alioth’s, which managed to cut halfway through the neck, Lufas’ sword got stuck inside the dragon’s flesh and snapped. But she still managed to dig in

pretty deep, and Alioth was once again reminded how ridiculously strong she was. On top of that, Lufas actually hit scales and busted through them, while Alioth's sword entered the same way the minotaur's ax did. Her sword breaking was only a matter of course.

Lastly, Mizar's ax came falling in, and the dwarf's might finally severed Nogard's head. Just like that, the three successful dragon slayers touched down—or not. Mizar was the only one who failed to do so and fell to the ground.

At any rate, they'd completed the request. The dragon that once destroyed a country was dead, and they'd obtained a whole dragon corpse, something that any blacksmith would be watering at the mouth for.

At some point, someone started laughing, which drew the rest of them in, and they all cheered and high fived.

\*            \*

“—That's a great weapon there.”

“Heheh. You jealous?”

The three of them had achieved something amazing and completely unlike most adventurers by killing a dragon. But for some reason, they were all sitting in the same bar a while later, just like always. Of course, they'd gotten job offers from other countries. There were so many messengers bearing offers of knighthood it was actually stifling. They even promised fame and status. But the three of them spent today as normal, still adventurers. Although Lufas was looking happily at the new whip sword she'd obtained.

Mizar had come through on his promise. The whip sword that Mizar had crafted was an excellent piece that could extend to mow down lots of small-fry all at once, and it didn't sacrifice attack power to do so. Lufas was completely taken with her new weapon, and she hadn't tired of polishing the sword even a few days after receiving it.

“Don't worry. I'll make one for all of you!” Suddenly, a familiar voice called out to them from the entrance of the bar.

They all turned around and saw Mizar. For some reason, the dwarf was fully armed. He plodded towards the group and sat down with Lufas and the others

without waiting for permission.

“Mizar? Why’re you here? Actually, what happened to your store?”

“I closed it.”

“What?!”

“I figured something out. Rather than opening up a store, going along with you guys would net me a mountain of good materials. And you’d be the best test subjects to try out the feel of my weapons, too. As if I could keep up a store with such a juicy opportunity right in front of me!”

While Mizar spoke as if it were a done deal when none of the others had agreed to this, it was actually a tempting proposal. Lufas and the others didn’t know of a more skilled blacksmith than Mizar, and with him in the party, they’d have no problems with their equipment. Alioth and Megrez sighed exasperatedly, but Lufas laughed amusedly.

“So that’s how it is. I’ll be counting on you guys from now on!” Mizar gave a sunny grin and held out his hand. It seemed that to him, entering the party was already a done deal.

Lufas was the first to shake Mizar’s hand, followed by Alioth and Megrez, who both smiled wryly.

Adventurers chased dreams. They chased them and died. But, if one managed to make it to the end, if they managed to get to the goal with comrades who shared the same dream... They might be elevated to the status of hero.

The world would later call these people heroes, or at least the Great Conqueror... But they didn’t know that at the time. They were simply some lowly adventurers dreaming big in a dirty bar and laughing together.



# Afterword

Yahhaahhh! Say my name!

Firehead

⇒ Birdon

Bomberhead

Whyyyyy?!

Hello, everyone. So we meet again. It's Firehead. This time it's the afterword of *A Wild Last Boss Appeared! Volume 3*. I'm living on the line of just barely not being cut. I'm planning to have the series finished in about six or seven volumes, so if I can manage to not get dropped before then, I'll consider this whole thing a great success. If I do get dropped, though, please laugh it off, and just say that I needed to get it together.

Now then, let me brag to you about the contradictions in this story here in the afterword pages, where no one will benefit.

Contradictions are something that always happen when anyone tries to write a story. Consistency relies entirely on the writer's strength of memory, after all, given that you're writing something entirely out of your imagination. If the writer ever forgets a single detail of what they wrote, that can create a contradiction. It's really hard to get perfect. If the writer's memory fails, so does that same part of the world they've built. If the writer makes a mistake, the fictional world goes right along with them. If a character is established as a man, then that character is, of course, a man, and will be as long as the characterization stays. They'll enter the men's bath, and they'll have a deagle between their legs.

But just like Schrödinger's cat, as long as the readers don't 'observe' something, it's not definite. In other words, as long as the readers don't 'see' that the character is a man, then it's possible for the character to be revealed as a woman later on. Creators are just like that. If a fact is observed and then

breached, then that is when a contradiction is created. In that event, I'll hurriedly paint over it with a new fact to try to smooth things over.

Take the "Bull" of the Twelve Heavenly Stars for example. I've already made a mistake with his name. I forgot that I'd already named him "Tauros" and wrote his name as "Taurus" in this volume. As of the writing of this afterword, I was already told by my editor, "Taurus is fine," through laughter. Only now do I realize why.

I feel like I totally messed up. If this were a web novel, then I could just edit that back in afterwards, but that doesn't fly in print.

So what do I do? That's when I had an idea.

—That's right. Let's just make it a joke that the Bull is bothered by how often people get his name wrong! It's an annoying distinction anyway, and even I as the writer got it wrong, so it's fine if Lufas and the others do, too, right? That's what I think, anyway.

By doing that... Oh my, how mysterious! Both Taurus and Tauros are suddenly correct! I mean, the characters themselves are getting it wrong, too. On top of that, Taurus gains a "My master doesn't remember my name," trait and thus sets his character off on a strange arc.

Great, it all worked out. (I swear) Basically all the things I write turn out like this. Contradiction gets piled on top of contradiction, and I'm just trying to cover it all up like a criminal in the Ace Attorney series.

So, PhoeOix Wright, show us your evidence! I've been waiting for that chance! Objection! Take this! If that ever happened, I wouldn't even be able to argue. I'd just be found guilty and carted off to prison.

Now then, of all the new characters that appeared in this volume, I'd have to say that my favorite is Friedrich. While he was named in volume 1 as the Sword Saint (lol), he's really just a misfortunate tiger. Even though he's hailed as humanity's strongest in this era, he's nothing much from Lufas' perspective. Not to mention, Benetnasch exists, too, so he ends up being a character where his fame and his actual ability don't match up. I already knew from the start that he wouldn't even be strong enough to be considered an underdog.

That's why I decided to specialize him in jokes, which turned him into the tiger/Sword Saint you see now. I myself am really satisfied with how the character turned out, and I think I did a pretty good job of making him stand out. If he was just a regular hot swordsman, then he'd probably be even less memorable than Dina.

Also, Sei unexpectedly stood out a lot, too. I'd always had him in the role of a victim (hero) who was troubled, because he was called into such a ridiculous world, but he's trying pretty hard to find his own way. Sure, I get that people might not like the fact that he threw away the defeat-Lufas route for the peaceful route so quickly, but it's the right choice to make in-universe, so... I don't know if he'll be able to successfully mediate between Lufas and the rest of humanity, but I'd like it if all of you cheered him on.

There were also a bunch of other important characters who debuted in this volume like the Devil King, Scorpius, Virgo, and Parthenos. It'd be great if you cheered them on, too.

...Ah, and don't forget the Crab.

Lufas? Ahh, you don't really have to cheer her on. Even without main-character levels of plot armor, she'd still be able to take out most enemies with a single flick to the forehead with how oppressive her stats are. In fact, you should try to bolster her enemies.

That's just what *A Wild Last Boss Appeared!* is like. So if you all like, it'd be great if you'd keep reading.

-Birdon



Thank you all so much for reading volume 3!

So the Hero appears! I bet he never expected to join such a sweaty sausage fest of a party after being summoned to the other world...!  
...Oh wait, there was one exception.

Do your best, Sei!

Yahako

I've only drawn Jean from the 2nd volume and not everyone else from his party, but his friends definitely have their own designs already. (lol)

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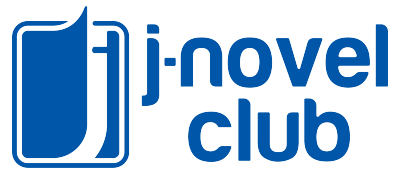
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A Wild Last Boss Appeared! Volume 3

by Firehead

Translated by Kevin Chen Edited by Kathleen Townsend

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2021