



HELL MODE

■ The **Hardcore Gamer** Dominates in
Another World with **Garbage Balancing** ■

STORY HAMUO

ART MO



I'M GONNA
WIN IN THE
END, BUT
IT'S NO FUN
TO CLOBBER
A WEAK
OPPONENT.

I WANNA *FEEL*
SOMETHING.
LEMME HAVE
SOME FUN,
ALLEN.



I WILL.
LEAVE IT
TO ME.

DOGORA.
BECOME MY
DISCIPLE AND
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FLAMES. AIM
TO BECOME
A HERO.



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Chapter 1: Team Allen Meets Shia

Located to the southeast of the Central Continent was Galiat, a continent composed of several smaller countries. One of these countries was the Holy Land of Elmahl, a nation that worshipped Elmea, the God of Creation. Its capital, Teomenia, the home of the Church of Elmea, was up in flames.

The capital had been responsible for the Daemonism debacle. The Pontiff of Daemonism and founder of his church, Gushara, had been scheduled to be executed, but this had all been a part of the Demon Lord's plan. The Pontiff had taken the divine vessel that the Demon Lord Army had stolen from Fire Goddess Freyja in the Heavenly Realm and used it to set Teomenia ablaze, transforming its civilians into daemoninc incarnations. Furthermore, those killed by these monsters were turned into daemoninc incarnations themselves. The No-life Gamers had headed for the Galiatan Continent to put an end to this invasion and had managed to defeat Demoninc Deity Lycaoron.

From the temple altar that the Demoninc Deity had been protecting, a pillar of light had burst forth. It pointed toward a floating island at the center of the continent. The Gamers had also learned that similar pillars of light were stretching from different locations. They had decided to split into three groups, each team had headed for a pillar of light to fight against the Demon Lord Army.

Sophie, Meruru, and Volmaar had flown to the east, toward a group of cities that served as an oasis in the desert area. They had then received aid from the dark elves to destroy the monsters plaguing the cities.

Keel, Krena, and Merus had headed to the south end of the continent. The river region served as the border for two opposing nations: the Kingdom of Calvarna and the Republic of Carlonea. Together with the vanguard unit of Calvarna, they had stopped the monsters that had flooded in from Carlonea.

Allen, Cecil, and Dogora had rushed west to the Kingdom of Crevelle. Like the other regions, this merfolk kingdom had also been overrun by monsters.

"We made it in time, didn't we, Allen?" Cecil asked worriedly.

“Yeah. Just barely, though,” Allen assured her.

They were surrounded by the buzzing wingbeats of Insect As as Allen flew above the dirt wall. There, he spotted a person resembling Beast Princess Shia. He Summoned his Bird B to make his descent.

Everyone’s using all the Extra Skills they’ve got. I guess we really were cutting it close, Allen thought.

The vast majority of Extra Skills had a cooldown timer of a day. There was not any data backing this up, but everyone knew from experience; no one would blindly start using them without good reason. If Extra Skills were being used, it implied that the user had no other choice and was backed into a corner. If multiple people were using them during the war against the Demon Lord Army, it signified that their fortress was about to fall or that the people were unable to hold their own against the army.

There were only two courses of action here: to die on the battlefield or to retreat. Allen and his team had luckily arrived before Shia and her squad had been forced to make that choice.

“Allen, duck!” Dogora bellowed.

As Allen instinctively obeyed that command, he heard a sharp clang of metal above his head. Dogora had used his shield to parry an arrow that was headed for them. Unable to tell if Allen’s team was friend or foe, a beastkin had loosed it as a warning.

“Thanks,” Allen said. “But we won’t be able to fight with the beastkin at this rate. We need to explain our motives to them first. Dogora, raise your shield higher and protect us.”

Allen and Cecil ducked behind Dogora, using him as their shield.

“Hey! What gives?!” Dogora demanded.

Allen ignored his friend’s comment and waved at Shia. The rhinokin beside her noticed the group and waved back, stopping the archers from attacking. Team Allen then descended in front of Shia. Beast Prince Zeu had described her as a prideful woman with a fierce attitude befitting her nickname “War Princess.” Allen had braced himself, assuming that he would get attacked on sight, but nothing came. In fact, she emanated a sympathetic and gentle air as she tenderly clutched her wounded comrade.

“Who are you?” the rhinokin demanded, stepping in front of Shia as though to protect her. He held a giant mallet in his hand.

“My name is Allen. I’m a Rank S adventurer and I’m here to lend you my aid.” He spoke loudly and clearly, conveying his motives and identity to the Beast Princess.

He would have usually never revealed his rank under these circumstances; the beastkin had their guards down. However, Beast Prince Zeu had apparently been in frequent contact with Shia.

“Allen? Aren’t you the one who worked with my brother?” Shia asked.

“That’s me. His Highness, Beast Prince Zeu, requested that I lend you my aid,” Allen replied.

“Huh?!”

Shia scowled. Perhaps it was inconvenient for her to know that she had received help from her brother. Allen recalled that Zeu was a lionkin, while Shia was a tigerkin. Though he knew little about beastkin, he wondered if such a thing was normal for biological siblings.

Or maybe they have different mothers? No, that’s not important right now. We don’t have time.

“He looks gravely injured. Please let me use a healing potion,” Allen said.

With that, he took out a Blessing of Heaven from his storage and used it. In an instant, the injured deerkin, along with the beastkin and merfolk soldiers within the Ability’s effect, had their wounds healed. The soldiers looked stunned for a moment before they immediately headed back to the battlefield.

Allen gazed at the deerkin atop Shia’s lap. The upper half of his body had turned black and he was giving off an ominous aura.

Ugh, the transformation’s already starting. I don’t know if I’ll make it in time.

“This item might be more effective,” Allen said, using a Potherb.

The deerkin was knocking on death’s door as the dark fog lifted from his body. It disintegrated under the sunlight, and he started to recover at an astonishingly fast pace. Moments later, he blinked quizzically and sat up.

“It’s just as my brother told me,” Shia muttered as she helped the deerkin to his feet. “I see... Then that massive swarm of bees must be the Summons he told me about. You say that you’re here to offer your aid, but I have nothing on me. I have no reward to give you.”

“I don’t mind, of course,” Allen replied. “Our primary goal is to annihilate the daemonic incarnations.”

“Daemonic incarnations, you say? Does it have anything to do with what just happened to Vice-Captain Rasu?”

“It does. Rasu should be fine now—you can rest assured that he won’t turn into that monster with a slimy lower half. I’ll tell you the details

later.”

“Very well.”

Allen knew that he had to defend this place first, so he Unsummoned his Bird B and Summoned a Bird E in its place. He took to the skies and used its Awakened Ability, Farsight, to gain a bird’s-eye view of the battlefield and take stock of the situation.

Hmm... So, they’re not going all out to surround this place. In fact, I can see some monsters marching in from outside my vision.

Farsight allowed Allen to see everything within a hundred-kilometer radius. He was able to see every branch, leaf, and pebble on the road, but the amount of detail shared was heavily reliant on the Intelligence of the Summoner. Fortunately, Allen had about 10,000 Intelligence and thus was able to accurately note the number of daemoninc incarnations within range.

In addition, the enemies out of range were flooding in from the west. He saw traces of a past battle as they marched toward him and his party, implying that Shia’s army had made countless sacrifices as they desperately tried to protect the Crevelle citizens.

Name: Allen

Age: 15

Class: Summoner

Level: 83

HP: 2,815 + 2,000

MP: 4,460 + 2,200

Attack: 1,564 + 3,200

Endurance: 1,564 + 12,800

Agility: 2,911 + 15,525

Intelligence: 4,470 + 5,725

Luck: 2,911 + 2,000

Skills: Summoning {8}, Creation {8}, Synthesis {8},

Strengthening {8}, Awakening {8}, Expansion {7},

Storage, Sharing, Quick Summoning, Equivalency,

Deputize, King Me {Locked}, Deletion, Sword Mastery

{4}, Throwing {3}

XP: Approx. 500,000,000,000/2,000,000,000,000

Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 Attack

Ring 2: +5,000 Attack

Adamantite Sword: +2,500 Attack

Black Dragon Cape: +6,000 Endurance, +3,000 Attack

Holder (80 Total)

Insect: A x 49

Beast:

Bird: A x 11, B x 3, E x 2, F x 1

Grass:

Stone:

Fish: B x 2

Spirit: A x 5

Dragon: A x 6

Angel: A x 1

Breakdown of Summons After Splitting into Teams (80 Total)

Northern border of Giamut: 10 (Insect A x 8, Dragon A x 1, Fish B x 1)

Northern border of Rohzenheim: 15 (Insect A x 10, Dragon A x 3, Fish B x 1, Bird F x 1)

Holy Land of Elmahl: 5 (Insect A x 4, Spirit A x 1)

Rodin Village and elsewhere: 5 (Spirit A x 4, Dragon A x 1)

Bird As used for teleportation: 10 (Bird A x 10)

Team Sophie in the east: 13 (Insect A x 11, Bird A x 1, Bird E x 1)

Team Keel in the south: 12 (Angel A x 1, Insect A x 8, Bird B x 2, Bird E x 1)

Team Allen in the west: 10 (Insect A x 8, Bird B x 1, Dragon A x 1)

Name: Cecil Granvelle

Age: 15

Class: Wizardess King

Level: 60

HP: 2,470 + 2,400

MP: 3,974 + 2,400

Attack: 1,640
Endurance: 1,686
Agility: 3,382 + 2,400
Intelligence: 4,138 + 2,400
Luck: 2,541 + 2,400
Skills: Wizardess King {6}, Fire {6}, Ice {6}, Thunder {6}, Light {6}, Abyss {2}, Sparring {4}
Extra Skill: Petit Meteor

Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 Intelligence
Ring 2: +5,000 Intelligence
Rod of the Wizardess King: +4,000 Intelligence, +20% Magical Damage
Robe of the Wizardess King: +4,000 Endurance, Magical Damage Resistance (High)

Name: Dogora
Age: 15
Class: Destroyer
Level: 60
HP: 4,089 + 2,400
MP: 1,919
Attack: 4,348 + 2,400
Endurance: 3,595 + 2,400
Agility: 2,849 + 2,400
Intelligence: 1,757
Luck: 2,664 + 2,400
Skills: Destroyer {6}, Full Might {6}, Explosion {6}, Peerless Slash {6}, Slaughter Strike {6}, Fighting Soul {2}, Axe Mastery {6}, Shield Mastery {4}
Extra Skill: Heart and Soul

Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 Attack
Ring 2: +5,000 Attack
Adamantite Greataxe: +4,000 Attack
Adamantite Large Shield: +3,000 Endurance
Adamantite Armor: +3,000 Endurance

Allen checked his grimoire and turned to the Wizardess King. “Cecil, we’ve officially received a request for help from Beast Princess Shia. We’ll support her with everything we’ve got. Could I have you signal the start of the battle? Make it flashy.”

“Yup. Leave it to me,” Cecil replied with a nod.

Stepping forward, she used her Extra Skill, Petit Meteor. Moments later, a massive rock appeared in the skies above, a kilometer to the west of Allen’s current location. The flaming red meteor, drawn in by gravity, fell to the earth with great speed. It landed smack in the middle of the oncoming horde of monsters.

BOOOOM!

“What?!” Shia gasped.

The ground shook as the meteor crashed down with a mighty roar. Nearby trees were blown away, and the marshy soil of the wetlands hissed as water evaporated due to the scorching heat. A shock wave hit Allen’s group a moment later, and the first defensive wall was blown away along with the monsters. Even the final defensive wall, which Allen was on, shook under the tremendous impact. The beastkin and merfolk soldiers staggered as they gazed upon the destruction that could be called neither a miracle nor a nightmare.

Allen and Cecil, however, were used to this chaos.

“I’ll switch to attacking the surrounding area,” Cecil said. She knew that she had to rid the vast western region of Galiat of the monsters plaguing it.

“Right. Leave the big ones to me. I need to create more slaves,” Allen instructed, thinking ahead.

“All right. Understood.”

After giving her curt response, Cecil gazed down at the horde of monsters that had survived her meteor and unleashed a barrage of attack spells. Everyone with a Mage Talent—herself included—used attack spells that differed from the offensive skills those with Warrior Talents like Krena employed. According to Merus, this world operated under such rules, which explained why there were different deities managing each Talent.

Cecil was able to manipulate fire, ice, lightning, and light elements. Each element had six magic skills—one for each of its levels. In Krena’s and Dogora’s cases, each level increase only raised their MP usage and Attack. Cecil, on the other hand, did set damage with each skill and was

able to use a new magic skill with each level increase, which raised her damage and range. Fire Magic, for example, was as follows:

Level 1: Fire

Single-target attack

MP usage: 5

Power: Based on Intelligence

Activation time: 3 seconds

Cooldown: 5 seconds

Level 2: Flame Lance

Area-of-effect attack

MP usage: 20

Power and range: Based on Intelligence

Activation time: 6 seconds

Cooldown: 10 seconds

Level 3: Mega Fire

Single-target attack

MP usage: 30

Power: Based on Intelligence

Activation time: 15 seconds

Cooldown: 1 minute

Level 4: Flame Rain

Area-of-effect attack

MP usage: 100

Power and range: Based on Intelligence

Activation time: 30 seconds

Cooldown: 3 minutes

Level 5: Flare

Single-target attack

MP usage: 200

Power: Based on Intelligence

Activation time: 1 minute

Cooldown: 5 minutes

Level 6: Inferno

Area-of-effect attack

MP usage: 500

Power and range: Based on Intelligence

Activation time: 3 minutes

Cooldown: 10 minutes

Cecil poured her mana into her rod and chanted, "Flame Lance."

Exactly six seconds after she scribbled her magical incantation in the air, fiery spears rained down on the daemonic incarnations and monsters. They were turned to ash in an instant.

"H-How was she able to cast Inferno so quickly?" a member of the mage squad gasped.

"No, she chanted, 'Flame Lance.' Still, how is her Fire Magic so effective?" another wondered.

The mage squad was so confused by how quickly Cecil had activated her spell that some lost their concentration. Some had even written their incantations incorrectly, causing their spells to disperse in all directions. Usually, no one made such an elementary mistake.

Daemonic incarnations and monsters were known to be highly resistant to fire; no one understood why Cecil had seemingly ignored this disadvantage. Yet every time the creatures trampled over their fallen comrades, they, too, fell victim to Flame Lance.

The beastkin mage squad members drew their own conclusions as the pile of soot grew. They had been tasked with stopping the oncoming enemies and becoming obstacles for the monsters that followed. Their mission was to buy time. They had chosen this strategy because they did not have enough power to defeat the monsters with their Attack Magic. Cecil, however, perhaps due to her strengthened Intelligence, was able to launch powerful Fire Magic that paid no heed to the monsters' resistance and burnt them to a crisp. And so, she set her enemies ablaze, creating space that lured more victims toward her.

"Ugh, this wall's in the way. Flare!" Cecil chanted. She raised both arms in the air as a massive flame started to form.

"Huh?!" the mage squad gasped.

She swung her arms down in the direction of the wedge-shaped wall that was their second line of defense. The fire flew toward the wall and exploded on contact, blowing the magic barrier the mage squad had painstakingly created to bits along with the surrounding monsters. Only then did they realize just how high Cecil's Intelligence was, as rocks and ice made from magic could only be destroyed by spells cast by a user who possessed higher Intelligence.

Cecil was equipped with two rings that boosted her Intelligence by 5,000 apiece, as well as a Rod of the Wizardess King she had obtained from defeating the Iron Golem, which increased her Intelligence by an

additional 4,000. With over 20,000 Intelligence and a special twenty percent magical damage boost from her weapon, her spells were far more powerful than anything anyone could have imagined.

In contrast, the beastkin mage squad members could only reach between 3,000 and 5,000 Intelligence even if they equipped themselves with every magic-enhancing weapon and tool they could find. Put simply, the hundred-beastkin-strong mage squad that had split off into groups of five to ten to cast their spells over a wide range was worth one Cecil. Indeed, her power was truly overwhelming. When she had joined the fray, even the spear squad had frozen in astonishment.

“More monsters will approach us from both sides,” Cecil said as she launched more spells. “Leave this place to me. You all should separate into two groups.”

“R-Right,” the mage squad captain replied with a nod.

Together with the spear squad captain, they broke into two groups, each containing both mages and spearmen. Allen saw the beastkin split off and came up with a plan of his own.

“Dogora, assist the people on the right. I’ll take the left,” he ordered.

“Gotcha. Will Cecil be fine taking the front by herself?” Dogora asked.

“Yeah. She’ll be fine, right, Orochi?”

Allen’s five-headed Dragon A Summon, a five-headed Hydra, emerged. “*Yeah. Not a problem. Graaah!*”

The twenty-meter-tall, hundred-plus-meter-long Hydra reared back one of its heads and let out a mighty roar, causing the beastkin and Crevelle soldiers to tremble in fear.

You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?

Its other four heads split into pairs, and the beast spewed fire in three directions as it slowly trudged forward. It walked past the second line of defense that Cecil had blown away using Flare and fought against the daemonic incarnations and monsters that continued to flood the area.

The Insects As that had descended on the forests to either side of the battlefield when Cecil had launched her Petit Meteor were finally fighting against the monsters that had been marching through those forests. The Summons were flying farther west to target the monsters that were ignoring the wall that Allen was on and trying to attack the Crevelle residents.

“Seems like there are no problems,” Allen muttered to himself.

“That so?” Beast Princess Shia asked.

“Yes. If we keep going at this pace, we should be able to destroy all the enemies attacking us within half a day. All that’s left is to prepare ourselves for any attacks from our flanks while pressing forward. We’ll increase our scouting range and wipe out any remaining enemies.”

“That is what your Summons will be doing, correct? Then we should split into two groups and protect the Crevelle citizens while supporting your attacks.” Shia turned to her subordinates. “Did you hear that, Captain Rudo, Vice-Captain Rasu?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Your wish is our command!”

Rudo and Rasu gave a swift salute before heading down the dirt staircase to the west of the wall. And with that, Team Allen had successfully managed to meet up with Shia and her beastkin squad.

Chapter 2: A Reward from the Crevelle Royal Family

After Allen's initial encounter with Shia, his team had spent the next three hours wiping out the enemies coming from the west. They had continued to protect the five hundred refugees of Crevelle who were headed for the fortified city of Carlo to the east. Once they had parted ways, Team Allen had marched to the west with Shia's beastkin squad of fifteen hundred. Everyone in her squad possessed a Talent, and they could easily slay daemonic incarnations and Rank B monsters.

Three days later, Team Allen had managed to traverse a third of Crevelle while decimating the monsters and daemonic incarnations that blocked their path. He had also created a barrier with Gold and Silver Beans to form a safe zone. In doing so, Allen learned just how small of a kingdom Crevelle was. But thanks to its size, his team had managed to rid the land of monsters much quicker than Team Sophie in the desert and Team Keel in the half-destroyed land of Carlonea. He decided to tackle the remaining two-thirds of the kingdom at a later date and chose to head back to the fortified city for now. The refugees of Crevelle were surely waiting for him.

The members of Team Keel had not been twiddling their thumbs while waiting for the general who was supposed to arrive with the main army, however. Merus had gathered the soldiers who had been dispatched to the three fortresses to have them help defeat monsters, guided the refugees to a safe area, healed the wounded, and erected barriers. Once the main army had arrived at the fort, they were worked to the bone to further increase the size of their safe zone.

For the past three days, the beastfolk squad under Beast Princess Shia had been doing more than just fighting. They had scouted the terrain, investigated villages, saved any survivors, helped evacuation efforts, and treated the injured using Blessings of Heaven and Potherbs. The well-trained soldiers had been doing all that they could. Needless to say, Allen did not want any of them to be killed or transformed into daemonic incarnations, so he had used his Fish Summons to buff her squad. He

spoke quite a bit with Shia while they were working together.

On the first night, when they had been trying to think of a plan for a defensive battle, her first words had been, “I’m surprised that you conquered that Rank S dungeon!” When she had first been told of this via a letter sent by Beast Prince Zeu, she had ripped it to shreds out of rage. She had gone through the painstaking effort of capturing the Pontiff of Daemonism and thus overcoming her trial, but now, she was unsure if she could become the Beast King.

If her older brother had cleared the otherwise unconquered Rank S dungeon, Shia believed that she simply needed to go one better. She had decided that her claim to fame would be quelling the civil war that was about to break out in the Crevelle Kingdom, with her plan being to act as the middleman between Crevelle and the Prostia Empire. Eventually, she would rally their support so that they would form a diplomatic relationship with her home country. She had divulged this plan to Allen during their two-day travel to Carlo.

Just two days ago, two hundred thousand Crevelle refugees had arrived seeking shelter. Thanks to Allen and his friends marching east while destroying any monsters in their path and the Insect As in the forest fending off any monsters that could have been lurking within, the refugees had made it to Carlo safely. Not once had they bumped into any enemies.

The following day, after a good night’s rest, Gold and Silver Beans were sowed around the fortress city of Carlo to create a barrier for safety. Once that was done, Team Allen and Beast Princess Shia were summoned by the Crevelle royal family. According to the merfolk messenger who had been sent to retrieve them, the royal family wanted to thank the group for their heroic actions.

“Do we have to go too? I’d rather stay back,” Allen grumbled with a frown.

Shia recalled the letter from her older brother that had contained a description of the boy. It said that Allen was someone who did not hold deep respect for others, and this rang especially true when it came to royalty.

“Don’t say that,” Shia said. “It’s the king’s duty to reward good deeds.”

The group made for the castle, which stood in the center of the city. They headed through its wooden gates, across the stone pavement of its courtyard, and inside its stone walls. A tidy-looking merfolk was waiting to guide them—likely one who served the Crevelle royal family.

“This way, please,” the merfolk said.

The group walked up a few staircases before finally arriving at a simple room that had nothing more than a single wooden table in it. However, there were three merfolk seated and waiting for them, all wearing their own bejeweled crowns. Allen guessed that these merfolk must have been the king, queen, and princess. Beside them were several knights that resembled the Kingdom of Ratash’s royal guard. Without a doubt, this was where they had been summoned.

Huh? This place doesn’t really seem like an audience room. Maybe it’s because Beast Princess Shia is with us.

Shia was the princess of Albahal; the merfolk probably found it unwise to have her seated in an audience room. A merfolk resembling a king noticed the group enter.

“Thank you for coming. Do have a seat,” he said. Wrapped around his head was a thick crown adorned with jewels.

Upon closer inspection, Allen spotted four empty chairs across the table from the royals.

“Thank you,” Her Highness Shia said.

The four glanced at one another for a moment before taking their seats. From the left were Dogora, Beast Princess Shia, Allen, and Cecil. Allen had nothing to say and remained quiet, but it seemed Dogora was trying his best to hide his presence. He was as silent as a tomb.

Allen stared at the merfolk sitting across from him—he had never seen the species so up close. He thought back to when he had learned about merfolk at the Academy. They worshipped Aqua, the Goddess of Water, and their homeland, the Prostia Empire, could be found in the depths of the sea. It was formed by the allied nations of Galiat, known as the Union; the Garlesian Continent, where Albahal was located; and the places bordering the Central Continent.

The empire was a treasure trove of ocean resources. Its main export was fish. Other species hesitated to plunge into the oceans riddled with sea monsters, and fisheries became the empire’s main industry. In addition, there were precious minerals, shellfish, pearls, and corals—items that served as popular accessories—that could only be found on the ocean floor. In recent years, talismans blessed by Goddess Aqua that warded away marine creatures had also started being sold. Thanks to these talismans being circulated around the world, people could fish even in seas infested with monsters, allowing Allen and many others to have access to

seafood.

Of course, the Holy Orbs of Macris had helped their economy greatly, becoming a local specialty that represented Prostia.

The nation in charge of selling the empire's specialties to others was the Crevelle Kingdom, for their country was above ground. The kingdom was a vassal state and was said to have formed when a Prostian duke had received orders from the empire to guide the residents of his duchy to the surface to form a settlement.

That was all Allen knew. The Prostia Empire was not a part of the Five Continent Alliance, and it was less neutral than it was disinterested in the whole Demon Lord Army affair. As a result, the boy had only briefly learned about the empire's geography in class.

However, the Crevelle Kingdom had friendly relationships with many nations. That was why it was responsible for distributing the prized local specialties of the empire. There were rumors that royals and titled nobility were buying jewelry along with useful magic tools to prepare themselves for the battle against the Demon Lord Army. It was their duty to protect their people.

I see. No wonder Beast Princess Shia had her eye on the Crevelle Kingdom.

When Beast Prince Zeu had conquered the Rank S dungeon, his honorable feat of being the first to do so had spread on a global scale. Hero Helmios and Admiral Garara had joined the conquest in hopes of receiving this honor as well.

Her Highness must've thought that the only way to turn the tables was to bring practical profit instead of honor.

When she thought about how to bring in enough money that her feat would be on par with her brother's fame, she determined that she wanted to form a friendly diplomatic relationship with the Prostia Empire—something no country in the world had managed to do just yet. If she was successful, she would bring indescribable profits to Albahal.

I guess Beast Prince Zeu can't sit around idly.

Just as Allen was wondering which of the siblings would be more fit to succeed the title of Beast King, a delicious aroma wafted into the room.

"Since you have worked hard to save our residents, I'd love for you to satiate your hunger first," the king of Crevelle said.

Merfolk servants entered the room, bringing various delectable dishes. A massive fish grilled with herbs was plated onto four dishes and handed

to Allen's group.

Ooh! This looks delicious!

Allen was excited to be able to taste seafood, a rare delicacy in this world. He voraciously wolfed down his food as though he were trying to get his effort's worth. As he was busily indulging in his gluttonous side, Shia decided to explain what was happening.

"We shall resume our efforts to rid the land of monsters," she said. "In three days' time, we should be able to recapture the royal capital."

"Th-Three days?" the king shouted. "I-Impossible! Are you sure, Beast Princess Shia?!"

"Wonderful! Is that really true?!" Princess Carmine cried with sparkling eyes.

"Allen here is the first adventurer in two decades to have been assigned Rank S by the Guild," Shia explained. "With his support, it's certainly not an impossible mission."

Rumors claimed that, including Allen, there were fewer than three Rank S adventurers in the world. It was an honorable status that transcended the realm any normal adventurer could hope for.

"Is that true, Allen?" the king inquired.

The boy smiled. "It is. I'm glad that everyone in the Crevelle Kingdom is safe."

And the fish was delicious.

"Hey!" Cecil scolded at Allen's inattentive reply. She stomped on his foot from underneath the table. "You should fully answer his question. You're being rude."

"Ack! I'm sorry!" Allen hastily said. "Um, okay, then I'll explain a few things."

He stated that it would take a few more days to ensure that the royal capital was completely safe and guide the royals back to the city. Even more time would be needed to purify the land of daemonic incarnations and those possibly infected by them. Unfortunately, the Crevelle royal family would have to stay in Carlo for the foreseeable future.

"You unexpectedly have good manners, Sir Allen," Carmine said.

The boy was not an aristocrat, and the princess had only heard that he was a mere adventurer. She had expected him to be more crass and vulgar, but he spoke rather eloquently. She could not help but have her interest piqued.

"C-Carmine!" the king scolded. "He spared our lives. Don't be so rude

to him, my dear.”

“I’m sorry, father,” the princess replied. “But I believe we should offer him some sort of reward.”

“A reward?” Allen asked, turning toward the king.

The merfolk nodded. “Indeed. Is there anything you’d like?”

“Uh, let’s see...”

“Anything at all. No need to hold back,” Princess Carmine added with a gentle smile.

“Please pardon my insolence, but I’d like to refrain from requesting anything,” Allen said firmly, refusing the reward.

“Huh?” The three merfolk royals gasped and exchanged glances with one another.

“Um, m-may I ask for a reason?” the princess inquired.

Even Shia looked stunned by Allen’s words. Cecil and Dogora, on the other hand, were used to this and did not bat an eye despite Allen not having discussed his decision with them beforehand.

“Many of Crevelle’s citizens are begging for aid,” Allen said. “I believe it’s imperative that the royal family provide them with ample food and shelter. Please give our reward to the citizens.”

He once again bowed his head, fully aware just how impudent he must have sounded to the royal family.

My life is filled with situations like these. Maybe it’s because I’m always too late to arrive at the scene. I wonder if there are any praiseworthy kings willing to trade black pepper and ships.

Allen did not hesitate to make requests of those with power, such as Rohzen, the God of Spirits, and Dungeon Master Dygragni. However, when it came to poorer aristocrats who offered money in exchange for the protection of their daughters, or nations that greatly suffered from the destruction wreaked by the Demon Lord Army, Allen made sure to refuse any rewards. Above all, the Crevelle Kingdom had no resources to offer him anything. There were at least two hundred thousand refugees within the city waiting for help. Albahal had stated that they would be crossing the sea to lend support by providing food supplies, but time was of the essence.

“Huh...” Shia murmured.

For the past three days, she had worked hard with Allen, so she had not expected his selfless response. As the word tumbled out of her mouth, she could only think that this boy, who had devised a thorough plan to wipe

out the monsters, had a unique mindset.

“But...” the Crevelle King started.

“Then how about this?” Allen suggested. “Once everything has been settled, may I come ask you for a reward? But I should warn you that I may ask for twice as much as what you’re offering right now.” He gave a joking grin.

The king smiled in return. “If you insist, then we shall set this matter aside for now.”

Allen felt like he had managed to skillfully refuse the reward without damaging the royal family’s pride. And if the kingdom really *were* to flourish after this incident, Allen would surely request better compensation. He carefully committed those words to memory.

All right. All that’s left is to return and take care of the rest of the monsters. Hmm?

Just as Allen had eaten his fill of seafood and was about to leave, he noticed a purple jewel glimmering on Princess Carmine’s arm. Its bright dazzle was eye-catching. The princess noticed his stare.

“Hmm? Ah, are you curious about this?” she asked. “This is a Holy Orb of Macris.”

She gave a happy smile. She must have been pleased to see that Allen was interested in the local specialty that her kingdom was so proud of.

“Ah, the one from the tale,” Allen said. “Is this a Tear of the Holy Fish Macris?”

Whoa! I heard that you could purchase an entire kingdom with just one of those.

Allen’s understanding was that this item was more expensive than anything else in this world. It was said that a single Orb had caused a neighboring nation to concede a third of their land to Crevelle as payment.

“That’s what I’ve been told,” Carmine replied. “In our kingdom, the royal family has a custom of sending one to their spouse or potential partner. It’s a symbol of love. My father presented this to my mother.”

“I see,” Allen said. “It’s a stunning jewel.”

“Then please feel free to take a closer look.”

The princess removed her leather-woven bracelet that served as a small shrine for the priceless gem. She handed it to her servant, who took it to Allen.

“Ah, what a beautiful purple stone! It’s absolutely breathtaking, and it doesn’t look like a tear at all,” Allen observed.

He understood why kings and nobles from other nations coveted this jewel. Its beauty was alluring. Allen nodded as he wondered if fish were capable of shedding such lovely, purple, crystallized tears. He gazed at it under the light of the magic tool on the table.

“Ah, Cecil, would you like to take a look?” he asked.

It's your favorite, a Tear of the Holy Fish Macris!

He knew that Cecil would be interested in seeing it at least once in her life, so he offered the bracelet to her.

“Huh?! H-Hey!” Cecil wailed, her face beet red. She stood up, looking half angry and half troubled while gazing down at Allen, biting her lip.

What's with her?

Princess Carmine glanced at the king, who nodded in response.

“Sir Allen, you may keep that bracelet. Please do with it as you wish,” she said with a smile.

“Huh? Can I really have this?” Allen asked.

“Of course. We still have a few in the Prostia Empire.”

“But it's so precious...”

He glanced at Beast Princess Shia. It was true that he had lent his aid to help spare the lives of Crevelle's citizens, but Shia had done the same. He did not know if it was right for him to be the only one receiving such a priceless gift.

“No need to act so reserved,” Shia said. “I plan on forming a meaningful relationship with them. That's far more valuable than any item.”

She proceeded to flash a toothy grin at the king. He jolted, as her gaze was that of a predator aiming for prey.

“Besides, purple doesn't suit me,” the Beast Princess added. “If I were to wear something, it'd be yellow.”

How can she not like the color of such a pretty gem?

Even Allen, who was not interested in jewels, found the Holy Orb of Macris to be absolutely stunning. He could not understand Shia's words, but he turned back to the bracelet fitted with the stone.

A bracelet, huh? Would be helpful if Pelomas were here with me to appraise this. Can I really just have it?

None of Allen's party members had the Analyze skill like the merchant Pelomas did. When they had needed to learn the effects of the items they had found in the Rank S dungeon, they had been required to go to an appraiser and pay a fee.

“Please accept this gift from us,” Carmine said. “Just yesterday, we received word from the Prostia Empire that they have officially decided to lend us their aid. Among the supplies that they plan on dispatching to our kingdom is a Holy Orb of Macris.”

The Crevelle Kingdom and the Prostia Empire were inhabited by the same species, and the royal family were descendants of a duke of the empire; they had blood ties to the emperor. While there were a few rumors of a potential uprising, Prostia could not ignore Crevelle when it was in dire need of help. However, there was a budget in place that prevented the empire from providing monetary aid to the kingdom. Because of that, the empire had decided to part with a Holy Orb of Macris, which could be sold for millions of gold coins.

Parting with such a valuable item for free simply because they could get another worried Allen—he didn’t want to negatively affect the kingdom’s relationship with the empire. But if this was in exchange for saving over two hundred thousand people along with the royal family, he was tempted to gladly accept.

“I see,” he finally said.

Unable to find a reason to refuse, he glanced at the stat-boosting ring on his finger. He could only receive the effects of two, but the final floor boss of the Rank S dungeon had dropped a necklace. He hoped that a different type of accessory would allow him to stack the effects.

I might be able to equip a bracelet since it’s different from a ring.

Just as he wrapped the bracelet containing the Holy Orb of Macris around his arm, he felt a significant boost in his stats.

“Huh?” he gasped.

“Is anything the matter, Sir Allen?” Princess Carmine asked.

He ignored her question and summoned his grimoire to check his Status.

“Huh?! What is this?! What’s going on?!” he cried, unable to contain his befuddlement.

Aside from the change in his stats, he had even been granted a new effect.

Effects of Holy Orb of Macris (Bracelet)

Reduces activation time of Attack Magic by half.

Halves cooldown time.

+5,000 MP

+5,000 Intelligence

Reduce cooldowns by half? What is this? Wait, I feel like I've heard stories about this before...

Back when Allen was at the Academy, he had heard rumors about items capable of reducing cooldown times. He had never seen one appear from a chest or at an auction before, however.

This is amazing. I don't doubt that this is worth millions of gold. Can I equip two bracelets too? Would that completely reduce my cooldown? No, even if I get down to just a quarter of my original cooldown times, that's more than enough! Are Extra Skills included too?

In the games he had played in his previous life, after every new patch, an item was added that put all others to shame. After painstakingly grinding, collecting, and processing items, the new item was far superior. Allen remembered the excitement he had felt at those times, as he had desperately wanted to get his hands on the newest equip.

This item is way more precious than the MP Recovery Ring.

"Is it to your liking?" Princess Carmine asked, all smiles.

"O-Of course!" Allen cried.

He was unable to contain his excitement and elation. The bracelet was so precious and its effects were so good that he was not planning on returning it.

"Isn't that great, Lady Cecil?" Carmine said.

Allen was confused at first, but he quickly caught on.

Right. This bracelet is practically made for her.

Tossing it over to her, he said, "Cecil, this item's amazing."

"Eep!" Cecil cried in an odd voice that he had never heard before.

Her face was redder than a tomato, but she reached out toward the bracelet. In her haste, she was unable to catch it properly, causing her to juggle the precious jewel for a short while.



Chapter 3: A Battle Against Bask, the King of Shura

Five days had passed since Allen's meeting with the royal family of Crevelle. Team Allen had headed for the royal capital of Crevelle with Beast Princess Shia while killing any daemonic incarnations that lurked nearby. As promised to the king, the group had managed to recapture the royal capital in just three days.

However, unlike Teomenia, where the Demon Deity Lycaoron had resided, the royal capital did not have an altar that emitted a pillar of light. There was one outside the walls that protected the city, however, standing atop a hill that looked over the ocean. It looked like a temple to Aqua, the Goddess of Water. Once Allen and his group had recaptured the capital, they noticed the light being emitted from this temple. In other words, there should have been a Demonic Deity guarding that altar, and it was unlikely that Team Allen and Shia's army could best them.

And so, Allen had called for his party to regroup. The beastkin squad would cooperate with them to defeat the Demonic Deity as well. Each team leader had gauged their situation and made their decision. Sophie had left matters to Olvahs, the king of the dark elves, and Keel had had the Calvarna army handle the rest of the monsters. It had taken both teams two days to prepare to head for Crevelle Kingdom.

On the day of their reunion, Allen used his Bird A's Ability, Return to Nest, and teleported inside the fort of Carlonea, where Team Keel was.

"Allen?!" Krena gasped, rushing over to him.

It had only been twelve days since they had parted ways, but it felt like she had not seen him for a good while.

"Heya. Long time no see," Allen replied.

"We've cleaned up quite a few of the issues here," Keel said, approaching the pair.

"So it seems. Tell me the details later."

Allen had used Sharing with his Summon, Merus, and was more or less aware of what Team Keel had been up to. Still, there had been times when Merus was away, and Allen was not aware of any minute details; he

wanted to receive a report from the team leader.

Keel spoke about the three days after he had defended the fort by the river that ran along the border between Calvarna and Carlonea. His team had slaughtered all the monsters that had attacked via the river. Following the arrival of Calvarna's main army, Team Keel had gone across the river and into Carlonea to protect the nation from monsters. He had taken a few people with Talents from the Calvarna army and had them join his cause. Thanks to their combined efforts, Keel and his team had exterminated the monsters and daemonic incarnations near the capital, Mitpoi. Once Keel's report was over, Merus arrived.

"All right, let's go. Cecil and the others are waiting," Allen said.

He used Bird A's Awakened Ability, Homing Instinct, to teleport himself, Keel, and Krena back to Crevelle. Meanwhile, Merus used Bird A's Return to Nest Ability to warp to Team Sophie in the middle of a desert oasis.

Bird As had an Ability and an Awakened Ability that teleported the user where Nests were. The difference was that the former, Return to Nest, could transport *only* Merus, who could activate it using Angel Halo, or Allen. The latter, Homing Instinct, could teleport friends as well. Since Homing Instinct was an Awakened Ability, there was a cooldown of one day if Allen or Merus used it. The plan was for Merus to use Return to Nest and teleport to a Nest where the rest of Allen's friends were, then use Homing Instinct to transport everyone to the Nest that was their final destination.

Cecil and Dogora were on standby as Keel and Krena were teleported. Krena noticed a bracelet on Cecil; it was woven with leather and had been fitted with a large, sparkling purple jewel.

"Huh? Where'd you get that bracelet?" Krena asked.

"Mweh heh heh," Cecil chuckled with a grin. She waved around her bracelet-fitted arm with a series of unusual movements, clearly showing off her new accessory.

Well, I can't blame her. She basically received a one-in-a-million drop item. I'd probably do the same thing.

Cecil's Holy Orb of Macris was highly sought by women—especially nobles—who knew of the tale *Tears of the Holy Fish Macris*. It was an item that every lady dreamed of.

"Awww, lucky! I want one too!" Krena whined.

Cecil's cheeks grew pink as her eyes became damp. She started to

wiggle her body out of embarrassment.

“You got a necklace last time, remember?” Allen reminded Krena. He was referring to the final floor of the Rank S dungeon.

“Hmph...” Krena pouted.

“And the Holy Orb of Macris is an item specifically for Attack Magic users. I *did* hear that there are other Holy Orbs out there, so there might be one that’s a perfect match for you.”

“Really?”

After Allen had received the Holy Orb of Macris from Princess Carmine, he had showered Merus with questions. Currently, the angel was Allen’s Summon and could share information with him even if they were apart. Merus could be in the far south while Allen was in the far west and they could still communicate with one another. They were also capable of holding telepathic conversations.

According to Merus, much like Minor Deities, beasts that gathered faith were given power by the gods, turning them into Holy Beasts. These beasts would produce crystallized forms of their powers known as Holy Orbs. Holy Fish Macris was one such Holy Beast, and Holy Bird Quatro and Holy Beast Rubanka were among the others.

The world sure is vast.

Allen could not help but feel this way. This world was filled with gods, Minor Deities, Spirits, and Holy Beasts that lived in a world separate from that of humans. He had no idea where they were or what kinds of powers they held. Simply living in this world was not enough for him to glean this kind of information.

He had only managed to get his hands on a Holy Orb by pure, dumb luck. It was the result of numerous coincidences. Allen had met Sophie during his Academy days and had learned that her hometown of Rohzenheim was under attack by the Demon Lord Army. He had decided to lend his aid and, in doing so, found out that his friends could undergo class promotions. His party had headed to clear the Rank S dungeon, had become stronger, and had managed to save the nations of Galiat, including the Holy Land of Elmahl. If even one thing had gone differently, he might have never known about Holy Beasts and Holy Orbs.

This also implied that if Allen purposefully grew his area of activity, he would be able to find items that he had never seen before, allowing them to do even more things. Just as an item was hiding in plain sight within a famous fairy tale despite it having been omitted from Academy

documents, there might have been nuggets of truth within rumors. Indeed, it was very possible that valuable information was just lying around, waiting to be discovered.

By paying careful attention and traveling far and wide, he might gain the ability to prevent his party from getting softlocked in a certain situation. If he were to use games as an example, not doing so would be like forgetting to find an item or not doing a quest that was required to move forward.

“Well, I don’t know for sure. Merus kept silent,” Allen replied.

Just then, the angel brought Sophie, Volmaar, and Meruru with him.

“I wasn’t keeping silent,” Merus said. “You’ve never asked anything outside of Extra Skills, Sir Allen.”

Allen could not argue with that.

It’s true that I was a bit too obsessed with Extra Mode. Wait...

“I heard that the crown prince of the Prostia Empire was a Holy Fish, but is that possible?” Allen asked, a realization hitting him.

Merus nodded. “It’s not completely outside the realm of possibility.”

“Then can I form a contract with a god and have an Extra Skill unlocked?”

“No, you shouldn’t do that,” Merus replied, changing his tone.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Surely you know the story of a country plagued with famine forming a contract with Molmol, the God of Bountiful Harvest?”

Molmol had been worshipped by agricultural villages that prayed for stable harvests of vegetables and wheat. This faith spread across the world, making him into a Greater Deity. Those higher in rank had more followers and thus had power on a grander scale than others. When Molmol became a Greater Deity, a certain nation came to him to form a contract. This nation had suffered from famine due to poor weather, bug infestations, and other problems that had led to repeated poor harvests. Molmol graciously accepted, and the nation was able to reliably harvest molmo year-round, no matter how poor the weather was. In fact, the residents of the nation did not need to do a thing as the fruits grew in abundance by themselves. The people ate molmo and regained their energy. They never forgot to express their gratitude toward Molmol as their life returned to normal.

However, the people soon realized that they could not harvest any other crops. It did not matter how well they plowed the fields or how many fruit seedlings they planted. They could produce nothing but molmo, which

grew all year long, rain or shine. Thus, they began selling them to other nations. Though they could eat the molmo to their heart's content, they yearned for other food to enter their diet. They used the money they earned from selling the fruits to buy other crops. People were able to eat fewer and fewer molmo, leading them to have a surplus of the fruit. All around the nation, the abandoned molmo rolled on the ground to rot.

One day, the wrath of Molmol fell upon the king. The king vowed to never let another molmo rot in hopes of quelling the Greater Deity's anger and swiftly issued a decree. The people made sure to eat molmo and diligently sold them to other countries before the fruit ever had a chance to spoil again.

As a result, molmo could be obtained anywhere, even by serfs, and were sold for a low price.

"The more powers the deities use, the more they break the equilibrium of the world," Merus explained. "Humans are free to hope that their convenient wishes will be granted, but even if they are, it will always come with a price."

Allen thought back to the kamikami. This fruit had been cultivated in the Kingdom of Ratash far before Allen was born. Its flesh was so sour when eaten raw that one would spit it out. However, when it was dehydrated and dried, only its sweetness would remain.

These fruits had been used as an emergency food supply in the kingdom during winter. Nobles and serfs alike consumed it. When molmo, which could be reliably harvested even in the winter and were sold for cheap, entered the market, the people of Ratash stopped making dried kamikami. Kamikami trees remained in Ratash to this day, but no one dared to harvest their fruit. Allen remembered that House Granvelle had one such tree as well; Cecil had climbed atop his shoulders to pluck a kamikami from its branches.

As he was deep in thought, the rest of the party was overjoyed by their reunion. Sophie and Keel, the leaders of their respective teams, were sharing information.

"Your team is amazing, Sir Keel," the elf said. "We haven't been able to clear out all the monsters yet." She sounded a bit bothered that she was a step behind Keel.

"The desert's a huge place," Allen assured her. "It's not your fault that you're a little behind, Sophie."

"You think so?" Sophie was a bit surprised that Allen had suddenly

joined the conversation, but she managed to nod.

“Right, we should go. We’re probably making everyone wait. Come on, guys.”

He led his party toward Beast Princess Shia’s army. She was waiting on the outskirts of the royal capital, right next to the outer wall.

Now that I think about it, beastkin worship Garm. Isn’t he a Greater Deity too?

There were over two hundred million beastkin in the world, most of whom resided in Albahal. They all worshipped Garm, the God of Beasts.

Legend stated that a beastkin who was being persecuted by humans had prayed to Garm in hopes of gaining power that would allow them to attain independence and freedom. The Greater Deity had granted this wish, and after receiving Garm’s favor, the beastkin had left the Central Continent and created Albahal, the Country of Beastkin, in Garlesia. Naturally, the beastkin worshipped Garm far more passionately than they did Elmea, elevating the former to a Greater Deity.

Because of this, there were times when Garm gave special blessings to the beastkin. One of these blessings took the form of Beast Mode, which Beast Prince Zeu and the Ten Heroic Beasts had shown off during the battle against the final floor boss of the Rank S dungeon. This created the tradition of beastkin valuing power above all and was likely why the beastkin soldiers waiting for Allen outside always looked so proud while standing tall.

“Over here,” a beastkin soldier said, guiding the No-life Gamers to the latest tent.

Beast Princess Shia and her beastkin subordinates were seated in an upside-down U shape with the opening facing Allen’s group. At that opening were eight empty chairs—likely where the Gamers would be sitting. There was a blackboard with a cover, and a diagram of a templelike structure was drawn on it with chalk.

“Sir Allen and his party have arrived,” the soldier announced, causing Shia to look up from the blackboard.

Princess Shia would be participating in this upcoming battle with the Demonic Deity. Though she had saved Crevelle Kingdom from certain destruction by having worked with Allen to destroy the daemonic incarnations, she believed that if she gave up before the Demonic Deity fight, it would affect her future claim to the throne. When Allen had stated that he would be subjugating the Demonic Deity, she had insisted on

offering her full cooperation.

She was not the only one participating either. Captain Rudo the rhinokin, along with a squad of elite beastkin that possessed three-star Talents or better, would be joining the fray. Only the cream of the crop had gathered in this tent.

For the past five days, Allen had been hearing from Captain Rudo about how he had become Beast Princess Shia's personal guard and attendant after retiring from the military. Rudo had served her since he was five, but when he had learned that she had accepted a trial as a means of fighting for the throne and formed a squad to protect her and fight by her side, he had been selected as squad captain.

In his youth, Rudo was a fierce warrior who had won the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. The deerkin Rasu had been his vice-captain back when the two had served in the military. The rest of the elite squad was formed by carefully selecting those with Talents.

"Please head inside," the soldier said.

Allen stood in front with the rest of his party in tow. "Thank you for your patience," he said, apologizing to the rest of the beastkin for making them wait before silently bowing to them. Then, Captain Rudo stood up and approached him.

"Your Highness Princess Sophialohne," the rhinokin said, walking past Allen. "Thank you so much for coming today. Please have a seat here." He guided Sophie toward a seat across from Princess Shia; this was likely where the person in charge would be seated.

The elf princess obediently followed the captain. However, instead of taking a seat, she turned around and said, "I believe you should sit here, Lord Allen."

Upon hearing her firm words, Shia and the rest of the beastkin understood that Allen was the leader of the party. Allen silently stepped forward and sat down. Rudo pulled out the chair beside the boy, and Sophie finally took her seat with a bright smile. Everyone but Volmaar, who stood quietly behind Sophie, proceeded to carefully sit down. Once they had all settled in, Vice-Captain Rasu spoke.

"We will now begin the meeting about the Demonic Deity battle."

"I'm sorry, may I have a few moments?" Shia requested, standing up.

What now?

Allen looked at the Beast Princess quizzically as she gave a slight bow to Sophie, who sat across from her.

“My name is Shia van Albahal from Albahal, the Country of Beastkin. This is my first time meeting you, Princess Sophialohne of Rohzenheim. I apologize that we had to meet in this fashion, but I was looking forward to greeting you. I hope we can get along.”

Sophie stood up in kind and bowed deeply. “Certainly, Beast Princess Shia. I am Sophialohne of Rohzenheim. I apologize for such a belated greeting as well. I look forward to getting to know you. From now on, I ask that you call me ‘Sophie’ as Lord Allen and the rest of his party do.” She looked up and gently smiled.

“Is that so? Then you may call me ‘Shia’ as well.” The Beast Princess had calmly given her response, but she was curious as to why Sophie had referred to the boy as “Lord Allen.”

Beastkin used to be a race of humans. They had not forgotten their dark history of being persecuted by the Empire of Giamut. When they fled to Garlesia, they had found it imperative to have an organized chain of command in their military and had imitated the social statuses that humans had. And though they managed to create a societal structure that greatly resembled the humans’, they refused to create serfs as they were treated like slaves. Any slaves in their land were criminals who, as punishment, were forced to work and given a limited range of travel. If these slaves gave birth, the newborns would be commoners. Beast Princess Shia, who had been raised with these values, could not understand why the princess of Rohzenheim insisted on being called casually by her name while referring to one of her party members as “lord.”

The Beast Princess had obtained quite a bit of information on Allen from Albahal. The boy hailed from a family of serfs within the tiny Kingdom of Ratash on the Central Continent. Unlike in Albahal, most serfs in human society died as serfs. Allen, however, had managed to obtain the rank of commoner and attend an Academy. Last year, he had joined the battle against the Demon Lord Army in Rohzenheim. He had produced outstanding results, and as a reward, he had somehow become the grand strategist of Rohzenheim.

This implied that Rohzenheim had greatly appreciated Allen’s abilities. Princess Sophialohne, who had a high likelihood of becoming the next queen, had even offered the highest-ranking seat to him. It was clear that she was quite aware of how skilled her party leader was.

Shia had heard that the elves of Rohzenheim did not care much about status. Did that explain Sophie’s attitude? Was the elf princess allowing

others to stand above her as long as they had the skills to have earned that position? Did her cultural background allow this much freedom? Shia had requested that Allen refer to herself as “Princess Shia,” but she felt that perhaps “Shia” was just fine.

“May we begin the meeting, Princess Shia?” Captain Rudo asked.

She snapped back to reality. “I-Indeed.”

When she sat down, she noticed Allen staring at her, perplexed by the situation and seemingly expecting something to occur. Sophie, who sat to his left, and Krena, who sat two seats to his left, were also looking at Beast Princess Shia, waiting for the meeting to start. Krena had a sheathless greatsword in front of her. It was pointing down and her hands were resting on its guard. The other members of the party were also equipped. It wasn’t absurd to claim that this was rather impudent behavior in front of a royal, but Shia assumed that this was their way of doing things.

Albahal had never hired mercenaries of other species, and she had rarely fought alongside nonbeastkin. According to the beastkin who had returned from the Rank S dungeon, parties that had several species mingling together would assess raw abilities alone as they spent more time together. The origins and attitudes of each individual would matter less; obsessing over trivial matters like that would only hinder a party’s teamwork.

As Princess Shia’s mind was filled with various thoughts, she glanced at her subordinates and analyzed them. She had handpicked each soldier and had no doubt that they were excellent warriors. And while she could not blame them for being wary of Allen’s fully armed party, she felt like her squad was lacking in some way.

Captain Rudo began the meeting. “First, Sir Allen, I’d like to confirm one matter. In the temple beyond these walls is a Demonic Deity, correct?”

“That’s right,” Allen replied. “As I wrote on the blackboard the other day, there’s an altar in this area of the temple. I’m certain that a Demonic Deity is waiting for us there.”

For the past five days, while Allen had been exterminating the rest of the daemonic incarnations and monsters, he had used his Bird A to inspect the interior of the temple. The temple of Aqua, the Goddess of Water, sat on a cape between the royal capital of Crevelle—Allen’s current location—and the westernmost port city of Galiat. The Crevelle Kingdom was a state dependent on the Prostia Empire, a nation of merfolk on the ocean floor. When the citizens of the royal capital prayed to the altar, they were

also lowering their heads to their suzerain, the Empire.

For that reason, the temple was as large as Crevelle's royal castle and adorned with intricate carvings. The magnificent scenery of the ocean was beautifully etched into the aboveground temple. Perhaps it was a way for the king and the suzerain to show off their powers.

Allen had set up a few Nests for teleporting while inspecting the interior and found a Demonic Deity standing in front of the altar. He had used his findings to draw out a diagram on the blackboard. This was where the beastkin squad was cooking up plans of their own as well.

"Hmm... And we'd be fighting as a small group, right?" Rudo asked.

"Right," Allen replied. "We have a party of eight, and we'll use five of your elite soldiers, including Princess Shia, for a total of thirteen people. The Demonic Deity is extremely powerful. Even if you use your entire army of two thousand soldiers against them, I have no doubt that everyone would be killed within an hour. In addition, even if all two thousand of us charge at our enemy within the temple, only about ten people at most would be able to attack at a time. The rest of them would be unable to move nimbly in such a cramped space. I think it's best if we have a small party fight the Demonic Deity, allowing us to use each person's powers to their fullest."

Beast Princess Shia had an army of two thousand under her, and every soldier had a Talent of their own. Allen had asked Shia about the number of people who had three-star Talents or better. The answer he had received was "four."

Captain Rudo: Hammer Beast King (four stars)

Commander Kamu (Archer Squad): Bow Holy Beast (three stars)

Commander Gonu (Support Squad): Beast Spirit Medium (three stars)

Commander Sera (Healing Squad): Greater Holy Beast (three stars)

There's a four-star guy too. I guess I should expect no less from the winner of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament.

Rudo was a massive rhinokin who stood over two meters tall and looked to be over fifty years of age, but he gave off an air of intensity, vowing to protect Princess Shia from harm. Gonu the monkeykin's Talent, Beast Spirit Medium, allowed them to call upon wandering spirits and debuff enemies while buffing allies. Bearkin Sera had Greater Holy Beast,

a Talent that seemed to resemble Saintess. She was thus in charge of the Healing Squad. Along with these four was Shia, the Beast Princess, who possessed a three-star Talent called Beast Fist Lord. They would be working with Allen.

There were around seventeen hundred other soldiers with one-star Talents and about three hundred with two-star Talents. Despite Shia's position as Beast Princess, she was not given a large army. Furthermore, the Central Continent was sandwiched between Albahal and the Forgotten Continent; the Country of Beastkin had not fought the Demon Lord Army before. No one had died in battle yet, hence Albahal had quite a few Talent users remaining compared to other countries. The Central Continent had suffered especially greatly from the lack of capable warriors.

However, the majority of Albahal's Talent users had been dispatched to the Rank S dungeon within the Empire of Baukis. A good chunk of them had perished during their battles—there were not many like Sara and Uru, who had survived the dungeon and safely made it back home. Unfortunately, this meant that even though the Beast Princess needed to overcome a trial to claim the throne, the country was unable to provide her with a large army.

She had originally left her country with an army of three thousand soldiers, but she had jumped into back-to-back battles against Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism, and the daemoninc incarnations in order to successfully capture him. Between that and her efforts to aid the citizens of Crevelle, she had lost about a thousand of her men. Among the casualties was a commander who had a three-star Talent. To prevent any further loss of life, it was best for Shia's army to stay back. Though Vice-Captain Rasu had the two-star Talent of Spear Master, he was also asked to stay back.

"Do you have a specific plan in mind?" Rudo asked.

"First off, I want you five to listen to Princess Shia's orders within the temple," Allen started. "If you were to try to fight with our party of eight, I'm certain that our plans would become more complex. If we split into two parties and act as two cooperating groups, we won't need to have any complicated commands."

"I see. So, we should act with you by supporting your group, then?"

"Let's make it so that we can support one another. For example, if we were to move here, your party should move there..."

Allen stood up and crouched in front of the blackboard on the floor. He thought of a few potential situations and explained his plan while

scribbling with chalk what each party would do.

Captain Rudo and Vice-Captain Rasu silently listened to Allen's explanations. They were internally very surprised; though Allen's plans sounded simple, they were actually quite refined. Each party was split into a vanguard, middle guard, and rear guard. Their positions and movements would change based on the enemy or the other party. Allen had carefully thought about how each person should act and adapt to the situation. The beastkin who had fought through many battles knew that Allen had seen how the beastkin moved and accurately analyzed what they were and were not capable of.

The beastkin had been on the battlefield for over two decades. It shocked them to see a young boy like Allen speak so eloquently, as though he had the same amount of experience. Just what kind of life did this child lead to have such a sharp mind? They looked at him dubiously.

"A type of hero, I see..." Shia muttered. Only then did Rudo and Rasu realize that their master had the same thoughts running through her mind.

"Princess Shia, can you enter Beast Mode?" Allen inquired.

"I've never been able to," she instantly replied.

"I understand. If you *can* do it, I'd like for you to."

Allen would have liked Hero Helmios's party, Sacred; Beast Prince Zeu's Ten Heroic Beasts; and Admiral Garara to join the battle against the Demonic Deity. However, as battles against the Demon Lord Army raged on in the Central Continent, Rohzenheim, and the ocean by the Empire of Baukis, he knew that receiving their help was impossible.

He wanted Beast Princess Shia to use Beast Mode at the very least, but even Zeu had only first managed to do so within the Rank S dungeon. It was dangerous to formulate a plan on the assumption that Beast Mode was at his disposal.

"We can't get used to fighting in formation unless we're fighting actual battles," Allen said. "If we don't stand a chance, please keep in mind that retreating is always an option."

He proceeded to carefully explain how to retreat. Since this was the first time his party would be fighting with Beast Princess Shia's squad, he had to ensure a safe retreat more than ever before. The beastkin at first found this idea to be cowardly, but as they listened to his explanation and saw the serious expressions on the faces of Allen's party members, they reconsidered their thoughts. It was clear that the No-life Gamers were well aware that retreating without any casualties was far more difficult than

dying on the battlefield.

"I'd like to avoid a hectic fight," Allen said, "but if push comes to shove..."

Princess Shia quickly nodded. "I don't mind. No one here lacks the resolve."

"If we really have no way out, we'll destroy the temple, Demonic Deity and all."

"Got it," Cecil said with a nod. She knew that would be her job.

"Again, this is *worst-case* scenario."

"I know, I know."

Do you really? Your MP went up thanks to the Holy Orb of Macris, and I feel like you have so much power that you might destroy more than the temple.

Over an hour had passed since the start of the meeting about the Demonic Deity.

"Vice-Captain Rasu, I leave this place to you," Beast Princess Shia commanded from atop a Bird B.

"Yes, Your Highness!" Rasu shouted energetically.

He and the rest of the beast squad watched the Bird Bs leave for the temple with the Beast Princess and the No-life Gamers riding on their backs. Rasu and his squad would march to a different location.

One of Allen's plans was to teleport to the Nest he had made with Bird A and launch a surprise attack, but he wanted to ensure that he could teleport to a Nest during battle. He also wanted to discuss some matters with the Demonic Deity, so to make that happen, he had decided to forgo a surprise attack.

The temple was built on high ground, and there was a staircase leading up to it. Beside that was the statue of Aqua, but her head had been cleanly sliced off and was on the ground a short distance away, broken in two. The cut was clean, making it clear that it had been done in one go by something very sharp.

The group ascended the stairs and entered the temple. The floors and pillars were engraved with intricate artwork that resembled the ocean floor, but the temple itself was rather simple in design. Quite plainly, it served only as a place of prayer. There was nothing obstructing the view from the entrance to the altar deep within; Allen had taken only one step inside, but he could see the pillar of light shooting out from the altar, as well as a Demonic Deity sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“You guys are late,” the Demonic Deity said in a clear voice. “Thought you got scared and turned tail.”

The Demonic Deity was tall and muscular, but it was not outside the realm of what a human could achieve. His mahogany hair was messily trimmed short, and his upper body was completely exposed. Two leather belts were slung across his shoulders, crossing in front of his chest. His body was adorned with several accessories, the most eye-catching being the bracelets—one embedded with a red jewel and the other with a yellow one—that were on either of his arms. He wore wide pants with the hems tied around his ankles, and several small bags hung from the thick belt around his waist. A greatsword was stuck in the ground on each side of him. The two glimmering blades were made of orichalcum.

Allen remained silent, observing Bask’s behavior and mannerisms.

“Is there one called ‘Allen’ here?” the Demonic Deity asked with a searching gaze. “You’ve been observing me for a while, haven’t you?”

It was then that Allen realized that even the whites of his eyes were tinged mahogany. In stark contrast to his daunting appearance, Bask spoke with a bit of a drawl that creeped everyone out.

“Yep, that’s me,” Allen replied. “Are you the Demonic Deity protecting this altar?”

Bask glared at the boy before his lips curled up to form a grin. “For a guy with the despicable hobby of being a Peeping Tom, you ought to watch how you speak to your superiors. Looks like you need to be punished for that. Heh heh.”

Allen found this exchange to be odd. Having Shared with his Bird A, he had expected the Demonic Deity to be a gorilla or a monkeykin, but that was apparently not the case.

If he was a beastkin who became a Demonic Deity, he’d probably be taking this way more seriously. Wait, what does he mean by “superiors”?

“What are you talking about?” Allen asked.

“Guess you haven’t studied enough, Allen,” Bask replied. “Your Rank S adventurer card’ll be put to shame. But of course, I only see it as trash. When I was still human, I was called the King of Shura. Surely you’re familiar with that nickname, yeah?”

He pointed his mahogany sclera at Allen and smirked. The boy had heard about the King of Shura from Guildmaster General Makkaron.

Then no doubt he’s an amazing fighter.

Around twenty years ago, a man called Bask had killed more monsters

than anyone else, and his efforts had led to him being awarded the title of Rank S adventurer. As a fellow Rank S adventurer, Allen knew that he should be more respectful, but the man had gone AWOL years ago.

“Your name is Bask, correct?” Allen asked. “Did a Rank S adventurer like you become a pawn for the Demon Lord Army?”

“Who cares? I don’t,” Bask replied. “I just wanna do what I want. Human militaries constantly talk about discipline and all that crap—I always found it suffocating. Even if I form a party with them, they only get in the way, those boring cretins. I was told that I could run wild to my heart’s content if I joined the Demon Lord Army, y’know.” His smile started to fade. “But I can’t take this shit anymore! I didn’t think I’d be waiting this long! They told me to stay put! I’m not some mutt, dammit!”

He roared so loudly that the nearby pillars began to tremble.

I can’t keep up with his rapid mood swings.

“Who is this man?” Beast Princess Shia asked with a scowl. “Is he the Demonic Deity?”

Bask turned to her and started to grin once more. “Ooh! You’ve got a cutie on your team, huh? Hey, why don’t you come over to my side? Oh, I’ll treat ya *real* well. Heh heh.” He looked the lightly dressed Beast Princess over from head to toe and started to lick his lips lecherously. He was clearly undressing her with his eyes. She sensed danger and shuddered, taking a step back.

Sounds like he speaks his mind. Then maybe I can pry some information out of him.

“What is that altar?” Allen asked, trying to gather some intel.

“Huh? Hell if I know,” Bask replied. “I remember something about collecting souls, but I wasn’t interested, so I didn’t listen much.”

I knew it. They were collecting human souls.

Did people turn into daemoninc incarnations once their souls had been sucked out, or did the process of transforming into the monster squeeze out their souls? Either way, it was clear that the daemoninc incarnations and the altar were related to soul collecting in some way. However, Allen was not sure if the Demon Lord Army knew that Bask was quite the blabbermouth and had thus refrained from mentioning any details or if Bask had genuinely not listened to the Demon Lord’s plan.

These altars existed in all four corners of Galiat. If all this was for the sake of gathering human souls, the Demon Lord Army had to have explained their reason for doing so.

Allen decided to suddenly shift topics and glanced at his allies. “So, how does one become a Demonic Deity? You can tell me the secret seeing as you’re my superior, can’t you?”

“Oh? You’re interested too?” Bask asked. “Being a Demonic Deity is a pretty sweet life! Want me to introduce you to Kyubel?”

“Kyubel? You mean the Greater Demonic Deity, Lord Kyubel? Do I just need to ask him or something?”

Shia, who had been suspiciously listening to this exchange silently, could not hold herself back any longer and cried hastily, “H-Hey! What are you on about?!”

She had noticed that the conversation was headed in an odd direction. Her four elite soldiers who surrounded her looked equally astonished. The rest of the No-life Gamers, on the other hand, reacted differently. Dogora moved to Allen’s left, while Krena wandered to his right. Sophie and Meruru hid behind Dogora, and to their left was Cecil. Keel stood in the very back as Volmaar nonchalantly made his way behind Krena, to her right. Beast Princess Shia noticed Allen’s party getting into formation and glanced at Captain Rudo. The rhinokin gave a small nod.

Bask did not seem to notice and laughed boisterously. “Bah ha ha! You’re gonna make me bust a gut! The cutie’s right, kid! There’s no need to call that guy ‘Lord’! I mean, c’mon! Not even *I* know what the hell goes through his head! If you wanna revere someone, revere *me*! I’m the great Lord Bask!”

Allen nodded as Bask laughed heartily.

I was barely able to get any information about the Demon Lord Army until now. This is some good stuff!

According to Merus, the gods had seen a Demon Lord appear and try to bring humanity to ruin several times in the past. Every time, a hero had emerged to lead the people and defeat the enemy. If the Demon Lord had been slain, it meant that humankind had managed to survive, and the world was at peace until another Demon Lord was born.

There were times when the hero had been defeated instead, allowing the Demon Lord Army to rule over mankind. Consequently, humanity had perished. Once enough humans were killed and it was clear that they stood no fighting chance, Elmea saw it as a disruption of harmony. Under the orders of the God of Creation, Merus and the other angels were dispatched to the world to destroy the Demon Lord Army and kill any surviving humans. In that way, the world was reset.

Merus had claimed that he had done this numerous times. However, according to the former First Angel, the situation was different this time around. The Demon Lord Army had managed to gather several Demonic Deities, but no one knew why or how.

I wonder if that Greater Demonic Deity dressed like a clown is one of the reasons things are so different this time. I haven't seen him since Rohzenheim, but maybe I could ask him something if I get to meet with him again.

“By the way, kid, if you’re gonna ask for something, you should have a gift to give in return,” Bask said. “It’s important to have manners. How ’bout it? I feel like the heads of the people behind you would be a perfect souvenir.”

“Awww, do I?” Allen whined. “Can’t you negotiate for me? You’re my superior, aren’t you?”

I see. So those with power can become Demonic Deities. Is that why Helmios was kept alive?

Kyubel had fought Helmios, but the boy was allowed to walk away with his life. Perhaps he, a powerful person, had been kept alive so that he, like Bask, could be turned into a Demonic Deity. Just as Allen got absorbed in his thoughts, he was quickly brought back to reality.

“Why don’t we end the chitchat for now,” Bask said, clearly shifting his tone. “I’m getting bored. Besides, you guys made your preparations, didn’t you?”

“Huh?” Allen asked.

“Don’t play dumb. I was waiting until you guys got into position. I’m gonna win in the end, but it’s no fun to clobber a weak opponent. I wanna *feel* something. Lemme have some fun, Allen. And if you live, I’ll let you see Kyubel.”

Bask slowly stood up and removed the two greatswords from the ground. A normal person would require both arms to hold a single greatsword, but the Demonic Deity easily gripped each in one hand as though he were holding sticks. His gaze turned fierce, and he bared his teeth to form a malicious grin.

“Get ready, everyone,” Allen warned. “Don’t be fooled by his calm air and remain vigilant.” He knew that their opponent was anything but normal.

“Right,” Dogora said with a nod, lifting his greataxe and large shield.

Krena and Shia, who stood on either side of Allen and Dogora, leaped

forward. As the two ladies closed the gap, Dogora and Captain Rudo followed close behind.

Beast Princess Shia was fast. She reached Bask before Krena did, proving that Fist Lord was a Talent that raised her Attack and Agility. Bask turned out to be faster than her, though. He saw that her fists were a feint and swiftly dodged her kick. Then he sidestepped Krena's horizontal slash and reached Allen before Dogora and Captain Rudo had a chance to approach him, assaulting the boy with his twin greatswords. He looked to be swinging wildly in the air as Allen stepped back, avoiding the two fierce swings.

Whoa! Huh?!

Bask dashed forward and delivered a kick to the Summoner's stomach.

"Gah!" Allen cried. He had managed to use his sword to defend himself, but he was blown back into the temple wall.

A total of forty-nine Insect As were buzzing around throughout the Central Continent, Rohzenheim, and Galiat. In exchange for decreased Attack, Allen had high Endurance. He managed to survive the hit, but if his Endurance had been any lower, Bask would have blown a hole through his stomach.

And he hasn't even used any skills! His Attack's insane! I feel like he's stronger than the usual Demonic Deities!

"Lord Allen!" Sophie cried.

"I'm fine! Use Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, please!" Allen ordered.

"O-Okay! Lord Rohzen, please lend me your strength!"

"Ha ha, I'm being called on pretty early today," Rohzen said, sitting on Sophie's shoulder. The deity floated in the air and wiggled his hips, and a rain of light showered the party.

This skill increased all allies' stats by thirty percent. The effect would last as long as Sophie had the MP. The cost was 1 MP per second—Sophie had 5,000 MP, meaning that the skill would last for five thousand seconds. The range depended on her Intelligence, but perhaps due to the power of the God of Spirits, she was easily able to buff anyone within a one-kilometer radius despite wearing no Intelligence-boosting items. Thanks to that, though, she was able to equip items that increased her MP instead.

Under the shower of light, Krena and Beast Princess Shia pounced on Bask from behind. They proceeded to stand in front of Allen as though to protect the boy while launching a series of attacks aimed at the Demonic

Deity's flank and back.

Dogora activated his skill with his greataxe, and Captain Rudo used his great mallet to join the fray. Rudo went all out, partly because he was up against a Demonic Deity, but also because he had a duty to protect Shia. Muscles throughout his entire body throbbed as he fought.

The four skilled vanguards fired a barrage of attacks from all directions, but Bask used his two greatswords to skillfully parry each one and keep them at bay.

His moves are masterful. He really is like an Asura.

Bask barely moved his head, yet he was able to accurately defend attacks that came from his blind spots. It really seemed like he had three heads that gazed in different directions, the same as an Asura from Allen's past life would have.

"Huh?! Who the hell are you guys?!" Bask demanded.

"I'm Sword Emperor Krena!"

"I'm Dogora!"

The two members of the No-life Gamers introduced themselves, but Shia and Rudo remained silent, focusing on dishing out as many attacks as they could.

"Who?! Never heard of you guys!" Bask bellowed. "You should get a nickname or two before you dare introduce yourselves to me! Super Shura Whirlwind Slash!"

He thrust his arms out to either side, and his two greatswords glimmered for a split second. The blades started to form a small tornado before he swung his weapons down at Allen's party.

"He's using a skill, guys! Dodge!" Allen shouted.

Instantly, the four vanguards took up defensive stances. The small twister headed straight for the party as it dispersed into tiny blades of air, assailing its surroundings. Bask's skill was an area-of-effect attack centered around himself.

"Whoa!" Allen cried.

Krena, who was closest to Bask, bore the brunt of the attack. She used her sword to protect herself from the innumerable sharp wind slashes, but it was not enough. She fell to the ground.

"Heh. Puny weakling," Bask spat, tightening his right hand around his sword. He used a backhanded grip and tried to plunge his blade into her body.

"Rah!" a voice grunted.

“Huh?” Bask gave a look of confusion as he raised his right hand to guard his face. When he did, an arrow whizzed through the air like a bird and sank into the back of it.

“Tch! He blocked it!” Commander Kamu said through gritted teeth. His body wavered as though he were in a heat haze—an effect that occurred when one used their Extra Skill.

When Allen had commanded everyone to dodge earlier, that was not just to make them all aware of Bask’s skill. It was also the signal that their planned joint attack was about to commence. Unfortunately, Bask had sensed the ambush.

“Oh, c’mon. That’s no good,” Bask said. “You can’t say it out loud.”

“Yeah, you can’t say it out loud,” Allen agreed, mimicking Bask’s drawl.

“The hell? Gah!”

Volmaar’s Extra Skill, Arrow of Light, pierced through Bask’s body. Volmaar was currently equipped with two rings that raised his Attack by 5,000 apiece. Combined with the Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, his power had increased greatly. Commander Kamu’s earlier attack had been a diversion; the real attack had been loosed at Bask’s back while his guard had been down.

How’d you like that?

Bask gazed down at the arrowhead piercing his chest in disbelief.

“That was a good attack! Ha ha ha!” Bask laughed happily. “This is what I’m talking about! I gotta feel *some* pain in battle, y’know?! This is getting fun! It’s been a while since I’ve felt this giddy! Heh heh heh!”

He plunged his swords into the ground and pulled Kamu’s arrow out with his left hand. Then, using his blood-soaked right hand, he grabbed Volmaar’s arrow and snapped it in two. He tossed the broken bit aside before reaching around with his left arm to yank the rest out from his body with a disgusting squelch.

I guess it wasn’t good enough. He’s about as strong as a Demonic Deity post-transformation. Are those bracelets the key?

Allen glanced at the bracelets embedded with red and yellow jewels that were equipped on Bask’s arms. Did they perhaps have the same effects as Cecil’s Holy Orb of Macris?

“Huh? What’re you staring at? Are my Holy Orbs that rare to you?” Bask asked.

I knew it.

Bask's entire body was covered with items that Allen had never seen before. The man was far more powerful than a normal Demonic Deity. Grinning from ear to ear, he grabbed his greatswords and dashed in with astonishing speed. The Holy Orbs—the yellow and red jewels fitted on the metallic bracelets—glittered magnificently as he did. A series of soundless bells dangled from his right anklet, a scarlet pendant hung from his neck, and an earring with a rainbow shimmer shone beautifully in his ear as well.

Those equips must be boosting his stats considerably.

Bask was not wearing a single piece of armor. This was not only because his Talent primarily focused on Agility, but also because his gear protected him enough.

Enemy with precious equipment found. I'll steal them even if I have to kill him.

Allen wanted those items. "Merus, come on out."

"Flare!" Cecil chanted, joining in on attacking Bask from the rear.

Just as Krena and Dogora were flanking Bask, Cecil unleashed her spell. Bask crossed his blades in front of himself, blocking the massive fireball that flew toward him. His body was engulfed in flames for a moment, but he swung his weapons to extinguish them. As he was doing so, purple lightning and a spear of ice assaulted him—Cecil was continuing her attack.

"Hrm?! Is that a Holy Orb I see?" Bask howled, dodging the lightning and slicing the ice into pieces. "Gotcha! So you went to Crevelle for it!"

"Sophie, can you lend your aid with your Spirit Magic?" Allen asked.

"Roger!" Sophie said, summoning a juvenile fire spirit, Salamander. She carried it in her arms and started to pour her MP into it.

While Sophie did not have as much Intelligence as Cecil, she did have just as much MP. Intelligence was not as important for Spirit Magic, however, as the amount of MP used determined the effects of the spell. Simple Attack Magic that only applied elemental damage became stronger if more MP was used.

Salamander might still have been a juvenile spirit, but if given enough MP, its attacks could be deadly.

"Salamander, I'm counting on you!" Sophie said.

"Au au!"

After absorbing Sophie's MP, the Salamander shot out from her arms and charged toward Bask. Cecil, Volmaar, and Kamu timed their attacks with the fire spirit. The plan was to crumble the Demonic Deity's defenses

before the Salamander reached him, then launch follow-up attacks once the spirit had landed its blow.

Bask purposefully took the lightning attack, then threw a right-handed backfist, blade still in hand, to subdue Salamander and parried the arrows with the greatsword in his left.

“Au...”

Salamander bounced along the temple floor before clinging onto Sophie. She must not have used enough MP; the spirit was only able to burn the back of Bask’s hand.

“You guys are all so annoying, attacking from afar!” Bask roared before his eyes settled on the elf princess. “Oh?! You’ve got an elf lady too?!” He started running straight for her.

“I won’t let you!” Dogora said, trying to obstruct Bask’s path. The boy was easily kicked aside like a pebble in the road. “Gah!”

Cecil and Sophie managed to split up and dodge to the side, escaping Bask. He was dangerous in all sorts of ways. Unlike Krena and Beast Princess Shia, however, Dogora could not keep up with Bask’s Agility. And though the Destroyer tried his best to predict the Demonic Deity’s movements, he could only defend with his shield. Not once was he able to land an attack of his own.

Yet Dogora, possibly hoping that his Extra Skill would activate, did not fall back. He continued to step forward and managed to become a wall of defense, delaying Bask’s movements. But at this rate, Dogora would only be on the receiving end.

“Captain Rudo, please help Dogora out,” Allen requested.

“Very well!”

The rhinokin stepped up to become a wall of defense as well. He was set to have a defensive role from the start; the captain was equipped with two rings that increased his Defense by 5,000 each.

We can’t prolong this fight. And Bask hasn’t gone all out yet.

Like the Demonic Deities that Allen had faced before, Basks could surely undergo a transformation. The man was extremely powerful before doing so, and Allen did not want to imagine how strong he would become after.

“Merus, can you use your Endow Element? Dogora won’t last long,” Allen said.

“His earrings seem to be blocking my Ability,” Merus replied.

The angel had been repeatedly trying to use Endow Element on the

Demonic Deity, but to no avail. Commander Gonu seemed to have similar issues. He was able to call out spirits that wrapped around Bask in a pale-blue mist, but every time the Demonic Deity's earring gleamed, the spirits melted away.

"Hmm, got it," Allen said before he shouted to Shia. "Princess Shia, can you use your Beast Mode?"

I'm waiting on you.

"What?!" Shia yelled back, dodging Bask's fist. "Wait, I'm trying!"

She had been desperately trying to activate her Extra Skill, but she had not been having luck. It was clear that she did not have a good grasp on using it.

God of Beasts Garm is a Greater Deity. He doesn't need to be stingy. Just bestow the power upon her, yeesh.

This world had numerous gods, with Elmea, the God of Creation, at the top. Each deity had an indispensable role in operating this world. Especially famous were the Four Elemental Deities, the gods who manipulated fire, earth, wind, and water. Without them, nature would not flourish. Globally, the light, heat, and power of fire had weakened considerably because Freyja's divine vessel had been stolen. This vessel was the source of her power.

There were also Minor Deities, young gods who had just received a divine vessel from Elmea and were still not fully mature. Like Dungeon Master Dygragni, the one responsible for creating the Rank S dungeon in Baukis, these nongods who hoped to be worshipped were turned into Minor Deities by Elmea.

In other words, gods were entities that had the power to completely change the world, and using those powers garnered them the faith of the people. Among these gods, those who managed to gather many followers of their faith, allowing them to wield more power than the essential Four Elemental Deities, were specially called Greater Deities.

A millennium ago, a beastkin had been bestowed enough power to become independent from the Dreaded Emperor of Gaimut. The one responsible for this power was God of Beasts Garm, a Greater Deity. He had given the royal family of Albahal the might to rule over these powerful beastkin in the form of an Extra Skill, Beast Mode. In addition, anyone born into the royal family was given a three-star Talent or higher, and whoever claimed the throne to become Beast King was promoted to a higher-star Talent.

However, there were no guarantees that Garm's blessing would be bestowed on a person at any time. Even Beast Prince Zeu had only managed to unleash his Extra Skill once in the Rank S dungeon.

"Cecil, get ready," Allen said, approaching her. "This isn't the worst-case scenario, but I need you to use Petit Meteor."

"Got it."

"Merus, you ready too?"

He seems to be a pure physical attacker, so I'll teleport maybe a kilometer away. I hope his earrings won't interrupt me.

"Yeah, whenever you are," Merus replied.

There were no range limits when it came to using Bird A to teleport an ally. To teleport an enemy, however, the Bird A and the foe's Intelligence were the deciding factors. If the enemy's Intelligence was high, it would be difficult to teleport them, but if it was low, they could be forcibly whisked away to a different location.

Allen thought that he could easily transfer Bask outside of the temple. He used Sharing to receive the vision of the Bird F he had on standby around a kilometer away and saw that preparations were complete.

"Are you guys ready? I'll begin!" Allen said, using Bird F's Awakened Ability, Messenger.

Bask could not hear the Summoner's words; only his teleported allies had received the message.

"Oh? Tryna do something again? Interesting..." Bask said, sensing the change in Allen's demeanor. His leering grin was soon interrupted by a clap of thunder.

"Judgment Lightning!" Merus bellowed, using all the MP he had to activate his Awakened Ability. After a blinding flash of lightning, countless purple bolts rained down on Bask.

"Gah?!" Bask cried as the attack hit him.

A bright light filled the room, enveloping the altar behind him, and there was an earsplitting pop that sounded like an explosion. As the light started to fade, only Bask remained. The altar behind him melted away, with only white smoke billowing from its remains.

Sizzling and crackling loudly, white smoke rose from Bask's body, but he was still alive. He stood petrified, his greatswords still in his hands.

Judgment Lightning did more than just attack its target; a direct hit would temporarily paralyze its foe. Bask was not killed by this Ability, but he was left unable to move for a short while.

Only a Rank S monster, a golem on the final floor of a Rank S dungeon, or a Demonic Deity was able to endure this attack, which had been buffed by Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits. Allen swiftly approached Bask, as the Demonic Deity would soon be freed of his petrifying shackles. His plan had to be carried out quickly.

Teleport.

The moment Allen touched Bask, he activated Bird A's Awakened Ability, Homing Instinct. This Ability required the user to touch the hand of their foe to teleport them. There were a few other limitations when it came to teleporting an enemy as well.

Their destination was the beach a kilometer away from the temple. Bask, Allen, and the Summoner's allies all stood on the sand as the ocean breeze tickled their noses.

"Huh? Where am I?" Bask said, snapping back to his senses. "Huh? What's over there?"

His back against the splashing waves, he saw a thousand beastkin soldiers lined up on the slope by the beach, their javelins at the ready. Their bodies wavered as though they were in a heat haze.

"Huh..." Bask murmured with a smile. The Demonic Deity finally realized that Allen's party still had more allies.

"Follow my lead!" Vice-Captain Rasu roared. "Brave Lance!"

A javelin cut through the air, but Bask did not seem at all daunted. He made no effort to slice or dodge it.

"Huh? You think your puny spears can—" he said before his face contorted with pain. "Gh..."

In contrast to Bask's expectations, the spear's point penetrated his chest before it sank into the sand behind him.

I knew it. This plan's gonna work. Thank goodness I used Finny's Shark Oil on everyone.

Knowing that it was possible they would be unable to defeat the Demonic Deity while inside the temple, Allen and Princess Shia had discussed several plans. There were ways of killing him that did not involve destroying it and everything around it, after all. To that end, a thousand beastkin soldiers with an Extra Skill that allowed them to use powerful ranged attacks had gathered by the beach. They were ready to fire at a moment's notice.

Normal attacks from people with normal stats were hardly effective against Demonic Deities. However, the fight against Rehzal at

Rohzenheim had taught Allen that Extra Skills could dish out enough damage. Just in case, Allen had had Kamu and Volmaar use their Extra Skills to test this theory out. That was the purpose behind the joint attack they had launched earlier.

Furthermore, Allen had had the beastkin on standby equip Attack-boosting rings that he had painstakingly gathered from within the Rank S dungeon. Combined with Shark Oil Ability that increased one's critical hit rate by ten percent, Allen believed that the attacks would pierce through the Demonic Deity's defenses. Surely, his high Endurance stat would be negligible under this merciless barrage.

This also took into account that Bask, whose main focus was on Attack, barely wore any armor. Moreover, from this distance, the beastkin soldiers had also received the Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits. They were as buffed as they could be.

"Raaaaaaah!" the soldiers bellowed as they fired their Extra Skills toward Bask.

"You goddamn weaklings!" Bask howled, swinging his greatswords around like a tornado.

He desperately defended himself against the javelins that relentlessly rained down on him. His arms moved so quickly that it looked like he had six of them, making him further resemble an Asura that Allen had seen in his previous life. Bask was unable to parry them all, however. Spears struck his chest, stomach, and thighs.

Great! We'll call this the Extra Attack plan. Now for the finishing blow.

"Cecil," Allen signaled.

She quickly nodded. "Here I go! Petit Meteor!"

Thanks to the Holy Orb of Macris, Cecil's Extra Skill activation time was halved, and a massive, fiery boulder quickly appeared in the skies above the beach, aiming straight for Bask. The Demonic Deity saw the meteor, but he was locked in place by the spears that showered him.

Once Allen saw the titanic shadow of the meteor looming over everyone, he used Homing Instinct to teleport everyone, including the beastkin, away from the sands. They landed on top of a cape, gazing down at the scene. Bask, having been hit by the seemingly limitless number of javelins, fell to his knees as the massive boulder landed on him.

The intense heat melted the sand around him as the fiery, red meteor crushed him, turning his body into cinders. A loud *crack* rang in the air as the red pendant on his chest started to crumble. And then, Bask's body

fully healed.

“Damn, guess I used up my Ruby of Life,” Bask muttered. “But I had fun. I’ll be waiting for you at the Temple of Gushara. Heh heh.”

Amid the darkness, the Demonic Deity gave a maniacal cackle as he disappeared, leaving behind a vestige of the blue glow from his anklet.

Chapter 4: Hunting Demonic Deities and Unsealing King Me

The blazing meteor remained nestled in the sands. Steam rose with a hiss as the ocean waves lapped the boulder. Allen and his allies stood in stunned silence, taking in the bizarre scene. They still were ready to fight.

“Princess Shia!” Vice-Captain Rasu shouted, rushing over to her. As planned, he had been on standby on the beach.

The Beast Princess paid him no heed and turned to Allen. “Did we do it?”

“I’m checking that right now,” Allen replied, flipping his grimoire open.

“We didn’t get him,” Cecil said, peering into the book.

“Doesn’t seem like it.” The grimoire had no record of the Demonic Deity being defeated.

Princess Shia and her soldiers quietly intuited that the No-life Gamers had some sort of unique power that allowed them to either see or sense their foe. Allen was none the wiser toward the beastkin’s thoughts and merely pondered what his next step would be. He assumed that the Demonic Deity was still alive.

Bask might have had gear that automatically recovered his HP. The bags that hung around his waist might have contained powerful healing items. He could have been lying in wait, patiently searching for an opportunity to attack as Allen and his team let their guard down, celebrating a victory.

Better safe than sorry here. Hopefully, I won’t destroy all his rare equipment.

Allen Unsummoned his Bird F, then Summoned it once more and used Messenger.

“Meruru, fire,” he commanded.

“Aye, aye!” Meruru replied, controlling her mithril golem.

A hot laser shot out toward the beach where Bask had been crushed by the meteor. It blew sand away and steam rose into the air. Amid the evaporating seawater, the Petit Meteor slowly melted away. And yet,

Allen's grimoire did not indicate that Bask had been defeated.

When Meruru finally stopped her attack and the smoke started to clear, only a crater in the sand remained. The waves licked the site of the battle. Allen and his party approached the beach and inspected the area, but there was no trace of Bask to be found.

"Seems like he managed to escape," Allen said.

"Can he teleport like you?" Krena asked.

"Probably. I don't know if it's a skill or the effect of one of his items, but he probably had a means of escape ready."

"Ugh..."

She looked disappointed by the outcome, and Allen was even more frustrated—he was dying to get his hands on Bask's precious gear.

My equipment... My level gain...

This might have been the first time since he had come to this world that his prey had successfully fled. Princess Shia, however, was dumbfounded. For the first time, she had experienced for herself the might and terror of a Demonic Deity. It was a miracle that not a single person had died while managing to successfully chase the Deity away.

The No-life Gamers were not elated by this outcome; their vexation at having failed to defeat the Demonic Deity was on full display.

"What shall we do now?" Princess Shia asked.

"Let's see..." Allen said. "It seems like the altar that the Demonic Deity was protecting is used for no good. We'll go around the continent to destroy the rest of the altars, and defeat the Demonic Deities there on the way."

"O-On the way'?" Shia stuttered, unable to help herself.

Allen spoke as though he would be killing the Demonic Deities while he went on a leisurely stroll. Shia would have undoubtedly laughed the claim off had it been anyone but him making it. When she had seen him battle for herself, it had truly felt like the Demonic Deities were not his primary concern. She had heard from her brother, Zeu, that common sense did not apply to Allen. She found this to be quite true.

"What shall we do, Princess Shia?" Rudo and Rasu called to her back.

She kept her back facing them and nodded. "We'll accompany them, of course. My trial may come to an end if we manage to execute Gushara."

Shia was here because her father, the Beast King, had given her a trial: to defeat the Pontiff of Daemonism, Gushara. By doing so, she would stake her claim to the throne. She had captured Gushara Selbirohl once and

turned him in to the headquarters of the Church of Elmea, but he had managed to escape while burning Teomenia down. Furthermore, he had transformed people into daemonic incarnations, causing pandemonium throughout the world. Even as they spoke, the man was spreading terror and confusion throughout Galiat.

The Beast Princess felt as though she bore some responsibility. If she had ignored the Church of Elmea's request to bring Gushara back alive, countless people would not have been turned into monsters, a fate worse than death. While she knew that she had to overcome the trial given to her by her father, she was itching to settle the score with Gushara.

"I am proud to serve you, Princess," Rudo said, calling her by a nickname that had not been used since she was a child. "Let's go. We shall be by your side till the ends of the earth."

Shia was caught a bit off guard. Rudo had been with her since she was a child, and she felt nostalgic—if slightly embarrassed—to be called by her childhood nickname. She turned around and saw Vice-Captain Rasu standing beside the rhinokin, nodding with a reliable smile on his face.

* * *

Three days later, Captain Myuhan of the Calvarna Army saw that Mitpoi, the capital city they had encircled, was in complete ruins. He froze in astonishment.

"How can this be?" he murmured.

The dilapidated city stood in front of him, remnants of destroyed houses blowing past. The assembly hall, a central building for the Republic of Carlonea, had crumbled to the ground. He spotted a gigantic meteor that had seemingly caused all this destruction.

Before Carlonea became independent, Mitpoi was one of the merchant cities in the southern reaches of the Galiatan Continent. The region was blessed with rolling grassy plains that were perfect for farming and raising livestock. This had allowed the city to make agriculture one of its main industries, and Mitpoi had flourished.

As northern Carlonea began to call for independence, its citizens had decided to use the most flourishing merchant city, Mitpoi, as their base. The capital became a place to store weapons and equipment in preparation for combat against Calvarna. A defensive wall was even built, but this was purely for battles against humans; it was not very tall.

Regardless, Carlonea had emerged victorious and won its

independence. When Myuhan had marched to Carlonea with Team Keel, he had found himself rather impressed with the Republic's defensive measures. Yet now, Mitpoi was destroyed. It was not because of monsters—this was the result of a plan thought up by Allen, a young boy who was supposedly Keel's friend.

Before the city was destroyed, Captain Myuhan had reported that Carlonea was no longer operating as a nation. The Calvarna Army had surrounded Mitpoi and launched a series of attacks within the defensive walls. He surmised that the assembly building had fallen at the hands of monsters, and it seemed that there were no confirmed survivors. Once the monsters inhabiting the capital were wiped out, the Kingdom of Calvarna could claim this city for themselves. If that were the case, Allen had concluded that the city could surely take a *little* damage.

Meruru's mithril golem, Tam-Tam, had fired its laser through the walls. The beam had pierced the temple across the assembly building, where the pillar of light was emanating from. As Tam-Tam had continued to fire and keep the Demonic Deity in place, Cecil had used her Petit Meteor to crush the enemy, temple and all.

The obliterated city was almost completely snuffed out—so much so that it was necessary to rebuild it from the ground up. Allen had assumed that the Kingdom of Calvarna did not have any sentimental ties to the capital, unlike the temple in the Holy Land of Elmahl.

Allen stood beside a stunned Myuhan as he gazed at his grimoire, grinning with delight.

<You have defeated 1 Demonic Deity. You have reached Lvl. 84. Your HP has increased by 100. Your MP has increased by 160. Your Attack has increased by 56. Your Endurance has increased by 56. Your Agility has increased by 104. Your Intelligence has increased by 160. Your Luck has increased by 104.>

“Good,” he said. “My stat increase rate has quadrupled from Lvl. 60.”

The grimoire logged the Demonic Deity's defeat and notified Allen that he had leveled up. He received no XP whenever he defeated a Demonic Deity; instead, he automatically gained a level. The rate of stat increase had gone up considerably after he had hit Lvl. 80. Allen flipped his grimoire open to confirm his new stats.

How Leveling Up Affects Status Increases

Leveling up increases seven stats: HP, MP, Attack,

Endurance, Agility, Intelligence, and Luck.

Stats increase a set amount, but can differ based on Talent.

Until Lvl. 60, the highest possible increase for each stat is 40.

From Lvl. 61, this number will double for all stats.

From Lvl. 81, this number will quadruple for all stats.

For example, if Allen's Agility increased at a set rate of 26 per level until Lvl. 60, his Agility will increase by 52 from Lvl. 61 onward. From Lvl. 81 onward, the number is 104.

Allen closed his book and left a stunned Captain Myuhan behind with his army. He headed for his next destination.

"Aw man, we did nothing this time around," Dogora grumbled to Krena. He was resting in the lounge of Tam-Tam's Eagle Mode.

To be honest, I'm just removing any dangerous factors.

* * *

Another three days passed. The No-life Gamers were with Olvahs, the king of the dark elves. They were on a sand dune in the Muharino Desert, which overlooked the oasis city of Rukoaque.

A few decades ago, a water source had suddenly welled up in the desert, gathering nearby people. From there, the oasis city was built. Now, under the glaring rays of the sun, the lake emanated a hue of poisonous purple. This ominous place, complete with a temple that emitted a pillar of light, had become a nest for monsters.

"General Bunzenberg, you say that there's a Demonic Deity there, correct?" the king inquired.

"Precisely, King Olvahs."

I didn't expect the king and his men to come out here. He's surprisingly gung ho about this.

Just yesterday, Allen had had Sophie convey his intention of defeating the Demonic Deity that guarded the altar in the Muharino Desert to a dark elf elder. It was then that the king had declared that he would personally join the fight. He had even brought his general and soldiers with him.

Olvahs was confirming the situation with his own eyes, receiving reports from Allen and General Bunzenberg regarding the results of their

joint battle. The dark elf king wanted to see the Demonic Deity's defeat for himself and was also curious about the leader of Sophie's party. When he had asked the boy if he was the "man of light who shook off the darkness," the boy had given a troubled look and introduced himself as Allen.

Because of Allen's vague response, King Olvahs was still carefully analyzing the Summoner. He proceeded to shift his gaze to Merus.

Stop staring so intently. You're making me nervous.

"Okay, Sophie," Allen commanded. "Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, please."

"Of course," Sophie replied.

"Ha ha, a sudden request again," Rohzen said.

The flying squirrel floated in the air, wiggled his hips, and cast the Ability. Once Allen saw that his stats had increased, he called out to Cecil, who was on standby on the back of a Bird B.

"Cecil, let's start," Allen said.

"Leave it to me," she replied, flying off with her Bird B.

The night prior, Allen and King Olvahs had come to an agreement. Rukoaque, the root of the evil that plagued the desert, would be destroyed. It had been several days since the pillar of light and monsters had appeared. The city of Rukoaque had already been long abandoned. As a safety measure, a Spirit A and Merus had gone to scout the area, but they had found no survivors.

High above the skies, Cecil sat on her Bird B and gazed down at Rukoaque, which had become a nest for monsters. She saw the pillar of light. Then, she focused her aim on the altar, her body wavering as though she were in a heat haze while she prepared to use her Extra Skill.

"Petit Meteor!"

A colossal boulder appeared in the skies above, engulfed by a fiery glow. It flew down with astonishing speed toward the altar. Equipped with the Holy Orb of Macris and Rohzen's buff, her Extra Skill was overwhelming. Her activation time was decreased, and the skill's power had increased immensely. The meteor itself was over a hundred meters wide.

"Whoa!" the dark elves gasped.

As this horrific scene unfolded before their eyes, many could not help but express their shock. But when the scarlet boulder blew the entire city and temple away, they were at a loss for words. They froze in stunned silence, in awe of the sheer might of Petit Meteor. Once the crowd fell

silent, Cecil and her Bird B slowly made their descent.

“What do you think? Did I get it?” Cecil asked.

“Wait, a sec. Let me check,” Allen said, gazing at his grimoire. “Ooh! I gained a level!”

<You have defeated 1 Demonic Deity. You have reached Lvl. 85. Your HP has increased by 100. Your MP has increased by 160. Your Attack has increased by 56. Your Endurance has increased by 56. Your Agility has increased by 104. Your Intelligence has increased by 160. Your Luck has increased by 104. You have unsealed King Me.>

This time around, he had Summoned a Fish C and used its Ability and Awakened Ability to stack buffs onto Cecil. He had then had her ride a Bird B to assist her attack, meaning that he had not directly participated in the fight. However, it seemed that his involvement had counted; he had gained a level.

This reminded him of Meruru’s fighting style. She used golems to dish out commands and was not directly involved in fights, but she still managed to gain XP.

Cecil jumped off her Bird B and pointed at the grimoire. “King Me? Didn’t you want to use this skill?”

“Hey! You’re right!” Krena cried happily as though the skill were her own.

King Olvahs and Beast Princess Shia stared in astonishment. The No-life Gamers were not celebrating their defeat of a powerful enemy in a single blow—no, they were more overjoyed by the fact that a new skill had been unsealed. The two royals simply could not understand it.

Though Bask had successfully fled, the No-life Gamers had managed to destroy all four light-emanating altars and defeat three Demonic Deities, including Lycaoron in Teomenia. Allen could not contain his excitement at having finally unsealed King Me.

“King Olvahs, we have to stay here and confirm a few things,” Allen said. “We’ll come to your village later to offer a proper greeting, but you’re free to go back without us. Merus, would you be so kind as to guide the general and his soldiers back?”

The elite soldiers had amped themselves up for a grisly battle against a Demonic Deity, but it had ended before they could even raise their weapons. The No-life Gamers parted ways with an astonished King

Olvahs. Allen knew that he had much to report to the king, but a different matter had filled his mind completely. He had even spoken more rapidly than usual.

“Very well,” Olvahs said with a nod, looking a tad exasperated. He turned to Sophie. “We shall meet again, Princess of Rohzenheim.”

“I implore you to consider joining,” Sophie added.

“I must consult the Elder Council. Give me some time.”

When Sophie and King Olvahs were fighting against the daemonic incarnations, they had discussed the relationship between elves and dark elves. Aside from their battle against the monsters, Olvahs had good reason to close the gap between the two species.

Sophie watched him leave and bowed deeply as the king gave her a firm nod. A moment later, the general and the dark elf army were gone—Merus had teleported them all back to the village. Beast Princess Shia and her four elite soldiers were standing a short distance away, gazing at Allen.

“Princess Shia, did he...” Captain Rudo said, noticing Allen’s excitement.

“It seems he has gained some sort of skill via a method I’m not familiar with,” she replied. “Perhaps he received special treatment from Lord Elmea.”

Every species in this world worshipped their own deity in hopes of receiving protection, favor, or a blessing. The elves worshipped Rohzen, the God of Spirits, while the beastkin revered Garm, the God of Beasts. Most humans prayed to Elmea to receive the god’s aegis.

No matter the faith, there were laws that needed to be followed. And though every deity had different laws, abiding by them ensured that one could receive divine protection.

Shia was aware that Elmea gave his followers Trials in hopes of people overcoming them. In other words, Shia had surmised that if the Demon Lord Army trying to annihilate the world was a Trial, Allen had been granted power in hopes that the boy would overcome it. His party members had also been given this Trial, and they were encouraged to support one another and work together to defeat the enemy.

“Has Lord Garm said anything?” Rudo inquired.

“Nothing,” Shia replied. “He won’t lend me his power. He bestowed it upon my brother and allowed him to use Beast Mode, but why won’t he do the same for me?”

The Albahal royal family was given special powers that allowed them

to rule over the beastkin. One of these powers was the ability to speak with Garm. There were quite a few people outside of the royal family who were able to make contact with the deity, such as the chief of the beast squad and their family. Garm would equally lend his aid to anyone who had the duty of respecting the lives and dignity of the beastkin. However, this also meant that he had given numerous beastkin special abilities, ensuring that there would always be a beastkin with power.

Hence, Garm did not aggressively support fighting the Demon Lord Army. This was also why the beastkin of Garlesia did not cooperate with any battles against the Demon Lord. In a way, Beast Prince Zeu using the union with Rohzenheim as an excuse to lend his aid went against the wishes of the God of Beasts.

Keel gazed at the Beast Princess, who stood a short distance away. He saw her ears droop, and it caused him to inadvertently touch the back of his head. It was then that he noticed that his hair had grown rather warm under the blazing sun.

“If we tag along with Allen anymore, we’d all become fried meat,” he said to the party’s golem pilot. “Can you give us some shade, Meruru?”

“Okey dokey!” Meruru replied with a nod. “Descend, Tam-Tam! Turtle Mode!”

She hunched her back and bent forward with her arms glued to her sides. This posture, meant to mimic a turtle shell, was one of the cool poses Meruru had in her repertoire. Allen called it the Stout Turtle Form.

Tam-Tam appeared, transforming into an elongated octagon over fifty meters long. As the name stated, it resembled a turtle. This mode had low movement speed, but in exchange, its Endurance was high. Its “shell” was especially tough and could shift its angles, creating a shield that protected allies and forts from bombardment.

Meruru used this feature to create some shelter that would shield everyone from the sun. Even Beast Princess Shia and her soldiers were able to enjoy the cool shade. Allen, however, was too excited about his skill to notice.

There’s nothing in this desert. It’s a good opportunity.

He could test out the effects of his Summons’ Abilities and Awakened Abilities to his heart’s content; there was no need for him to hold back. Needless to say, though, he was not sure if he could have held himself back even if he had been on a grassy plain or in a lush forest.

PLINK!

Suddenly, the open grimoire in Allen's hands glowed and text started to appear.

Sir Allen

From the Divine Realm Staff
First Angel Lapt

We thank you warmly for your continued patronage.

Because you have unlocked your King Me skill, we have decided to make adjustments to your other skill, Deputize, as below. We hope for your understanding.

Please note that Summons targeted by King Me will have their appearances altered. It would be greatly appreciated if you could kindly confirm that as well.

We sincerely hope for your good health and wish you the best of luck in your future battles. We hope for your continued use of our system.

Changes

Deputize will increase stats at a set rate of 5,000.

Recruit will increase stats at a set rate of 2,500.

Cooldown has been reduced.

Effect range has increased.

Wait, isn't this a downgrade? It's a nerf, right? I just got nerfed into the ground?

Once Allen had finished reading the letter he received, Merus returned. Another note popped up on the grimoire.

To Merus: Adjusting stats should be done solemnly.

"You've got a message from Lapt," Allen said, showing his Summon his book.

Merus scanned the page and scowled. "That angel..."

It seemed like the two angel siblings had differing thoughts about the ideal Summon.

I guess it's like a difference in musical tastes.

Allen had carefully calculated the effects of his skills and the stats of his Summons when making his plans. It was bothersome for him to change these numbers since it meant that all his previous plans needed to be redone, but he decided to not pursue this topic any further. Merus's scowl told him more than enough.

"Let's test it out for now," Allen said.

He wanted his first test subject to be Merus. The angel was currently

about the same height as Allen, and the boy thought that it would be easier to spot the differences once Merus had transformed thanks to King Me.

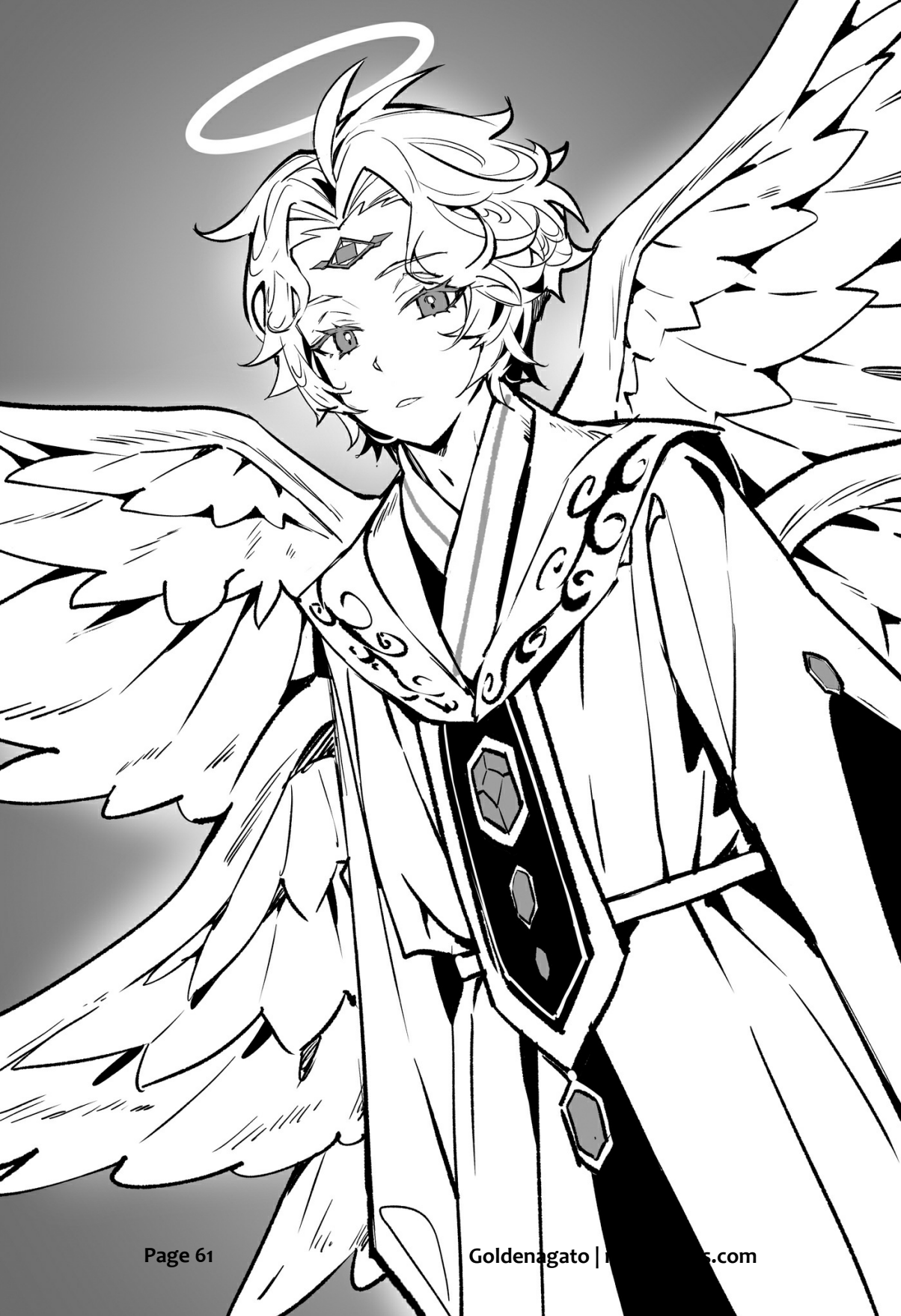
“Very well,” Merus replied with a nod.

“King Me—Merus!” Allen shouted.

The angel’s body glowed brilliantly as he started to metamorphose.

“Whoa!” the rest of the No-life Gamers gasped with awe.

Merus had always only had one pair of wings sprouting from his back, but now, he had a total of six wings, making three pairs. His usual attire of a simple white cloth wrapped around his waist had turned into an elegant outfit of white embroidered with dazzling gold. Glittering jewelry of various colors added the finishing touches to his luxurious garb. Despite the obvious changes in his attire and wings, however, he still looked like a humanoid in his late teens with an androgynous face, and his curly chestnut hair remained.



“Your height didn’t change much,” Allen noted.

“Seems not,” Merus replied. As though to confirm the changes for himself, the angel clenched his hands and shook his arm, flapping his six wings about.

When Allen read his grimoire to check the stats, he spluttered in shock. The numbers were so different that he could hardly believe his eyes.

Type: Angel

Rank: A

Position: King

Name: Merus

HP: 32,000

MP: 32,000

Attack: 32,000

Endurance: 32,000

Agility: 32,000

Intelligence: 32,000

Luck: 32,000

Bufs: All stats increase by 2,000

Abilities: Endow Element, Angel Halo, Deputize

Awakened Ability: Judgment Lightning

With the use of King Me, all of Merus’s stats had gone up by 10,000. He was more powerful than any Summon Allen had ever seen.

Ooh! His stats went up just like the message said they would!

Krena curiously peered into the grimoire as well. “Whoa! You’re amazing, Merus!”

Allen looked up and pointed toward the boulder that had sunk into the remains of Rukoaque. “Can you try firing your Judgment Lightning on that rock?” he requested.

“Very well.”

Merus stretched his six wings and placed his hands in front of him. There was a blinding flash of light from the skies above, and a torrent of purple lightning fell upon the boulder. A deafening roar rang out, and the Petit Meteor crumbled into pieces.

Whooooa!

Allen internally gave a round of applause. Like Deputize, King Me

increased the stats of Summons. This also implied that Awakened Abilities grew in power as well, boosting their raw damage.

This might give us an edge in the Demonic Deity battle.

While trying to test if there were any other notable changes, Allen noticed that Merus now had Deputize as one of his Abilities.

I guessed as much.

Deputize was similar to King Me, buffing the stats of a target. The number of buffs a target would receive was based on the user's stats. In other words, the stat increase would vary drastically if a Summon was affected by King Me. However, a Summon's Deputize could only be used on the same type of Summon. In Merus's case, he could only cast the Ability on other Angel types.

I need test subject number two.

"Orochi, come on out. I'll use King Me on you," Allen commanded.

A Dragon A, a hundred-meter-long hydra, appeared and raised its five heads. Allen cast King Me, surrounding the desert with blinding light for a moment. The Dragon A tripled in size to three hundred meters, its body laid out on the sands in all its glory. The number of its heads tripled as well.

"Graaah!" Orochi's fifteen heads roared viciously.

"It's huge! What in the world?!" Dogora shouted. He'd been swinging his axe around, not at all interested in Allen's testing, but he could not suppress his awe when he saw the colossal Dragon A.

"Hey, Cecil," Allen said. "Why do you think Orochi got bigger but Merus didn't?"

"Who knows?" Cecil responded, unable to provide an answer. "What makes you think I would know that?"

"Hmm. Then I guess I should check size differences first. Bea, come on out. King Me. Huh?"

The Insect A looked a bit more intimidating, but like Merus, it had not changed much in terms of size. Only Orochi had grown substantially. Allen proceeded to Summon the rest of his menagerie and cast King Me on them. As every type of Summon he had was now out in the desert, it looked like he was in charge of a small zoo.

While Allen had confirmed that every Summon affected by King Me would have its stats increased by 10,000 and gain the Deputize Ability, their appearances greatly differed. Their visual transformations were seemingly random. About an hour passed.

“Sir Allen, I can use Judgment Lightning again,” test subject number one, Merus, suddenly said. He had been standing silently this entire time.

“Huh?” Allen gasped.

Seriously?

Judgment Lightning had a cooldown of one day. King Me must have decreased that.

King Me provides other advantages to my Summons on top of boosting their stats? Huh. Does that correlate with the changes in appearances?

Allen glanced at the King Me’d Insect A, whose appearance was mostly unchanged, and had an epiphany.

“Did you perhaps not grow larger so that enemies wouldn’t be able to single you out in a swarm?” he asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Cecil replied.

He slowly organized his thoughts. “That Bea can give birth to a hundred Baby Beas, but aside from that, it can use Queen Cell to birth one Parent Bea per hour. This Parent Bea also has the capability of birthing a hundred Baby Beas. After three hours, we’d have a total of four Beas, including the initial one. If they birth a hundred Baby Beas, we’d have a total of four hundred Baby Beas. Are you following me so far?”

“Of course I am! I can do basic math too!”

“If the initial Bea had King Me used on it, it’ll have the power to Deputize all four hundred Baby Beas buzzing nearby, making them stronger. Even if the King Me Bea flies off on its own, it can Deputize the Parents Beas that it birthed through Queen Cell. The Deputized Parents Beas would be under the effects of Recruit, allowing them to Recruit the hundred Baby Beas that they’ve birthed.”

Allen had Summoned a total of forty-nine Insect As for his plans. This was because the Insect As had the power to multiply, amplifying their raw strength.

The No-life Gamers had to defeat a far greater number of monsters in Galiat than they had in the battle of Rohzenheim, as the Demon Lord Army’s plan involved turning its victims into monsters to increase their numbers. This plan would likely be put into effect when the No-life Gamers inevitably had a direct clash with the Demon Lord Army in the future. The Insect As’ Abilities would become useful in a battle of numbers.

In addition, Insect As had another Ability called Slave Needle, which allowed them to control enemy monsters. If the Parents Beas and Baby

Beas multiplied and then used Slave Needle, Allen could create an army of ten thousand soldiers in just one day.

Furthermore, if Allen used King Me, the Insect As could buff their allies. This would allow Allen to decrease the number of Insect As needed and Summon something of a different type instead, increasing his raw power.

“Yeah, so?” Cecil asked.

“You can actually punch a hole in this plan,” Allen explained. “If the Parent Bea dies, its Baby Beas will disappear along with it. In other words, if the initial Bea gets killed, the Parent Beas it birthed and the Baby Beas would all be wiped out. The swarm would be gone in an instant. If the Demon Lord Army knew this, I’m sure they’d target the initial Bea.”

“Ah, I get it now. King Me doesn’t change the appearance of the Bea much, so it wouldn’t stand out in the swarm.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Swell probably doesn’t increase in size either because its role is to sneak into enemy territory and obtain information or build Nests so we can launch a sneak attack.”

Aside from the Bird A, the other Bird-type Summon likely did not change in size so that they could sneak around more easily. It did seem, however, that Bird B, Allen’s main form of transportation, would still be enlarged by Deputize.

“Then what about Beanie?” Cecil asked, pointing to the Grass A. The Summon resembled a fava bean with arms and legs.

“There’s probably little meaning in changing this guy’s appearance,” Allen guessed.

“Makes sense.”

She knelt down and gently petted the Grass A, which had its chest puffed out proudly from being King Me’d.

* * *

Five days had passed, and Allen was still continuing his tests. He had a King Me’d Bea use Queen Cell to give birth to a Parent Bea. In turn, the Parent Bea birthed a hundred Baby Beas. As Allen stared at his army of Baby Beas, he learned that his Bea limit was ten thousand.

I guess testing ends here for now.

He wrote down his notes about King Me in his grimoire.

Characteristics of Deputize and King Me

Those that have been King Me’d will have a King

position and increase their stats by 10,000.

Those that have been Deputized will have a General position and increase their stats by 5,000.

Those that have been Recruited will have a Soldier position and increase their stats by 2,500.

Beast-, Stone-, Fish-, and Dragon-type Summons will grow visibly larger and change based on Position. Kings will grow 3× in size, Generals will grow 2×, and Soldiers will grow 1.5×.

Angel-, Spirit-, and Insect-type Summons won't change much in size, but their appearances will become a bit more luxurious. Kings, Generals, and Soldiers all have slight visual differences from one another.

Bird- and Grass-type Summons won't change much in size and appearance.

Bird-type Summons that have been Deputized will change in size and appearance.

Only one Rank A Summons per type can be cast with King Me.

Only three Rank B Summons per type can be cast with Deputize.

There are no Rank or number limits for Recruit.

King Me'd Summons must have their Deputized Summons within a hundred-kilometer radius. Going outside of this range will remove them from Deputize.

Deputized Summons must have their Recruited Summons within a ten-kilometer radius. Going outside of this range will remove them from Recruit.

There is no range limit should the Summoner cast King Me, Deputize, or Recruit.

King Me'd Summons have a cooldown time of one hour for their Awakened Abilities. Deputized Summons require three hours, and Recruited Summons have a timer of six hours.

It had been a month since this entire debacle had begun at the Church of Elmea, kicking off the events that had caused the world to fall into a state of panic. SOS signals had been sent by various cities when Allen, who had been in the Baukisian royal palace at the time, had learned about

the chaos.

Chapter 5: The Questioned Resolve and the Full Account of the Debacle

While Allen was busy testing out King Me, the rest of the No-life Gamers were busily handling their own affairs. With the help of Meruru—specifically, her mithril golem Tam-Tam’s Eagle Mode—they had flown to the center of Galiat to scout out a small, ten-kilometer-wide floating island that looked as though a chunk of earth had been gouged out and thrust into the sky. Initially, a glowing white membrane had surrounded it—a barrier. When Allen had sent his Insect As to attack that barrier, they had failed.

The membrane had given off the same color as the pillar of light that Demonic Deity Lycaoron had been defending, however. Thus, the No-life Gamers had surmised that the four pillars, one at each corner of the Galiatan Continent, had been creating a light barrier for the island. After they had destroyed the four light-emitting altars, Meruru and her group had confirmed that there was no light membrane to be seen. They had correctly predicted that the barrier would come down once the four pillars of light were gone.

Now that they were able to enter the island, they had had the Summons that they had brought along to scout the area. In doing so, they had discovered that this island was nothing more than a floating, elliptical boulder ten kilometers long and eight kilometers wide. There were no plants, much less animals, living on its exposed, rocky surface.

In the center of this island was a large mountain, and a temple stood on its peak. Even from Tam-Tam, the group had confirmed that something was wavering like a flickering flame on top of the temple. They had sent a Bird E and a Spirit A scope out the place, but the moment the Summons had entered, their vision Sharing had been cut off. Allen, who had been testing out King Me in the desert, could not hide his shock. The temple must have had the same effects as the barrier of light, disabling Allen’s skills. He had not even been able to have Bird A place its Nests for teleporting. However, this just meant that Summons could not communicate from the inside. Since they could approach the temple, he

had asked them to scout the area, leave, and report what they saw.

Once they had finished exploring, he had learned that the temple was teeming with Undeads and ghost-type monsters, giving off an ominous air. The highest floor was protected by a sturdy gate that even Spirit A had been unable to pass through. When Bird Es had tried to scope the place out from the outside, they had seen through the window the Pontiff of Daemonism, a Demonic Deity-like entity, and Bask.

There did not seem to be any treasure chests within the temple. Allen had assumed that there would be at least one or two since the place was filled with monsters and bosses, but it appeared that he had been wrong. He had hoped that he would find some sort of gear on par with Bask's precious equipment and wanted to find it before the boss battle. And though he had searched every nook and cranny of the temple, he had come up empty-handed. There were numerous enemies they would have to fight, but not a single chest to be found.

Allen was filled with rage, but this world did not operate on the logic of preparing a hefty reward for adventurers at the end of a dungeon or an enemy castle. And so, he decided to destroy the temple. There was no need for him to bumble around in a place where his enemies were waiting. Especially not when they had been rude to him first. The complete lack of treasure chests disgusted him.

Unfortunately, he had been unable to destroy the temple. Cecil, buffed by the Holy Orb of Macris and Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, had used her tried-and-true Petit Meteor, but the skill had fizzled out before it could reach the temple. The same had occurred with Judgment Lightning. Every attack from the outside had been nullified by a white membrane surrounding the building. The flame flickering above the temple was no doubt related.

According to Merus's analysis, the powerful barrier could only be destroyed from the inside. And so, the rest of the Gamers had decided to wait for Allen before descending upon the island and infiltrating the temple.

At present, Allen, the rest of the Gamers, and their allies were all on the island's rocky surface courtesy of Eagle Mode Tam-Tam. They had just finished holding one final meeting before their fateful battle. Beast Princess Shia looked up at the temple on top of the mountain and frowned.

"This is our enemy's base, I take it," she said. By her side were her four elite soldiers, who would also be taking part in the conquering of this

temple.

“Yeah, I think it is,” Allen said sadly. “There weren’t any treasures or anything.”

“Treasures?” Shia asked before she shot him a look of exasperation at his antics. He was more concerned about treasure than he was about the terrifying fight against the Demonic Deities. “No, never mind.”

“I’ll be staying back, right?” Meruru asked, a Bird F perched on her shoulder.

“Yeah. If—and this is a big *if*—we manage to destroy the barrier protecting the temple, I’ll let you know using Transmission,” Allen replied. “I want you to attack from the outside.”

“Got it.”

I guess I gotta tell it to them straight. I’ll start with Shia.

He turned toward the Beast Princess and said, “On the highest floor of the temple are Gushara and Bask. There might be other Demonic Deities lurking about as well. I suspect that this will be a grisly battle, but what would you like to do?”

“We can’t back down after coming all this way,” Shia replied.

Until now, Allen and his party had been the ones to finish off the Demonic Deities. To be more precise, it had all been thanks to Cecil’s Extra Skill. Beast Princess Shia and her elite soldiers could not claim credit for those honorable deeds. Furthermore, if she decided to forfeit this battle while knowing that Gushara was present, she would not be fulfilling her initial goal. Her journey thus far would lose all meaning.

“You’ll have to be ready to make sacrifices,” Allen warned. “Your subordinates must be prepared to lose their lives, and you must have the same resolve, Princess Shia.”

“But of course,” she replied. “My subordinates are not cowards.”

Allen saw Shia as a proud leader, capable of commanding her troops. Though she excelled in that field, she also became emotional rather quickly, despairing at the death of her subordinates. She had even shed tears when Rasu had been at death’s door. Allen saw her as a princess who easily lost her cool. She did not have a safety plan either, and it was possible that her group would hinder the No-life Gamers in a time of emergency. However, since Captain Rudo did not stop her, Allen had no choice but to accept her words.

He turned to Dogora. “What are you gonna do, Dogora? Wanna wait here with Meruru? I might not be able to teleport you.”

Allen had once had Beast Astrologist Temi, one of the Ten Heroic Beasts and Beast Prince Zeu's subordinate, divine the reason behind Dogora's Extra Skill not activating. The Summoner was cautious as a result of her prophecy, which had said that Dogora risked losing his life if he went to the southeast.

When the prophecy had been told, they had been in the Rank S dungeon in the Empire of Baukis. If one were to go southeast from there, they would end up in the Kingdom of Ratash on the Central Continent. But Allen realized that their current location of Galiat, which was southeast of the Central Continent, would also be considered southeast of Baukis.

This was also why Allen had diligently ensured that the other Demonic Deities would be killed by Cecil's and Meruru's long-range attacks. He had learned his lesson with Lycaoron and Bask. He wanted to keep the number of times Dogora would be on the battlefield as low as possible. Needless to say, during their fight against Lycaoron and Bask, Allen had used his Fish Summons to heighten their defenses and relied heavily on Keel's Support Magic. He had even used Sophie's Spirit Magic to restrain the enemy's movements. In that way, he had ensured that his party members, especially Dogora, were safe and sound.

Their superb teamwork had prevailed because they had been up against a single opponent. This time around, however, they would have to fight against both Gushara and Bask, at the very least. The upcoming battle would be fierce like never before, and Allen feared that this was where Dogora was at risk of losing his life as per Temi's prediction.

Thus far, if Dogora had looked to be in danger, he had had the option to teleport by himself to his parents in Rodin Village. Unfortunately, that did not seem like a feasible plan this time around. Allen could not place any Nests inside the temple, meaning there was a good chance that he would be unable to teleport anyone out. Moreover, since he could use King Me, he would be able to buff Merus and the rest of his Summons; Dogora was not absolutely necessary for this battle.

But Dogora merely glared at his party leader. "Huh? What the hell are you talking about? I'm tagging along, of course."

"Dogora..." Allen murmured. Krena and the rest of the Gamers looked worried as well.

"Allen, you're being persistent," the axe-wielder said, puffing his chest out with pride. "It's a given that we'll fight together. Don't make me repeat myself."

Allen met Dogora's gaze. Allen was the leader of the party, but he treated his members as his equals, not as subordinates or subjects. He could not give absolute orders or force them to do his bidding. He saw the Destroyer's resolve and decided to drop the subject.

"Got it," Allen finally relented. "But be careful."

"I know. Stop nagging at me like my mom," Dogora grumbled.

The rest of the party breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing the two converse. They prepared themselves for the final battle.

"Let's head out!" Allen bellowed.

They all climbed on the backs of Bird Bs and flew to the temple at the peak of the mountain. From there, they marched straight through its front entrance.

"We kinda just...waltzed right in," Cecil observed.

"That we did. Everyone, maintain your positions," Allen replied.

Allen was understandably perplexed. The barrier of light that had caused even Cecil's Petit Meteor to dissipate had not activated as they had entered.

Yeah, I feel like we're being beckoned to enter.

He had noticed that Cecil and a few others looked anxious, so he had raised his voice to maintain their vigilance. And though he had seen the inside of the temple before, he could not tolerate the horrible stench wafting throughout the building.

"It's so dark and dingy," Keel complained, using his Purifying Magic. "Turn Undead!"

A majority of the skeleton warriors fell to the ground with a large thud, and the vanguard easily took care of the rest. The temple interior was simple, making it difficult to get lost in. There was no need to make any detours either. Spirit A had already found the fastest route to the gate on the highest floor, and the party arrived there with ease.

The gate had looked white from a distance, but on closer inspection, Allen and his party saw that it was embedded with bones. Human, merfolk, and even monster bones seemed to have been used for this door, which emanated an ominous and uninviting air.

"Let's head inside," Allen said.

"Roger!" Dogora shouted, raising his greataxe and large shield.

"You don't need to be so tense."

"I know."

With that, Allen pushed the massive door open. He had braced himself,

but it opened naturally with the gentlest of touches. The No-life Gamers and their allies peered inside. Light poured in from the ceiling window, brightly illuminating the reception room. In front of them, in the depths of the room, was a glimmer of orange like a flickering flame in a fireplace. It resembled a crimson plate and floated within the jet-black flames that spewed forth from an altar. Allen had never seen an altar this large. It was difficult to tell from afar, but the crimson plate looked metallic as it slowly emitted a flickering, orange glow inside the darkness.

That's...Fire Goddess Freyja's divine vessel.

Merus had claimed that he was certain this item was Goddess Freyja's divine vessel. A robed individual was kneeling in front of this altar and vessel.

"Gushara..." Shia growled, informing Allen of the person's identity.

Merus believed that Gushara was probably a Greater Demonic Deity. Lycaoron had referred to Gushara as "Lord." It was likely that the Demonic Deity had used a title because Gushara was ranked higher.

Standing beside the kneeling Gushara was a skeleton dressed in lavish, tattered robes of the Church of Elmea. A clergyman who had been killed in Teomenia, then turned into an Undead to serve the Pontiff of Daemonism.

What's going on? It appeared so suddenly. Wait, a clergyman?

Though the skeleton was wearing the raggedy clerical garments of a clergyman, a golden necklace hung from its neck. The necklace was so pronounced that it was almost bizarre.

A carpet was laid from Allen's group to the altar, and thick pillars stood equidistant from one another on either side of it. In the very back, sitting cross-legged while leaning against the pillar to the right, was Bask. His two orichalcum greatswords were plunged into the ground in front of him. He gazed up.

"Ah, you're finally here!" the Demonic Deity said. He did not look at all nervous and had been eagerly awaiting the boy. "Come on, Allen! You're slower than a snail! You *always* make me wait, don't ya? Heh heh heh!"

"I thought you ran away with your tail between your legs. Didn't know you'd decided to hide here," Allen said provokingly. He was well aware that angering his enemy could oftentimes lead to his victory.

But Bask only grinned wider at Allen's taunting words, seemingly impervious to the provocation. "Yeah, we had some good times, huh? It was so fun! It's been a while since I thought that I was gonna die! But the

same trick won't work on me twice. If you're fine with that, let's fight!"

The divine vessel that floated above the altar was surrounded by void flames. It would occasionally change its shape, looking almost viscous at times, and would sometimes look like a voiceless face screaming with sadness. Perhaps the "collecting souls" bit that Bask had mentioned referred to that black flame. It required many lives to be sacrificed and gathered so that it could create the pillars of light.

I knew it. Their goal was to gather people's lives.

Allen came to a conclusion in regard to the role of the divine vessel. The Demon Lord Army had turned many civilians into daemoninc incarnations. Those who had been transformed had had their lives stolen from them, unable to revert to their human form. They could no longer lead their lives as normal people. This alone was not enough to know whether people turned into daemoninc incarnations because they had had their lives stolen or if they forfeited their lives to turn into these monsters.

However, the people attacked by daemoninc incarnations turned into these monsters as well and could not be cured. In other words, they became daemoninc incarnations as their lives were taken. The monsters were given the power to turn enemies they attacked into daemoninc incarnations as well.

These lives were then gathered in the divine vessel within the altar. Allen speculated that the lives had turned into pillars of light to create a barrier that protected this island. Or perhaps the Demon Lord Army had other uses for these lives. And this plan was being executed by Gushara, who was praying at the altar.

Allen had heard that Gushara had not resisted at all when he was captured by Beast Princess Shia and her beastkin. If he was a Greater Demonic Deity, it was likely that he had gotten caught on purpose.

"Are you Gushara?" Allen asked.

The robed man stood up and turned toward the group. Though his face resembled a human's, his skin was pale and damp. It was clear that he was anything but.

"I am," Gushara replied in a shrill voice. "And you must be Allen. Are you here to join my religion, child?"

"Nah, I'm here to take you down. But before that, mind telling me what you've been up to? All the Demonic Deities I've faced thus far have been so tight-lipped."

Gushara gave a screeching laugh. "My, oh my. You're hasty *and* you

can't take a joke. I didn't *actually* think you'd join my faith. Wouldn't you agree, Lord Kyubel?"

A Demonic Deity wearing a clown outfit suddenly appeared. Allen and his allies gulped in shock. Even Allen felt his nerves grow tense; he had not met this Demonic Deity since Rohzenheim.

Don't just pop up out of nowhere. And if you could do that, surely you could've launched a sneak attack or two.

Allen had learned all he could from Merus in regards to the Demon Lord Army's structure. Kyubel was known as the Strategist of the Demon Lord Army and acted on his own, taking direct orders from the Demon Lord himself. In addition, Kyubel was known to be the longest-living Demonic Deity who currently existed—there were even rumors that he had been created first, earning him the nickname "Primeval Demonic Deity." His clown mask obscured his face, but he could have actually resembled a doddering old man.

"Hello, Allen," Kyubel said in a tone that suggested he had been there the whole time. "It's been a while. I'm impressed that you made it here. I suppose I should expect no less from the hero guided by Elmea."

"What do you mean by that?" Allen asked. He was not sure why Kyubel referred to him as a hero. He did notice Bask trying to stifle his laughter, though, and that Gushara was chuckling.

What's going on?

"I feel sorry for you," Kyubel said, hopping from side to side. "You don't know anything at all, do you? I don't think you want to die with zero answers, hmm? Why don't I tell you a thing or two."

A gift for the afterlife, I take it? He's more generous than I thought.

Allen felt that he should prioritize gathering information. He wanted to know just what was occurring right now.

"Are you giving me a gift for the afterlife?" he asked. "If you are, I'll gladly take it."

"Hya ha ha!" Kyubel laughed. "I didn't think *you'd* be the one to suggest your death! You're so funny, Allen. All right, then! I'll tell you as a special treat!" Kyubel twirled around and jumped before floating cross-legged in the air. And just as abruptly, he started his story. "I think Bask was the first one. But he was so obsessed with the idea of getting stronger that he had no interest in others. The humans didn't know how to handle him."

"Huh? Bask?" Allen asked quizzically. It seemed the Greater Demonic

Deity was not talking about the destruction currently happening on this continent or the divine vessel.

“Next up was Helmios,” Kyubel continued. “Elmea gave the boy the Hero Talent because the god had learned from his mistakes with Bask. A kind person who prioritized others over himself could surely carve the path. But this didn’t go well either. Do you know why?”

“Was he too kind or something?” Allen answered. He understood that this was a discussion about Elmea preparing humans—or heroes, rather—to fight against the Demon Lord Army.

“Impressive as always! Bingo! Elmea couldn’t wait for a person who pursued strength while siding with humans to be born. Such a person defied all logic.”

“That’s why...he decided to summon me from another world.”

Allen was not the type to ignore others and pursue only his own strength like Bask. The Summoner was also not like Helmios, who delayed acting because he spent too much time thinking about others.

I was chosen because I was certain to press forward without being satisfied with my current situation, wouldn’t be arrogant, and was social enough to get by.

“Ding ding ding! Precisely!” Kyubel said midair, pointing at Allen and praising the boy.

“Why do you know so much about the Heavenly Realm?” Merus asked.

“Hey there, Merus. You’d like to know why? Because I asked your comrades, of course. I can’t ask Elmea about this directly, now can I?”

“There isn’t a single soul who’d tell you anything.”

“That’s not true. They all kindly divulged their secrets. Ah, they spilled the beans after they resisted with all their might.” Perhaps due to the light, it looked like Kyubel’s masked face had smirked.

“Y-You monster!” Merus roared furiously, his six wings trembling with rage.

Kyubel did not seem at all daunted. “Yeah, I didn’t have to go that far. I just thought that I should check up on the Heavenly Realm and see how they were progressing.” He paused and turned to the boy. “Allen, how long do you think it’s been since this world was created?”

“Huh? I heard it’s been about ten thousand years or so,” he replied.

According to Merus, when Elmea deemed that the world he created, managed, and operated had had its harmony disturbed by humans or

monsters, the world would be reset. This cycle had continued for several tens of thousands of years.

“And do you know how long the world before this one lasted?” Kyubel asked.

“Nope,” Allen replied.

“Hmm, okay. Then I’ll keep that part a secret, but the past world lasted much, *much* longer than this one. In other words, just because two Heroes had failed, Elmea wouldn’t see that as harmony being disturbed. There would be the birth of a third Hero, without a doubt. And that prediction came true.”

Kyubel was implying that the Demon Lord Army had known that Elmea was trying to create a Hero and that they had countermeasures for it. They had remained hidden in Galiat for decades and finally created daemonic incarnations to bring chaos upon this world to lure out the Hero that Elmea created—Allen.

The Demon Lord Army had a guide on how to rule this world, then? It really feels like Hell Mode for me.

The Demonic Deities that had escaped the reset of the world and survived for hundreds of thousands of years, such as Kyubel, had expected Elmea to create a Hero once the Demon Lord was born. And so, they had cooked up plans against it.

When Allen had been called to this world, Elmea had shown him Talents that included Demon Lord and Hero. Perhaps Kyubel and his colleagues were aware of this.

“So, what are you planning on doing with the lives you’ve collected this time?” Allen asked. “Was all of that just to lure me out?”

“And what use is there to ask that?” Kyubel replied. “It has nothing to do with you, and even if I told you, there’s nothing you can do...if you’re dead!”

The Greater Demonic Deity cackled as Merus charged forward, receiving a command from the Summoner through Sharing.

“*You’re the one who’s gonna die!*” Merus roared.

Only Bask, who was a short distance away, could react to the Agility that the King Me-buffed Merus had. He swiftly stood up and swung his two greatswords, stepping in front of Kyubel.

“Don’t ignore me, angel!” Bask bellowed.

“Outta my way! Move!” Merus shouted back. He did a somersault in the air and landed a kick on Bask.

“Grah!” the Demonic Deity gasped as he was blown back into the depths of the altar and slammed against a wall.

Thank goodness King Me was unsealed in time. There are way too many Demonic Deities here.

Allen was internally ecstatic to see the strengthened Merus kick the living daylights out of Bask. The angel had struggled in his prior encounter with the Demonic Deity.

Merus flew through the air and approached Kyubel, who was floating, before throwing a punch squarely at the clown mask. Kyubel blocked the punch with the palm of his hand and guarded against the Angel A’s other fist, which had been aiming for his stomach.

“Huh. Not bad,” Kyubel observed. “Did your powers return?”

“A little,” Merus replied.

“Hee hee. Well, that’s no good. There won’t be enough despair.”

Despair?

“What?” Merus asked, jumping back to gain some distance. He sensed danger, as it seemed that Kyubel was smiling behind his mask.

“It’s best to be well prepared, huh?” the clown Strategist replied. “We can return it to its former balance.”

Still floating cross-legged, Kyubel ascended as a black line ran through the temple floor and approached where he was. The line then split off to either side, creating a rectangular void space that was like a doorway.

Thunderous hoofbeats could be heard from the depths of the darkness, as though a horse or goat were approaching. The beast ran full speed ahead as it emerged, sporting a long, sharp horn. It had no hair, and its body was instead covered in scales. Its long, slender legs and sleek body resembled a horse more than they did a dragon or lizard.

Is that...a kirin?

Just as Allen thought back to a similar mythological beast he had seen in his previous world, Merus looked on in awe.

“The Goddess of Arbitration,” the angel murmured.

“Now, Falnemes, Goddess of Arbitration,” Kyubel said with glee. “It’s time for you to cast your long-awaited judgment.”

Falnemes glared at Allen and his allies, her eyes glittering with animosity.

Chapter 6: The Obstacle of Despair

Falnemes, the Goddess of Arbitration, was a Greater Deity granted special powers that allowed her to judge gods who had sinned. According to Merus, more than fifty years ago, Falnemes had been sent to the Demon Realm—another name for the Forgotten Continent—by Elmea to cast judgment on the Demon Lord. She had not been seen since.

The Goddess of Arbitration had appeared upon being summoned by Kyubel. Had she been brainwashed or won over somehow? No matter the case, nothing but murderous intent and malice emanated from her body, her glaring eyes filled with hatred. Clearly, she was not an ally.

“I’m sure you won’t run, but juuust to be safe...” Kyubel said.

The doors behind Allen and his party suddenly closed by themselves. Then, from beyond the altar that was far in front of them, Bask’s voice could be heard.

“Heh heh heh. You really did a number on me.”

He’s tough.

Allen remained wary as Bask returned to the altar with firm strides. It looked as though he had taken no damage whatsoever. Even his greatswords were still clenched in his hands. He plunged one of the blades into the ground and turned to the floating Kyubel.

“Hey, lemme use the divine vessel,” the Demonic Deity demanded.

“Be my guest,” Kyubel replied.

Still cross-legged, the Strategist glided through the air toward the altar. He stuck his hand in the jet-black flames and flicked Freyja’s divine vessel, causing it to soar through the air and fall into Bask’s hand. As the Demonic Deity clenched the vessel, it went up in flames before transforming into a fiery greatsword.

A greatsword was massive and usually required two hands to hold. Its hilt was usually longer than that of a regular sword so that two hands could snugly grip it. Yet Bask was holding this one with one arm as though he were gripping a twig, wielding it gracefully. This transformed divine vessel was no doubt Goddess Freyja’s weapon; its crimson blade continuously spewed forth bright orange flames. When Bask swung it around, it left behind a trail of fire.

“So, this is the divine vessel Flamberge... Not bad.” Bask nodded with satisfaction.

“Istahl,” Kyubel said. “These people are criminals who have strayed from the right path. Please heal Bask, who is about to cast judgment on them.”

“A-Aghhh... All Heal,” the skeleton clergyman murmured.

The golden ornament around its neck glimmered, and the tip of its staff started to glow with MP. Light enveloped Bask’s body, healing the injuries he had sustained from the blow dealt to him by Merus. Allen’s team was flabbergasted by the quick healing.

“Istahl?!” Keel shouted, dumbfounded. “Is he *the* Great Pope Istahl?!”

The Great Pope had been present for Gushara’s execution in Elmahl’s capital of Teomenia, when the city had gone up in flames, but he had been missing ever since. That very man was now in front of everyone—a charred skeleton wearing high-ranking clerical robes, clenching a staff, and donning a glittering golden necklace. Allen had suspected that this might be the case, and Keel had confirmed that suspicion.

Keel was trembling with rage. The Great Pope, who had devoted over fifty years of his life to guiding the people, had been transformed into something so pitiful.

“I had Istahl become a Demonic Deity,” Kyubel explained. “Come on, now. Bask doesn’t have any armor. Cast a defensive spell on him, will you?”

“Aaagh... All Protect,” the Great Pope said obediently, casting his spell. Bask was surrounded with a magical glow, confirming that Defensive Magic had been cast on him.

Now we’re also up against a healer, a Demonic Deity with Saint King Talent. This couldn’t possibly get any worse. They already had Kyubel, Bask, and the Goddess of Arbitration to deal with, so the last person Allen wanted to have join that group was a capable healer.

This situation only worked to his foes’ advantage. Unlike Keel, who was trembling with fury, Allen was desperately trying to think of a plan that could help them out for even a little while. However, he could not hide his shock at the overwhelming power that Kyubel had decided to deploy.

Without so much as a word of thanks to the Great Pope, the clown called for Falnemes. “Hmph. Horse, come over here.”

The Goddess obeyed his orders. Bask jumped in the air and sat on Falnemes’s back, finally reaching the same eye level as the floating Merus.

“Hey, shitty angel. You ready? Heh heh,” he said, grinning with exhilaration.

At once, Falnemes dashed forth with thudding hoofbeats, crushing the stone tiles underneath her as she charged straight for Merus. The angel grimaced bitterly, outstretched his six wings, and rushed at Falnemes with his fists clenched at his hips.

The moment the trio clashed, the intense impact sent out a shock wave, causing Allen’s hair to flutter. When the sound of a loud crash reached his ears, he saw that Merus had been slammed into the ground.

“Gah!”

In addition to being on the ground, the backs of Merus’s hands were burned black. A set of hoofprints was stamped firmly into his chest and stomach.

“Heh heh heh. How does it feel? Hurts, doesn’t it?” Bask cackled triumphantly. Leaving behind a trail of fire, he raised Flamberge in the air. Falnemes stood on her hind feet and raised her front hooves to stamp Merus down again.

“Keel, heal Merus!” Allen quickly ordered. “Sophie, Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits!”

The usually calm Allen had no time to maintain his composure. Merus buffed with King Me was supposed to be their ace in the hole, but the boy had not expected the angel to go down so easily.

“I’m doing that already!” Keel yelled back. He had already finished chanting his healing spell. Though he was late to start because he had been overwhelmed by Kyubel’s plan, he was back in his usual form and making quick decisions.

“Lord Rohzen, lend me your strength!” Sophie cried.

“This looks like a tough one,” Rohzen replied. He jumped in the air, swung his hips, and cast his spell, but his face looked tenser than usual.

Upon receiving the thirty percent stat buff, Merus finally stood up once more.

“Ooh! So, you got stronger, eh?” Bask said. “Nice! Now *that’s* worth killing!”

“Hmph! Here I go!” Merus roared back.

All right! Merus should be a lot stronger now.

Merus’s Buffed Stats

Name: Merus
HP: 53,690
MP: 45,500
Attack: 41,600
Endurance: 56,420
Agility: 45,500
Intelligence: 41,600
Luck: 41,600

Bask continued to guffaw as he clenched his two greatswords. Merus went on the offensive with punches and kicks; at first, it looked as though he was putting up a good fight, but Falnemes was too quick. With Bask still on her back, she was able to predict Merus's movements and give Bask the advantage.

As the fight wore on, Gushara aimed for Allen.

"What are you lot staring at?!" the Pontiff screeched. "Here I go! Chaos Fire!"

He thrust his arms forward, and a number of pale blue spears of fire appeared in the air. They made not a sound as they flew straight for Allen. Sophie, who was regenerating her MP, noticed the danger and immediately summoned her water spirit, Nymph.

"Lady Nymph, please lend me your strength!"

"Right. I've got to protect everyone," the spirit, who resembled a little girl wearing a raincoat, replied.

By manipulating the water dripping from her body, she created a wall of water, blocking the several fiery spears.

Though the wall boiled and evaporated in the blink of an eye, it was more than enough time for Cecil to cast her ice spell. "Blizzard!" she cried.

Several spears of ice flew straight for Gushara. He was able to nullify half of the icy attack with a wave of his hand, but the remaining half skewered him, making him stagger for a moment.

"All Heal," the Great Pope chanted, healing the Demonic Deity's wounds.

"Ha ha ha!" Gushara laughed shrilly. "You all truly love to make things fun!"

"Rockanel, Hayate, Okiyosan! Come forth!" Allen said, chanting for his Summons.

“...”

“Yessir!”

“Hee hee hee.”

A stone statue forty-five meters tall made of hihiirokane, a massive forty-five-meter-tall wolf with silver fur, and a lady wearing a beautiful kimono and carrying a lantern appeared. Stone A and Beast A had grown so ridiculously massive from King Me that they blocked the front and back of the temple. Though Beast A managed to stand, it struggled to change directions, and Stone A’s head hit the ceiling, preventing it from standing.

No, this is fine. This is what I want. Allen was more than satisfied with this situation. Stone A could manipulate hihiirokane orbs and use Absorb, allowing it to soak up ranged attacks from enemies and dish out attacks of its own. It did not need to move and could become a shield like Beast A.

Now, what next? Allen was using his Summons both as shields to block Gushara’s attacks and as extra eyes to analyze the battlefield for his next move. No one other than Merus could even approach Bask, who was riding on Falnemes’s back. While Krena, Dogora, Beast Princess Shia, and Captain Rudo were at the ready, they could not find an opening to take advantage of. Even a King Me’d Merus could barely keep up with their Agility.

Cecil was launching her Attack Magic at Gushara while Volmaar and Commander Kamu fired their arrows. However, the Pontiff had Magical Damage Resistance and high Endurance, so none of the arrows could land a fatal blow on him. Though Stone A had received Gushara’s attacks with its metallic orbs and defended Allen’s party successfully, it was meaningless if they could not defeat the Demonic Deity.

Meanwhile, the two Demonic Deities unleashed attack after attack with zero intention of defending themselves; they were completely reliant on the Great Pope’s healing. Merus, Cecil, Volmaar, and Commander Kamu were all landing their attacks, dishing out *some* damage, but neither Bask nor Gushara would falter due to a minor injury. Any wounds they sustained were quickly healed, and they had no openings. Thus, Allen knew who to attack first.

“Let’s prioritize the Great Pope!” he shouted. “Krena, your Extra Skill!”

“I predicted as much. Dammit!” Keel shouted, but he steeled his resolve and did not dissent. The Great Pope might have been a grand being while he was alive, but at this rate, the entire party would be wiped out.

“Roger!” Krena said, swiftly turning toward the Great Pope. As she dashed through the front paws of the Beast A, her body started to waver. She used her Extra Skill, Limit Break, to buff her stats.

And now, it's a race against time.

Both Limit Break and Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits were finite buffs. Once they wore off, they had a cooldown of one day. If the Gamers could not kill all three Demonic Deities while they still had their buffs, they would have to retreat. Allen knew that he could not let his guard down in this desperate situation.

Just then, Bask made his move. He exchanged a terrifying barrage of attacks with Merus, forcing the angel to jump back, then utilized the opening to kick Falnemes's side as his way of ordering her to leap forward. The Goddess kicked Beast A's vicious claws as it attempted to attack her midair and landed below its jaw. She jumped forward and caught up to Krena, who was trying to rush the Great Pope.

“Whoa, there,” Bask chortled. “I can't let you get the old man. He's our precious party member! Heh heh,” the Demonic Deity, who did not seem at all like the type to treasure his party members, remarked half jokingly as he swung Flamberge down at Krena's back.

“Hngh... Ack!” Krena cried. She had sensed his murderous intent and managed to turn around to defend herself with her weapon. She was able to avoid a fatal injury, but she was blown backward into Stone A's ankle.

“Princess Shia, let us charge forth as well!” Rudo suggested.

“Agreed. Time it with me, Captain Rudo,” Shia replied.

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Merus chased after Bask while Beast Princess Shia and Rudo joined the fray. Bask stood in front of the Great Pope to protect him and, with the support of Falnemes, kept the three from laying a finger on the healer.

Dogora joined after a slight delay, weighed down by his hefty gear. It was four against one, but Bask maintained his advantage. The four continued to attack without stopping for breath, with Bask dodging half the attacks and receiving the remaining half. He did not so much as flinch, however, and his wounds were quickly healed by the Great Pope.

Commander Gonu called out to spirits in hopes of hindering Falnemes's movements even a little, but they were quickly stamped away by her hooves. Keel and Commander Sera could barely keep up with healing the four that were injured by Bask's attacks. As the battle came to a deadlock, Allen realized that their buffs would wear off soon, putting

them at a disadvantage. Noticing this, Kyubel decided to hasten the process.

“You guys are stronger than I thought,” the Greater Demonic Deity said. “We need to make sure that we can kill you here.” He was beside Gushara. This put him in range of the attacks from Cecil, Volmaar, and Kamu, but he did not seem at all bothered. Indeed, the attacks all fizzled out before ever reaching him.

“Is something the matter, Lord Kyubel?” Gushara inquired.

“Nothing,” came a reply. “I just wanted to make them despair more. They might be able to flee at this rate.”

The clown turned back to the altar and reached out toward the void flames. Like iron sand drawn by a magnet, the fire reached for Kyubel and formed a sphere atop his palm. *BADUMP!* The orb started to beat like a heart. It continued to pulsate grotesquely.

“I think this is enough to send to the Demon Lord,” Kyubel said while staring at the sphere. “You can use the rest.”

The black fire of the altar visibly shrank as it formed a thin belt that wrapped around Gushara’s body. He absorbed the fire from underneath his robe, and flickering flames rose from his body.

“Goodness!” Gushara cried with elation. “I didn’t think I’d be graciously given such power! Oh, you have my utmost gratitude for this blessing!” As black fire continued to rise from his body, he extended his arms toward Allen and chanted, “Death Flare!”

Small black orbs shot out from him as Allen’s party jolted in shock. Beast A and Stone A stepped forward to protect Allen and his allies from the spheres. The moment they touched the dark globules, their bodies were turned to soot. A moment later, they turned into glowing bubbles and disappeared.

The two Summons had been acting as meat shields and thus had taken quite a few attacks. However, they were under the effects of King Me and Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits. Allen shuddered at the damage they must have sustained to have been defeated in one go. If he or his friends had been hit by the attack head-on, they would not have been able to walk away.

Allen changed tactics. He Summoned several Beast As and Stone As and cast Deputize on them. Gushara’s earlier spell had looked to be a multi-attack that applied damage as it dissipated. Instead of one large King Me’d Summon, it was better to have several smaller ones with decent

Endurance. This would allow Allen to decisively guard the dangerous attacks.

However, as Gushara launched the same spell and the black orbs assaulted the Deputized Summons, they, too, were reduced to ashes one after another.

This is bad. I won't be able to block them all at this rate.

He sent out more of his Summons, and Gushara launched even more dark orbs than before. At the entrance of the reception room stood Allen's Summons, while Gushara stood in the depths with his dark balls of fire, the two groups rushing at each other like waves. As the second group of Summons clashed against the spheres, the attacks grew stronger and faster than before. At the same time, Gushara's swarm of spheres was slowly but surely approaching the entrance. Allen's Summons could not defend against them all, and he noticed that a wave of them was headed toward the four who were fighting against Bask.

"No!" Allen shouted, sending out a squad of Summons to protect them. But the few dispatched Summons were not able to block all of them.

A black fireball flew straight for Princess Shia. The Beast Princess reacted to Allen's shout and turned to see dozens of creepy globules headed their way. She had seen this type of orb defeat a massive Summon in one blow. Was she supposed to parry or dodge the attack? For a split second, she hesitated.

"Princess Shia!" Captain Rudo shouted, jumping forward. He blocked the attack with his body and let out a pained gasp. "Gah?!"

He was blown into the air and his body started to turn into cinders. The tattered rhinokin crumpled to the ground as Allen Summoned a massive King Me'd Stone A to serve as a shield for the two. The Stone A raised its enormous buckler.

"Rudo?!" Shia cried, supporting his body. "Rudo!"

"Princess... You mustn't be so quick to cry at your age..." Rudo whispered, gently smiling in Shia's arms. "I've told you many a time."

He reached out to touch the tears that slid down Shia's face, but his hand was missing. No longer was he able to wipe away her tears like he had always done. Beast Princess Shia could only clutch Rudo, who was missing the right side of his head. She waited for the light to fade from his left eye. The remaining three beastkin hastily rushed to her side, but the Beast Princess was unable to move as she clung to Captain Rudo's tattered corpse.

The massive buckler was undoubtedly obscuring Kyubel's vision, but he giggled with satisfaction as though he saw the scene unfold in front of his eyes.

"Hee hee. She's experiencing despair excellently. Look how beautiful despair is!" He then turned to the Demonic Deity who was fighting Merus, Krena, and Dogora a short distance away. "Hey, Bask!"

"Hmm? What?" Bask replied.

The King of Shura parried Krena's attack with his greatsword and used Flamberge to defend against Merus's fist. Dogora had been blown back upon receiving a kick from Falnemes's hind hoof.

"I'll be heading back, but I want you to kill Allen and all of his allies, okay?" Kyubel ordered. "You can't take a liking to anyone here and try to bring them back. That'd be unfair to the others."

"Huh?! You're kidding me!" Bask whined.

"You say that, but you'll end up killing them even if you bring them back, no? If that's the case, it's better to have them all perish in the same place. Of course, you can kill them slowly and one at a time so that they'll experience despair to the fullest."

With that, Kyubel disappeared as though he had never been there in the first place.

"Ugh. Fun's over, apparently," Bask grumbled as he raised Flamberge high in the air. "Guess I'll get rid of that one first. Crimson Fury Cutter."

Flamberge's blade swelled up momentarily, then returned to its normal state. The flames that engulfed the sword grew larger and larger.

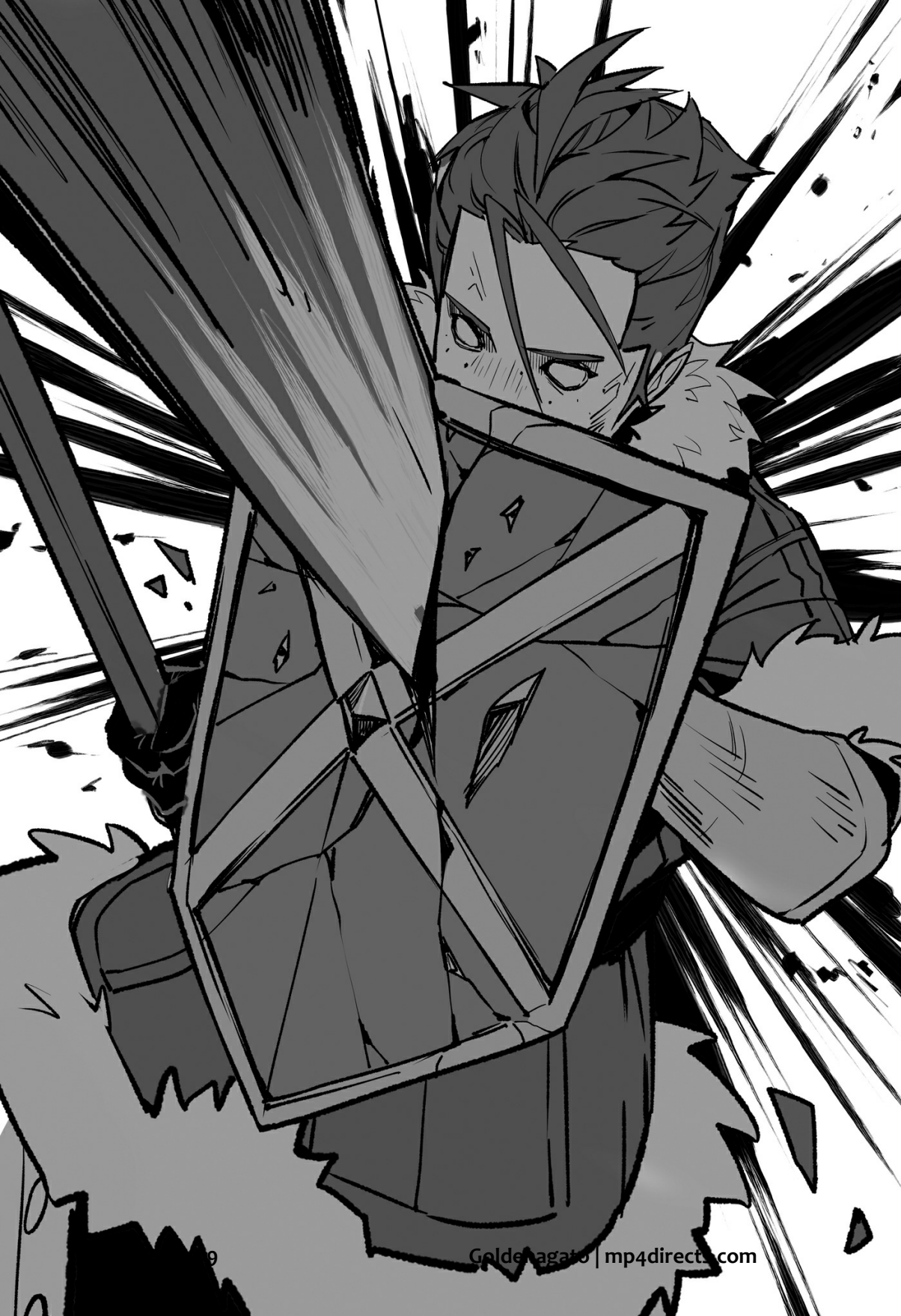
"Rear guard! You're being targeted!" Allen shouted.

By then, Bask had already thrown the divine vessel. It flew at an astonishing speed, spinning vertically like a wheel of fire. Slicing through Gushara's void spheres and reducing them to cinders, it made its way straight for Keel, Sera, and Gonu.

In the next moment, Dogora stepped forward. He was not thinking ahead. He did not even consider what would happen to his body if he failed to block this attack. He was not relying on the Endurance of his sturdy large adamantite shield, his trusty partner that had defended the Gamers in many battles, including the ones at Rohzenheim and Ratash. He did not think that he was the only one who could defend his rear guard allies either. Rather, his body had moved on his own. He widened his eyes and carefully analyzed the trajectory of the flaming sword, using the shortest route he could find to put himself between it and his allies. Then,

he raised his large shield with his left hand. Gluing that arm to his side, he placed his right arm between the shield and his chest, bracing for impact.

Moments later, a deafening clang rang out. Dogora slid back and felt the sword strike his chest area as though it was trying to pierce through his defenses. He could tell that his upper body was being pushed and tried to fight it, offering any resistance he could, refusing to go down even when he slipped.



Though his entire body was on fire, he had no time to find any of this odd. He reflexively tried to thrash around, but his left arm would not move, and he had lost feeling in his right. His vision turned black. He tried to scream but found himself unable to, and his incinerated body left him unable to struggle any longer.

“Dogora!” Allen shouted. But his voice no longer reached the Destroyer’s ears.

As Dogora blocked Flamberge with his great shield, the divine vessel pierced him, shield and all, before sinking into the ground. The skewered Dogora lay there, sewn to the floor of the reception hall by the blade. Flames spewed forth from the divine vessel, reducing him to a crisp in mere moments.

“Dogoraaa!” the No-life Gamers bellowed.

Gushara let out a triumphant cackle. “Oho! If you don’t want your friends to go before you, why don’t you stop this meaningless struggle? I’ll send you down with them!”

He launched a series of attacks, each of them meant to one-shot its target. Allen had his hands full Summoning so as to defend against this bombardment and could not think of a plan to save Dogora. Even if Keel, who was good at predicting situations and could make accurate calls, had cast a healing spell upon seeing Dogora step forward to guard Bask’s thrown sword, it was clear that Dogora was not healing. Anyone could tell how disastrous this situation was, but no one could do a thing about it.

Dogora had gone down in one blow. Gushara continued to mercilessly attack Allen’s party, forcing them to go on the defensive and locking them in place. Falnemes carried Bask on her back as they approached Dogora’s charred corpse.

“You made me have some hope, you weakling,” Bask spat, leaning down to grab Flamberge.

Chapter 7: Dogora Returns

Dogora was walking all alone in the middle of a dark forest. The trees had shed their leaves, and the sky above was bizarrely dark. The place was freezing cold, making him grateful that there was no wind. When he had come to moments before, he had found himself in the middle of a mysterious grassy plain. Having seen a forest in the distance, he had decided to head there while pushing aside dead brush.

“Ugh, it’s so cold,” he grumbled, trekking through the icy forest. “Where am I? Allen *did* say that he’d teleport me back to the village if I was in any danger...”

In the past, Beast Astrologist Temi had divined the reason behind his Extra Skill, Heart and Soul, not activating. He wanted to resolve this issue and had been told that the answer that he sought was in the direction of the southeast. While going there would bring him one step closer to activating his Extra Skill, he was warned that he might lose his life in the process.

Dogora was well aware of how worried—almost absurdly so—Allen seemed about that. Ever since the divination, Allen had insisted on sending Dogora back to his hometown of Krena Village were anything to happen. The Destroyer had refused every one of the Summoner’s offers, but Allen had not budged this time around. Dogora had not thought that he would truly be teleported back, but as he reached the edge of the forest, he spotted a village of some sort.

“Did Allen actually send me back?”

Cold, white puffs escaped from Dogora’s mouth as he dashed toward the village. Indeed, he was very familiar with this place.

“It really *is* Krena Village!”

There was no chance that Dogora would ever mistake the village he had been born and raised in. He had only left when he had gone off to the Academy. Perhaps it was because of the dark sky or the lack of people, but the place was darker and quieter than he remembered. Still, he was absolutely sure that this was Krena Village.

As he took in the sight, he was overcome with an inexplicable sense of rage. He had thought that friends trusted and protected one another. During times of hardship and suffering, he believed that they would overcome

together. Friends were supposed to fulfill their own roles and work as a team. As a fellow party member, he believed that they would respect one another's wishes. And yet, while his allies were still fighting for their lives against Demonic Deities, he alone had been sent back to the village. He was sure that he had voiced how fervently against the idea he was.

"Screw you, Allen!" Dogora spat furiously, clenching his trembling fists until his knuckles turned white.

What was further rage-inducing was that he had not been sent to Rodin Village, where Allen had placed his Summons for communication. Had this been Rodin Village, Dogora would have quickly searched for the Spirit A and demanded to be teleported back while giving Allen a piece of his mind.

Rodin Village was a two- or three-day walk from Krena Village. If he sprinted, however, Dogora believed that he could make the trip in under an hour.

"Should I just start running and head to Rodin? Hmm?"

When he faced the direction of the village, he noticed a small light. Its glow filled the village square. Only then did Dogora realize that he had not run into a single soul since he had entered Krena Village. The fight against the Demonic Deity on the floating island had started in the middle of the day too. No matter how dark the skies were, it was not because night had come; he concluded that it must have been the weather. But when he looked up, the dark welkin was clear with not a cloud in sight. He could not spot a moon or any stars either.

Dogora was suddenly filled with anxiety. Was he truly in Krena Village? As he headed for the square where the light was, he noticed that this was undoubtedly the place he had grown up in.

"What's going on?"

When he finally reached his familiar destination, he saw that a shocking amount of firewood was piled up in the middle of the square. Never had he seen this when he had been living here. He approached the mountain of wood and saw that only the front portion was on fire. The flames were surprisingly small.

"What in the world... Huh? A granny?"

Beside the enormous pile of wood, in front of the tiniest flame he could see, was a sitting figure wearing a dusty, gray robe. Dogora could only see her profile, her elderly, wrinkled face peeking through her red hair peppered with white. When he approached, he could hear her speak.

“Ah, the flame... It’s grown so small...” she croaked feebly.

Dogora could not leave her alone. “Hey, don’t be looking for warmth in such a small fire. Head on home.”

He crouched beside the elderly woman and gazed at the fire. It was so small that it could be snuffed out at any moment.

“Did you forget how to stoke the flames? Here, I’ll do it for you,” Dogora said.

He took a log from the mountain of firewood, peeled off the bark, and cut it into smaller pieces before adding them to the tiny fire. He also removed the firewood on either side of the flame to allow air to pass through. A bad flow of oxygen and a large chunk of firewood that was difficult to burn would never make a good fire. Every child in the village knew that—it was common sense.

As Dogora was adjusting the fire, the old woman raised her head and turned toward him. “May I ask who you are?” she inquired.

Her words were far more polite than Dogora had expected, making him turn to her as well. She gazed at him with scarlet eyes from under her messy hair. Her wrinkled face had an air of refinement, reminding him of Cecil and Sophie.

Why is such a dignified old lady huddling for warmth in front of this tiny fire? It’s in the middle of the village square to boot, Dogora thought. He had never seen this woman in Krena Village before, but he decided to be truthful.

“I’m Dogora.”

“Dogora, you say? And why are you here?” the elderly woman asked.

She did not seem to recognize his name. Had she perhaps been called by someone to live in the village while he was at the Academy? That was the only conclusion he could draw.

“Ah, well, a lot of things happened,” Dogora replied. “I guess I returned here.”

“‘Returned’? How did you open the gates?” the elderly lady said.

“What gates? Uh... Oh, now that you mention it, I think they were wide open. It’s dangerous. There could be monsters lurking about.”

I did think it was weird that the gates were open at night. There are monsters all over the place around this village.

“I see... So, I must have kept the gates open,” the woman replied. “And?”

“What do you mean? I was born and raised here, y’know. You see that

weapons shop over there? My father used to own the place.”

Dogora did not quite understand what the old woman was saying, but he decided to answer as best he could. He pointed to the weapons shop facing the square that had its double doors wide open. His parents had already moved to Rodin Village; a different weapons shop owner or blacksmith must have been living there now.

Speaking of, this is where I first met Allen.

After the Appraisal Ceremony, Dogora had learned that there was a child with the Sword Lord Talent. The knights of the Kingdom of Ratash had arrived to test out their skills. That child was Krena, and she had participated in a mock battle with the Vice-Captain, beating him to a pulp. It was then rumored that she would become a splendid knight.

Dogora had already learned that he had the Axe User Talent, so he had decided to attend the knights’ banquet with his father in hopes of gaining a chance to have his skills recognized like Krena. The black-haired boy who had tagged along with her—a boy whom Dogora had heard was Talentless—was Allen. When Dogora finally met Allen, he had found that the boy was difficult to read. He was a weird kid, and the Axe User could not tell what he was thinking.

Unlike Krena, Dogora, and other kids his age, Allen rarely changed expressions. He was always quietly analyzing the people and things around him. It made him unlikeable.

Six months later, when Dogora and Allen had met once more in front of the weapons shop owned by the former’s father, that impression did not change. When Dogora had asked for a fight with Allen, the boy had not seemed at all displeased. In fact, he had invited Dogora to play knight with him and Krena. After that, the Axe User no longer found Allen to be unlikeable. Weird though he might have been, he was not a bad guy.

“And what’s the son of a weapons shop owner doing returning to this village after all this time, boy?” the elderly woman asked as Dogora was silent.

“I’m not a boy. I’m already fifteen,” Dogora insisted. “And I didn’t return here so much as I was teleported to this place.”

In the blink of an eye, Allen the weirdo had begun fighting the Demon Lord Army. More than that, he had declared that he was going to crush them all. He was up against an enemy that would not go down despite global leaders banding together to defeat it for decades, yet he had firmly decided to put an end to the Demon Lord Army. How could he not be

weird?

Allen was not alone. He was surrounded by many capable friends, and they worked together to defeat any strong enemy that barred their path. Sword Lord Krena was a genius in combat. She gracefully fought against any foe and lived through any danger.

Cecil, whom Dogora had first thought of as a selfish girl born with a silver spoon in her mouth, could use powerful spells that destroyed enemies in a flash. Sophie was an elf princess who could use spirits to support everyone as well as defeat enemies in an instant.

Volmaar, who came with Sophie, did not speak much and was harder to read than Allen, but he was capable of firing arrows with incredible speed and never missed his mark. Keel did not directly join fights, but he was a competent healer and an irreplaceable member of the party.

Every person had different strengths, but they had all gathered together to conquer even the Rank S dungeon. But...

"I wasn't able to be of use to everyone," Dogora confessed. "In fact, I think I was just dragging everyone down."

He was overcome with self-loathing. Meruru had a Talent that allowed her to call forth a colossal golem and pilot it for combat. She had received a magic disc, an item required for controlling golems, from the Rank S dungeon. Thus, she was able to put her Talent to good use.

Before that, when they were together at the Academy, she had clumsily wielded her weapon while timidly flinching during fights. Her Talent did not call for her to use weapons; she had simply been left with no other choice because she had been unable to unleash the full potential of her Talent. No one could blame her for having been unable to fight well in her situation.

As a fellow party member, Dogora believed that it was his duty to protect her. But the moment the words "dragging everyone down" had left his lips, Meruru had flashed across his mind. He felt like he was even more of a deadweight than Meruru had been before she could use her golem. Indeed, he had felt that Meruru was dragging everyone down back then.

"To think a guy like me dreamed of being a hero," Dogora said. "Really makes you laugh, huh?"

He had thrown a tantrum upon seeing that he was the only one who had failed to activate his Extra Skill during the battle with Lycaoron.

I looked down on someone who couldn't use her powers to their full potential because of a situation that was out of her control but then threw

tantrum after tantrum when I learned that I couldn't use my powers like I wanted to. I'm pathetic.

Dogora was so frustrated that he felt tears beginning to well up. While desperately fighting them back, he took a deep breath. That was when he noticed the elderly woman silently staring at him with her scarlet eyes. It was as though she was looking straight through his disgraceful thoughts. However, her eyes were not filled with pity or scorn. She looked as though she was inquiring about his future actions.

"Sorry, granny," Dogora said, standing up. "You didn't need to hear about all that. I think I'm gonna go."

"Go? Where to?" she asked, looking up at him.

"To my friends, of course."

He had made his resolve. Even if he was killed, he wanted to fight with everyone until he drew his last breath.

"That's impossible," the old lady said firmly.

"What do you mean?" Dogora asked.

"Just as I said. You're already dead."

"What are you on about, granny? I'm— Aaahhh!"

Dogora looked down and shrieked as he saw fire spewing from his chest. The flames from his body traveled to the mountain of firewood, turning it into a large bonfire. It illuminated the square brightly, and it looked like there was a large shadow in front of and behind his feet. Had something pierced him?

"Hmm, it seems like you've died from touching my divine vessel," the elderly lady said with a nod. "Hence, your soul came before me, and the gates were open."

The flames from Dogora's chest were swiftly absorbed by her.

"H-Huh?!" he cried in shock.

The elderly woman waved her hand, causing flames to burst from his chest once more.

"See?" she said. "Flames are coming out from your chest. You died because something pierced through it."

Finally, Dogora was able to recall his last moments before he was teleported to the plains with the dead brush. Bask had thrown the divine vessel that had transformed into a sword. Dogora had tried to protect his party from the attack by placing his large shield in front of his chest, and...

"Right, I..." Dogora said, grabbing the fire from his chest. Oddly enough, he did not feel any heat. His body was not warm either despite

being literally covered with fire. With an approving grunt, he tried to remove the flames from his chest.

“What are you trying to do, boy?” the elderly woman asked.

“I *have* to go,” Dogora insisted. “I need to protect everyone!”

If these flames represent the divine vessel sword, maybe I can find a way back if I take them out of my chest.

It was anything but a well-thought-out plan. There was no basis for his deduction, and it could not have been called intuition. His thoughts were more akin to a prayer.

“How foolish...” the elderly woman said, trying to confirm his intentions. “You’ve been killed. Even if you can revive yourself, you may simply die again. Do you still want to protect your friends? Are you fine with dying?”

“Damn right!” Dogora yelled. “If that’s all I can do, I’ll take it!”

“You are truly a fool to your very core, boy...”

“I’m not a boy! I’m fifteen!”

The elderly woman stood up. “You’re right. Then, Dogora, become my disciple. If you agree, I shall let you live.”

Before long, the elderly woman’s face transformed into that of a youthful woman. Her messy, white hair turned into long, dazzling, silky locks of glorious red.

“Granny... Who *are* you?”

“I am Freyja, the Goddess of Fire.”

Dogora was stunned to hear this introduction. He was not overly knowledgeable on the names of gods, but even he had heard Freyja’s name ad nauseam recently.

“Freyja... Are you saying that you’re a deity, granny?”

“Quite right. I am the Goddess of Fire and one of the Four Elemental Deities,” Freyja replied with a grin.

“Granny... Uh, no, um, Miss Freyja, why were you dressed like an old woman?”

“Hmph. A divine vessel stores the faith of you humans and transforms it into my power as it’s poured into me. In other words, it is a path of power that connects you to us. The Demonic Deities who stole my vessel used this against me. They reversed the flow and tried to absorb not only the power stored within the vessel but my own as well. Regrettably, their plan had practically succeeded. However...”

Freyja put her hand over the massive bonfire and doubled the size of

the flames, brightly illuminating the square as though it were the middle of the day. The fire grew so hot that Dogora was unable to endure the heat, forcing him to hastily take a few steps back.

“Ouch! That was hot!” Dogora cried. “What was that for?!”

“I was not simply sitting here twiddling my thumbs while the Demonic Deities did as they pleased. I still have a bit of power left, you see. And I am willing to lend it to you. This will be a contract.”

Dogora gasped. “A contract? You’ll let me use your power?”

“Indeed. It is the only path you can take if you would like to revive and save your friends, is it not?”

“Got it. Okay, let’s make this contract,” Dogora replied almost immediately, jumping on this opportunity.

“Huh? Hold. You would decide that without hearing the terms of the contract?”

The boy looked baffled at the goddess’s hesitance. “What? You’re lending me your power as a goddess, aren’t you? Then I’m gonna take that, of course.”

“I shall. However, you must pay something in return. Surely you understand that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah, so you did not understand... Do not fear, for I shall not request that you turn into a fish like Aqua once did. I am a bit cornered myself, as you can see.”

Just then, Dogora remembered the ancient tales he had heard about the deities. If a human borrowed their powers, they would no longer remain human. Some had pursued power without much thought for the future and met a grisly demise. However, Dogora’s heart was already set.

“Sure,” he finally said. “I’ll do anything you say.”

He noticed Freyja staring into his eyes as though searching for something. The boy met her gaze head-on; he was willing to do anything if he could attain the power to protect his friends. His resolve was not going to waver anytime soon. In fact, that happening would only be more troublesome to him.

“Dogora. You said that you wanted to become a hero, yes?” Freyja asked.

“That’s right,” the boy replied honestly. “Not that I have a clue where to start. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“I shall lend you my power. In return, devote the rest of your life to

using this power to become a hero. Those are the terms of my contract. Are we clear?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“When I lend you my power, you shall use it to strive to become a hero. Many will bear witness to your process and see a person who borrowed power from a god to become a hero—no, to *aspire* to become a hero. Everyone will think that this is a miracle bestowed by Goddess Freyja. Should a day come when you are called a hero by the people, the humans will believe that I am one who bestows miracles. They will admire and put their faith in me. I shall have no shortage of followers.”

“So you’re telling me to become a hero with the power of Goddess Freyja, right?”

“Correct. You will dedicate the rest of your remaining life to becoming and proving that you truly are a hero. You will become living proof of my power, which will allow me to gather more faith than I have lost from having my divine vessel stolen from me. This shall be our deal. What do you say?”

“Okay. I’m fine with that.”

Dogora’s reply was instant. When he glanced at Freyja’s scarlet eyes, he could see a hint of weariness mixed with a tinge of happiness.

“Indeed, you live like an inferno,” she said knowingly. “It seems I have no choice but to admit that you are worthy of becoming my disciple.”

“So, what now? How do I form this contract with you? I’ve gotta hurry—my friends are in danger.”

But the goddess purposefully gave a slow nod at Dogora’s haste. “Do not worry. Because you are currently a soul, time passes differently.”

“Huh?” Dogora asked. “Then where am I?”

“This is the temple of Freyja, the Goddess of Fire. I told you earlier that the divine vessel is used to convert you humans’ faith into my power. You used that vessel to appear before me.”

As she spoke, Dogora’s surroundings started to transform. Like dry mud being peeled off, the dimly lit scenery of Krena Village slowly crumbled away. From the depths emerged a temple with several thick pillars. The interior was composed of stone the color of obsidian, and it was so well polished that one could see their reflection.

The light of the massive bonfire, the only remaining fragment of the village, bounced off the walls, making it seem like the entire temple was on fire. Dogora glanced around while Freyja reached out to the enormous

flames.

“When you first came here, you said that you wanted to stoke these flames,” the goddess said to no one in particular. “You had no idea that this is the fire of a deity, that a single human could not possibly make a difference. Even so, I was happy to hear those words.” She touched the fire and extended her other arm toward the boy. “Dogora. Become my disciple and stoke these flames. Aim to become a hero.”

Dogora took her hand. He had no idea why, but he intuitively knew that doing so would form a contract with Freyja. “I will. Leave it to me.”

* * *

“You got my hopes up, you weakling,” Bask spat. He leaned forward and grabbed the hilt of Flamberge. However, the crimson greatsword that had sunk into the ground of the reception room, piercing a charred corpse, refused to budge.

Bask found this to be odd. His beloved orichalcum greatswords could easily plunge into the floor and be removed smoothly. The divine vessel greatsword was even sharper, so it was absurd that it offered any sort of resistance.

“Huh?” he mumbled quizzically. “Why can’t I—ouch!”

His palms felt like they were burning and he saw white smoke rising from the hand that had grabbed the sword. He reflexively released the divine vessel from his grip and checked his palm. It was badly burned, with skin peeling off and exposing his flesh.

“Dammit...” Bask grumbled as Falnemes stepped back.

Just then, the red-hot divine vessel emitted a flash of orange light. The beam of light slowly turned blue, then white while letting out a thunderous roar. A massive pillar of fire, tall enough to touch the ceiling of the room, towered over everyone present. Within the fire, the divine vessel greatsword rose into the air, still piercing the body. The greataxe and large shield fell from the corpse’s hands and hit the ground with a loud thud.

The boy’s carcass began to regenerate before everyone’s eyes, the wound from the sword quickly healing. Pale blue flames gushed out from his wound before engulfing his entire body. His charred skin peeled away as the flesh around his bones slowly regained its healthy color.

His heart started to beat once more despite the greatsword penetrating his body. Blood coursed through him as the pale blue flames emanated from his body, surrounding his fingertips. His skin and hair regenerated,

and his charred, wide-open eyes regained their moisture. He gazed up at the ceiling and blinked a few times.

“Huh?! What’s going on?!” Bask roared.

“He’s forming a contract with a god…” Gushara murmured. “Bask, hurry up and take the divine vessel from the boy!”

“Shut up! Don’t order me around!”

Dogora, who had been levitating within the pillar of fire, slowly descended to the ground in front of Bask and Falnemes. The surrounding fire was absorbed by the divine vessel in his chest. Once the fiery pillar had been fully consumed, the divine vessel quietly removed itself from Dogora’s body and floated in front of him, the blade facing the skies. He focused on the sword.

“Is this your divine vessel?” he asked.

“*It is indeed,*” a woman’s voice answered from the divine vessel. “*You may call it Kagutsuchi.*”

He nodded and reached out toward the greatsword. The moment he gripped its hilt, the blade glowed white and blue flames spewed forth. In a flash, it transformed into a greataxe that was longer than the greatsword Flamberge. He placed both hands on the handle. Though the flames had changed from orange to blue, they did not burn his body, and he did not take any damage from their heat.

“That’s mine!” Bask bellowed furiously, charging in atop Falnemes. “Give it back!”

The Goddess of Arbitration reared. Her attack was so powerful that even Merus could not receive a direct hit from her front hoof as she swung down on Dogora. The boy wielded Kagutsuchi swiftly to defend himself.

“Super Slaughter Strike!” he shouted.

Dogora had meant to use Slaughter Strike, the most powerful skill the four-star Talent Destroyer had. However, he had inadvertently added “Super” to it. The power of a goddess who arbitrated deities and an attack containing the might of a goddess clashed against each other.

BOOM!

Following a loud explosion, Falnemes was blown back. With Bask still on her back, she was unable to brace herself with her hind legs and crashed into one of the pillars in the reception hall. The Goddess of Arbitration whinnied and neighed in shock.

“Hey! Ugh!” Bask grunted.

The pillar was unable to absorb the impact and snapped in half. Having

broken through it, Falnemes flew deeper into the room and slammed into a wall. Cracks slowly started to creep up the wall and the pillar was knocked off its base. It slowly leaned to the side before it fell, seemingly in slow motion, with a reverberating whump.

Amid the dull thud that kicked up clouds of dust and the fragments of the pillar and floor that danced in the air, Dogora quietly clenched his divine vessel, Kagutsuchi.

Chapter 8: Bask's Brute Force and Dogora's Roar

Beyond the clouds of dust, by the wall Falnemes had crashed into, Bask was slowly getting to his feet. He had managed to jump off her back right before the collision.

"What the hell?" he muttered, glancing at Falnemes, who had slid down from the wall to the ground. Her front hooves were completely crushed from her clash with Dogora. She tried to stand but found herself unable to do so, and her body writhed in agony.

As the dust started to settle, Bask finally caught sight of Dogora. The boy was gripping a flaming divine vessel but seemed to be taking no damage from it. In fact, he was wielding it masterfully, as though the weapon were a part of his body.

"What the hell is going on here?!" Bask roared.

"I'm guessing he was chosen as Freyja's underling," Gushara surmised.

Bask grinned. "Heh, so the boy's just wielding the true power of that vessel, then? That's perfect. He exceeded my expectations, but I guess this is his last stand." He approached Falnemes, who was still struggling to stand. "You useless piece of garbage. I don't need you anymore. Just give me your powers, mongrel!"

He struck the goddess's neck with his hand, causing Falnemes to neigh and convulse. His hand sank into her body up to his wrist. When he pulled it out, he was pinching a hard, dark sphere between his fingertips.

"Yep, this is what I need," Bask said. "And now, I'll become a Greater Demonic Deity too."

He popped the ball into his mouth and swallowed with a loud gulp. Instantly, his body grew to twice its size. Unable to endure the sudden growth spurt, his skin started to tear, allowing tiny, purple scales to peek through. His pants had completely ripped apart, exposing his lower half, which was covered with red fur. His body started to deflate just as abruptly, and the nails on his hands and feet grew thick and started to curve. Once his claws had turned black, his transformation was complete. He was a tad bigger than before, but it was nothing too alarming.

But Bask smiled with satisfaction. His mouth had grown noticeably wider, allowing him to literally grin from ear to ear. Black fangs peeked from his mouth, and purple scales adorned his body, resembling tattoos of various shapes. Dogora quietly stared at Bask's transformed body.

"Dogora, listen well," Freyja said through Kagutsuchi.

"What's up?" the boy asked.

"You must kill him with your next attack."

"What do you mean?"

"I do not have much power to give you for this battle. And my power has not adjusted to your body quite yet. We only have one attack left."

"Got it."

He nodded and stepped forward. Kagutsuchi clenched in his hands, he slowly approached Bask, carefully analyzing the Demonic Deity's movements. Bask walked forward in turn, swinging around his remaining orichalcum greatsword with one arm. He looked relaxed, but his entire body was giving off an ominous aura of confidence and murderous intent—he could pounce at any moment. The two finally stopped right before either was in the other's attack range.

I don't get it, but it looks like Dogora's back, Allen thought.

Keel started to cast his Support Magic, and Allen Summoned multiple Stone As along with Fish-type Summons. He had them cast their support Ability. A King Me'd Stone A protected Beast Princess Shia and her remaining elite soldiers while Allen used Deputized Stone As to negate Gushara's attacks. The boy had his hands full.

However, he had seen the unfortunate demise of Captain Rudo. If he did not go all out, even his class-promoted friends would not come out of this unscathed. He wanted to down Gushara if nothing else, and his Stone As Absorbed the dark fireballs with their metallic spheres before bouncing them right back with Focused Bombardment. Unfortunately, the Pontiff was able to defend himself with the jet-black flames surrounding his body, and the Great Pope beside him was casting healing spells to nullify any injuries. Still, Allen was at least able to protect Dogora from Gushara's attacks.

"Hurry up, old man," Bask barked. "Heal and support me."

"Aghhh..." the Great Pope groaned. "All Heal. All Protect."

Dogora watched in silence as Bask's wounds started to heal in the blink of an eye.

"Allen, stop him!" Cecil cried from the back, noticing how powerful

Bask had become. “Dogora will die at this rate!”

“I know. But I have to leave this up to him,” Allen replied bitterly. He had his hands full trying to block Gushara’s attacks.

“Heh heh heh. I’ll make you guys despair,” Bask cackled. “I didn’t think I’d use this power against shitty brats like you.”

Dogora maintained his silence and vigilance while glaring at Bask.

“I’ll grind you into dust! Berserker Mode!” the deity bellowed.

SNAP! CRACK! Bask’s body started to grow once more, just like when he had devoured the Demonic Deity Stone from Falnemes. His muscles expanded, and the blood vessels clamped between his skin and expanding muscles started to boil, turning his whole body purple. The Demonic Deity was clearly increasing his stats.

“Just what *is* he?” Cecil murmured, her eyes filled with despair. “How are we supposed to fight him?”

“He still had a support skill that buffed his stats?” Allen said. “I didn’t think he had another one in his arsenal...”

In contrast to the expressionless Dogora, the Summoner’s words hinted at the worst possible scenario. In front of Bask was a boy who seemed minuscule in comparison, and the Demonic Deity had chosen to crush this young man with everything he had. The Destroyer remained silent.

“What’s wrong? Too scared to talk?” Bask goaded with a mocking laugh. “What was your name again?”

“Dogora,” came a curt reply.

The young man kept his eyes glued to Bask, who was undoubtedly faster and stronger than him. Knowing that, there was only one thing he could do. The only surefire way to land a strike was to wait for the Demonic Deity to pounce in an attempt to kill him. Dogora was betting his entire life on that one moment. He raised his weapon above his head, his eyes still trained on Bask. If Dogora had done this at the Academy, he would have surely gotten scolded, as his stance clearly gave away that he was going to strike downward.

“Huh. So you’re just a puny weakling without a nickname,” Bask remarked, keeping his posture while following the boy with his eyes.

“I’ll earn a nickname when I defeat you,” Dogora replied.

“Hah! Didn’t know a weakling like you could talk the talk! Hya ha ha!”

Bask could not forgive Dogora’s provocation. Quick as a flash, he rushed the boy. As the Demonic Deity leaned forward and tried to brute force his way through Dogora’s defenses, the Destroyer kept his posture.

“That vessel’s mine! I’ll be taking it back!” Bask bellowed. “Super Shura Cyclone!”

He crushed the tiles beneath his feet as he leaped into the air, gripping his orichalcum greatsword with both hands. Then, he turned his blade to its side and slowly started to rotate as he flew toward Dogora.

The Destroyer stared intently. He was concentrating so hard that his opponent seemingly moved in slow motion. He could see the minute ripples of Bask’s muscles and even predict where his enemy was about to land and how he was going to swing his blade.

As Dogora predicted Bask’s movements, he focused on Kagutsuchi, which was raised high. He felt his blood being absorbed and his body filling with intense heat, which made him a bit lightheaded, as though his body were floating. It was like his failure to activate his Extra Skill until now had been all a dream. His MP was being drained by Kagutsuchi. He saw Bask descend in front of him, and the moment the Demonic Deity touched the ground, Dogora swung his arms down.

“Heart and Soul.”

SCREECH! A loud, metallic grating sound echoed through the room as the stone tiles crumbled radially as a result of the clash between the two.

“Huh?” Bask said, shocked. His strongest slash had been met by Dogora’s mightier attack. The orichalcum blade could not crush the crimson blade surrounded by orange fire. In fact, he was slowly but surely being pushed back.

“Kh! Graaaaaah!” Dogora roared as Kagutsuchi’s orange flames grew larger still.

“Don’t let it go to your head, you wimp!” Bask howled back, putting all his strength into his blade.

His skin started to tear. Blood gushed from his body, then vaporized due to Kagutsuchi’s flames, leaving behind only the purple luster from his scales. From his elbows to his fingertips, his arms were covered in scales, and gnarled horns of differing sizes protruded from either of his temples.

“I’m Bask, the goddamn King of Shura!”

With his guttural bellow, he transformed once more as he put additional force into his greatsword. Dogora gritted his teeth, but he felt Kagutsuchi being slowly pushed back. He desperately fought back against Bask, who was looming over both Kagutsuchi and his own greatsword, trying to knock away Dogora’s weapon.

“Freyja! This is it! Give me more power!” Dogora pleaded.

“Shut the hell up and die already!”

Bask’s left hand glided from the hilt of his greatsword to its tip. His palms, enveloped in purple scales, protected him from the greatsword’s edge. As he was now able to grip his horizontal blade and apply force more evenly, he used both arms to push Dogora back with everything he had.

Kagutsuchi was pushed back, its blade now next to Dogora’s face as he leaned forward. The orichalcum greatsword slowly approached Dogora’s widened eyes. And just then...

“Good grief. You are a disciple, yet you order your master around,” a woman said, her voice reaching Bask’s ears. *“But should the disciple of one of the Four Elemental Deities lose to a mere Demonic Deity, surely I, as your master, would be put to shame.”*

The moment Freyja uttered these words, the flames disappeared from Kagutsuchi.

Dogora’s body was engulfed in a colorless aura that emitted intense heat. He braced himself with both legs, causing the crushed floor underneath his feet to melt and grow red hot. His eyes grew wide as his black pupils flickered, a fire burning deep within them. Its scarlet glow turned white and then blue. Kagutsuchi shifted colors in tandem as colorless heat radiated throughout the room.



“Hngh?!” Bask grunted. As he tried to push his orichalcum blade with both arms, he sensed a feeling of discomfort. When he looked down, he noticed that the part of his blade that was in contact with Kagutsuchi was changing color. Orichalcum, renowned as the ore of the gods and famous for being the strongest and sturdiest of all minerals, was melting under Kagutsuchi’s heat.

“A blade forged in the fire of a god cannot possibly win against a true god. Go forth, Dogora!” the woman shouted.

Bask felt that his power had nowhere to go. His thick orichalcum greatsword was being melted down and split cleanly in two. He instinctively released the greatsword from his grip, then used his left arm to guard his head while he tried to punch Dogora with his right. But Kagutsuchi jumped upward before quickly being swung down on him.

“Gah?!” he gasped.

He felt the weapon hit his left shoulder. After he cried out in pain, Kagutsuchi sliced through his purple scales, cut off his left arm, sank past his shoulder blade, and cleaved halfway through his chest.

“Raaaaah!” Dogora roared as loud as he could.

He used both arms to swing through as his blazing axe sliced diagonally from Bask’s left shoulder to his right hip, severing the Demonic Deity’s upper half. Dogora’s battle cry filled the room as though he was ridding himself of all the rage he had been harboring.

Chapter 9: Gushara's Horrific Spells and Allen's Brainpower

Dogora's Kagutsuchi slowly melted through the floor. A moment later, Bask's severed upper half slid onto the floor with a disgusting squelch, falling on his back on the liquefied ground. The remaining lower half stood for a while before abruptly falling back as well.

"Dogora! Be careful!" Allen warned while defending against Gushara's repeated barrages. "Bask's still alive!" He peered down at his grimoire before looking up to sound the alarm. The grimoire did not note Bask's defeat.

"R-Right..." Dogora said with a nod. But Kagutsuchi fell from his hand, and he dropped to his knees. Allen and Keel had been continuously healing Dogora—the Destroyer still had full HP and MP—but he could no longer remain standing. It looked like he had burned part of his soul away with that attack.

Beside him, the divine vessel Kagutsuchi had lost its color and reverted into a seemingly normal steel greataxe. The weapon had no doubt used up all of its divine power as well.

Allen turned to Gushara. The Pontiff was still throwing black fireballs one after another, but for whatever reason, he did not aim for Dogora. Or perhaps he was ensuring that his flames would not hit Bask, who was lying on the ground near the boy.

Allen's eyes were glued to Bask's severed legs. The glimmering anklet was an item that had been imbued with MP. *It's now or never!* he thought.

"I'll go," the Summoner said, weaving through his defensive line of Stone As as he dashed forward.

Looking at the still-prone Bask, he checked his grimoire while running, but there were no signs of the Demonic Deity's defeat. As he rushed ahead without glancing at Dogora, he noticed that Bask had moved his head, which was attached to his severed torso. Bask was certainly feigning his death.

"Your elder's all beat up here," Bask said. "You're a merciless young'un, aren't ya? Well, see ya later! Teleport!"

His remaining right hand touched his severed lower half, and his anklet started to glow. In the next instant, he disappeared.

He was defeated! You're kidding! No way he fled! Allen had an unwritten rule in his head: the victor would retrieve the items of the defeated. He had assumed that this was the law of the world. *And he broke that rule! The one rule he absolutely shouldn't break!*

As he silently cursed at Bask, his eyes fell upon an item that let off a red glimmer.

Huh? Isn't that...

It was on Bask's severed left arm—the one he had raised in hopes of blocking Kagutsuchi's attack but had gotten sliced off. The arm, which had failed to teleport with the rest of Bask's body, was wearing a bracelet embedded with a crimson pearl. The moment Allen picked up the dismembered limb, he saw Gushara launch a black fireball at him.

"Whoa there," Allen said, using Homing Instinct to teleport himself and Dogora behind the King Me'd Stone A.

Dogora remained lying on the ground. He was still alive, but his breaths were shallow and slow, and he would not open his eyes. When he had taken a fatal blow from Bask and revived, his armor had melted away. The clothes he was wearing underneath had also been burned away—he was only half naked, but he might as well have been completely in the buff. To maintain the boy's dignity, Allen quickly took a cloak from Storage and placed it over him.

"Welcome back, Dogora," Krena said. "You worked *really* hard."

Allen swiftly removed Bask's bracelet from his detached arm, put it on his own, and glanced at his grimoire to check its stats.

Effects of Holy Orb of Rubanka (Bracelet)

Halves cooldown time

Increases the power of offensive skills by 20%

+5,000 HP

+5,000 Endurance

It doesn't increase Attack or Agility... But halving cooldown time and a twenty percent increase sounds great. And we've been fighting enemies with high Attack these days, so we could definitely use the extra Endurance.

According to Merus, Holy Orbs were precious, and the effects they had were random. Allen could not hide his excitement; this was exactly the type of item he was planning to grind for in the future.

“I mean, um, this is probably for you, Krena,” Allen said, handing her the Holy Orb of Rubanka.

Krena did a little happy dance as she swiftly put the bracelet on her wrist. “Yippee! A scarlet pearl!”

“H-Hey!” Cecil shouted angrily as she saw Krena express her joy. “We’re in the middle of something, remember?!”

“Oho ho!” Gushara laughed shrilly, launching more black fireballs. “What are you all doing, hiding away like that?! Come on out!”

Sir, we’re upgrading our equipment.

Currently, a King Me’d Stone A was crouching down to act as a shield for Allen’s and Shia’s parties. In front of it were Deputized and Recruited Stone As using their Ability, Absorb, to block Gushara’s attacks. The Pontiff’s fireballs thus never reached the King Me’d Stone A. Combined with the effect of Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, this King Me’d Stone A would not go down easily like the first one had.

For a Stone A to use its Awakened Ability, Focused Bombardment, it would have to be under attack and would be vulnerable. There was a chance that the Summon would die before it had the chance to use its Awakened Ability, and as a result, Allen was unable to move his King Me’d Stone A. Even if the Deputized and Recruited Summons managed to use Focused Bombardment and launch a counterattack...

“All Heal,” the Great Pope chanted, restoring Gushara to full health.

Needless to say, Gushara and the Great Pope did not have limitless MP. If they kept using their spells, they would soon run out. Allen had cooked up a plan to attack when the void flames surrounding Gushara’s and the Great Pope’s bodies started to fade, but the moment that happened, dark flames flowed from the altar and restored their flames’ power.

They probably have near-limitless MP as long as that altar’s around. We can’t damage it with our attacks, and if we get hit by their powerful spells, we’d probably get one-shot. Hmm, I see... There’s one more thing I’d like to check.

“Hey, Gushara,” Allen called from behind the King Me’d Stone A.

“Oho ho, what is it now?” Gushara replied.

“Bask fled and the Goddess of Arbitration can’t fight anymore. You two are the only ones left standing. If you wanna run, now’s your chance.”

“Oho ho? But it looks like you guys have used up the power of Freyja’s divine vessel. What more can you do?”

“Got it. If you don’t wanna run, you’ll probably experience the cruelest

death imaginable.”

“Hee hee. I can’t believe you’re trying to threaten me, given the situation you’re in. Do you have a plan, perhaps? You can struggle as much as you’d like.”

So, he’s not gonna let us leave alive. Hmm, he can probably be this confident because he basically gets unlimited power from the altar. But it’s clear that neither one of us has a trump card.

Gushara’s skill activation time was undoubtedly a lot lower than that of Cecil’s Petit Meteor and Merus’s Judgment Lightning. In addition, his cooldown was much shorter too.

“Dogora,” Allen said.

“Yeah?” the boy replied without opening his eyes.

“Rest easy and just keep relaxing here. This guy’s nothing compared to Bask. I’ll wake you up once this is all over.”

“Got it.”

With that, Dogora let out a large breath and fell into a deep slumber. When Allen raised his head, he noticed that his friends looked like they wanted to say something. Unable to flee and cornered by powerful multi-attacks, they could not hide their anxiety. They had never been in a situation like this before.

Okay, so, uh, we don’t have enough Intelligence. I’ll Summon a few more Okiyosans, then.

He swiftly added sixty Spirit A cards, removed the two rings he had equipped, and equipped two rings that each increased his Intelligence by 5,000.

“Sorry, Cecil, but can I borrow your Holy Orb for a sec?” Allen asked.

“Huh? Fine, but give it back, okay?” Cecil replied, handing her Holy Orb of Macris to him.

Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits was still in effect, and Allen’s total Intelligence was now at 41,000.

Ooh! So this is the vision a person with over 40,000 Intelligence has. I can see it! I can see it all! Gushara, I see right through you!

Higher Intelligence increased one’s ability to analyze situations accurately. The current Allen was able to notice even the tiniest movements made by Gushara and the Great Pope. He Summoned Stone As as his defensive line was taken down, purposefully having them get hit by Gushara’s attacks, and analyzed the scene for a few minutes.

The rest of the No-life Gamers stared at the party leader with hope and

anxiety. They were able to hold on to a sliver of hope because Allen had never lost after making a declaration of victory. Beast Princess Shia and her subordinates had not fought alongside Allen enough to trust him, however. They looked as though they believed the world was ending.

He relies heavily on RNG.

Once Allen had finished his analysis, he turned to the elven princess. “Sophie, is Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits still active?”

“Yes. It’ll last for a while longer,” she replied.

The effects of Spirit Magic, including damage increase, success rate, and how long it lasted, relied solely on the amount of MP used. Because MP was more important than Intelligence, Sophie was wearing two rings that increased her MP by 5,000 each.

“What’ll we do?” Cecil asked. “Your magic stones aren’t unlimited, right?”

Allen had already used up over 10,000 magic stones from simply Summoning Stone As one after another. Combined with Sophie, who was using her Spirit Magic, and Keel and Sera, who were healing and buffing their allies, over 100,000 magic stones had been lost within the past hour.

“Yep. I’ll return this to you, so prepare to use your magic,” Allen said.

“Okay, but what are we going to do?” Cecil replied, equipping the Holy Orb of Macris once more.

Allen placed a Bird F on his shoulder, and the rest of his party realized that he was going to explain his plan using Transmission. If any one of them misunderstood his message, it could easily lead everyone to defeat. The situation was desperate enough already, and they all grew tense.

“Um, Gushara seems to have some sort of habit before he launches his attacks. He makes these odd sorts of movements. He also undergoes a specific process before using his spells. The black flame flowing out from the altar restores his MP, but he will almost always use the same spell afterward. We need to take advantage of the RNG of his spells and find the right time to strike. To do that, we need to know exactly when he receives the fire from the altar and how many attacks he has left before he needs to recharge his MP. Theoretically, he needs to use sixty-four Chaos Fires, sixteen Death Flares, or six Enemy Fallens before his MP completely runs out and he needs to recharge. These are all theoretical estimates, though. We might get bad RNG at times.”

Allen proceeded to share his analysis with his allies via Bird F’s Ability. Gushara and the Great Pope had certain patterns to their attacks.

Of course, no one was sure what the order of these patterns was, and Gushara could easily break it. Furthermore, the Stone As on the receiving end of his Attack Magic showed that the power of his attacks varied quite a bit.

In Allen's previous world, this was referred to as RNG, or a random number generator, where these varying factors were left to pure dumb luck. He used a few other gamer slang terms that he had not used before, reminding him of his previous life when he was Kenichi.

"Huh? Y-You mean..."

"Incidentally, the Great Pope can All Heal about twenty times before he needs to recharge, but the RNG is super bad for that one. We can only hope and pray that RNGesus gives us a good roll."

"We don't have many opportunities, so we all need to time our attacks together," Merus explained. The No-life Gamers nodded in understanding.

"Exactly," Allen said with a mischievous grin. "So, this is what we'll do..."

"Oho ho!" Gushara screeched mockingly just as Allen finished explaining his plan. "It seems you all fear me, who has received limitless power from Lord Kyubel!"

"Shut up! I'm gonna kill you!" Allen shouted back, acting like he fell for the taunt.

Perhaps Gushara had determined from Allen's reply that the Summoner was backed into a corner. The Demonic Deity's face contorted with ecstasy as he placed his arms in front of him in an exaggerated manner and spread his legs shoulder-width apart.

Oh? He's about to use Enemy Fallen, isn't he? Idiot. He's using a big spell in this situation. Theoretically, this is the best attack pattern.

Allen silently raised his right hand, and Cecil started to activate her Attack Magic. After five seconds, he raised his left hand, signaling Sophie to pour her magic into Nymph. Finally, he used Sharing to signal the timing for Merus to use his Judgment Lightning.

"Enemy Fallen!" Gushara cried.

As predicted, he cast his powerful Gravity Magic. The Stone As forming a defensive line started to crumble before Allen's eyes, but more than half remained standing. The Summoner had predicted the power of the spell and had ensured that he had enough Summons to protect him.

And now to make adjustments on our end.

"Focused Bombardment," Allen commanded.

Among the remaining Stone As, the three General-position Stone As used their Awakened Ability to launch their counterattack. The Great Pope used All Heal—marking his twentieth time. He would need to recharge his MP from the black fire before he could cast it again.

“Cecil, Sophie, now!” Allen ordered.

“Blizzard!” Cecil chanted, unleashing her level 6 ice spell. The moisture in the air around her turned into countless blades of ice.

“Lady Nymph, please lend me your strength,” Sophie said.

The water spirit answered her call and flung a massive ball of water toward Gushara. The water combined with the blades of ice, creating an enormous iceberg that assaulted Gushara. This was the same combination attack the party had used against Demonic Deity Lycaoron.

“Hee hee, how cheeky of you. Chaos Fire!” Gushara shouted.

Allen smirked internally, delighted that Gushara was moving as predicted.

Right. You can only use Chaos Fire. And with this, you won’t receive any more support from the jet-black flames. You’ve probably never fought like this before, so this is like taking candy from a baby.

Though Allen did not know how long Gushara had been a Greater Demonic Deity, he had gone through countless battles of his own. He felt like he was a veteran on the battlefield after having braved numerous hardships.

The fiery lances from Chaos Fire were Gushara’s weakest form of attack, but they still put up a good fight against Cecil and Sophie’s combined move. After a brief clash, the fires started to melt the ice and pierce through. Allen took this chance to try to land the finishing blow.

“Now, Merus!” he yelled.

“Right! Judgment Lightning!” the angel chanted.

There was a flash of blinding light from the skies as innumerable bolts of purple lightning rained down on the enemies.

KABOOM!

The thunder was aimed not at Gushara or the Great Pope, but at the altar. Merus had activated his Awakened Ability the moment Gushara had used his Attack Magic. The Pontiff was thus unable to move to protect the altar, and the flames around his body had just begun to fade from lack of MP. He could not increase the power of his attack either.

If the altar was destroyed, he could no longer receive the help of the void flames. Allen knew that sealing away their magic, taking their MP, or

somehow restricting them from using spells was the best way to defeat a mage.

“I-Impossible...” Gushara gasped as he laid eyes on the crumbled altar. “My altar... The one that I was going to offer to the Demon Lord...” He glared at Allan lividly, his eyes filled with wrath and choler. “Y-You swine! I’ll kill you! I’ll freaking *kill* you!”

His hysterical face twisted with hatred and madness as his glare became sharper still. His body started to bulge and inflate under his robe.

“He’s transforming! Watch out!” Allen called.

Gushara Selbirohl tossed his robe aside, exposing his true identity. Though pale-faced, he resembled a humanoid figure but had a few crucial differences. He did not have heels and constantly stood on his toes, his fingers were long with numerous joints, and his body looked damp and slimy despite not being drenched in water. Clearly, he was anything but a normal human—the most defining factor being that human faces filled with hatred and sorrow covered his body.

For decades, the man had whispered sweet lies into the ears of his believers, filling their heads with false promises. Once he had gained enough followers, he had made them all walk a path of villainy and atrocity. Gushara’s true aim was to gather their sufferings and sorrows. Their deep-seated grudges were currently swirling within Gushara and running berserk.

“You must atone for the sin of destroying the altar! Pay with despair! Suffer in agonizing pain as you die!” Gushara shrieked. “Evil Gardens!”

He used a spell that had never been seen before as the pale faces of sorrow peeled off his body, transforming into ghosts with dark bodies.

“Oooaaahhh!” The ghosts let out an ominous screech as they wriggled their dark bodies.

Assuming that this was a new type of spell, Allen Summoned more Stone As to bolster his defenses. The pale-faced ghosts squirmed as though doing a bizarre dance. They approached each Stone A and carefully inspected the Summons before wrapping their bodies around them.

The Stone As immediately turned into cinders where the ghosts had touched them. They looked like they had been hit by Gushara’s Death Flare. The Summons had no time to use Absorb as they disappeared one after another.

Is this a type of homing magic that doesn’t fly in a straight line?

Unlike the fireballs of Death Flare, the ghosts did not disappear even

upon applying damage. They continued to writhe around as they approached Allen and his party.

“I see. He’s going all out now and increasing the power of his spells,” Allen observed, swiftly using his magic stones to Summon more Stone As. “He’s completely different from before.”

“Seems like it,” Cecil answered.

Will my supplies last until he runs out of MP?

He glanced at the God of Spirits, who gave a forced smile in reply, seemingly reading his thoughts.

“Ha ha, I guess things don’t always go according to plan,” the deity confessed.

I knew it.

From here on out, it was a race against time. They had to shave off as much of Gushara’s HP as possible before Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits ran out.

“We don’t have much time,” Allen said, telling his party how to position and time their attacks. “We’ll be going all out too.”

“Got it,” Cecil said.

“I see...” Keel mused.

“I shall follow your orders,” Sophie agreed.

“We’ve gotta beat him!” Krena declared.

As everyone nodded in reply, Allen signaled the start of his plan. He first gave Merus an order.

“Let’s go! Become a wall for me,” Allen asked.

“Roger,” Merus replied.

Allen emerged from behind the King Me’d Stone A’s buckler and dashed ahead. He purposefully took large, slow strides so that he would be caught by Gushara while Summoning several Stone As to bait out the ghosts and keep them in check. Once the ghosts flew over, there was nothing between Gushara and Allen. The Summoner ran straight ahead and charged into the Pontiff.

“Oho ho! Already surrendering, are you?!” Gushara shouted, casting the fiery spears of Chaos Fire.

He did not have the support of the black flames. Was he trying to conserve his MP, or did he find his weakest attack to be more than enough against the defenseless Allen?

Unfortunately, Chaos Fire was blocked by Merus, who had also jumped in. All the while, Allen did not stop running—his true goal was not

Gushara. He headed for Bask's orichalcum greatsword, which had been plunged into where the altar had been. When Bask had been wielding Flamberge, the divine vessel, he had stuck one of his swords into the floor near the altar. Judgment Lightning had later blown it away, and the greatsword was now lying on the ground nearby.

Yoink! I'll be taking this!

As Allen grabbed the greatsword using both hands, with nary a scratch on him, he shouted to his comrades.

"Krena! Here I go!"

As planned, Krena had already jumped out from behind the gigantic buckler, followed the same path as Allen had, and stood on the front line. Allen threw the orichalcum greatsword at her with all his might. It flew in a magnificent arc.

"Hup!" Krena grunted, jumping to catch the blade in midair. The moment she landed, she charged straight toward the Great Pope. "Rah!"

Equipped with the Holy Orb of Rubanka, her HP and Endurance had soared, meaning there was little chance for her to get one-shot. Cecil, Keel, Sophie, and Volmaar stepped up. Allen immediately Summoned three Deputized Stone As to protect his friends from the ghosts.

"Shining Punish!"

"Turn Undead!"

"Lord Gale, please lend me your strength!"

"Okay, mama," the wind spirit replied, ready to launch his attack alongside Cecil and Keel.

Volmaar quietly loosed arrow after arrow, hitting the Great Pope with each one. Krena landed the finishing blow with the orichalcum greatsword.

The No-life Gamers had not learned much about the Great Pope's appearance. They had little idea what he had looked like before his death. However, they knew that he had dedicated his life to supporting those who had put their faith in him. No matter how he had met his end, the No-life Gamers knew how terrifying and heart-wrenching it must have been for someone to have their corpse freely manipulated without their consent. They believed that stopping the Great Pope's miserable corpse as soon as possible was the most respectful thing they could do. It was their tribute to him.

While Allen and his party were attacking the Great Pope, Beast Princess Shia and her three beastkin subordinates stood by Dogora and Captain Rudo, who were lying on the ground, protected by the King Me'd

Stone A.

“Perhaps we should join the battle as well,” a subordinate suggested.

“You’re right,” Shia replied, glancing down at Rudo. Unlike the peacefully sleeping Dogora, Rudo’s ragged body was covered in horrible burns. He was smiling gently, but half of his face was gone.

Captain Rudo had been by Shia’s side for as long as she could remember. He had taken care of her. When Princess Shia had turned ten, the first person she had consulted about wanting a squadron of her own was Rudo. He had agreed to consult the Beast King, Shia’s father, about it, and after getting his consent, Rudo had personally declared that he would become its captain.

Over a decade separated her from both Crown Beast Prince Beku, her eldest brother, and Beast Prince Zeu, her second-oldest brother. She felt like she could not possibly reach their heights. Even ministers and generals had seen only the two brothers as potential heirs to the throne, with none having ever approached her.

Captain Rudo alone had been by her side since the beginning. But that was not all. He had rallied the subordinates of the brothers, the ministers, and the generals who were unable to unleash the true potential of their skills, bringing them all together to serve under Shia.

Her beloved subordinates were dying one after another. All told, around a thousand had fallen during the battle against Gushara. The No-life Gamers had kept casualties to a minimum during the battle that had allowed the Crevelle royal family to retreat, but there were still some who had lost their lives. Those soldiers had all served Beast Princess Shia loyally. They had truly believed that she would be the one to ascend the throne, become the Beast King, and unify the fragmented nations of the beastkin continent into one large empire to bring peace to their civil strife.

“Please stay here, Your Highness,” Commander Kamu said. “Should we fight and die in battle as well, we will have protected your life *and* your name.”

Even if the commanders lost their lives in combat, as long as there was proof that they had participated in battle, it would become their master’s accomplishment. And should their lives truly be lost, if they were the only ones fighting, they would be able to protect Shia. The Beast Princess understood his implications, but she stood there completely frozen. Captains Gonu and Sera nodded in agreement. The three captains then lined up and bowed deeply.

“Your Highness, we shall be off.”

“Please leave the rest to us.”

“I leave the future of Albahal and the Garlesian Continent in your capable hands. May you bring glory to this world.”

The three dashed ahead, and Beast Princess Shia could only stand there and watch them leave. Regret swirled in her heart. She found herself unable to stop her men, but unable to go along with them at the same time. What had she been fighting for all this time, then?

She glanced at Dogora in front of her. The boy was in a deep slumber, taking shallow breaths. He had used up everything he had, but his expression was one of utmost satisfaction—proof that he had done what he had needed to do. Hence, he was able to quietly wait for time to pass while trusting that his party would return victorious. But what about her?

“Lord Garm, why will you not lend me your strength?” Shia asked, praying to the God of Beasts. She spoke like the deity was sitting right beside her.

Albahal and any other bloodline that had led the beastkin kingdom might have had their differences, but they could all sense Garm to some degree. They certainly could not see him, but they were aware that he was right beside them, watching over his people. Only the heads of their biological families could sense the deity; the rest were not blessed with this privilege. However, if one were to gather and unite a large number of beastkin, they could suddenly gain that ability. These people could pray to Garm and be granted the special skill Beast Mode.

This was the power that Garm had given to spare the beastkin, who were once weak and left with no choice but to live miserable lives. Using this skill was proof that one was worthy of being the head of the beastkin kingdom.

“Are you saying that I am not worthy?” Shia wondered aloud.

Her older brother, Zeu, had managed to gain this skill in the Rank S dungeon. This meant that the God of Beasts had assisted the Beast Prince in overcoming the trial given to him by their father, Beast King Muza, and gaining the right to claim the Albahalan throne. Garm had decided that Beast Prince Zeu was worthy of being bestowed this awesome power.

Shia, who was currently facing her own trial from Beast King Muza, was not able to use Beast Mode. In other words, Garm had deemed her unworthy of the power and found little meaning in having her overcome the trial that would grant her claim to the throne. Even so, Shia wished to

have access to Beast Mode. She wanted to help Allen's party, which was currently struggling despite having easily defeated the Demonic Deities in Crevelle, Carlonea, and the Muharino Desert.

They had picked a fight with three Demonic Deities. They had managed to force one to retreat after stealing his divine vessel, but the remaining two were still alive and well. This certainly was no time for her to be hiding away. She had to—no, she *wanted* to fight here. Even if she was not worthy of the throne, she wanted the power of Beast Mode.

"Lord Garm, please, I beg you!" she pleaded.

"I cannot lend you my power. You mustn't fight those Demonic Deities," a voice instantly replied to her prayer. She could not see him, but she knew that this was the voice of the God of Beasts.

Once more, she pleaded, "Lord Garm! Please lend me your strength!"

"I shall lend you my power should you find yourself up against anyone else. But you mustn't fight the Demon Lord."

She remembered that the beastkin of the Garlesian Continent did not enter the Five Continent Alliance and did not dispatch soldiers to the fight against the Demon Lord Army because of Garm's orders. However, Shia found herself turning defiant. She did not understand why the God of Beasts had lent his aid for the battle against the final boss of the Rank S dungeon but would not do so for one against the Demon Lord Army.

"I cannot accept that logic even if it comes from you, Lord Garm!" she shouted. Though she was speaking to the guardian deity of her species, there were just some things that she could not agree to.

"I have lent your race my power to protect you and distance you from the path of death. Should I lend you my power to fight the Demon Lord, you shall become his enemy and will be stepping into death of your own accord. I am trying to protect you from such a fate. Why can you not accept this?" Garm answered, his voice tinged with sorrow.

Shia found his words to be self-righteous. "Lord Garm, did you not lend us your power so that we beastkin could become independent? Were you not of the belief that we had to stand up with our own power? Did you not approve of our ways this entire time?"

Her anger was clear in her voice. She had been told that Beast God Garm had given beastkin power in hopes of them becoming independent. But the words he was saying now were mixed with selfishness—he intended to protect only what he wished to protect even if it meant ignoring others' wishes.

The beastkin did not want to always be one-sidedly protected. They might have required the assistance of divine powers, but they, too, had the right to decide their future with their own hands. Shia thought about her father, Muza. He had given her a trial like he had her older brothers, accepting that she had just as much right to claim the throne as her siblings. Even if she were to lose her life here, he would undoubtedly accept the fact that she had decided her own fate. Surely, she was allowed to choose such a way of life.

“The Demon Lord Army has already attacked the Central Continent and the Empire of Baukis. They’ve even tried to invade Rohzenheim and are now on Galiatan Continent!” Shia shouted so loudly that the buckler belonging to the King Me’d Stone A trembled. “I have no doubt that they will eventually try to attack our Garlesian Continent as well. Should that happen, there will be no future for Albahal or any of the beastkin in Garlesia!”

Garm fell silent for a while. The sound of Allen’s party and her three subordinates clashing against the Demonic Deities rang loudly in Shia’s ears. She could even hear her angry huffs.

“Just like Zeu, you choose to walk toward the spiral of death of your own accord,” Garm finally said with a sigh. *“You fight against fate. No, perhaps this is fate. I suppose I have no choice, then.”*

Suddenly, Shia felt as though her blood had started flowing in the opposite direction. She felt like her body was turning inside out, like another version of herself slumbering within her body had finally awoken. Her other self had reached maturity and was trying to surface while wearing her skin. The sensation of it was suffocating; Shia was struggling to breathe.

“Graaaaah!” she bellowed. The rampaging power within her body seemingly escaped from her lips.

“This world and fate are cruel indeed...” Garm murmured.

The fur all over her body stood on end and she felt herself growing larger. Her slender legs bulged to twice their original size and her upper body became abnormally large. The clothes and armor that she wore were torn into shreds as she transformed into a bipedal tiger over two meters tall.

Beastkin greatly resembled humans. The only differences they had were that some had fangs, animallike ears and tails, horns, and sometimes fur covering parts of their bodies. Beast Mode, however, turned the user

into a beastlier state.

Nice, she finally got Beast Mode, Allen thought. He had watched her metamorphosis via Sharing with his King Me'd Stone A.

According to Zeu, who had used this skill on the last floor of the Rank S dungeon, entering Beast Mode caused nearby beastkin to transform similarly.

“Follow me! Graaar!” Beast Princess Shia cried, leaping out from behind Stone A. It seemed she was still able to use the human language, which she followed up by letting out a bestial roar and pounding her fists into the ground with a loud *bam!* Bright light emitted from her fists as a magic circle with a hundred-meter radius appeared before her. It was enough to cover the entire upper floor of the temple.

A hundred-meter radius... And there's something above this in Beast Mode.

Beast Prince Zeu had told Allen that Beast Mode had several levels. The power, bestowed upon by Beast God Garm, could become stronger in accordance with the deity's wishes. During the battle on the Central Continent, when the beastkin fought for their independence from humans, a colossal magic circle with a one-kilometer radius had been created, transforming an army of ten thousand soldiers into beasts.

“Beast Princess Shia!” her three subordinates cheered. They howled as the light of the circle beneath their feet flowed into them. “Graaah!”

This magic circle was proof that their master, Beast Princess Shia, had been accepted by Garm. The three grew larger and more beastly as Shia charged toward them. Her eyes, fixed on Gushara, were filled with hatred—she wanted to avenge the death of Rudo.

“Ha ha, it'll wear off soon,” Rohzen said, notifying Allen that his time was soon up.

Crap! We might get wiped out!

Though Shia was able to use Beast Mode, she could only buff beastkin; if Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits wore off for the No-life Gamers, one of them might become a casualty.

When Merus had destroyed the altar, Allen had used Sharing with his Summons stationed outside to confirm that the barrier surrounding it had faded. He was sure that they could now flee with Homing Instinct, but he wanted to decisively kill Gushara, who was responsible for taking millions of lives. This was a rare Greater Demonic Deity, and Allen wanted to gain another level.

I wanna make sure he's gone for good. I'll tell them to prepare themselves, but it's difficult to explain it all via Transmission.

"We'll temporarily retreat," Allen said. "When I give the signal, I want you all to follow me!"

"Roger that," Krena replied.

The Summoner had already moved behind the King Me'd Stone A before Krena had finished her reply. He was trying to teleport away while hidden from Gushara's view. Merus could have teleported as well, but Allen did not want the power of the King Me'd Merus to leave the front line. That would only serve to put his friends in danger. Above all, it was the leader's job to ensure that everyone could use their powers to the fullest by making detailed preparations.

Merus approached Gushara, ensuring that the Demonic deity did not notice Allen's absence. Gushara fought back with his ghosts that could dish out one-shot attacks, but he could not keep up with the buffed Merus's Agility, allowing the angel to approach him.

Together with Shia, Merus engaged in close combat with Gushara. While their attacks hit the Demonic Deity, his wounds were quickly healed. The three remaining enlarged beastkin joined the fight as well, but they were still unable to overpower him.

Krena, Keel, Cecil, and Volmaar, on the other hand, were trying to take down the Great Pope. The altar had been destroyed and the black flames were gone, but he still managed to cast healing spells.

"What incredible healing power..." Keel muttered in awe.

As the Great Pope's golden amulet glowed, his staff filled with MP and completely healed any injuries. Would the enemy run out of MP first, or would Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits wear off before that? In this race against time, the No-life Gamers were at a standstill. But a few minutes later, the signal came.

"Now! Back off!" Merus ordered, and everyone retreated.

"Oho ho!" Gushara cackled mockingly. "What more can you—"

He stopped midsentence as he came face-to-face with a thousand beastkin soldiers. They all were under the effects of Shia's Beast Mode and had turned more bestial than human.

"We can fight too! Troops, follow my lead!" Vice-Captain Rasu bellowed from in front of the thousand soldiers. He raised his spear over his shoulder and took charge of the beastkin.

"Yessir!" the beastkin shouted back.

“Brave Lance!”

Rasu, who had transformed into a terrifying beast, used his Extra Skill. Right on cue, the other thousand bestial beastkin soldiers all used their Extra Skills as well. Their targets: Gushara and the Great Pope. Nothing was blocking their way now that Krena and the rest of the party had retreated. An overwhelming amount of damage rained down upon the two—a torrent of destruction composed solely of Extra Skills.

“Gh... Gaaah!” the Great Pope cried as he crumbled away, unable to withstand the assault.

Oh? Did we get him?

Allen checked his grimoire and saw that a Demonic Deity had been defeated, along with a log stating that he had leveled up. It seemed the Great Pope had been transformed into a Demonic Deity. Gushara, however, had managed to survive the merciless barrage.

The robe he was wearing had been torn to shreds and his pale skin was covered in wounds, but he could no longer heal without the Great Pope. The thousand buffed beastkin, who had used their Extra Skills, were now charging in with a vicious roar.

“A-At this rate...” Gushara murmured.

It was then that he noticed his shadow stretching toward his quickly approaching enemies. When he turned around, he saw that the glistening sun was in the west. The earlier attack had destroyed the wall of the altar. He hesitated only for a moment before jumping through it.

“H-Hey!” Keel yelled angrily. “He’s running!”

Keel had a stronger sense of justice than any of the other Gamers. He did not want to stand idly by while Gushara, who had sensed that his defeat was inevitable, fled. More than anyone else, Keel had been pained by the destruction that had been caused during this debacle.

Gushara could not fly, and he was on the highest floor of the temple. However, he believed that he had a higher chance of survival if he jumped and slammed into the ground below than he did if he stayed to finish the fight.

He’s so easy to predict. This was all within my calculations!

In contrast to Keel, who was trembling with rage, Allen was grinning so maliciously that one wondered if he was truly on the side of justice. He looked as though he were staring at an ant stuck in an ant lion pit.

“Oho ho! I suppose I’ll let you all off the hook for today!” Gushara said before his declaration was cut short. “I’ll bid you adieu— Gah?!”

His body was torn by a large talon, and he found himself clamped between powerful jaws. A King Me'd Dragon A had Gushara between the sharp teeth of one of its many heads. Allen had devised a plan were his foe to try to escape; he had decided that a King Me'd Dragon A would be the perfect Summon for the role and had placed one outside of the temple.

"S-Stop! Wait! Please!" Gushara implored, begging for his life to be spared.

Needless to say, Allen had no intention of obliging that request. For a moment, he wondered if he should extract as much information from the Pontiff as possible, but Gushara was a man who could hold his own against a fight with a King Me'd Merus. Allen did not believe it was possible that he could restrain the man for long. Thus, the Summoner prioritized gaining experience.

"Orochi, Hellfire of Sheol," he ordered.

It's a fitting Ability to use on you, who stole countless lives to gain power.

Allen felt that Gushara had to atone for his sins and pay a worthy price. Dragon A, who still was under the effect of Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, crushed Gushara with one of its heads while the remaining fourteen showered the Demonic Deity with its flames.

"Meruru, now!" Allen commanded using Bird F's Messenger.

Meruru was a good distance away, sitting in the pilot's seat of Tam-Tam, who was kneeling silently. The golem's arm turned into a long gun barrel as it raised one knee to lock the barrel in place. It took aim toward the temple.

"Target, Demonic Deity Gushara! Long-range sniper rifle, fire!" Meruru shouted.

A beam of light appeared between the barrel and the temple, the magical ray obliterating the Dragon A head that was chomping down on Gushara. Still, however, the Demonic Deity refused to die. As his beat-up body fell to the ground, the Dragon A used another of its heads to grab him once more. His head, which had been blown off mere moments ago, was regenerated before their eyes. This was the effect of Super Regeneration, healing one percent of his max HP per second.

"All right, Cecil. I need you to land the finishing blow," Allen said, always reliant on her Extra Skill.

"You don't have to tell *me* twice," she retorted. "Petit Meteor!"

Cecil had been preparing to fire her Extra Skill ever since Gushara had

jumped out of the temple. She had had a feeling that she would need to use it. A gigantic, fiery meteor appeared in the skies above, landing on the Dragon A head that had Gushara in its maw. The Summon chomped down again and again, dealing as much damage as possible while Gushara could do nothing but watch as the meteor approached.

“Aaahhh! D-Demon Lord! I beg youuu!” Gushara cried.

His shrill screeches stopped the moment the hundred-meter-wide meteor landed, decimating his body and Dragon A’s fifteen heads.

KABOOM!

The enormous meteor landed on the floating island, causing it to rock from the impact. The altar shook as well, and Allen and his allies could barely remain standing. Once the rumbling died down, Allen saw his grimoire glow and he excitedly checked the log.

<You have defeated 1 Greater Demonic Deity. You have reached Lvl. 91. Your HP has increased by 500. Your MP has increased by 800. Your Attack has increased by 280. Your Endurance has increased by 280. Your Agility has increased by 520. Your Intelligence has increased by 800. Your Luck has increased by 520.>

“Yes! I leveled up! I gained five levels!” he crowed, jumping with joy.

At long last, Gushara Selbirohl, the Pontiff of Daemonism, had been defeated. Allen’s allies all breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Chapter 10: Going Beyond the Limits of Normal Mode

Allen approached the crumbling wall of the altar and gazed outside. There were no signs of any living creatures nearby. Cecil's Petit Meteor had sunk into the barren, rocky surface and the desolate earth. This floating island was about ten kilometers long and eight kilometers wide—the hundred-meter-long Petit Meteor indeed looked rather small in comparison.

"We really defeated him, right?" Cecil asked dubiously.

"That's what it says in the grimoire," Krena replied, peeking at Allen's book.

"Ha ha. I'm glad we made it in time," Rohzen, the God of Spirits, said. He floated in front of Sophie and rubbed his fuzzy head against her, hoping she would pat it.

"Yeah," Allen replied, then thanked the God of Spirits, who was currently in Sophie's arms being petted. "Thank you so much. You're always a huge help, and this was definitely a tough battle."

Plus, I gained a total of six levels from it! I should give credit where credit's due, but before that...

He turned around to see the beastkin gazing at the late Captain mournfully.

"Rudo, it seems we were victorious," Beast Princess Shia said, tears streaming down her face as she spoke to his corpse. Her Beast Mode was long gone. "It's all because you protected me."

"H-He's in such a horrific state. Captain..." Rasu said in stunned shock as he approached Rudo.

Though the rhinokin was considered elderly, he was a former champion of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. Rasu and the rest of the soldiers could not suppress their tears at the loss of such a great man. It showed just how revered and respected Captain Rudo was.

"Keel, can you use Drops of God on Captain Rudo?" Allen asked.

"Yeah, I'll do that," Keel replied with a nod. He approached the mourning beastkin. They knew that he was a priest of the Church of Elmea

and assumed he was going to say a prayer to send the dead to his rightful resting place. They made way for him and allowed the boy to approach Captain Rudo's corpse. Shia nodded too, implying that she welcomed his prayer.

"I apologize for my tardiness," Keel said to Rudo, who had turned cold. Then, he activated his Extra Skill. "Drops of God."

Light started to gather above Rudo's body. The particles coalesced into a ball before gently raining atop his chest. His body was enveloped in pale light, and he opened his eyes. Then, he slowly sat up and let out a heavy sigh as though he had awoken from a deep slumber.

"Wh-Where am I? I..." he mumbled.

The surrounding beastkin burst into cheers.

"C-Captain!"

"H-He revived!"

"This is a miracle! A miracle's occurred!"

The success rate of this resuscitation skill depended on the user's Intelligence. Keel, who was equipped with two rings that raised his by 5,000 each, could revive a person with an almost one hundred percent success rate.

"I would've liked to have revived you immediately, but we were in the middle of a battle," Keel explained apologetically. "I didn't have time to do so. I apologize for the delay."

When Rudo had fallen, Bask and two other Demonic Deities were still alive and well. No one had been sure who would die next. Were Allen to have been killed, Keel had been prepared to revive him instantly. Without Allen, Merus, their strongest ally, would have disappeared as well. Their defeat would then be inevitable. And so, Keel had been unable to revive the rhinokin until the end of the battle.

"Huh? Uh, sure. Right, I see," Rudo replied with a nod. He did not seem to fully comprehend Keel's words.

Allen was approaching Dogora, who had already opened his eyes.

"Good work, Dogora," Allen said. "Still can't stand?"

"Nope, don't think so," Dogora replied.

As Allen gazed down at his friend, he thought about the orichalcum greatsword and the Holy Orb of Rubanka that he had gained. These items were more precious than leveling up.

This is a pretty big development. Until now, our trump card against Demonic Deities has been Cecil.

Transformed Demonic Deities and Greater Demonic Deities had terrifyingly high stats. To land a finishing blow on them, the Gamers needed one of their members to have Attack that was on par with that of their foe. Only Merus's Judgment Lightning and Cecil's Petit Meteor had been able to fill that role until now.

As a result, Allen had been wholly reliant on Petit Meteor ever since the debacle at the Holy Land of Elmahl began. But during this fight, Dogora had unleashed his true potential. Allen opened his grimoire and checked Dogora's stats.

Name: Dogora

Age: 15

Blessing: Goddess of Fire (Tiny), Absorbs Fire-type Attacks

Class: Destroyer

Level: 66

HP: 4,569

MP:

Attack: 4,828

Endurance: 4,075

Agility: 3,197

Intelligence: 1,973

Luck: 3,012

Skills: Destroyer {1}, Super Full Might {1}, Super Explosion {1}, Super Peerless Slash {1}, Super Slaughter Strike {2}, Heart and Soul {2}, Axe Mastery {6}, Shield Mastery {4}

XP: 0/3,000,000,000

Skill Levels

Destroyer: 1

Super Full Might: 1

Super Explosion: 1

Super Peerless Slash: 1

Super Slaughter Strike: 2

Heart and Soul: 1

Skill Experience

Super Full Might: 0/100

Super Explosion: 0/100
Super Peerless Slash: 0/100
Super Slaughter Strike: 400/1,000
Heart and Soul: 21,757/100,000

His stats look weird. Safe to say he's entered Extra Mode. I didn't think Dogora would be the first to overcome the Normal Mode barrier, though.

Allen compared his friend's stats to his own.

Name: Allen
Age: 15
Class: Summoner
Level: 91
HP: 3,615 + 4,000
MP: 5,740 + 2,200
Attack: 2,012 + 12,000
Endurance: 2,012 + 5,600
Agility: 3,743 + 15,400
Intelligence: 5,750 + 4,400
Luck: 3,754 + 2,000
Skills: Summoning {8}, Creation {8}, Synthesis {8},
Strengthening {8}, Awakening {8}, Expansion {7},
Storage, Sharing, Quick Summoning, Equivalency,
Deputize, King Me, Deletion, Sword Mastery {5},
Throwing {3}
XP: 0/100,000,000,000,000,000

Skill Levels

Summoning: 8
Creation: 8
Synthesis: 8
Strengthening: 8
Awakening: 8

Skill Experience

Creation: Approx 400,000,000/10,000,000,000
Synthesis: Approx 400,000,000/10,000,000,000
Strengthening: Approx 8,500,000,000/10,000,000,000
Awakening: Approx 500,000,000/10,000,000,000

Creatable Summons

Insect: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H

Beast: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H

Bird: A, B, C, D, E, F, G

Grass: A, B, C, D, E, F

Stone: A, B, C, D, E

Fish: A, B, C, D

Spirit: A, B, C

Dragon: A, B

Angel: A

Holder

Insect: A x 7

Beast:

Bird: A x 10

Grass:

Stone: A x 10

Fish: A x 1

Spirit: A x 1

Dragon: A x 50

Angel: A x 1

When he compared the two, he noticed that Dogora's stats were nothing short of bizarre. First, Dogora had the Blessing of Freyja, much like what Sophie got from Rohzen. The Blessing that he received was "Tiny," which theoretically explained why he was too exhausted to move despite his HP being full. Beside that were the curious words "Absorbs Fire-type Attacks." If taken at face value, instead of taking damage from them, Dogora could possibly use opponents' fire-type attacks and spells to boost his stats or regain HP.

I can have Cecil use her fire spells on the exhausted Dogora and see what happens.

As dangerous thoughts filled Allen's mind, he continued to read his friend's stats. Dogora had gained six levels and broken through the level cap of 60, attesting to the fact that he, like Allen, had entered Hell Mode.

Heart and Soul, the Extra Skill that Dogora had struggled to activate for so long, was now a normal skill—its level could be raised now. It required at least a hundred times more XP than his other skills, but if its level could be raised, did that mean its power could increase as well? Or perhaps the

cooldown would be reduced. Either way, this was nothing but beneficial.

Save for one, his other skills had all reverted to Lvl. 1. The one that had not was likely what he had used during his battle with Bask. The word “Super” preceded every skill name, hinting that the skills had been revamped as a result of him entering Extra Mode.

Speaking of, Bask also added “Super” to the names of his skills. He’s probably entered Extra Mode too. Fighting Soul is gone, but maybe he’ll regain it once he increases his class level?

Goddess Freyja’s divine vessel, which Dogora had transformed into a greataxe, was lying beside him. This weapon was also filled with mysteries and could use further testing.

“You defeated Bask,” Allen said. “That was a huge help.”

Krena had been the main attacking force until now, but while her stats were well-balanced, that prevented her from landing decisive blows. Dogora, on the other hand, had stood his ground against Bask all by himself and was able to increase his power in short bursts. He might have had support from Allen and Keel, but the same could have been said of Bask. Ultimately, while Dogora had been unable to kill Bask, he now had a skill that could tip the scales in the No-life Gamers’ favor. Allen was overjoyed by this development.

“I didn’t think the day you praised me so highly would ever come,” Dogora said.

Meruru met up with them, no longer on standby outside the temple. “Ooh! Seems like everyone made it out alive!”

“Yep. Dogora was amazing,” Allen said.

“Oh, I know. Dogora’s *always* amazing!” Meruru replied almost instantly.

Dogora’s cheeks grew pink at Meruru’s words. He thought back to his time with Freyja and the words that had plagued his mind at the time.

“Did something happen back there?” Krena asked, joining in on the conversation with great interest.

“Uh, well, I returned to the village...” Dogora started, trying to tell his friends what had happened after he was stabbed by Flamberge. The events that had transpired were so bizarre, and Dogora was not skilled at talking like Allen was. Furthermore, his friends’ gazes were all fixed on him. They were all dying to hear the details of how he had returned from the dead, causing him to struggle to form words.

Satisfaction permeated the air. Allen and his allies had emerged

victorious against three Demonic Deities. But just then, a whinny could be heard. Falnemes, who had been attacked by Bask and had a black clump taken from her, was lying on the ground. She had been there the whole time, so everyone had assumed she was dead. But her cry had just proven the opposite.

“What?!”

Everyone simultaneously turned in her direction and instantly raised their weapons, ready to attack at a moment’s notice. As Allen glanced at his beastkin allies, his party also got into battle formation.

Yeah, I totally forgot about her.

Everyone in the room had their eyes glued on the Goddess of Arbitration as she tried to stand on her broken front legs. Blood dripped from the wound that Bask had given her. She was obviously not even close to being in top form, but nevertheless, they could not let their guard down.

“Cecil, everyone, stand back,” Krena said, stepping forward. “I’ll cover our front.”

Merus stood guard beside her. The two were acutely aware of just how fast Falnemes’s front kicks were, but they did not need Allen to order them to act as the vanguard.

Falnemes had finally managed to stand on her own, but having not fully recovered, she staggered and lost her balance, stumbling back to the ground. She let out another feeble neigh. Allen slowly approached and peeked over Krena’s shoulder. Falnemes looked up at them, no longer emanating an air of animosity and malice. Her eyes were no longer clouded by hatred the way they had been when she was summoned by Kyubel.

Hmm, she’s clearly about to die. If I kill her, will I level up again? She’s a deity who judges other gods, right? Maybe I’ll gain ten levels?

Allen had gained a level for every Demonic Deity he had killed, and five levels when he had defeated a Greater Demonic Deity. He wondered just how many he would gain from ending the life of this weakened Greater Deity. But Krena sheathed her orichalcum greatsword and approached Falnemes.

“You’re injured, aren’t you? Does it hurt?” she asked.

Huh?!

“Hey, Krena!” Allen cried, unable to stop himself.

Krena, however, ignored the boy’s warning and crouched in front of Falnemes, gently touching her broken front legs. The Goddess of

Arbitration looked up at Krena silently while Allen and his allies watched on without another word.

“I’m sure it hurts,” Krena said, rummaging around in the bag on her belt. “Give me a minute.”

Her little pouch contained Blessings of Heaven for when she could not receive healing from her allies during emergencies. But she soon took her hand out of it and ran over to Allen.

“What’s up?” Allen asked.

“Could I have another Blessing of Heaven?” she requested.

She reached out and showed her empty palm. Allen hesitated for a moment, but he took a Blessing of Heaven out of his Storage and handed it to her.

“Here you go,” he said. “But be careful.”

“I know. Thanks!” Krena replied with a beaming smile before rushing back to Falnemes. “You’ll be all right now.”

She used the Blessing of Heaven, and the goddess’s body was enveloped with light as her crushed front legs regenerated. The wound that Bask had given her behind her neck was also healed. She placed her front legs firmly on the ground and stood up. Then, giving a low cry, she moved her long-horned head toward Krena and gently licked her cheek.

“Whoa! Hey, that tickles!” Krena giggled. “But I’m glad you seem better! You can walk again!”

She petted Falnemes’s cheek while grinning broadly, and Allen thought back to the time when she had tried to feed the white dragon after it had reverted to its childlike form.



“I would like to know your name,” a voice suddenly said.

Krena turned away from Falnemes and quickly glanced around. She noticed her friends staring wide-eyed at the goddess beside her, and she quickly turned back, locking eyes with the kirin.

“I didn’t know you could talk, Miss Horse. My name is Krena.”

Falnemes stepped away from the girl and raised her head high. “Krena. I shall remember your name. I am Goddess of Arbitration Falnemes, the one who defends the God of Law. I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone else as well. It would appear that whatever was controlling me has been removed.”

Is she referring to that black clump Bask took out?

It seemed Falnemes had been being manipulated. She turned around and slowly walked toward the destroyed temple wall. Upon reaching it, she stepped through it, walked on air, and ascended into the sky. Everyone could only watch as she took her leave.

“And she’s gone...” Krena murmured.

“Yeah, but I think this was for the best,” Allen replied.

“Yeah.” Krena nodded, unable to tear her eyes away from Falnemes, who was fading into the distance.

“I suppose we must mourn the dead at the church,” Keel said once the goddess was gone. He was gazing where the altar was, at the skeletal corpse of the Great Pope who had fallen victim to the assault of the beastkin.

The Great Pope had been turned into a Demonic Deity by the Demon Lord Army. Keel wanted to, at the very least, return his body to the priests of the Church. Everyone admired his poise. He gave a satisfied nod and cast a sweeping glance around the room before he approached the Great Pope. The boy silently prayed and cast Purifying Magic. As a fellow priest of the Church of Elmea, Keel could not stand to leave the Great Pope as a Demonic Deity. He wanted to purify the corpse, return it to the Church of Elmea, and have them give him a proper burial.

The rest of the room watched as Keel went through the process when a flash of light blinded them for a split second.

“Whoa! Bright!” Meruru cried in surprise, using her hands to shield her eyes.

The rest of the people in the room gazed up at the ceiling, but they could not hide their shock. The walls of the temple had indeed been destroyed by the Extra Skills of the beastkin, but the ceiling was still

intact. If the ceiling was still there, what was the light that had showered them? Allen racked his brain for an answer.

“Must be Aura and the others,” Merus muttered, the first to understand the situation.

From the bright light, three women slowly descended while flapping their angel wings.

“I would like to congratulate everyone here for overcoming an extremely challenging hardship,” the angel called Aura said. She seemed to know Merus.

She looked a tad awkward for a brief moment, but it seemed she did not have any business with Merus. Though she acted like she had met a friend in the middle of work, she quickly shifted her gaze and, along with the two other angels, approached Keel.

“Who are—” Keel started as the three angels surrounded him and the Great Pope’s corpse.

“We are here to guide the soul of Istahl Kumes, the man who dedicated his life to this world. We have come under the command of Lord Elmea, the God of Creation. Is that not so, First Angel Lapt?” Aura said.

There was another flash of light as a fourth angel emerged from the ceiling.

“Quite right indeed,” the newcomer said. She had the same curly, chestnut-colored hair as Merus.

“Hey, that’s Merus’s twin sister,” Allen pointed out, quickly noticing that Lapt had assumed the role of First Angel following Merus’s defeat at the hands of the Demon Lord Army.

The First Angel, who closely resembled Merus, flapped her divine six wings magnificently. Her role was to bestow the words of Elmea to the people, and Allen quickly understood that she was taking the Great Pope’s soul to the Heavenly Realm.

“Keel, I thank you for purifying Istahl’s spirit,” Lapt said, approaching Keel. The other three angels knelt before her, and Keel was not quite sure what to say.

“Uh, yeah, sure. No problem,” he replied in a panic.

Lapt tried to pick up the corpse when a miracle happened.

“Whoa! What?!” an elderly man gasped.

When she took the corpse into her arms, a translucent, elderly man dressed in clerical garments appeared. He was no longer a skeleton and had deep wrinkles akin to a man over eighty.

“Stay calm, Istahl. There have been many sacrifices, but it is now over,” Lapt assured him.

“‘Over,’ you say?” the elderly man—Istahl—said.

“That’s right. The heroes in front of you have thwarted the evil with their own hands. We have received an order from Lord Elmea to take your spirit to the Heavenly Realm, for you have saved the world.”

It seemed the soul of the Great Pope, who had devoted his life to bringing peace to the world, was a special existence even to the Heavenly Realm. The way Lapt gently carried him looked like a mother lovingly holding her child.

“Th-Thank you so much,” Istahl said. “I see. So the world has sustained many casualties. And you all have saved the world from this predicament. Thank you. I see... You must be the youth in gold from the divine revelation.”

Istahl cared not about his death and instead showed more shock about the number of casualties. He remembered the divine revelation that he had received from the God of Creation shortly before Gushara had burned Teomenia to the ground. *“A youth in gold will rush in from the heavens, bringing with him the light of hope. Raise your voice, for the coming age is dazzling and filled with hope.”*

“I don’t think we’ve saved the world quite yet,” Keel replied.

He had heard about this revelation from Cardinal Krypton. As the Great Pope had personally stated that the boy was undoubtedly the “youth in gold,” Keel could not help but become humble. The No-life Gamers decided to let Keel handle talking with the angels.

“We shall head to the Heavenly Realm,” Lapt said to the Great Pope. “Would you like to leave a message to the people remaining in this world?”

She waited for him to say his final words to humanity. Given that many had lost their lives during the hellish fight against the Demon Lord Army and despaired at their fate, the Great Pope was undoubtedly being given special treatment. He shrank for a moment, knowing that the words he uttered would imply the approval of Lapt, but his mind was filled with thoughts of others.

“Then, young man, may I inquire about your name?” the Great Pope asked.

“My name is Keel. Keel von Carnel.”

“I see. Keel, please tell Cardinal Krypton that I leave the Church in

his hands.”

“Certainly. Is that all you’d like to say to him?” Keel asked. As the cardinal’s face flashed across his mind, he wondered if the Great Pope wanted to relay a message or two.

“Oh, it’s him we’re talking about,” the pope joked with a smile. “If I say too much, he’ll look displeased by it all.”

“I’ll relay that message to him as well.”

“And what about you, Keel? I see you’re wearing clerical garments. Are you a priest of the Church of Elmea?” Still cradled in Lapt’s arms, the Great Pope craned his neck to peer at the unfamiliar Keel.

“I’m an apprentice clergyman.”

“I see...”

“Istahl, your time is passing quickly. Do you have any words you’d like to leave Keel with?” Lapt asked.

“I don’t have any words, but I’d like to give him the Sacred Necklace,” the Great Pope answered. Without leaving the angel’s arms, he reached out and desperately tried to grab his corpse.

His golden necklace glimmered within his skeletal remains and his robe. He wanted to give this precious item to Keel, who would surely continue to fight the Demon Lord Army. Lapt turned to Allen and his party as they quietly watched this play out.

“I have been told to retrieve the Sacred Necklace, but I suppose I can make an exception,” the angel said. “I shall tell Lord Elmea that it has been entrusted to the heroes who saved humanity.”

“Thank you,” the Great Pope replied. “I have no more regrets.”

The golden necklace majestically floated from his corpse and slowly made its way to Keel. As the boy outstretched his hands, it fell into them as though it could defy gravity no longer.

I’ve been watching this quietly, but was this some sort of cutscene to receive a precious item?

Allen used his game knowledge to understand this situation. He could never have too many precious items.

“Heroes, I will be sure to tell Lord Elmea about your valiance and brave deeds,” the First Angel said. “Until we meet again.”

She let off a divine light as she slowly ascended toward the ceiling, and the four angels disappeared.

“Keel, that was awesome!” Krena said as she eased the tension. She rushed over to him.

“Y-Yeah,” Keel stammered, indulging in feelings of sentimentality.

“Can you try wearing it?” Allen asked.

“Sure.”

Allen was curious to know the effects of the necklace, so he opened his grimoire to check Keel’s stat changes.

Effects of Sacred Necklace

Doubles the effects of Healing Magic.

Halves cooldown time.

HP +3,000

Intelligence +3,000

Awesome! These effects are insane! No wonder the Great Pope could heal so much. This equip’s practically tailor-made for Keel.

Allen’s heart began jumping for joy when he saw the effects this item had.

“Good grief, Allen...” Keel said wearily.

While Lapt had taken the Great Pope’s spirit, his corpse was still here. Keel collected the remains and the clerical garments to take back to the Church of Elmea so that they could hold a memorial service.

And so, with Falnemes gone and First Angel Lapt doing what was required of her, the battle on the floating island ended in an overwhelming victory for the No-life Gamers.

Chapter 11: What the Demon Lord Army Desires

“Now then,” Allen said, turning toward the rest of his party while leaving Krena and Keel behind.

“What’ll we do now?” Cecil asked.

Allen noticed Beast Princess Shia staring at him. He felt like he was being given permission to make a decision and thus wanted to prioritize his desire.

“I want to look for something,” Allen replied. “I’m guessing there’s a power source or the like in this building.”

“What do you mean by that?” Keel asked.

“Well, this island’s floating, isn’t it? But I don’t think there are any legends of this island having always existed here. That means it came from somewhere and is still floating because of some sort of power. I feel like that power is somewhere on the island.”

“Huh. Well, when you put it that way, that makes sense.”

“Very astute, Lord Allen,” Sophie praised as she put her hands together in front of her chest in awe.

Everyone nodded along with his train of thought, but a question still remained.

“What are you gonna do after you find this power source?” Meruru asked.

“Well, if I can move this island however I want, there’s something I’d like to do,” Allen confessed.

“Hmm...” Cecil pondered his words. “Well, it’s not like we’ve got anything else to do, so why not?”

And so, the group split up to search within the temple. They searched every nook and cranny of the reception hall that was half destroyed as a result of the chaotic battle against the Demonic Deities, but they found nothing. There were no signs of any hidden rooms either.

They proceeded to the lower floors. With the help of a Spirit A and the beastkin soldiers, they managed to destroy all the monsters and ghosts that they had previously ignored. Once the presence of enemies had completely

disappeared, they searched every place they could, including tiny rooms and corridors. It was then that they found a long, hidden staircase that descended to a floor below.

As they went down the stairs, they were greeted by a room as grand as the reception hall on the top floor. The barren space had a high ceiling, and floating in its center was a translucent cube of epic proportions. Between the cube and the floor was a hexagonal pedestal surrounded by mysterious magic tools.

“What...is this?” Beast Princess Shia murmured.

“It’s some sort of cube-like object,” Allen explained.

“A cube-what now?” She seemed more baffled than before.

Every now and then, Allen would use knowledge from his past life, and he would sometimes inadvertently use gamer slang. It seemed he still struggled to succinctly explain his thoughts. The rest of the No-life Gamers had dubbed these mystical words “Allenese,” a language that only Allen seemed to know. Some could grasp the general gist of his explanations after having spent some time with him, but most chose to just ignore it altogether.

Beast Princess Shia, unfortunately, had not spent enough time with Allen to fully comprehend what he had meant. She assumed that this was simply how adventurers spoke. People often made up code words so that they could cook up plans in secret, and this was a common tactic that was used in the military. Such preparations would occasionally determine the fate of a squad.

“It seems this is the power source,” Allen stated firmly.

“And what do you want to do with this island?”

“Well, I was wondering if I could just drop it on the Demon Lord Army’s base.”

“Huh?”

Everyone froze in astonishment.

“If we can freely manipulate this island, then we can probably just make it fall to the ground too, right?” Allen explained. “I was thinking we’d have it fly over the Demon Lord Army, shut off the floating ability, and let gravity do the rest. An island this big and heavy would surely cause some serious damage.”

Allen felt like this island was large enough to be the meteor that had wiped out the dinosaurs in his previous world.

I’ll make this island go as high as it can, then drop it on the Demon

Lord Army and wipe them out.

“I-It seems like such a waste...” Sophie mumbled, sounding troubled.

“Hmm?” Allen turned toward the elf.

“Nothing.” She shook her head, dispelling any doubts.

“Hrmmm...” Meruru said, approaching the cube. Her gaze was fixed on the items beside the pedestal. “This is a magic tool. It looks to be made similarly to the ones in the dungeon.” She started touching around, confirming for herself. “Oho. Mm-hmm. I see.”

Krena stood next to Meruru as she gazed at the odd devices as well.

“I think a Magus Smith can move this,” Meruru said, raising her head.

The Empire of Baukis was renowned for creating and producing magic tools, which they exported to allied nations. Dungeon Master Dygragni was in charge of developing magic tools, but those who could inspect, utilize, analyze, and replicate these items in order to produce them had a Talent called “Magus Smith.” They were the hallmarks of the empire’s technological prowess, much like how golem users were symbols of its might. Magus Smiths could also control massive magic ships, the crown jewels of the Baukisian air force, and titanic warships and cargo vessels, the pride of its Navy. They were essential to the fight against the Demon Lord Army.

“A Magus Smith, huh?” Allen said. “Can we bring a few of them over?”

“I wonder...” Meruru replied. “If we ask Admiral Garara, he might lend us a hand.”

“Yeah. Then all that’s left is to join the war.”

Allen felt that he needed to touch upon this important topic. Currently, northern Rohzenheim and the northern region of the Central Continent were under attack by the Demon Lord Army. He had sent a total of forty thousand Baby Beas to these two war zones. Thanks to their efforts, the battles seemed to be tipping in favor of the Five Continent Alliance, and Allen wanted to provide further help to these places.

Daemoniac incarnations still roamed around the Galiatan Continent, but he had a King Me’d Insect A forming an army of thirty thousand Baby Beas—he felt like he could leave the battles to his Summons.

All that’s left is to report to the Holy Land of Elmahl that this matter has been resolved.

Just then, Dogora used his divine vessel greataxe as a staff to prop himself up and said, “Hey, Allen. You guys done now? I need some rest.”

“Ah, right. Okay, let’s head out for now,” Allen replied.

Since there was nothing left to do on this island, they decided to leave for the time being. Once they did so, they noticed the sky turning orange under the setting sun. The No-life Gamers decided to head to Elmahl to give their report. When Allen said as much to Beast Princess Shia, she changed her initial plan of heading back to the Crevelle Kingdom. She parted ways with her beastkin soldiers and decided to tag along with Allen.

“I’m responsible for the wretched situation in Elmahl,” she insisted. “Though it might have been a part of their plan, I was the one who captured Gushara and brought him to the Holy Land.”

Allen asked Merus to use Bird A’s Homing Instinct to send the beastkin army back to the Crevelle Kingdom. The angel agreed, though he seemed rather pensive.

“When you return, there’s something I’d like to tell you,” he said.

“Hmm? Is it about Kyubel’s plans?” Allen replied.

But Merus had already left with the beastkin, and only Beast Princess Shia, Captain Rudo, and Vice-Captain Rasu remained. Meruru brought Tam-Tam down and, after ushering the trio of beastkin into the lounge, waited on standby.

“So? What’d you wanna talk about?” Allen asked once Merus returned.

The angel looked solemn. “I believe I hold great responsibility for this series of events. Had I explained a few more things to you and your party, Sir Allen, perhaps you would’ve been able to sense that they were thinking of this atrocious plan.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

From his conversation with Kyubel, Allen had gleaned that a part of the Demonic Deity’s plan was to kill him, the hero prepared by Elmea. If that was the case, then even if the Summoner had been able to predict his opponents’ goals and understand their plans beforehand, there was little chance that he could have prevented this entire debacle.

If Allen had accurately predicted the Demon Lord Army’s plans and tried to hinder them, they would likely have adjusted accordingly or discarded the plan altogether. There was little doubt that they had an extra scheme or two up their sleeve. In addition, if Allen had sensed that this plot was just to bait him out and fled, the damage that the daemonic incarnations would have wreaked upon the continent would have been immeasurable. There was a good chance that other continents could have also gotten involved in this mess as the Demon Lord Army pursued him.

They're all just possibilities, though.

This series of events had allowed Dogora to enter Extra Mode, given Keel a precious necklace, and strengthened the party as a whole. Allen found it unnecessary to regret any of their actions. What was more, the Demon Lord Army's plan was not solely to defeat Allen. Daemonic incarnations had been necessary to gather human lives for the altar. The lives had been transformed into black flames, which Kyubel had taken more than half of before he had disappeared. What exactly was he planning on doing with those lives?

"I wonder what that altar was all about," Cecil wondered. "What were the Demonic Deities trying to do with them? Do you have an inkling, Merus?"

"Why didn't Kyubel stay to finish the fight?" Allen added. "If he'd joined the battle, there was a good chance that we would've all been wiped out."

For a moment, Merus seemed unsure of which question to answer first, but he then turned to Allen. "It's wrong to assume that he didn't want to kill you guys. He might have thought that Bask, Gushara, and the Goddess of Arbitration were enough."

Kyubel must not have expected King Me to be unsealed or Dogora to form a contract with Freyja.

If Allen had not done as much grinding as possible since first arriving in this world, he might have not been able to unseal King Me in time. Even Freyja herself likely had not expected to form a contract with Dogora through her divine vessel, making this series of events nothing short of a miracle. As for the man of miracles himself, he was still unable to move his body well and, eyes closed, had sunk into the sofa in the lounge. Was he not thinking about anything, or was he simply asleep?

"What about during Helmios and Bask's fight?" Allen asked. "Kyubel didn't kill Helmios, and Bask was already a Demonic Deity then. Just what is that clown thinking?"

Is the Demon Lord Army not united? Maybe Greater Demonic Deities that've been around for tens of millennia don't want to listen to a Demon Lord that only appeared a hundred years or so ago. But then why is Kyubel being used like a pawn? Are they cooperating for some reason?

Strategist Kyubel was also called the Primeval Demonic Deity and had apparently existed for far longer than the Demon Lord. In fact, he had existed for longer than Merus, who was around a hundred thousand years

old. Kyubel's words made it difficult to understand what the Demon Lord Army was thinking. Allen decided to set this matter aside for now and return to Cecil's questions.

"So, why was that altar with the black flames there?" Allen asked. "The fire was the sacrificed lives of the people turned into daemonic incarnations, right?"

"I don't doubt it," Merus said, nodding firmly.

"And Kyubel took some of that back. What're they gonna be used for?"

"I haven't a clue. But you saw Bask take a dark sphere from Lady Falnemes and swallow it to transform, didn't you? That little nugget was the crystallized form of the lives gathered at the altar."

"Then can those black flames be used to create Demonic Deities or make existing ones into Greater Demonic Deities?"

"I don't know the specifics, but I think that's a safe assumption to make. Just as people's faith becomes the source of a god's power, human lives will strengthen a Demonic Deity. Each Demonic Deity requires a sacrifice of at least a hundred thousand lives. A Greater Demonic Deity will require at least ten times that."

"A hundred thousand?!"

The horror was on such a grand scale that even Beast Princess Shia could not hide her astonishment. As the rest of the room froze in terror, only Allen was quickly formulating his thoughts.

Is it inefficient to create Demonic Deities? They seem to require so much. But I guess they're just given power and move on their own whereas gods slowly receive their power through faith. It's fundamentally different, so I can see why.

Kyubel had left only ten to twenty percent of the flames for Gushara to use as his power source, and even then, the Pontiff had become nearly immortal. This could only mean that his stats, buffed by the black flames, were higher than the Attack of any of the No-life Gamers. But though Allen was unsure just how powerful these flames were, there was a possibility that Gushara simply had high stats to begin with.

"Then is Kyubel trying to take those flames back to create more Demonic Deities?" Cecil asked. She shuddered at the mere thought of the Demon Lord Army growing stronger.

If dozens of those terrifying Demonic Deities were created simultaneously, the level of destruction they could cause was unimaginable.

“When the Demon Lord Army tried to invade the Heavenly Realm, how many Demonic Deities were there?” Allen asked.

The attack on Rohzenheim had been a diversion—their true aim was the Heavenly Realm. Merus had fought the Demon Lord Army back then and was killed, turning him into a Summon for Allen.

“A few hundred, I suppose,” Merus replied.

“A few hundred Demonic Deities?” Allen’s party murmured, defeated.

Allen had been thinking of another possibility. “Then it’s not likely that they’ll try to increase their numbers. It’d be far more efficient to buff the Demon Lord.”

“Quite possible,” Merus replied with a nod.

“Isn’t it, um, *better* for them to have more Demonic Deities?” Cecil asked. “Didn’t you say that the more Summons you had, the better, Allen?”

“Summons and Demonic Deities are fundamentally different,” Allen answered. “There were apparently hundreds of Demonic Deities trying to invade the Heavenly Realm, yet this plan, which had been in the works for decades, only gathered enough lives to create about ten of them. I can’t imagine Kyubel being the slow and steady type.”

“Ah, I see. You and Kyubel are totally different.”

“Now then, let me explain a few things that I believe I should’ve told you all before,” Merus said.

“Go on,” Allen replied, remembering the point of this conversation.

“The Demon Lord Army is trying to invade the Dark Realm as well.”

“Interesting...”

It is a realm that could be invaded... But wait.

“Isn’t the Dark Realm sealed by Elmea right now?”

In the Academy, there was a lesson called the Story of Creation, explaining creationism and how this world had come to be. It discussed tales of the Heavenly Realm, the Terrestrial Realm, which was also known as the Mortal Realm, and the Dark Realm. The Dark Realm was a place where Demonic Deities, demons, and monsters with overwhelming power had been sealed away by Elmea, the God of Creation, with the help of numerous other deities.

Had the Dark Realm not been sealed, the Mortal Realm would be teeming with monsters. Because of this, many offered their gratitude to the power of Elmea. This was a major reason behind Elmea being so widely worshipped around the globe.

“It is,” Merus replied. “The Demon Lord Army might be gathering lives to undo this seal. Or perhaps they’re trying to undo the seal that’s keeping the Daemon God in their slumber.”

“Daemon God?!” Everyone gasped, shocked by this revelation.

“Is there a deity like that?” Allen asked.

They’ve gotta be connected to the daemonic incarnations, right?

Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism, had transformed his followers into daemonic incarnations. While the battle against the Pontiff had ended, no one knew exactly who this Daemon God was. Allen had assumed that the Church of Elmea called the belief in any evil gods “daemonism,” but it seemed that was not the case.

“I’ve heard that many, many years ago, before I was born, their power was on par with Lord Elmea’s,” Merus said. “But they tried to challenge Lord Elmea and the other gods in hopes of destroying the Heavenly Realm and were defeated. Their body was sliced into pieces and sealed away in various parts of the Dark Realm.”

“H-How absolutely terrifying...” Sophie murmured in a trembling voice.

“If that Daemon God is unsealed, can it vastly increase the power of the Demon Lord Army?” Allen asked.

“That’s what the Heavenly Realm fears,” Merus replied solemnly.

“In any case, the Demon Lord Army will surely make their next move soon, right?”

“You can certainly expect that.”

“Then we also need to keep moving forward.”

With that, the brief meeting was adjourned for the day.

Chapter 12: The Coronation and Goddess Freyja's Salvation

It had been fifteen minutes since the apprentice clergyman had begun standing stiffly. He could no longer take it anymore.

“Why do *I* have to do this?” Keel finally grumbled.

“It happens,” Allen called out from behind, trying his hardest to stifle his laughs. “You’re always wearing those clerical garments all by yourself, aren’t you?”

“Allen, aren’t you always pushing *me* to do the troublesome stuff?”

“Not at all.”

“I can totally hear you laughing!”

Keel tried to turn toward the sofa where Allen was sitting, but the other priests dressing the boy showered him with complaints.

“Please don’t move!” they cried.

“S-Sorry,” Keel reflexively apologized. But as he gazed up, he clearly looked bitter because of it all.

Keel’s sister, Nina, sat beside Allen and Sophie while giving a strained smile. The No-life Gamers were currently in Neel, a city in Elmahl. This city served as a refuge for priests of the Church of Elmea, who had fled as Gushara burned Teomenia to the ground. Allen and friends had arrived three days ago to give the full account of the fate of the others to Cardinal Krympton, who served as the priests’ representative.

While being a bit vague about the fact that the Demon Lord Army had turned people into daemonic incarnations to collect their lives, Allen spoke about how the Demon Lord Army had been behind it all and how it had been spearheaded by Kyubel, the Primeval Demonic Deity. Allen had also reported that the one who had started this all, Gushara, had been defeated. Cardinal Krympton and the other higher-ranking officials listened intently and requested that Allen’s party stay in the city while they determined their next steps.

As he had no time to dawdle, Allen had tried to decline at first. However, Krympton and the others had insisted that there was something they required his help for, but they needed just a smidge of time to decide

on the process. The rest of the No-life Gamers had claimed that there really was no reason to flatly refuse, and so, they were staying at the Church's shelter, which had also become an emergency assembly hall. This loaned building was apparently formerly a noble's villa.

Allen had placed a few of Bird A's Nests around the area, and he had teleported with his party to northern Rohzenheim. They had then flown around using Tam-Tam's Eagle Mode and annihilated any remnants of the Demon Lord Army.

Elven Field Marshal Lukdraal had said that the invading Demon Lord Army regiment was a group of around half a million monsters. A vast majority of them had been wiped out by Rohzenheim's army, which had been cooperating with Beast Prince Zeu and the Ten Heroic Beasts. There had not been much for Allen to do. But on the second day, Cecil had landed a killing blow on a Demonic Deity, raising Allen to Lvl. 92.

Dogora had not been present for the fight in Rohzenheim. He could move a lot better now, but the Gamers had wanted him to rest up.

Deciding that the elven soldiers and the Summons could clean up the rest of the Demon Lord Army in Rohzenheim, on the second night, Allen's party had decided to head to the Central Continent with Beast Prince Zeu and the Ten Heroic Beasts.

This area had been under attack by an even more massive army of over a million monsters, but the Insect As and the Baby Beas had fought back with their numbers, killing off most of them. The general of this army, the Demonic Deity, was still alive, but Allen planned on finding out their precise location and killing them within the next few days. He would never say no to killing a Demonic Deity.

The No-life Gamers had parted ways with Beast Princess Shia on their way to Neel. She was able to form an alliance with the Crevelle royal family and had decided to help out with maintaining and developing this friendly relationship. She was still unable to reunite with her brother, Zeu.

On the third night—just yesterday—Krympton had told the party that they were able to come to a decision. The cardinal had two requests. First, he wanted them to join a ceremony celebrating the end of this entire debacle. Teomenia and many other residents had had their peaceful lives stolen away from them. If they were to learn that Gushara, the one who had started this all, was dead, they would regain their hope for the future. Surely, they would work hard for the restoration efforts.

Secondly, they wanted Keel to become the new pope. When Teomenia

had gone up in flames, the highest-ranking priest of the Church of Elmea, Great Pope Istahl Kumes, had stayed to fight against Gushara and lost his life. The morning the city had burned to the ground, the Great Pope had received an oracle from Elmea.

“A youth in gold will rush in from the heavens, bringing with him the light of hope. Raise your voice, for the coming age is dazzling and filled with hope.”

Cardinal Krympton and the others, upon hearing those words, had been assaulted by the daemonic incarnations flooding the city. They had been spared by Keel, who had donned clerical garments of gold. The boy was thus thought to be the most fitting person to succeed the late Great Pope and become the new pope.

However, this initially was an unpopular opinion within the Church. The scales had only tipped in Keel’s favor when he visited Neel, having carried the skeletal remains of the Great Pope, who had been transformed into a Demonic Deity, and the articles he had left behind back from the floating island.

Keel had told the cardinal and the others that First Angel Lapt and the other angels had taken Istahl Kumes’s soul to the Heavenly Realm. He had also explained that he was given the Great Pope’s Sacred Necklace and that Istahl had wished for his remains and other articles to be given a proper burial.

Keel held the Talent of Saint King. In the Church of Elmea, a Talent was a miracle bestowed by the God of Creation, and the head of a temple was required to have a powerful Talent if they were to lead the people. If one were to take up the role of pope, they would naturally require an even rarer Talent like Saint King so that they could lead every believer of that faith.

Only the higher-ranking members of the Church were worried about such a thing, however. For the average follower, the specifics of a priest’s Talent were less important than their ability to heal wounds, treat illnesses, and dispel toxins. It did not matter to them how many stars their Talent had, where they had been born, or what their social status was. That was not what decided who the pope was. Of course, a person with a higher number of stars could surely save more people, but if their powers were not used to save others, even the head of a small church would quickly lose followers.

Given all the things he had accomplished, Keel had been chosen to be

the best candidate for the next pope, making him the head of the Church of Elmea. Its ranks were as follows:

Great Pope: The head of the entire Church of Elmea. Only those who have served as the pope for numerous years can receive divine revelations from Elmea.

This rank is essentially an honorary post, and there are times when there is no Great Pope at all.

Pope: The head of the entire Church of Elmea. Can receive divine revelations from Elmea.

Cardinal: A special post. One who aids the pope.

Archbishop: The leader of all churches within a nation. Only one can exist per continent.

Bishop: Aids the archbishop and helps lead the churches of a nation. Several people can take up the post.

Archpriest: The head of a church in a capital, large city, dungeon city, or other special area.

Priest: The head of a church in a reasonably large city. Can aid the archpriest at times.

Deacon: The head of a church in a small town or village. In charge of ensuring that there is no foul play during Appraisal Ceremonies.

Clergyman: Anyone below the rank of deacon.

In general, a Talented person who can heal others and who belongs to the Church is called a clergyman.

Apprentice Clergyman: Anyone who cannot become a clergyman for one reason or another, such as being underage.

To become a priest from a clergyman, one needed to be appointed by a bishop or pass an exam. Anything above that required a nomination from a colleague and an appointment by the pope. The pope and the cardinal were chosen by an election hosted within the Church. If the nominee was below the rank of Archbishop, the archbishops would exercise their right to vote.

The nominee did not actually need to be of high rank. If there was a worthy candidate among the lower ranks of the priests, they could skip several ranks and become pope—this had, in fact, occurred more than once within the long history of the Church. In other words, it was not out of the ordinary for Keel to assume the role. However, he had declined this offer because he planned to return to the Carnel fief after the war against the Demon Lord Army was over. The title of pope was much too heavy of a burden for him to bear, and he had other things he wanted to do. But his

humble reply had only solidified the Church's decision—they had taken his words to mean that he intended to save the world from the wrath of the Demon Lord Army.

The Great Pope had lost his life in Teomenia, and though his sacrifice had allowed others to live, it had left the Church without a way to walk the sacred path guided by Elmea. Their only option was to make this young man the new pope. The many priests who had fled to Neel paid no mind to his rank and worked to convince the boy to take up the position.

"That's not how I wanted to come off," Keel desperately pleaded. "Please, listen to my words!"

Unfortunately, he had been unable to convince the upper echelons of the Church—they were skilled enough to have negotiated with the empire, after all. After a long debate they had spent more than half a day on, they had settled with Keel becoming an apprentice pope who would rebuild the Church from Carnel City.

Unlike Allen's title of Rank S adventurer, apprentice pope was a role that had never existed until now. The rank was on par with that of cardinal, and Keel would be given knowledge and work befitting of a pope. And so, the boy was effectively promised the highest rank within the Church of Elmea, which served as an anchor for people the world over. If he was treated without respect, even the massive Empire of Giamut risked losing the trust of the populace. That was how great his influence now was.

This appointment was transmitted to the world via a magic tool, as was the news that the calamity that had attacked the Holy Land of Elmahl and plagued the Galiatan Continent as a whole was now over. Keel would now be known not only as a friend of Allen, the Rank S adventurer, but also as someone who had received the backing of the Church of Elmea and was of great importance to the spread of peace throughout the world.

Neel was going to host a ceremony celebrating the end of a disaster and the appointment of an apprentice pope. Everyone was making their final preparations, and Keel was currently dressed in the proper garments.

Shortly after the ceremony, Keel was scheduled to walk toward the city square and receive the pope's crown from the cardinal. The pope's real crown had been destroyed during the attack that the beastkin had launched, so a backup crown would be used.

"Isn't it weird, though?" Keel protested. "I'm still only an apprentice, so I shouldn't be wearing the pope's crown."

"Then please end your apprenticeship as soon as possible," one of the

Church's sisters swiftly replied. Both the robes they were helping him put on and his staff had been procured by Allen, who had collected these drops from the Rank S dungeon. "And now, we're done."

Keel usually dressed himself, but the sisters had done such a good job of it that everyone practically did a double take.

"You look so cool!" Nina, his younger sister, squealed, clapping her hands excitedly.

The Carnel servants standing behind Nina and Allen on the sofa clapped as well. Nina was Talentless and had started attending the Nobles College this year. But when she had heard about Keel's big moment, she had taken the day off so that she could drop by.

"Th-Thanks," Keel said, looking a bit embarrassed.

The other priests arrived and surrounded him. Since Allen and the rest of his party would be attending the ceremony, they had used a route separate from Keel to head to the city square. Neel was a decently large city within Elmahl, but the square was so packed that Allen thought that he was imagining things. He could barely move, and when he glanced around, he noticed people sitting on roofs and windowsills nearby. He was sure that there were over ten thousand people present.

In the center of the square was a tall platform with a staircase of twenty steps leading up to it. The wooden steps were rather plain, but each one was higher than the knees of a grown man. One would surely struggle to ascend them no matter how large their strides. The staircase was merely for show, however; it was meant to replicate the one that had stood in the temple within Teomenia. No one would actually be walking up it.

Allen had not listened closely due to a lack of interest, but large cities like Neel that were home to Church members ranked above archpriest often had a platform with a large staircase fashioned after the one in Teomenia.

Why not just make it out of papier-mâché, then?

Keel still had not arrived, but Allen and the rest of his party were guided to the top of the platform to announce that the horrific affair had ended. When they walked up a normal-sized staircase from behind the platform, they saw that Beast Princess Shia, Captain Rudo, and Vice-Captain Rasu were waiting for them. Everyone involved in this incident had been called to this ceremony.

As Allen stepped up onto the platform and stood alongside Princess Shia and the other beastkin, he felt the gazes of the crowd. Though only an

apprentice pope would be unveiled, he was a pope nonetheless. The people's eyes were glimmering with hope and anticipation, excited that they could be present for the start of a new era. When Allen turned around to look behind the platform, Keel was having one last meeting with Krympton, surrounded by priests and holy soldiers.

Seems like he'll need a bit more time.

"Look at all these people!" Meruru said excitedly, her eyes glued on the excited throngs of people. Just then, she stepped into the center of the platform, attracted by the hopeful gazes of the crowd.

Huh? Meruru?

"Hey, what're you doing, Meruru?" Dogora said, calling out from behind.

"Rah!" Meruru said, striking one of her cool poses.

The rowdy crowd fell silent. They were eagerly awaiting the apprentice pope, but a small dwarf had popped up and struck an odd pose. They could not hide their confusion. Meruru, however, took her chance. She found this to be a perfect opportunity to show off her new poses to the people, so she cycled through them smoothly. She even added some poses that she had only recently thought up.

The crowd was silent. Only Meruru's grunts could be heard as she gave it her all to look cool in front of everyone. When Allen glanced around, he noticed even Beast Princess Shia and his own party looking a tad troubled by the dwarf's antics. Sophie in particular looked to be in a state of panic as she fiddled with her hands in front of her chest, wondering if she should stop or watch over Meruru.

This is a good opportunity.

Allen leaned toward Dogora and whispered, "Hey, since we've got the chance, why don't you step in front of the crowd too?"

Your power comes from your close connection to Fire Goddess Freyja, after all.

The Summoner had gathered a good bit of information and done an analysis of his own in regards to Dogora being Freyja's disciple. It did not seem like a bad idea for the Destroyer to stand in front of a crowd.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?" Dogora whispered back in bewilderment, staring at Allen like he was some sort of pariah.

"Well, if you wanna become a hero, now's a good time to put yourself out there, no?"

Dogora did not respond. "*He has a point,*" said a woman's voice,

coming from Kagutsuchi, the divine vessel that was slung across his back. *“There are many people gathered here, and it indeed is a good opportunity to make your face known. Dogora, step forward!”*

While Allen assumed that this meant that Dogora would step up and strike a cool pose of his own, the boy in question looked even more troubled.

“W-Wait,” Dogora replied. “That’s not really what I’m aiming for.”

“What nonsense. You have a duty as my disciple to stoke the flames. Stop dawdling and go on out there!”

The head of Kagutsuchi, which was in the form of a greataxe, started to glow red-hot.

“Ouch! H-Hey, what gives?!” Dogora shrieked as he jumped up and saw that his bottom was on fire.

Though he had the ability to absorb fire-type attacks, it seemed Freyja’s little act of bullying was excluded. The crowd, already befuddled by Meruru’s antics, started to murmur confusedly as they heard Dogora cry out. From behind the platform, a priest in charge of facilitating this ceremony approached them.

“Um, w-we’ll be starting soon.”

Upon hearing those words, Sophie stood up, went to the center of the platform, and grabbed Meruru by the shoulder to drag her back. Once the enigmatic dwarf was gone, the crowd held their breath, waiting for the moment of the unveiling. The cardinal stood in front, followed by Keel and the other priests as they stepped onto the platform. Once Keel was standing at its center, the crowd began whispering excitedly.

“I-Is he the new pope?!”

“I’ve heard that he cleared a swarm of over ten thousand monsters!”

“God didn’t abandon us...”

As Allen heard these mutterings, he turned to Keel, who was furrowing his brow. The apprentice pope standing in front of him was wearing fresh, clean clothes of white with gold embroidery. They fit him perfectly. However, to the people watching the appointment of the new pope, the boy was undoubtedly the savior of the Church of Elmea who had magically descended from the heavens to rid the land of the monsters that plagued it.

The cardinal stepped forward to stand beside Keel, holding the crown that designated the boy as pope. Keel knelt in front of the cardinal as planned, and the masses grew silent.

“O Lord Elmea, God of Creation!” Krympton bellowed, his voice

ringing throughout the square. He slowly raised the crown that the late Great Pope, Istahl Kumes, had left behind. “You created the world we live in, graciously gave us life, and have guided our souls on the right path! O benevolent God, today, we appoint Keel as the successor to the previous pope, who is no longer with us. As your representative, he will hear your words, convey your thoughts to the masses, and walk alongside us as we undergo the Trials you have bestowed upon our souls. Elmea, God of Creation, should you deem him worthy, please bestow upon him a fitting Trial, as well as your blessings!”

Krympton slowly lowered the crown onto Keel’s head as the boy remained kneeling with his head facing the ground. A moment later, thunderous applause and deafening cheers rang out from the crowd.



Keel stood up and faced the throngs of people showering him with hopeful gazes. He was overcome with a feeling that he simply could not describe. The waves of applause and the cheers were so loud that he could barely make them out, but every now and then, he heard the words “Thank you!” Keel stood there as he felt a sting in his eyes, and a sliver of his emotions rolled down his cheek.

Dogora was feeling an odd sense of *déjà vu*. He recalled the cheers of the masses at the entrance of the dungeon when his party had conquered the final floor boss of the Rank S dungeon in the Empire of Baukis. Back then, he had assumed that the applause was directed toward Admiral Garara, the four parties who had conquered the dungeon, the parties’ leaders, and Minor Deity Dygragni, who had appeared before the people. As Dogora was being showered in praise alongside them, he had felt a twinge of pain to be even near them—he had believed himself to have been completely useless in combat and had thought that he was worthless. It had been suffocating to be treated like he had done anything.

But things were different now. Much like at the Rank S dungeon, this applause was not directed only at him but at all the people standing atop the platform. He knew as much. And yet, this time, he was entirely unfazed. He knew why this was—the difference lay in whether he wanted to be praised and admired for his deeds.

In the fight against Bask, Dogora had given his all to protect his friends. Not once had praise from others or the results of his actions crossed his mind; he had merely done what he had felt he ought to do to fulfill his role. Obviously, he was sitting here today because the fight had tipped in his favor, but had it not, he likely would not have been here alive. Above all, he had thought that he simply needed to do what he could, and he knew that he had done just that. And because he knew that he had given it his all, he could honestly accept people’s praise.

It was likely, Dogora thought, that Keel was of the same mindset. The apprentice pope was not one to risk his life so that he would be thanked by a crowd—no, he only ever did what he believed he should do. As he fulfilled his role, results simply followed.

“I see... I think I get it now,” Dogora muttered.

“*Then I suppose this is where it starts,*” Freyja replied.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

If he was to be the next in line for the people to shower with praise, it would surely only happen when he was satisfied with what he had done.

After more than five minutes of continuous applause, the cardinal stepped forward.

“I’m sure that your cries of elation have reached the ears of Lord Elmea above us,” he said. “On this joyous day, we once again pray that we may be guided by Him and that we can be strong enough to finish Trials that will refine and nurture our souls.”

Ten minutes ticked by as Krympton recited his speech. Allen was growing tired of listening, feeling that this had gone on long enough, and he took out his grimoire to organize his future goals such as class promotions. He finished about five minutes later, and when he looked up, he saw that the cardinal was still giving his speech and showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. We get it, Elmea’s great. Chop-chop. Come on, just fast forward.

Just then, a part of the crowd started to murmur. A group of holy soldiers squeezed through to part the sea of people. They made their way to the platform, but there was someone in front of them pushing the people aside. A different set of soldiers guarding the stage tried to step forward to stop the ruckus, and the moment they did, a woman between the two groups of soldiers cried out.

“Equality?! What a load of nonsense! It’s all lies! We’re being oppressed!” she screamed.

Keel swiftly stepped forward. He made it to the edge of the stage and gazed down at a woman who was clutching something close to her chest. Surrounded by holy soldiers, she gazed up at the platform and made eye contact with the newly appointed apprentice pope.

“Please save us!” the woman cried, trying to show what she was holding. She raised a baby wrapped in tattered rags up to him. “This child hasn’t drunk any breast milk since yesterday! Please, I beg you! Please at least spare this child’s life!”

She cried until her voice grew hoarse, and the surrounding soldiers hesitated in trying to hold her back. They were likely overwhelmed by the woman’s desperation or the fact that she was raising a child in the air, or they might have simply hesitated to use force in front of the people.

“What are you doing?!” the cardinal roared angrily. “Take her away!”

“No! Don’t touch her!” Keel shouted, drowning out the voices of both the cardinal and the crowd. He descended the stairs toward the square.

Allen and the others stood on the edge of the platform with the cardinal

as the apprentice pope went down the twenty steps of the large staircase. These steps were simply for show and it was unthinkable that anyone would use them, but Keel practically jumped down each one to approach the woman. The people gazing up at him were shocked but ecstatic that the apprentice pope was making his way toward them.

“The pope is coming!”

“He saved our nation at such a young age.”

“Oh, I’m so grateful. So very grateful, dear pope...”

As the crowd murmured their shock and awe, some started to pray to him, but the boy was none too pleased.

“I’m not the pope! I’m an apprentice pope!” he insisted.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he parted the crowd to approach the woman. The people naturally gave way to the boy, clearing a path to her. He finally stood in front of her and took a good look for the first time. Her clothes were filthy, her arms and legs looked skinny and malnourished, and her skin was dry and cracked. She clutched the baby to her chest as she looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. He was reminded of the time when his father, Viscount Carnel, had been jailed for insurrection and House Carnel had fallen into ruin. His sister and servants had been forced to seek refuge in the Church of Elmea, and his young sister’s arms had looked just as skinny and frail.

As he stared into the woman’s eyes, he finally realized that he recognized her. “You’re...”

When Keel and the party had first come to Neel to offer their aid, Allen had asked if there were any followers of Daemonism. This woman had stepped up and claimed that their faith was not Daemonism. The effects of Allen’s Potherb had rid her body of the holy water curse that they had been forced to ingest to join the faith. The followers of Daemonism had had their curses lifted and decided to live in shelters for a while. She had likely been with her baby back then as well, but as the Gamers had been busy running around Neel to ensure its safety and then immediately headed to Teomenia to fight the Demonic Deity, Keel had not heard any news about the followers since.

“What happened? How did such an awful thing occur?” Keel asked.

He peered into the baby’s face. The child looked to be asleep, but their face was pale and they looked limp while taking shallow, infrequent breaths. They were in a dangerous state.

“Great Heal,” Keel said, placing a hand over the baby and chanting a

spell. As an apprentice clergyman who had healed numerous followers, he could easily heal others. But he soon realized that he had not received any alms from the woman. The Church of Elmea required a fee for performing a healing—usually at least one silver coin.

The doctrine of the Church stated that one needed to face the Trial of the Gods given by Elmea, the God of Creation. All actions resulting in the salvation of others required a form of compensation. As a result, those seeking help had to offer money in exchange for these deeds.

Even if just a single silver coin, as long as a payment was made, wounds and illnesses would be healed, and toxins would be removed. Those who had nothing to give would be abandoned, including the gravely ill. Just as living creatures took the lives of others to eat and survive, just as humans had to till the soil to raise trees and gain sustenance, the world created by Elmea was harsh and unforgiving. Facing this cruel world would refine the souls of others.

However, Keel did not stop casting his healing. The woman in front of him and the dying baby in her arms reminded him of his sister, Nina. The baby, surrounded by the golden light emitted from Keel's hand, opened their eyes.

“Waaah!” the baby cried out energetically.

As the crowd watched the scene play out in shock, they gulped before applauding Keel louder than they had at his papal coronation. The woman widened her eyes in shock and hugged her baby tightly, unable to believe how healthy her child had become.

“Your baby will be fine now!” Keel shouted over the deafening cheers.

The woman, clutching her crying baby close to her, suddenly knelt in front of the apprentice pope.

“H-Hey...” Keel said, crouching down to help the woman back up. He turned to the crowd and bellowed, “Can’t you all be silent for a moment?!”

Like a rippling wave, the applause died out as Keel helped the woman to her feet.

“What happened? How did your baby fall into such a state?” Keel inquired.

The woman spoke with tears streaming down her cheeks. “We followers of Daemonism haven’t been able to eat properly for days. We’re unable to leave our section of the city, and though we are given food, it’s not nearly enough for everyone to have their fill.”

The woman’s words reached Allen’s ears as he descended the steps

with the rest of the party and stood behind Keel.

Because Neel was where those fleeing Teomenia and other nearby settlements had taken refuge, the city was facing a food shortage. It had only been a month since the SOS signal that notified the world of this predicament had been sent out, so there was still a long time left before the other nations could lend their aid.

For now, Rohzenheim was offering their support, but that was not nearly enough to replenish the city's food supplies. In preparation for even greater emergencies, food was rationed out under strict control. It seemed, however, that the distribution was unequal. Specifically, the followers of Daemonism were being given absurdly small rations compared to others. Citing their reverence to Gushara Selbirohl, the one behind this series of events, the followers of the Church of Elmea had been intentionally restricting their food consumption.

Above all, the followers of Daemonism were being forced to stay in their section of Neel.

She must've sensed danger and fled her section with her baby.

Allen glanced at the cardinal beside him. Krympton looked a little hesitant and awkward, hinting that he likely knew about the situation the Daemonism followers were in. Once the sobbing woman had finished her plea for help, Keel turned around and headed toward the twenty steps. He ascended the first five, looked over the square, and raised his voice.

"Is there anyone else following the religion of Gushara here?! Please show yourselves if you are! I want everyone to make way for these people!"

Voices started to pipe up from the crowd.

"Here!"

"Please let me through!"

One after another, malnourished people dressed in rags gathered in front of Keel. Within a matter of minutes, a crowd of around a hundred people had formed. These people had either escaped from their designated area or managed to slip through the cracks and find a separate place to live.

"This...can't be all," Keel muttered, furrowing his brow in anger and displeasure. "There were over five thousand who fled."

And yet, there were only around a hundred here. The rest were either unable to leave their area or confined someplace else. He wanted to help them as soon as he could and transfer them to a safer place. However,

while he could transport the hundred present to Carnel City, he could not bring all five thousand. Even if he could, he was not sure if there were any shelters that could accept a crowd of thousands. Was it better for him to ask Allen to use the resources they had received to feed these five thousand hungry followers? Keel was unsure what the correct answer was.

Allen gazed up at Keel, who was frowning like never before.

Religion and the feelings of others are entangled in a complex web.

Just three days ago, people finally had been told that this incident had been caused by the Demon Lord Army. But the persecution of the followers of Daemonism had been occurring for a while. Once it came to light that Gushara was a part of the Demon Lord Army, many Daemonism followers around the world would undoubtedly begin being treated poorly. While these followers had been freed from the curse, there were not many who would be willing to accept them, as they had revered Gushara as their Pontiff.

Allen watched Keel, who seemed deep in thought. A crowd of thousands, including the former followers of Daemonism, waited for the apprentice pope to speak his mind.

This is a difficult decision to make.

“Lord Allen,” Sophie suddenly said.

“Hmm? What’s up?” He turned toward the elf, who was smiling at him.

“Why don’t we lead these people to the floating island?”

“Huh?”

“We cannot stand idly by while people are suffering. But I don’t find it wise to keep them within the city either. So perhaps we should lead them to that island.”

Only then did Allen understand Sophie’s words. He had planned to use that floating island as an attack, dropping it on the base of the Demon Lord Army. Three days ago, when Allen arrived in Neel, he had filed a request with Admiral Garara, who had agreed to lend a Magus Smith who could control the magic tools on the island and teach Allen and his party how to use them. It was at that moment that the followers of Daemonism, the floating island, and Freyja all connected in Allen’s mind.

Wait, this might be the perfect solution.

Allen looked at Sophie. When he had first proposed his plan, she had muttered something about how it would be such a waste. She had shrugged off his request that she repeat what she had said, so he had done the same, but he now realized that he had been overlooking an important detail.

“Have you been thinking about this sort of thing the whole time?” he asked.

Sophie smiled and nodded. “But of course. We’re friends, are we not?”

Allen looked at Sophie, then at Dogora. The elf had decided to act upon her own thoughts, and he was certain that Dogora had achieved more than anyone else in this most recent fight.

I’m being saved by my friends left and right this time around.

“Yeah. You’re right. That’s perfect,” Allen said, deciding to use Sophie’s idea.

Within Neel, there were around five thousand refugees who were former followers of Daemonism. They were all survivors of northern Galiat who had been in Teomenia to stop the execution of Gushara. Since similar situations had occurred in the eastern, western, and southern regions, there were surely former followers of Daemonism in those regions too. Presumably, over ten thousand such people in total were scattered throughout the continent. They could all fit on the floating island.

“Then I guess there’s only one thing to do,” Allen said as he turned to the apprentice pope. “Keel, we’ve got a good idea.”

“And what would that be?” Keel replied dubiously.

Allen did not answer and instead turned to Dogora. The nearby cardinal looked to Keel for answers, but Keel simply shook his head and told everyone to wait. Dogora looked befuddled by Allen’s gaze, but it was soon made clear that the Summoner had business with the divine vessel.

“Lady Freyja,” Allen whispered.

“*Hmm? What’s wrong?*” Freyja answered from Dogora’s back.

According to Dogora, the deity’s body was in her temple within the Heavenly Realm, but Kagutsuchi could be used to communicate with the Mortal Realm or to lend some of her power. The faith of others could be gathered into the divine vessel, providing her body with power.

“If you gain ten thousand followers, how powerful will Kagutsuchi become?” Allen asked.

“*Oh? Explain yourself.*”

“We’ve got around ten thousand people praying for salvation.”

With a mischievous grin, Allen told Freyja his plan. For the past few days, he had been gathering information about the goddess from Dogora. All deities, Freyja included, gained power from the faith of the people. While there were numerous methods to transmute that faith into power, among them were the usage of divine vessels and disciples. These were

both connected to a deity and could thus directly send faith to them.

These transfers were a two-way street; the deity could also use the divine vessel or disciple to send their divine power. By stealing the divine vessel, one could assume that the Demon Lord Army had forcibly shut off the route that gave Freyja her power. Hence, the Goddess of Fire did not have much divine power to her name. Furthermore, she had used every last bit she had managed to retain to answer Dogora's call and assist him in defeating Bask. It seemed the Fire Goddess was an impulsive woman with little thought toward the future.

In other words, currently, there was little chance that Dogora could receive divine power from Freyja. Allen had nicknamed this phenomenon "Outta Gas Dogora," but his friend could not remain exhausted for long. And there was little hope that Freyja would be able to restore her divine power over time, as she was not as revered as before.

While there were multiple reasons behind humanity's loss of faith in her, the main one was that fire was no longer seen as important as it once had. In the past, fire had been precious. People had frozen without its warmth, and it had allowed them to defend themselves against monsters. Fire was also difficult to create and extinguish; if mishandled, it could cause great destruction. And so, many had prayed to Freyja. They had prayed that they could create fire and that their flames would not be snuffed out. They had prayed that fires would not break out within buildings, and that it would light up the night to comfort them and provide them with warmth. Freyja was vital to ensuring that fire could be handled safely.

But once the humans learned how to handle fire, their prayers had started to cease. The magic tool created by the Baukis Empire had become widespread, and its light and heat were more stable than fire. A different magic tool could easily create fire without much trouble. And so, people had begun losing faith in Freyja.

Then what of the other three Elemental Deities? Had they gone down the same path as Freyja? The answer was no. Technology was unable to create the other elements, and they had thus not lost as many followers as the Fire Goddess.

When tilling the fields, people prayed to Molmol, the God of Bountiful Harvest, as well as Gaia, the God of Earth. They prayed to Water Goddess Aqua for protection from floods during rainy seasons and for water during droughts. She in particular had no shortage of followers.

Of course, Freyja did still have followers of her own. Blacksmiths, for example, required fire every day for their work. As this world had been at odds with the Demon Lord Army for years, weapons and armor were necessities. Blacksmiths prayed to Freyja daily as they got to work. But when Minor Deity Dygragni had started to construct dungeons, thus making equips attainable as exploration rewards, the need for blacksmiths dwindled. Since adventurers could now just find equips as drops, they did not have to wait for their gear to be forged. This caused many blacksmiths to lose their jobs.

This reminded Allen of Master Habarak, the famed dwarven blacksmith. When the Summoner had picked up some orichalcum in the Rank S dungeon and was looking for someone to process it, Hero Helmios had introduced the Gamers to him. But Habarak had complained that with the loss of Freyja's power, the world had lost the powerful flames that could forge orichalcum.

Naturally, Allen had wondered if mages prayed to Freyja when using Fire Magic, but Cecil had told him that she appealed to Isiris. The equations that mages inscribed when using spells were theological letters used to negotiate with Goddess of Magic Isiris—in other words, Isiris was the reason fire could be created with magic. This further decreased the number of Freyja's followers.

The elves communicated with spirits and rarely prayed to deities. Thus, Freyja would require quite a bit of time to restore her divine power. However, there were ten thousand former followers of Daemonism scattered throughout the continent. If they all prayed to Freyja, how much power would she gain? In truth, Allen wanted to know just how useful Dogora would be in the future when fighting against Demonic Deities, but he did not want to be so frank with his thoughts.

"What do you think?" Allen asked. "If ten thousand people started to pray to you, how powerful would Kagutsuchi become?"

"Ten thousand... It may take some time, but the amount of power Kagutsuchi would eventually regain would rival what it had during the battle against that big oaf."

Allen realized that the "big oaf" that she was referring to was the transformed Bask. Freyja had zero interest in Bask and had made no effort to remember his name, much less his nickname.

Seriously? Kagutsuchi would be powerful enough to defeat Bask even now that he's transformed into a Greater Demonic Deity?

While he was not sure just how much time would be required, this was good news. If a person could land a powerful blow against a Greater Demonic Deity, it would greatly increase the number of plans that Allen could utilize.

“Hmm, I see... New followers. Heh heh,” Freyja said, unable to hide her elation.

“Well, it’s not set in stone yet,” Allen replied with an evil grin. “But I believe it’s best if you show yourself in front of the people, Goddess Freyja.”

“Oh?”

“Humans are lacking in many ways compared to deities. If you’re gonna lend them a hand, I’m sure they’d like to know who exactly they’re receiving their aid from.”

If the former followers of Daemonism who had been cast aside by Gushara, the man they had put their faith in, were to be saved, they would surely be curious as to their savior’s identity. Just as the beastkin prayed to Garm, Allen wanted these people to have all their doubts dispelled and fervently offer Freyja their prayers. If these former followers put their faith in another deity, Freyja would be unable to gain power.

“That may be true, but I require a reason to show myself in the Mortal Realm. What would your reasoning be?”

A god could not show themselves in front of humans without a proper reason. The logic of the gods prevented them from wielding their power so offhandedly. If they were to do so and use their power frequently, the harmony of the world would be broken. Hence, the deities required some form of contract or compensation if they were to use their power to aid humans. The same was true if they wanted to grant a disciple their divine power.

This was also why Spirit God Rohzen was a flying squirrel instead of his true form—that of a bear—and did nothing but cast Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits.

“Is this situation not familiar? This is the Advent Festival,” Allen said.

Once a year, Elmea and a few other renowned deities would descend upon the steps of the Teomenia temple and show their power to the people. This was called the Advent Festival.

“Oho! I see! Then now is the perfect time for me to show myself!” Freyja said excitedly.

Allen smiled internally, knowing that his suggestion had been effective.

As I thought, deities want to join the Advent Festival. It's a great opportunity for them to gather more followers.

"The temple in Teomenia has been destroyed and is in no state to host an Advent Festival," Allen reasoned. "And conveniently, though an apprentice, we're in a ceremony celebrating the coronation of a new pope. Should you appear here in all your glory and beauty, Lady Freyja, people would surely find this to be an Advent Festival of sorts."

"Oh?"

"And you *coincidentally* bumped into people who had just lost their deity and were looking for salvation and a new god to pray to."

"*Interesting... Lord Elmea might just agree to that. But I've never saved a human before.*"

"Well, perhaps the specifics of saving these people can be left to your human disciple. What needs to be said is that the disciple saving them is under the blessing of Goddess Freyja."

As those words left Allen's lips, Spirit God Rohzen, who was listening in, whispered to the elf princess. "Sophialohne, I've gotten sleepy, ha ha."

"Huh? L-Lord Rohzen?!" Sophie gasped. But Rohzen had already closed his eyes atop her shoulders and started to take steady breaths. Allen, who had failed to notice this exchange, continued to explain his plan to Freyja.

"So, I just want you to do this, and then this, and if you can do this too, it'd be great," he finished.

Freyja gave words of agreement. "*Very well. That won't be a problem at all. I'm surprised that you can concoct such a brazen plan in such a short span of time.*"

"Oh, I wouldn't hold a candle to you, dear goddess."

"*Hmph. Well, no matter. Allen, was it? I shall remember your name.*"

"You're too kind."

Without warning, a pillar of fire erupted from Kagutsuchi, which was still on Dogora's back. As the tip of the fire reached the platform of the papal coronation, it changed shape, and a woman with long hair slowly emerged. The crowd gasped from the suddenness of it all, and some were reminded of the fires in Teomenia as they screamed and tried to flee to safety. The cardinal, priests, and Beast Princess Shia, who was standing on the platform, all froze in astonishment.

"*You over there. The mother and her child,*" the woman at the end of the pillar of fire said. She was referring to the lady who had made a tearful

plea to Keel just moments before.

“Y-Yes?” the mother stammered.

“I have heard your cries for help through my disciple. You may be at ease. My disciple shall protect you.”

“R-Really?!”

“I shall give you some proof.”

Freyja stretched her right arm toward the woman, and a sliver of fire headed for the woman and her baby. The woman was unable to move out of shock as the trail of flames enveloped her. Everyone gasped for a moment, worried that the woman was being burned alive. But her clothes and hair were not at all singed. On the contrary, she wore a look of relief.

“Ah... Goddess Freyja...” she said.

The crowd all sighed. They had been worried about the woman and her baby who were suddenly surrounded by flames. It mattered not if she was a former follower of Daemonism. Everyone, including the followers of Elmea, had feared for her safety.

All right, let's get Merus out here.

Allen Summoned a King Me'd Merus, who was dressed in lavish attire. Once more, the crowd gasped with awe; they had not expected the apostle of Elmea, the First Angel, to suddenly make an appearance before them. This had not occurred when the previous Great Pope had been crowned nor during the coronation of the pope two generations ago. The masses started to cry with joy.

“Lord Merus?!”

“What a divine form! Simply ethereal!”

“Lord Elmea didn't abandon us! I knew it!”

They all immediately began to kneel, praying to Merus. One by one, the wave of people from the stage of the coronation to the people outside of the square all knelt to offer their utmost respect.

“Ah, Goddess Freyja. Good day,” Merus said, greeting the Fire Goddess as he and Allen had planned ahead of time.

“Merus, what happened to the island that will be given to my disciple?”

“It's to the south of this city, in the center of this continent.”

The way Merus spoke his prepared lines seemed to imply that he was only playing along with this farce because he was Allen's Summon and thus had to follow the boy's orders.

“Did you hear that, humans? Merus has informed me that there is a

floating island for my disciple, Dogora. Those who support Disciple Dogora and his friends may live there. Is there anyone who would become my follower?"

Freyja made sure to keep the bit about Merus vague, for it was best to hide from whom exactly the angel was receiving orders. As she received Merus's message and made her declaration, someone stood up from the kneeling crowd. Another followed, then another, and soon enough, every former follower of Daemonism was back on their feet.

"Very well! I, Freyja, shall not forget your faces. Follow the fire of hope and head for the island alongside my disciple!"

With that, the goddess raised her arms to the heavens. Sparks flew from her palms and danced in the air before gently descending upon the crowd like flecks of snow. Naturally, the people were shocked by these floating particles, but they did not burn anyone; they merely felt warm to the touch. It was as though Fire Goddess Freyja was using her powerful fire to paint over the black flames that were burned into the memories of those who had been at Gushara's execution. Her fire was purifying their minds and ridding them of their trauma. The crowd members who had stood up to answer Freyja's call noticed that the falling sparks had formed a straight line leading due south of the square.



“If there is anyone else who would like to head to the island, come along! My disciple and I shall not abandon you!”

Upon hearing her declaration, everyone standing began to cheer, shouting Freyja’s and Dogora’s names.

“Hmm... Heh heh,” Goddess Freyja chuckled, unable to hide her smirk at this sight.

And as abruptly as she had appeared, she followed her path back into Kagutsuchi on Dogora’s back and vanished. And so, both the coronation of the apprentice pope and the Advent Festival had ended.

Chapter 13: Utilizing the Floating Island

Following shortly after the coronation was the ceremony declaring the end of this debacle. When that drew to a close, the No-life Gamers were sent off with cheers and applause as they headed to a Church of Elmea within Neel. Cardinal Krympton led the way, guiding them to a room in the back.

“Th-This way, please,” he said. “You may use this conference room.”

“Thank you,” Allen replied.

As he stepped inside, he wondered if this place was really used for conferences. It had four stone walls and a high ceiling, and there were no windows. The three walls that did not have a door were decorated with sconces that hung equidistant from one another. The candles in them brightly illuminated the room, which housed a large wooden table with chairs, but the entire atmosphere of the room seemed a little mismatched from its furniture.

Is this actually a room for the church’s rituals and they just added a few chairs to it or something?

“Um, w-would you like something to eat?” Krympton asked, more nervous than usual because he was in front of the former First Angel.

“No need to be so reserved,” Merus replied.

Krympton nearly fell to his knees as he bowed again and again. “Y-Your wish is my command.”

“Wait, Cardinal Krympton,” Allen called out just as the man made to leave.

“Y-Yes?”

“Could you confirm the number of the former followers of Gushara’s religion who want to leave this city and make us a list of names?”

Allen had no idea just what kind of life the former followers had lived, but it was safe to assume that they likely had houses and families within the Holy Land of Elmahl. Some of their family members might have also been believers in Daemonism while others had opted to pray to Elmea. Since these people were choosing to leave, they would need time to pack their belongings and possibly gather their loved ones as well. Allen wanted to comply with those needs as much as possible.

“I can,” Krympton replied. “But is it true that you want *only* the former followers of Gushara’s religion to emigrate to the island?”

Allen was trying to keep any followers of the Church of Elmea away from the island. He would make exceptions if spouses or other family members followed a different religion, but in general, he had claimed that this was a space for the former followers of Daemonism only. Everyone present for the coronation had seen Fire Goddess Freyja and former First Angel Merus appear before their eyes. Naturally, many of those people were faithful to Elmea, but some had wished to move to the floating island. Allen feared that there would be squabbles between them and the former Daemonism followers—Neel had shunned the latter in the past, after all. If the Elmea followers outnumbered the Daemonism followers on the island, the same situation might occur. If the roles were reversed, the Elmea believers might be shunned instead.

Allen wanted to avoid the floating island becoming a place of religious dispute. Krympton told his nearby subordinate, a priest, to write down Allen’s words.

“Right,” Allen said. “We don’t have enough people to handle them all.”

“If you say so,” Krympton replied. “We shall do as you request.”

“However, we have no expertise when it comes to living with them and guiding them down a path. If there are any priests within the Church of Elmea who could advise us or at least offer us assistance, that would be a huge help.”

When Allen was Kenichi, he had never tried to create a religious group. Stuff like this was best left to the experts. There were over ten thousand former followers of Daemonism scattered across the Galiatan Continent, and though Allen was unsure just how many would gather, if he was able to take them all to the island, he would like the help of a priest to look after their affairs.

“U-Understood...” Krympton said.

“There’s one more thing I need to tell you too,” Allen added.

“And what would that be?” the cardinal replied with a dubious expression.

“I believe I told you the other day and have shown you proof, but we were able to keep damages to a minimum thanks to the help of Fire Goddess Freyja.”

“R-Right...”

The cardinal seemed more befuddled now. This incident involving

Gushara and backed by the Demon Lord Army had brought destruction to the Galiatan Continent. The capital of the Holy Land of Elmahl, Teomenia, had burst into flames, and many lives had been lost, including that of the Great Pope, Istahl Kumes. Undoubtedly, one of Allen's party members had received a blessing from Freyja to help defeat Gushara Selbirohl, the mastermind behind this series of events, but what could Allen have meant by saying that the damage done had been kept "to a minimum"?

"I'd like you to erect a statue of Lady Freyja in the square where Keel's papal coronation was conducted," Allen said. "And of course, I'd like you to build one of her disciple, Dogora, as well. Without her and her disciple, I have no doubt that there would've been far more destruction inflicted upon this city."

Only then did the cardinal realize that he had misunderstood Allen's initial words. He fell silent for a moment as he weighed his options.

"For now, we will immediately host a meeting regarding your request," Krympton finally answered. "I'll try to provide a response as soon as possible, so I'd like to ask for your patience."

Keel bowed deeply as the cardinal left the conference room. Allen had hoped that there would be a few more people within the Church of Elmea willing to put their faith in Freya. The No-life Gamers then gathered around the table alongside Beast Princess Shia, Captain Rudo, and Vice-Captain Rasu.

The three beastkin would be heading back to Crevelle Kingdom once this meeting was over. The merfolk who lived there were also going to hold a ceremony celebrating the end of the daemonic incarnation threat, and Shia planned to drop by as an envoy of an allied nation. She had visited Neel not only because the Church was crowning a new apprentice pope, but also because she felt responsible for bringing Gushara to Teomenia and kicking off the events that had caused so much terror throughout the world. She wanted to see the events through.

"Lord Allen," Sophie said once Allen, the last to take his seat at the table, had finally done so.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"I've brought someone that I'd like to introduce to everyone. May I welcome that person here?"

Just then, there were two knocks on the door of the conference room.

"I shall open it," Captain Rasu said, heading for the door. He saw an elf standing in the hallway. "Huh? What business do you have with us?"

“I have brought a message for Her Highness Princess Sophialohne,” the elf replied.

The rhinokin turned around as Sophie nodded. “Come in,” she said.

The elf entered the room, knelt in front of Sophie, and respectfully presented her with a letter.

If memory serves, there are Rohzenheim elves here in Elmahl who serve as points of communication.

There were a few elven diplomats who had been dispatched from Rohzenheim to the Church of Elmea, which served as headquarters for one of the largest religions in the world. They had surely been in Teomenia during the fire, and they had likely escaped and sought refuge in Neel.

Sophie opened the letter and started to read. Once she did so, she raised her head and smiled. “It’s from King Olvahs. He has agreed to join the Allen Army.”

“The Allen Army?!” Cecil cried, unable to hide her shock. “I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“Me neither,” Allen added. “What are you talking about, Sophie?”

“The threat of the Demon Lord Army can no longer be suppressed by the Five Continent Alliance alone,” Sophie answered.

“Mm-hmm.” Allen listened intently.

“This time around, we managed to stop their plans, Lord Allen, but we should assume that the Demon Lord Army has other plans up their sleeve and is proceeding with several at once. Unfortunately, the Five Continent Alliance will delay acting against these plans. Even if they are able to sense the Demon Lord Army’s ploys in advance, they cannot act without first hosting an international conference and reaching an agreement.”

“Right,” Beast Princess Shia said, nodding while folding her arms.

“I see...” Krena said, clearly not seeing a thing as she nodded along and folded her arms as well.

“But if we stay with you, Lord Allen, we can act on our own, separate from the Alliance,” Sophie reasoned. “As a Rank S adventurer, you can work with various guilds from different nations. And if you use your title well, I’ve heard that you’ll be given quite a bit of freedom no matter where you may be.”

Allen finally started to understand the elf princess’s implications. “You want me to be in charge of a squad that I can freely use if I act on my own.”

“Precisely. This time around, we split into teams and acted

independently from you. Each leader used their own thoughts to make decisions and was able to produce results. But perhaps this plan only worked well because the Demon Lord Army regiment wasn't too large. The Demon Lord Army will undoubtedly come up with a new scheme after learning that we foiled this one. And as Kyubel said, our party, including you, is being targeted by him. If there comes a situation where we're forced to split up again, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that the Demon Lord Army will send a much larger force that we cannot possibly beat. Should that happen, we require allies who are willing to fight with us."

"I'd expect no less from you, Sophie," the Beast Princess said.

"Thank you, Shia. And so, I decided to file a request to the queen and had Rohzenheim dispatch a thousand Spirit Wizards, a thousand soldiers with two-star Talents, and Gatoluuga and the generals."

"Gatoluuga?" Allen asked.

He was the strongest Spirit User within Rohzenheim.

"Yes. He has the strength of a hundred people," Sophie replied.

Nice, this is great news. That floating island is nothing but a hunk of rock right now.

With the aid of Gatoluuga and his spirits, they could improve the place a bit before the former Daemonism followers arrived.

"And King Olvahs has just promised to dispatch a thousand people, including Spirit Mages," Sophie said.

Maybe the reason King Olvahs tagged along with us when we defeated the Demonic Deity of Rukoaque was to scope out whether we were worthy of receiving his soldiers' aid.

Sophie handed Allen the letter from King Olvahs, encouraging him to read it. While it claimed that a few of his generals would tag along with the thousand dispatched dark elves, most of whom had two-star Talents, the king made sure to note that he would concede the role of the highest commander to Allen.

"We're just getting more and more people..." Cecil muttered. "Will we continue to have more friends—or soldiers, rather?"

Sophie shook her head. "No. It'd be difficult for us to act if we were put in charge of too many people."

"That's true."

"We can gather more as needed, but we should prioritize increasing the army's experience. If we are to engage in a large-scale battle, each squad

will need to exercise teamwork or else our plans will fall apart.” She turned to the Beast Princess. “And what shall you do, Shia?”

Hmm, if we have beastkin on our side, we’ll be able to come up with more plans. Beastkin excelled at close combat and could use skills that Mages, Clerics, and Spirit Mages could not. If Allen could ally with Beast Princess Shia’s refined soldiers, he would have a skilled army he could take to battle. *But if the ones in the Allen Army can undergo class promotions, they might be able to conquer a Rank S dungeon.*

He wanted everyone in his army to head to the class promotion dungeon. At least half their stats would likely carry over, and they could become stronger than a person born with a two- or three-star Talent who had not trained at all. While Allen was lost in his thoughts, Beast Princess Shia struggled to provide a firm reply to Sophie.

“Hmm... Well...” Shia started. Should she agree to join the army, her subordinates would have to answer to Allen. She was not sure if the Summoner was worthy of commanding her soldiers, but she felt like she had to make a decision on the spot, so she turned to him. “Sir Allen, I’d like to ask you a question first. Why are you fighting against the Demon Lord?”

“Because he’s the Demon Lord,” Allen replied instantly.

She found herself unable to hide her shock at the response. “W-Would you care to elaborate?”

“I believe that a Demon Lord should be killed. I’m sorry, but I don’t really have an answer beyond that. I’m going to defeat the Demon Lord because he exists.”

His firm response only further confused her. “That, um... It sounds like you’re exterminating a monster simply because it appeared near your village. Am I understanding your words correctly?”

“Uh... Well, yeah, I guess so.”

Allen could not think of a better reply. He felt like Shia’s words were not completely off the mark but not completely correct either.

I mean, we’ve got a Demon Lord on our hands, right? Then we’ve gotta kill him.

As he fell silent, the Beast Princess took that as his answer.

“I see,” she finally said. “So you believe this world to be your village. Ha ha!”

She suddenly found this all to be very silly. She was currently working to unite the Garlesian Continent under a single monarch and create a

Beastkin Empire. In comparison, this boy was treating the entire world like he would his village and saw the Demon Lord as nothing more than a pesky vermin destroying his home. Such a train of thought could only be had by either a fool of great proportions or a legend, and the line between the two was paper-thin.

Given that she had seen him speaking casually to nobles, royals, the God of Spirits, the Fire Goddess, and the former First Angel, Shia was well aware of which group Allen fell into.

“Ha ha ha!” Shia laughed. “Sir Allen, you certainly have a grand view of things!”

The Beast Princess understood that this was a fight for dominance between Allen, who had been born in this world and thought it to be his own, and the Demon Lord, who wanted to invade the boy’s home. If she wanted to create a Beastkin Empire, she would need to gain an advantageous position within a battle that was occurring on a global scale.

“Princess Shia...” Captain Rudo gently called.

Her Highness only smiled and nodded. “I’ve decided.” Shia turned back to Allen. “Sir Allen, I shall lend you my aid. You may utilize and command my subordinates as you see fit.”

Assisting the one who would defeat the Demon Lord did not guarantee Shia the throne, but she believed that it would be a shortcut to creating her own Beastkin Empire.

“I deeply thank you for your cooperation, Shia,” Sophie said with a low bow.

“Hey, then why don’t we name that island?” Meruru suddenly chimed in.

“Name it?” Allen asked.

“Yep! With help from the brave soldiers from Rohzenheim and Princess Shia’s subordinates, our numbers will be multiplied by the thousands! And yet, we don’t have a name for the island, which is going to serve as our base! That’s no good!”

“Hear! Hear!” Krena agreed.

Sophie nodded and smiled. “I think Meruru has a point. Why don’t you choose a name, Lord Allen?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Any name you like. What should we call our base?”

Allen closed his eyes for a moment.

Hmm, let me think... Our party name is the No-life Gamers, so should

we call our base “No-life Island”? No, that doesn’t sound right. We should come up with a more serious name. The stuff we’ve been doing has been nothing but serious, after all. We need a fitting name since the base will be home to the former followers of Daemonism and a few thousand soldiers that’ll fight against the Demon Lord, the big baddie of this world.

One idea came to mind.

“How about ‘Hardcore User Island’?” Allen suggested.

“Hardcore User Island...” the Gamers murmured.

“Yeah, sure, why not?”

“Hardcore User Island! Got it!”

“Hey, I don’t care what name we give it.”

“Hardcore User Island, huh?”

“Yeah, sounds cool!”

Beast Princess Shia found herself unexpectedly excited. “Hardcore User Island... I’m not familiar with the name, and it sounds unusual, but it’s a fitting, revolutionary one, symbolic of our fight against the Demon Lord.”

Various races were coming together to form a solid army under Allen’s control. His eyes glimmered with excitement as he felt himself diving headfirst into a new chapter.

“Seems like we’ll be starting something new again!”



Chapter 14: The Demon Lord Army's Plans

A magic circle glowed on the floor of a room made entirely of pale marble. From that magic circle emerged the Primeval Demonic Deity, Kyubel. A large book was in his hand. Dancing a little jig with his usual pep, he hummed as he opened the only door within the room. A demon woman dressed in servant clothes had been awaiting him, and she bowed deeply upon seeing his arrival.

“Strategist Kyubel, welcome back,” she said, greeting him with the utmost respect. He was a greater Demonic Deity and held one of the highest ranks within the Demon Lord Army.

“Thanks,” he replied casually. “Is the Demon Lord in the throne room?”

The servant looked a bit troubled. “He is, but he is currently meeting with Greater Demonic Deity Ramon-Hamon.”

“Hmm... That was quicker than I thought.”

Kyubel left the connecting room and headed into the pristine white corridor lined with pillars. There was not a speck of dust to be seen. He was on his way up the marble staircase when he began to hear worried voices chattering away.

“Annihilated?! Is that true?!”

“First Rohzenheim, now the Central Continent too?”

“Yeah. The only one who made it back was the commander, Lord Ramon-Hamon.”

As Kyubel made it to the top step, he cast a sweeping glance over the numerous Demonic Deities who had gathered. The crowd of hundreds were of all different shapes and sizes: some were much larger than others, some had several arms and legs, and some were humanoid while others resembled bugs, beasts, or demons. Each Demonic Deity in the room had their own unique trait. This was the grand reception hall, the heart of the Demon Castle that served as the headquarters of the Demon Lord Army.

Just moments ago, they had received a report that the Demon Lord Army's main squad, which had spent this year invading the Central

Continent, had been completely surrounded and wiped out. Only a few, who were out gathering intelligence, had survived. No one could blame the Demonic Deities, who had been gathered to hear this report, for panicking. Kyubel, however, looked completely unfazed as he entered the room with his usual energetic footsteps.

Everyone present was shocked by the clown's appearance to the point that it caused an uproar, but they made way for him regardless. Yet the Strategist remained composed and walked in front of the others while humming a little tune. The Demonic Deities could do nothing but watch him climb the stairs in the middle of the room and head up to the Demon Lord's throne.

The moment Kyubel entered the throne room, the Demon Lord, who was seated a few steps above, noticed his presence and shot him a glance. Between the two, about ten other Greater Demonic Deities were waiting. Though the grand reception hall below was teeming with Demonic Deities, not a single person of such low rank was here. The Supreme Commander of the Demon Lord Army, Ardoe, sat closest to the Demon Lord, and the Six Great Demon Gods were kneeling behind them.

Behind the six, the strongest Greater Demonic Deities within the army, were two Demonic Deity siblings who had failed to notice Kyubel's presence and were still appealing to the Demon Lord. The older sister was Ramon, and the younger brother was Hamon—together, they formed a Greater Demonic Deity who had been magically created by Shinorom, the Director of Demonic Soldier Research.

"Demon Lord!" Ramon and Hamon pleaded. "The full brunt of the responsibility should fall onto Kyubel! Rohzenheim and the army on the Central Continent had fallen because of that man's plans!"

Ramon-Hamon shared one body with two pairs of arms and legs, and their one head had both a man's and a woman's face on it. Their two mouths were spewing complaints about the Primeval Demonic Deity, who was standing behind them.

"I, Kyubel, have returned. These are the results this time, Demon Lord."

Ramon-Hamon whirled around in astonishment, but Kyubel paid them no heed and outstretched his free hand toward his master. A jet-black sphere appeared above his palm—the souls that Gushara had gathered from the Galiatan Continent. The orb floated through the air before stopping and hovering over the Demon Lord's palm.

“Hmm... Good work, Kyubel,” the Demon Lord said.

“K-Kyubel!” Ramon-Hamon roared angrily, still kneeling as they turned to face the clown. “How dare you brazenly return! How will you take responsibility for this defeat?!”

The two heads—or faces, rather—spoke simultaneously, making it seem as though two people were talking. Ramon-Hamon, who was in command of the army on the Central Continent, had reluctantly followed the orders of Strategist Kyubel. As a result, their army had suffered an overwhelming defeat against the Five Continent Alliance; Ramon-Hamon could not hide their anger and confusion at this outcome.

“Sir Ramon-Hamon, you have loyally followed the plans of our Strategist,” said a beetle-like Greater Demonic Deity with a metallic glow. “The loss of our precious forces puzzles me as well. Strategist Kyubel, we’d like to hear your thoughts about this plan.” This Greater Demonic Deity was Bildiga, one of the Six Great Demon Gods who belonged to the Corps, a squad led by Ardoe that was under the direct control of the Demon Lord.

“You heard Commander in Chief Bildiga!” Ramon-Hamon bellowed. “If you’ve got any excuses, you better give them now, Kyubel!”

Still a new Greater Demonic Deity, they used the fact that Bildiga agreed with them to their advantage. As they gave a look of triumph, Kyubel practically jumped in astonishment.

“Huh? A loss?” he gasped. “Impossible! You commanded an army so massive! Surely you’re pulling my leg!”

After a moment of silence, Ramon-Hamon stood up with fury.

“I’ll kill him!” Ramon howled. “I’ll tear him to shreds!”

“Let *me* kill him!” Hamon roared. “I’ll rip you apart, Kyubel!”

They knew that they were being mocked and raised their four arms, ready to pounce on Kyubel at a moment’s notice. However, one person managed to gently quell their rage.

“Kyubel, what have you been doing?” the Demon Lord asked. He had already descended from his throne and suppressed Ramon-Hamon, staring straight at Kyubel the whole time.

As Ramon-Hamon found their head pushed down, they bowed even lower, their anger dissipating like a puff of smoke.

“I’ve already heard the details from Bask,” the Demon Lord continued. “Why have you taken so long to return?”

Bask, too, was present, and he had a gnarly scar running from his left

shoulder to his right hip. Unlike the other Greater Demonic Deities, who were seated upright, he was lazily sitting cross-legged.

"I apologize. I was looking for something, and it took me quite some time to obtain it," Kyubel answered, showing the book he was holding.

"I'd thought you went to Elmea to file some sort of report," the Demon Lord replied.

Ramon-Hamon was confused by that statement. "M-My lord, whatever do you mean by that?!"

"Kyubel, I've heard that you used to be a First Angel," the Demon Lord said.

The other Greater Demonic Deities, including Ramon-Hamon, could not hide their surprise.

"That's correct," Kyubel replied. "But that was a long, long time ago. I haven't met with Elmea for quite a while now."

"My lord, I shall kill him," Ramon-Hamon said, using their four eyes to glare at the clown. "May I have your permission?"

"Pardon?" Kyubel countered. "I apologize, as I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Is there any need for me to make excuses?"

"Oh?" the Demon Lord replied.

"Y-You bastard!" Ramon-Hamon rumbled with both mouths. "Because of *your* foolish plans, we suffered a crushing defeat last year in Rohzenheim and this year on the Central Continent!"

"The wars from last year *and* this year?" Kyubel said. "Are you saying that I failed twice? Please give me a moment to think about this."

"Very well," the Demon Lord conceded.

Kyubel floated into the air and sat cross-legged high above. He groaned while making a showy, exaggerated attempt to think.

"Everything I've done is for your sake, Demon Lord," Kyubel finally said. "Perhaps it's best to tell everyone that this plan was simply to gather the orb in your hand. I cannot think of any other solution."

"I see..." the Demon Lord mused. "So you did all this for the resurrection of the Daemon God. However, what I have here is not quite the amount you promised."

"That's because Allen and his party hindered this plan."

"Then you cannot blame people for finding it a partial failure. What say you to that?"

"Should we kill Allen or Helmios, the Heavenly Realm will surely not remain silent. Now is simply not the time. On the contrary, as long as

they're still alive, the gods won't be able to decide if they should leave matters of the Mortal Realm to the pair or if they themselves should act."

"Hmm..."

"And the divine vessel that we obtained thanks to everyone's cooperation has been useful for gathering human souls. This plan had us use an attack on the Central Continent as a guise while we accomplished our true goal."

"Goal'? What goal?" Ramon-Hamon asked.

"There's no such thing as a war without any motives. Even if it looks like the result isn't what we expected, as long as we get done what we set out to do, everything that got us there will be deemed necessary."

"S-Such sophism! Are you saying that Rohzenheim was a necessary sacrifice too?!"

"I'm impressed, Ramon-Hamon. You're very quick to catch on to things. That's right; it's precisely because we had Rehzal invade Rohzenheim that we were able to sneak into the Heavenly Realm and take Freyja's divine vessel. In fact, his defeat came right when he stopped being useful to us. The same goes for Gushara. The moment he'd gathered enough souls in the divine vessel—no, when he started the final step of our plot in Teomenia, his role was over."

Aside from Bask, the Greater Demonic Deities were shocked by Kyubel's audacious words.

"Besides, me stopping you when you tried to step out to take over the world, my lord, is why everyone here is alive today," Kyubel reminded.

"You're right," the Demon Lord said, reminiscing about the past. "I'm indebted to you."

The Greater Demonic Deities could not refute that and were forced to hold their tongues. As Ramon-Hamon stared at them, they came to a realization. When the Demon Lord had stated that Kyubel was formerly a First Angel, they were surprised. They found it odd that such an important piece of information had not reached their ears given their station. In fact, even if some of those present were unbothered by this information, there were others who looked equally surprised. The older Greater Demonic Deities, the Six Great Demon Gods, seemed to be in the know. There was no doubt that they knew Kyubel's true identity.

"My plan has been progressing smoothly toward my goal since back then," Kyubel continued. "Part of it includes not speaking about my past. My lord, everyone who has just learned who I am, I ask that you keep my

past a secret.”

“But as my army has grown, there has been a change in the chain of command,” the Demon Lord replied. “I wanted at least the new recruits here to understand how sound your actions are. Holy Insect Bildiga, can you now agree to our plans?”

“Agree? I merely asked if our plans were going well, is all,” Bildiga answered. “And my status as Holy Insect is all in the past. I’m now your subordinate, my lord.”

Ramon-Hamon were shocked once more. “The Holy Insect? Wh-What is going on?”

But as the Demon Lord looked around and saw the stunned faces of the Greater Demonic Deities, he seemed quite content. Only then did Ramon-Hamon realize that this series of events had gone according to the direct orders of the Demon Lord.

“Surely you all have come to understand that Kyubel and Bildiga are my subordinates,” the Demon Lord said. “Now, Kyubel, why don’t you state your goals and your reason for lending me your power.”

Kyubel nodded while floating in the air and quietly said, “Certainly. My goal is to kill Elmea. That’s my reason for lending the Demon Lord and his army my aid, and it’s why I’ve been living in this transient world.”

Hearing that, Ramon-Hamon raised their head to meet Kyubel’s gaze. The clown’s eyes peered through his mask, glittering with insanity and rage. Ramon-Hamon shuddered and froze with fear—Kyubel was staring off into the distance, yet they felt like his gaze housed bottomless despair. While his eyes were clearly fixed on another target right now, there was no telling when they would turn toward them.

Ramon-Hamon wanted to turn away, but they could not do so. They wanted to flee from Kyubel’s madness, but they feared that the moment they did so, he would train his eyes on them. And they did not want to imagine the terror when they met his gaze once more. However, the Demon Lord stood there coolly and stared at Kyubel’s eyes with satisfaction.

“I hope you all can understand,” he said, his voice echoing throughout the room. “I want every single one of you to lend me your aid like Kyubel is doing.”

Those words allowed Ramon-Hamon to flee from Kyubel’s intensity. “Yessir!” They swiftly bowed their head and replied with the rest of the Greater Demonic Deities while internally breathing a sigh of relief.

“Kyubel, what was the next part of our plan?” the Demon Lord asked. “The Daemon God had their body split into five before they were thrust into eternal slumber within the Dark Realm. Can the lives you’ve gathered resurrect at least one of those parts?”

“No, I don’t think I have nearly enough for that,” Kyubel replied.

“Oh? Then what now?”

“You said that the Daemon God is split into five within the Dark Realm, right? I thought the same...until I saw this! This book contains shocking news! I-I could hardly believe it! It states that the Daemon God’s tail is on the ocean floor of the Mortal Realm! What a discovery!” He opened the book in his hand and held it out with both arms to show it to the Demon Lord.

“That...is a picture book for human children,” the Demon Lord said with a tinge of nostalgia, familiar with it.

“Indeed. This was written by humans a few centuries ago. It seems they’ve continued to pass this story along and changed some details along the way, making it slowly stray further from the truth. What’s the point of passing it down, then? They truly are a foolish race.”

“But this so-called Allen is also a human, is he not? You mustn’t underestimate them just because you find them foolish. Even they can assassinate others if they wish.”

“Ah, pardon my careless words. I’ll be careful, of course, but it’ll take some time before this plan is executed since I’d like to carefully read this book from cover to cover. I wouldn’t want to make any mistakes—it’ll be a huge failure for us if I do,” Kyubel said facetiously.

“I won’t wait long.” The Demon Lord turned around, headed to his throne, and sat back down. He looked up and flashed a smile. “The Daemon God’s tail is next, is it? Finally, I shall become a transcender.”

“A transcender?” Ramon-Hamon asked, once again confused. But the other Greater Demonic Deities lowered their heads without enlightening them on the meaning of the word. That was when the new recruit finally realized that they had merely taken their first step into the heart of the Demon Lord Army.

“My lord, Shinorom has told me that preparations for the sacrifice are coming along smoothly,” Kyubel said, providing details on the Daemon God’s tail plan.

“Ah, so everything is going as intended,” the Demon Lord said. “I didn’t think I’d be this bothered with those beasts. I suppose it pays to live

long.”

“You jest. Your splendor will only grow from here. I’ll keep doing my job of making sure things go off without a hitch.”

“I’m counting on you. I’m counting on *all* of you. We must go all out for our next plan.”

“Yessir!” Ardoe shouted, once again lowering his head.

Kyubel and the rest of the Greater Demonic Deities all knelt. The Demon Lord gave a nod of satisfaction, his eyes glittering with childlike excitement toward an adventure that he was about to embark on. An innocent smile played across from his lips. The curtain was about to rise on a new battle between the Demon Lord Army and the No-life Gamers.

Side Story 1: The Sacrifice and the Blood of the Beast (Part 1)

Within the Beast King Castle in Albahal, the Country of Beastkin, was an altar room that enshrined a statue of Beast God Garm. Inside this room, a tigerkin girl with hair down to her jaw and red markings on her face was having purifying water sprinkled over her head by a beast clergyman who was chanting a prayer. This girl was Beast Princess Shia, who had turned five this year. Shia puffed out her cheeks angrily and pouted her lips as she turned to General Rudo, a rhinokin, who stood beside her.

“Stop wasting time with these pointless rituals!” she complained. “Hurry up and get on with it!”

“Please don’t say that, Princess,” Rudo replied, bending at the knees to match Shia’s height. “You are a lady of the Albahal royal family, so you must act in a way befitting your role.”

As the general of the Beast King Corps, he was requested by Beast King Muza—Shia’s father—to accompany the young princess to her Appraisal Ceremony. It was here that she would discover what Talent she possessed. As Rudo had received a direct order from the king himself, the rhinokin had polished his armor until it shone and even worn formal attire. Unfortunately, when he bent down to talk to Shia in his overly elegant garment, the clothes looked uncomfortably tight on him. Rudo himself, however, did not notice this.

“You always talk too much, Rudo!” Shia whined.

“What?!” he gasped.

“I apologize for the wait,” a beast clergyman announced, letting the pair know that preparations had been made. “Your Highness Princess Shia, please make your way over there.”

“Very well!” she replied.

After giving a nod, she began walking. Her movements were a bit awkward because she was nervous, but she managed to make it to the steps where the statue of Garm was worshipped. Atop the altar, in front of the statue, was a wooden platform covered with red cloth. A crystal ball used for Appraisal Ceremonies and a pitch-black plank were nestled on it, and a

beastkin clergyman was standing nearby. Their role was to oversee the Ceremony.

“Please place your hands over the crystal ball,” the beast clergyman said.

She gave a small nod and took a deep breath before placing both hands over the crystal with gusto. It flashed brightly, and a moment later, silver letters started to form on the black plank.

“Congratulations,” the clergyman said. “You’re a Beast Fist Lord.”

“A Beast Fist Lord?” General Rudo gasped joyfully upon hearing the name of the three-star Talent. “How wonderful!”

“Is that an impressive Talent?” Shia asked, not having expected Rudo’s elated reaction.

“It’s a Talent suited for combat with your bare fists. Since the founding of Albahal, the Beast King’s weapon had always been brass knuckles. This means that the Beast God has given his approval—you’re surely worthy to take the throne one day!”

“Oh? I’m worthy, am I?”

Still a bit perplexed, Shia stepped off the altar. General Rudo stood behind her and placed his large hand on her small back, pushing her forward.

“Let us return to His Majesty the Beast King and report this fantastic news!” Rudo said excitedly. “We don’t have a moment to waste!”

Shia gradually felt herself being gripped with joy. If the general most closely affiliated with the Beast King Castle was this happy, this was surely a good thing.

“Very well!” Shia nodded firmly. She proudly puffed her chest out and took large strides as she stepped out of the altar room.

When the duo arrived at the audience room, one of the soldiers who stood on guard opened the doors with a deafening rumble. Shia walked along the red carpet that led to the throne where her father, Beast King Muza, sat. Young as she was, she still walked with pride, showing her pleased profile to the beastkin nobles who were lined up on either side of the carpet. She could hear them speaking as she passed by, and her delight only grew.

“Oho. This must mean Her Highness Shia has been granted a splendid Talent.”

“She follows in her two older brothers’ footsteps. His Majesty has been blessed with such amazing children.”

But praise was not the only thing that reached her ears.

“No matter what Talent she has, it makes little difference.”

“Shh! Mind your tongue. Should His Majesty hear you, you’ll be punished with more than just his fists of fury.”

Shia continued to the edge of the red carpet, not fully understanding the words that were being murmured around her. She faced Beast King Muza, who was seated regally on his throne, and gave a deep bow, just as General Rudo had taught her. She then knelt on the ground.

“Father! Your Shia is here!” she said loudly.

Her voice reverberated throughout the room as lionkin Beast King Muza nodded and gazed down at his daughter.

“Very good. And what were the results of your Appraisal Ceremony?” he asked.

“I have the Talent of Beast Fist Lord, father!”

The king nodded once more. “I see. So you’re the second Beast Fist Lord after Zeu.”

He glanced next to Shia. Beside the end of the red carpet was an area reserved for royals. Beast Prince Zeu, who had turned fifteen this year and had his coming-of-age, was present. Shia followed her father’s gaze and stared at her brother.

“The same Talent as my brother? Hmm...” Shia mumbled, the pride she had shown moments before now nowhere to be seen. The royals and their close confidants saw her frown with displeasure.

“Goodness. Princess Shia is feeling competitive toward Prince Zeu,” one of the nobles murmured.

Suddenly, the fur on Shia’s body stood on end, her body overcome with tension and regret. She and Zeu had an older brother, Crown Prince Beku. Had the eldest son of the Beast King been useless, Zeu and Shia would have each received a trial, thus giving her hope of succeeding the throne. However, Beku was anything but, and it was only a matter of time before he became Beast King. His title as the crown prince was proof of that.

The nobles of Albahal all knew that it did not matter if the younger brother and sister competed with each other. They did not have a ghost of a chance of becoming the reigning monarch.

Amid the piercing glares at the noble’s careless remark, Beast King Muza said, “I see. So you’d like to compete with Zeu, would you, Shia? Indeed, if you two have been bestowed with such excellent Talents... General Rudo.”

The mountainously statured Rudo was kneeling behind Shia. He bowed even deeper upon being addressed by the king. “Yes, Your Majesty!”

“You are hereby absolved from your duties as general of the Beast King Corps. Instead, you shall act as Beast Princess Shia’s personal aide. From here on out, serve Shia and take good care of her.”

Rudo raised his head and met King Muza’s gaze. Right away, the rhinokin understood the king’s fatherly thoughts. He placed his fists onto the carpet and lowered his head with everything he had.

“Your wish is my command,” Rudo bellowed loudly. “I, Rudo, swear on my name that I shall serve Beast Princess Shia with my life!”

“You heard him, Shia,” Muza said. “From today onward, Rudo will serve you. Ah, but at your age, perhaps you’ll be more in his care. Regardless, go on and greet him.”

Shia gave a firm nod, stood up, and faced General Rudo. “Very well. You shall work under me! I will be the one to rule this world as its...um...er... What was it again?”

Rudo looked up and whispered, “‘Emperor,’ Your Highness?”

“Right! That! That is what I would like to be! I will be an emperor, so swear your loyalty to me.”

“Ha ha. In that case, Princess—I mean, Your Highness Beast Princess Shia, I shall be by your side until the day I die.”

“Indeed! I have high hopes for you!”

King Muza gazed at his beloved daughter’s back, watching over her with the faintest of smiles. He then turned to his chancellor. “Good grief... Shall we call it a day?”

Just then, the enormous doors of the audience room burst open with a loud *thud*. As everyone in the room turned toward the noise, they let out screams of panic.

“Eek!”

“What is that?! Some kind of monster’s head is walking this way!”

“Wh-What is the Corps doing?!”

A gigantic bird head covered in blood made its way into the audience room, accompanied by loud footsteps. The nobles and royal guards stepped onto the red carpet and guarded the path between the head and the king. General Rudo swiftly stood up, keeping Shia behind him. She peeked out from behind her aide and saw that the bird head had blood-soaked beastkin legs.

“Crown Prince Beku has returned!” the royal guard by the door

announced.

The guards on the carpet gasped and lowered their weapons, making way for the crown prince. The beastkin wearing the huge bird head walked forward without slowing down, as though nothing had occurred. A few beastkin knights followed close behind, but unlike the one carrying the bird head, they did not have even a drop of blood on them. The nobles and Shia, hiding behind Rudo, watched on as the group stopped in front of the king. With a loud *boom*, the colossal bird head was thrown onto the red carpet.

The audience room shook from the sheer weight of the head as Shia blinked blankly.

“Father. No, sorry, Your Majesty, I, Beku, have returned.” The beastkin who had carried in the bird head was Crown Prince Beku, who had just turned eighteen. He gazed at the throne and spoke with grandeur. “I present to you a king albaheron. As promised, I have slain it with my own hands.”

The crown prince, a lionkin, was massive. He stood a whole head taller than Rudo and had an incomparably muscular body. His voice was full of confidence, and he was smiling, showing his sharp fangs. Despite that, however, Beast King Muza merely stared at him coldly.

“So, you’ve become a Rank A adventurer and have hunted a Rank A monster without any help,” the king said. “I didn’t think you would complete the tasks I gave you so soon.”

The nobles immediately started chattering away.

“His Highness not only graduated the Academy at the top of his class, but he excels in combat as well.”

“He’s the youngest crown prince since the founding of this country.”

“Truly, he is fit to be called the reincarnation of our founder, King Albahal.”

Crown Prince Beku turned toward the voice with a troubled expression. “Please don’t praise me so much. I want to live with more humility.”

He looked down, his melancholic expression causing a horsekin lady to let out a loud neigh. “Eek! Your Highness...” She swooned and fell to the ground in excitement. The other monkeykin, catkin, dogkin, and oxkin ladies all followed suit, unable to hide the passion his somber look made them feel.

“Again? Oh dear...” Beku muttered with worry.

A knight who stood behind him turned toward a dogkin. “Captain Kei,

please carry these ladies to the medical station.”

“Yessir! Everyone, follow me!” Kei replied with a swift bow.

“Yessir!” the other knights replied.

They split up and helped the fallen ladies back to their feet before quickly leaving the audience room. Still, the king pointed a frosty gaze at his son.

“To think he would accomplish the feat of hunting a Rank A monster and bring us back a bird that changes names as it grows,” the chancellor whispered. “Perhaps Crown Prince Beku truly will take the throne.”

The king albaheron the chancellor spoke of was a special monster. Albaherons differed in size and power as they grew, with some having lived so long and defeated so many monsters that they were revered as divine birds and had become Minor Deities. The beastkin of the Garlesian Continent used these birds, whose names changed as they got stronger, as omens, wishing on them for a child to grow up strong or hold a high-ranking position. The monsters were also an excellent way to test one’s skills.

Ranks of Albaheron

Rank D: Albaheron

Rank C: High Albaheron

Rank B: General Albaheron

Rank A: King Albaheron

Rank S: Emperor Albaheron

Minor Deity: Legendary Albaheron

Beast King Muza cast a steely gaze at Beku’s back as the crown prince watched the women get carried out. He had not specified which Rank A monster to hunt; Beku was the one who had decided to carry in a king albaheron. Yet this had only solidified the king’s belief that Beku was still far too immature.

As king, he viewed his first son through an objective lens and could not deny that the boy was skilled with both the sword and the pen. Beku often relied heavily on his Talent, however, and had the tendency to be overly conscious of the public eye—in a nutshell, he was a bit of a show-off. Furthermore, he did not seem to realize that about himself.

That was why he had decided to hunt a king albaheron, a bird known for its growth, and had brought in its head with much bravado. When the women had swooned over his appearance, he had shown no reservations and looked troubled as he muttered, “Oh dear.”

Muza turned his gaze from his son's back to his chancellor. "Take the throne? Have I ever said anything of the sort?"

"No, Your Majesty, but it's true that Crown Prince Beku has hunted a king albaheron all by himself," the chancellor answered. "Even the previous Beast King, His Majesty Yoze, is surely satisfied by this result."

The king was thinking of his response to the chancellor when Beku turned toward the two. "Whew, I apologize for the fuss. Your Majesty, may I receive permission to enter the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament this year?"

Confidence filled his eyes, leading Muza to immediately come to a decision. But before he gave his answer, he posed a question to his son. "Do you know what it means for the Albahal royal family to enter the tournament?"

Beku smiled upon hearing his father's icy tone. "I do. I aim to be the champion. I won't be satisfied with simply winning a category. No, I'll reach the top. I promise to show the world the Albahal royal family's military prowess."

The other nobles gulped upon hearing this declaration. They nervously waited to hear their king's response. Shia did not fully understand the situation, but the tense atmosphere almost made her burst into tears.

Silence filled the audience room. Only one man had the ability to break this still air, and he quietly closed his eyes before opening them once more. His son was still confidently staring at him.

"Do as you like," the king answered quietly.

Beku's face lit up. "Thank you, father! I swear that I shall not humiliate the founder of Albahal!"

The nobles started to cheer loudly.

"Ooohhh!"

"Albahal shall be reborn!"

"The world will surely know how great our country is!"

Beku turned around with a beaming smile as though to answer the hopeful cheers. The ladies who saw his elation all fell to the ground.

"Prince Beku..."

"How grand..."

Beku looked troubled once more. "Good grief... And the tournament hasn't even started yet."

A small figure approached him and latched on to his sturdy shin. "Welcome back, brother!"

Shia loved her older brother very much. As she was still a child, she only came up to his knees. Beku gazed down at his adorable sister, his confident smile replaced with one of gentle serenity.

“You’ve grown, Shia,” he said. “And you look splendid. Ah, today was your Appraisal Ceremony, wasn’t it?” He petted his sister’s head with his large hands.

“I have the Talent of Beast First Lord!” Shia answered.

“As I thought, Lord Garm loves you very much. In fact, *everyone* loves you dearly, Shia.” He gently picked Shia up and raised her above his head.

“Wow!” she squealed. For a moment, she was higher than anyone else in the room, and she was greeted by a view she had never seen before. Though she was a bit confused, she was also inexplicably happy because of this and could not suppress her laughs.

Beku placed her on his shoulders. “All right, then why don’t we have a party celebrating the magnificent Talent Lord Garm has bestowed upon you? Let’s all eat the bird I hunted!”

“Hooray! Thank you!”

As Beku left the audience room with a happily squealing Shia on his shoulders, King Muza continued to point his frosty gaze at his first son. Still, the king reported the results of Shia’s Appraisal Ceremony and Beku’s entry into the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament to his citizens.

* * *

With the annual Beast King Martial Arts Tournament drawing near, various participants from beastkin nations throughout Garlesia had gathered in Albahal. Among them was a group surrounding two massive wolves—Beast King Oba and Beast Prince Giru from Brysen. Both of these men were wolfkin with silver fur, and each was riding atop a giant wolf. Due to the mountainous terrain of Brysen, many wolfkin and dogkin lived there; the country’s royal family was also a species related to dogs.

The Brysen royal family entered through the south gate and walked north along the main street, making their way toward the Beast King Castle. They left their two large wolves and guards in the castle courtyard and headed into the castle itself. Guided by a soldier, they proceeded toward the drawing room with King Oba’s royal knights, who had been allowed to keep their weapons, in tow.

Internally, the king was quite disappointed. His woodland kingdom was about a tenth the size of Albahal, which had been blessed with plains.

Naturally, their national power and military prowess were not equal either. The king being allowed to have his royal knights walk with him conveyed a subtle yet firm message. Oba understood this, and while he could not blame the other party for their actions, he was unable to suppress his displeasure.

“Ah, Sir Oba. I thank you for coming all this way,” Beast King Muza said when they arrived at the drawing room. Behind him were his queen, Beku, Zeu, and Shia. The fact that the entire Albahal royal family had assembled to greet Oba further displayed how little of a threat they found Brysen to be, but King Oba swallowed his complaints and let out a smile.

“I thank you for your greeting,” he said. “I didn’t think that the Beast Queen along with all three of your children would so graciously give us the time of day. I’ve only brought one son with me, and for that, I apologize.”

“Don’t say that,” Muza replied. “He is your pride and joy, is he not?”

Both kings were abundantly aware of the dangers of bringing their entire family in front of the other party. The implication was that even if Brysen were to launch an attack right this second, Muza was confident that his family, himself included, could make it out alive. Should any one of them fall victim and become a casualty of the attack, it simply meant that they lacked the power required of a member of the Albahal royal family. An ominous air swirled around the two monarchs, and Shia started to feel anxious when she heard a voice call from above.

“Shia, can I talk to you for a moment?” Beku asked.

“Of course, brother,” Shia replied, clinging to this opportunity as she looked up and was met with her brother’s gentle smile.

“Take a look at father’s back. He’s proof of the power of the Albahal royal family, bestowed upon us by Beast God Garm. It’s not just about Talent—it’s about bravery too.”

Shia turned to observe her father’s back. He was broad-shouldered and beefy, but she was not quite sure if “bravery” was the first word that would come to mind.

“Bravery?” she pondered.

“Right. So brave that he won’t lose to anyone,” Beku answered.

“He won’t lose...” As Shia repeated those words, the anxiety plaguing her heart gradually dissipated.

“And you, Zeu, and I have that flowing through our veins too. We’re his children, aren’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“So there’s nothing to fear. No matter what happens, father will be fine. Mother, Zeu, and I will be fine. You will be too, of course, so you don’t have to worry.”

Seeing her brother smile, she could not suppress hers as she exclaimed, “I agree, brother!”

A smile formed on King Oba’s lips upon hearing her energetic shouts. “You have quite the spirited princess. How old is she?”

“Five,” Muza answered. “She’s a mischievous one, and I can hardly get her to sit still. Ah, you have a daughter as well, don’t you? Princess Rena, was it?”

“Sir Muza, it would be rather rude to your daughter to compare her to mine. Mischief aside, my Rena is quite spoiled. She’s sunk her fangs into everyone within our country, barring Giru here. At this rate, any potential suitors would flee with their tails tucked between their legs.” Oba gave a strained smile.

Muza gave a jovial laugh. “Ha ha ha! Then have her come to our nation! My sons can endure getting an arm or a leg bitten off.”

“You’d best be prepared. She’ll go for your sons’ jugular if given the chance. Giru, why don’t you introduce yourself to the princess?”

The prince obediently stepped forward, knelt in front of Shia, and lowered his head. “Your Highness Beast Princess Shia, I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Giru van Brysen.”

Shia blinked in shock as she quickly thought of a reply. “My name is Shia. Thank you for coming all the way here,” she said nervously.

“It’s my pleasure,” Giru replied with a smile, his tone friendly and kind. “I made the unreasonable request of entering the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament hosted in your nation and was approved. I look forward to crossing fists with your older brother.” He then got to his feet and locked eyes with Beku, who was standing behind the princess. “I’ll be in your care, Sir Beku.”

“The same can be said for me, Sir Giru,” Beku replied.

As the two princes greeted each other, Shia, who was in between them, was able to see Beast Prince Giru’s physique up close. Though he was a bit older than her older brother, they were around the same height, with Giru being a bit more slender. However, his body was packed with muscles, as was fitting for a beastkin royal. Even the young Shia could sense that the man was as agile as he was powerful.

Giru turned away and faced King Muza. “Your Majesty King Muza, please pardon my belated introduction. You have my utmost gratitude for granting my selfish request. I’d like to once again thank you.”

He bowed toward both kings.

“‘Selfish’...” Muza mulled, his tone no longer serene. “Indeed, it is about a week past the deadline for entry.” His voice had changed so drastically that even Shia felt nervous for a moment.

“Sir Muza, please allow me to apologize,” King Oba said quietly. “I delayed in listening to his request to enter.”

Muza’s low timbre was as frosty as ever. “You have no need to worry, Sir Oba. I was the one who allowed your son to enter. Sir Giru, I specially allowed your entry because I heard you want to fight Beku. Am I understanding correctly?”

“Absolutely,” Giru replied.

As Shia heard his voice from above, she shuddered and froze. The friendly, gentle tone she had heard moments before was gone and had been replaced with one of cynicism and hostility. It was as though his thorny tone was mocking them, and it was unpleasant to her ears.

“I wanted to fight Sir Beku, the prodigy who has been heralded as the reincarnation of the founder of Albahal,” Giru continued. “That is why I made my selfish request.”

“Your weapon of choice is brass knuckles, correct?” Muza asked.

“Yes. The Talent that I received from Beast God Gillan, who watches over the Brysen bloodline, is the same as Sir Beku’s: Beast Fist King.”

Beast Fist King was a four-star Talent, a star above Shia and Zeu’s Beast Fist Lord.

“Very well. Then you should also know that the rules of our Beast King Martial Arts Tournament differ from those of other nations,” Muza said.

The chancellor, who was behind Muza, stepped forward with his subordinates and began his explanation. “Your Majesty Beast King Oba and Your Highness Beast Prince Giru, please pardon my impertinence. Allow me, Lupu, to explain the rules. Please take a look at this.”

His two subordinates approached the two royals and respectfully handed them each a piece of parchment wrapped in a red ribbon. They undid the ribbons and unfurled the parchments to read their contents.

Basic Rules of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament

All beastkin kingdoms within Garlesia must host a Beast King Martial Arts Tournament once a year.

The Beast King Martial Arts Tournament permits the use of weapons, armor, and magic gear*.

Note: The use of Support Magic and healing items is forbidden.

There are no restrictions in terms of participants. Even criminals are allowed to enter, and one's birth does not matter. The royal family must not receive any special treatment.

Should the Beast King of a different nation emerge victorious in a Beast King Martial Arts Tournament, they are to be given a fourth of the host nation's land.

Should a participant be injured or killed during the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament, the involved parties are not allowed to voice any complaints.

*Magic gear refers to stat-boosting items such as rings and necklaces.

Special Rules Pertaining to Albahal, the County of Beastkin's Beast King Martial Arts Tournament

There will be separate divisions based on weapon type.

Each division will hold preliminary rounds where contestants are free to fight as they wish. Matchups are decided by lottery, and contestants must win every match to reach the finals. The victor of the finals will be the winner of that division.

The winner of each division will fight the representative of that same division. Should the former be victorious, they shall become the new representative of the division.

The new representative shall fight against the division winner in the following year. Should the former be victorious, they will have successfully defended their title as representative.

Finally, there will be a tournament gathering the representatives of each division. The champion of this tournament will face the champion from the previous year, the Beast King. Should the former be victorious,

they will become the new Beast King.

The Beast King who is victorious as per Point 9 will be the one to receive the rewards outlined in Point 4.

Once Beast King Oba finished reading, he looked up from his parchment and flashed a fearless smile.

“A preliminary for each division and then a champion of them all,” he said. “I expect no less from Albahal. It’s no wonder you’ve taken so much of our land.”

“That was during my father’s reign,” Muza responded with a lionhearted smile of his own. “And if you’re dying to take back your land, I suggest you bet it on the fists of your son whom you’re so proud of. Ah, pardon me, he’s still a Beast Prince, isn’t he? Why not give him the throne if you’ve got the chance?”

“Well, if Giru is crowned the champion, he will have protected our land. I suggest you refrain from provoking others, else you may lose yours.”

“What did you say?”

Muza and Oba glared daggers at each other, immediately transforming the atmosphere in the room. The Beast King Martial Arts Tournament was first hosted after the beastkin had fled to the Garlesian Continent to escape persecution by the humans on the Central Continent, and Albahal had founded his Country of Beastkin. The Albahal Kingdom shared a millennium of history with the Garlesian Continent and had hosted countless Beast King Martial Arts Tournaments, but all of them had been used to settle political affairs between other nations or fight for different rights in lieu of going to war.

Were Garlesia to follow the example set by the Central Continent and break out into war, the beastkin would fight among themselves, lessening their numbers. Beast God Garm reasoned that this would make the beastkin no better than the humans they loathed and did not want his kind to be reduced to acting like such hideous creatures. Thus, he had suggested a tournament where those confident in their strength would represent a nation and talk issues out with their fists. Thanks to this, matters were settled without any needless bloodshed.

This idea still served as the central theme of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. The previous Beast King of Albahal, Yoze, who had also been a member of the Rank S adventurer party Majestic, had used this tournament to his advantage. His preferred fighting style was to utilize

both his fangs and his tail to attack multiple enemies at once, and he used what little free time he had to enter tournaments held by other beastkin nations, where he would show off his power and take their land.

Brysen had been a victim of Yoze's repeated victories, losing much of its land to him. When he first took the throne, Brysen had possessed about sixty percent of the region in comparison to Albahal's forty, but Albahal had since turned the tables. Now, it held ninety percent of the land, while Brysen had a paltry ten.

And so, the Albahal had claimed two-thirds of the Garlesian Continent as its own. If one were to become the champion of the tournament and claim victory against the previous champion, the Beast King, they would be able to claim a fourth of Albahal's territory for themselves.

Furthermore, one's origin and relation to the royal family did not matter. Everyone from a knavish criminal to a poor youth from a farming family was allowed to participate—if they beat the Beast King and became the champion, they would receive money, fame, and status. Over ten thousand people took part in the Albahal tournament every year for that very reason, which was why people saw the need to divide them into certain categories. If the vast majority of participants could not be sifted out in the preliminaries, they would be unable to host one a year.

Needless to say, a participant's chance of coming out on top as the new Beast King was less than one in ten thousand. But claiming that title with one's own hands was proof that they could survive as a beastkin. Even if one did not become champion, if they managed to become a representative of their category, they would join the Ten Heroic Beasts and be revered as one of the strongest heroes in Albahal. This alone was quite an honor, and many aimed for this goal instead of becoming the Beast King.

Once the chancellor saw that both Beast King Oba and Beast Prince Giru had finished reading, he silently signaled to his two subordinates, who each produced another sheet of parchment, a pen, and a pot of ink atop a wooden plank.

"Once you have finished reading, I'd like for both of you to please sign these papers," the chancellor said as the two Beast Kings continued to glare at each other.

What the visiting royals were being requested to sign was a contract—something every tournament participant had to sign. Oba glanced at the paper.

"I don't require one," the king said as his son took the pen and started

to sign his name.

“That’s some confidence you have,” Muza said as he watched Giru scribble away.

“Are you insisting that Sir Beku will win?”

Muza noticed his first son’s gaze and kept it in the corner of his eye as he replied casually, “Both parties need to give it their all in battle. That’s all. Am I wrong?”

“Not at all. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Oba extended his arm toward Muza and the two kings exchanged a handshake. Instantly, their arms bulged to twice their normal size, thick veins pulsating like snakes coiling around their limbs. As Shia looked up at the two men, she wondered who would be victorious if the two fought each other. Would it be more impressive than the battle of the two Beast Princes that was yet to be seen?

When she looked up at Giru, she noticed the corners of his mouth curling into a fearless smile directed at Beku. She turned to her brother and noticed the crown prince pursing his lips while staring at his father, Beast King Muza.

* * *

During the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament, the host nation was busy handling the festivities. This year, Albahal’s gaiety was incomparable to any year prior. The excitement and buzz could be attributed largely to Beast Prince Beku’s participation, but with the news of Beast Prince Giru of Brysen joining, people were eager to see the highly anticipated clash between the two.

The day after Giru had signed the contract, an enormous portrait of the two Beast Princes was raised in the host city, and a week later, Beast King Muza had personally used a communication magic tool to announce the two princes’ participation to the entire nation. He touched upon Giru joining at the last minute as well.

This announcement had crossed the border and spread throughout Garlesia, with innumerable people flooding into the kingdom to watch this exciting match. Requests for areas to dock magic ships swamped the host city, and on the day of the tournament, over two million tourists had come to watch—double the number of native residents. The city was packed, and while it was a given that the main shopping street had as many people squeezed onto it as possible, even the smaller alleyways were not safe

from the crowd.

As the preliminaries for each division began, people flooded into each of the thirty arenas located throughout the capital, doubling their maximum capacities. Naturally, a vast majority were forced to watch from outside, and many were satisfied with simply hearing the passionate roars of battle through an amplifier magic tool.

Stalls were scattered along the streets to take advantage of the throngs of people, and children who had been sent out to help were jogging around to grab orders. The bustle was deafening—kids were shouting and repeating orders back to customers who responded in turn, people were predicting the outcomes of the matches, and some had accidentally stepped on beastkins' tails and were being scolded while others were roaring back angrily. Silence settled in only when the results were being announced.

"And block B of the morning preliminaries for the knuckles division is about to begin!" the announcer's voice echoed from within the arena.

Moments later, a deafening sound akin to a rumbling thunderclap filled the arena. Beku, who stood on the firm, sandy ground of the ring knew that this was the applause of the crowd.

The elliptical arena was about a hundred meters long at its widest point, and the cone-shaped stands were packed with people. Everyone in the audience was staring intently at the hundred participants, sending their intense gazes and thunderous applause in support. This group of a hundred fighters, including Beku, was about to fight until only one remained.

"Listen to the excitement of this crowd!" a rabbitkin announcer said, speaking into the flat, round magic tool resembling a medal that amplified their voice. "But who can blame them?! The tournament favorite, our Beast Prince, is participating in this match!"

The rabbitkin approached Beku, who was gazing up at the section of the stands reserved for nobles. His mother and siblings were sitting there. When he met his sister's gaze, she pointed to him and started chattering to his mother and younger brother. Beku gave a small wave.

"Your Highness the Beast Prince, may I have a word before the start of the match?" the rabbitkin asked, thrusting the medal-shaped magic tool in front of his chest.

Beku glanced down at the tool and smiled. "Uh, let's see... I hope everyone will root for me as I try my best to be crowned the champion of this tournament."

The moment the words left his lips and were transmitted outside the

arena, loud cheering drowned out the applause, rumbling like an earthquake. The arena shook under the cries of the people.

“You can do iiiiit!”

“Prince Bekuuu!”

“Glory to Albahal!”

“Prince Beku, I’m rooting for you!”

The deafening cheers included young Shia’s excited voice. But Beast Prince Zeu, who sat beside her, narrowed his eyes with suspicion.

“Will brother be all right?” he muttered.

General Rudo, who was Shia’s newly appointed caretaker, lowered his voice in agreement. “Indeed... This type of provocation might be taking it a step too far.”

“Brother? Rudo? What do you mean?” Shia asked.

“Can’t you see, Shia?” Zeu replied. “His phrasing will make everyone hate him.”

“Though he’s the Beast Crown Prince—no, *because* he’s the Beast Crown Prince, those words carry much weight,” Rudo added.

Shia grew anxious and gazed up at her mother. The queen was silently watching the arena below, her profile indicating that she was suppressing some sort of emotion. Shia could not bring herself to speak to her mother and silently bit her lip as she fixed her eyes below in search of her beloved older brother.

When she found a large gong suspended by a wooden frame in a corner of the arena, a half naked leopardkin with beefy, bulging muscles raised his massive mallet. The rabbitkin announcer saw this and shouted into the magic tool. “And we’re off! Block B of the morning preliminaries for the knuckles division has begun!”

The leopardkin swung his mallet.

GOOONG!

The dull, metallic clang reverberated throughout the arena, and a third of the combatants immediately pounced on one fighter in particular.

“Get him!”

“I’ll make sure you never open that trap of yours again!”

“I’m gonna smash your face in!”

Rage filled their voices as they raised their brass knuckles. These fighters were confident in their skills to the point that they had participated in the tournament every year in hopes of clinching the title of champion. Beku, on the other hand, was a first-timer. Yet he had so little respect for

his opponents that he would not even glance their way. This behavior might have been fitting for a royal, but the beastkin prized power and thus could not hide their anger.

“Prepare yourself!” a bearkin roared, approaching Beku with swift footsteps. He aimed his right fist at Beku’s face and his left at the prince’s stomach.

“Hmph,” Beku huffed as he parried the left fist with his right elbow and the right fist with his left forearm. He immediately followed up with a left punch squarely into his opponent’s face, landing his attack with a dull thud.

“Gah?!” the bearkin gasped. He leaned his body into his left fist, causing him to lose his balance. Beku’s punch shattered his jaw, and he fell to the ground.

The other fighters who rushed in a moment later bumped into the unconscious bearkin and staggered. Each of them was met with Beku’s brass knuckles as one after another bit the dust.

“He’s fast! Surround him!” one ordered.

“Aye!”

A few of the participants worked together, with some rushing the prince’s back while others took his flanks. Beku sensed the attack and tried to shift his position, but a horsekin jumped over those who had fallen and launched an attack.

“Take this! Hurricane Kick!” the horsekin shouted.

Sensing that this skill was aimed at his upper body, Beku twisted himself to the side and dodged the attack. The defenseless, airborne horsekin was met with a backhanded punch to the gut.

“Hup!” Beku said, delivering a series of rapid blows to the enemies who had pounced behind him. He did not even glance at the downed horsekin.

The sharp sound made whenever Beku punched an opponent showed how fast his strikes were. No one could dodge or defend against his supersonic fists, and the skilled fighters all fell to the ground.

“Simply amazing!” the rabbitkin shouted, their voice echoing through the stadium. “Beast Prince Beku didn’t even use a single skill as he felled his opponents! He’s head and shoulders above the rest!”

The crowd cheered for Beku as the remaining participants all zeroed in on the Beast Prince with a fiery glare.

“Oh, come on. Give me a break already,” he said with a strained smile.

For the next thirty minutes, he put on a one-man show. He skillfully dodged attacks as though he were dancing and pummeled his opponents' faces and stomachs with his fists as he passed them by. One by one, the participants fell to the ground, and in the blink of an eye, only Beku and the rabbitkin announcer were left standing.

"B-Block B of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament's knuckles morning preliminaries are over!" the rabbitkin shouted, but their voice was drowned out by the cheers as Beku smiled at the crowd.

Just like that, the prince had safely made it to the next round, which would be held in the largest arena in the center of the royal capital.

He appeared once more in front of the people a week later, two days after the divisional preliminaries had ended. It was the first day of the second round.

Beku fought for multiple days in a row and was never hit by an attack. He managed to dodge them all and pummel his opponents into the dirt. People showed up to his fights in droves, hoping to catch a glimpse of his valor.

Brysen Beast Prince Giru had also won all of his matches. Every time he had emerged victorious, people had eagerly awaited the lottery results, hoping that the two Beast Princes would clash. Unfortunately, Lady Luck was not on their side, and the two reached the semifinals without having had to face off. This only spurred the crowd's excitement, however, as they expected the finals to be a battle between the princes.

On the day of the semifinals for the knuckles division, Beku's battle would be the first of the afternoon. The audience crowded into the arena before the crack of dawn, however, with some watching the morning battles and deciding to stay. Others, meanwhile, tried to sneak in by climbing the arena walls.

When Beku made his appearance, the crowd erupted into cheers and applause. He stepped into the center and faced his opponent, Bou, a water buffalokin. Bou was a head taller than the Beast Prince, and his burly body was so muscular that it was as though he was wearing armor. Steel claws were equipped on the backs of his hands, each claw about as long as his forearms. In the knuckles division, participants were permitted to use steel claws, gauntlets, and shin guards. Those who favored steel claws were normally slender, but Bou proved to be the opposite.

The two participants faced each other as a judge and an Analyzer, who used analysis magic to expertly confirm that participants were abiding by

the rules, approached them.

“No Support Magic detected.”

“No usage of healing items detected.”

“No healing items found.”

Once the inspection was over, the judge declared that preparations were over and the semifinals were about to start.

“No foul play has been detected by either participant,” the judge bellowed. “We will now begin the first semifinal battle of the knuckles division!”

The rabbitkin announcer waiting by the wall of the arena started the play-by-play commentary. “At long last, it’s time for the first battle of the semifinals! The combatants are our Beast Prince, Beku, and one of the favorites in this tournament, Bou of Gale! The Beast Prince is untouched thanks to his lightning-fast strikes! Will they be effective against the stormy gale?!”

Bou glanced at the crowd, which the announcer was expertly inciting to go wild, before turning to Beku. “Your Highness, I shall not go easy on you,” he warned.

“That’s only natural. Please give me everything you’ve got,” Beku replied.

The crown prince thought back to the water buffalokin’s battles the year prior. He had climbed to the top with gusto and been crowned the winner of the knuckles division. And though he had lost his battle with the division representative, his opponent had been a fierce warrior who had successfully defended the title for three straight years. Beku felt that he could win against this representative, however. Thus, even if Bou went all out, he was certain that the match would end with his victory.

Bou did not take kindly to Beku’s carefree smile. He knew that he had to show respect to the royal family as a citizen of Albahal, but he felt nothing but animosity toward Beku. And so, when the judge raised their hand into the air and shouted, “Begin!” Bou lowered his arms and stood in front of Beku as though he had nothing to fear. He slowly closed the gap between them, then unleashed his signature skill, Double Lariat.

Bou crossed his arms in front of his chest and swung them forward while spinning in place. The steel claws on his hands whirled around like a gale of death, trying to drag Beku to a grisly demise in which he was torn to shreds. However, his rapid spin came to an abrupt end as sharp pain coursed through his body—he had taken a powerful hit.

“Gah?!” Bou cried as he lost his balance and fell, rolling across the sands of the arena.

He managed to stop himself and get on one knee, but he was now covered with sand. Then, he lurched forward and coughed up blood. When he looked up, he noticed that Beku, who had struck him with an elbow from a low posture, was standing tall once more.

“B-Beast Crown Prince Beku lands a precise blow!” the rabbitkin shouted. “What a splendid, absolutely magnificent counter!”

Just then, Beku charged forward.

“D-Dammit!” Bou grunted, unable to stand back up. He used his beefy arm to guard against the quickly approaching Beku, but the crown prince delivered a swift uppercut, sending the water buffalokin flying a meter in the air. “Gah!”

When Bou’s massive frame hit the ground, his steel claws were crushed by Beku’s adamantite knuckles, each claw getting broken in half.

“Th-The winner is Beast Crown Prince Beku!” the judge said, raising their arm.

The arena shook as the crowd went wild with their whoops and hollers.

“He did it! One more round before the title match! This’ll be legendary! No, the Beast Crown Prince’s legend has already started!”

“He can definitely win his division! I’m sure he can even be crowned the champion!”

“Glory to Albahal!”

Amid the thunderous cheer, the rabbitkin shouted into the magic tool. “His Highness has once again claimed victory without so much as a scratch! Can he maintain his flawless record until the finals?!”

Beku raised both arms and smiled in answer to the cheers as he calmly crossed the arena. Once he reached the wall, he stepped into the corridor that led to the waiting room the other participants were in. It was there that he walked past Beast Prince Giru.

Giru did not say a word as the two passed each other. Even when Beku stopped and turned to face his back, the wolfkin did not turn around.

Beku returned to the waiting room to change his clothes. When he stepped back into the corridor, he heard the news that Giru would be proceeding to the finals.

* * *

Three days later, the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament had crossed

its halfway point; the finals for each division were underway. Every day, the arena in the center of the city would host the finals for two divisions, determining the winner of each one. A week later, the winners would be pitted against their divisional representative, the former being given a chance to attain fame while the latter hoped to defend their title. The ten division representatives would then enter a tournament where the winner would be crowned the champion of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. This champion would have the opportunity to fight the previous year's champion, the Beast King, two days later. That would mark the final day of the tournament festivities.

Numerous tourists crowded the city, hoping to witness the climactic moments. The participants, as though to answer to the crowd, exhibited their best attacks, most elegant abilities, and, following brief periods of silence, their ultimate techniques. Several of the battles even ended in major upsets.

The afternoon of the fifth day of the finals was drawing near, and the crowd was eagerly awaiting the knuckles match. In the center of the nobles' section of the audience was Beast King Oba of Brysen. His seat was next to Beast King Muza's; it was clear that the visiting king had been given the best treatment he could receive.

"I suppose I should expect no less from Albahal," Oba said. "It's such a large arena, yet I can see so well."

Muza gave a firm nod. "I wanted you to sit here and watch your son fight Beku."

Oba furrowed his brows and glared at the other king's profile. "What do you mean by that? Are you saying that your son will simply hand Giru the victory?"

"Heavens, no. I will not tolerate such insolence. Beku will go all out against your son. However..."

"However what?"

Just as Muza tried to reply, the two princes entered the arena for the finals of the knuckles division. Deafening cheers filled the room. Only Oba, who sat beside a frowning Muza, could hear the Albahal Beast King's quiet reply. And because everyone was focused on the two participants, only Muza saw Oba's expression of astonishment.

Diagonally below the two monarchs sat Shia, Zeu, their mother, and General Rudo, who all looked down into the arena with worry.

"Brother will win, right?" Shia asked.

“Yes, I’m sure he will,” Zeu replied.

“Princess, Prince Zeu, there’s no need to worry,” Rudo assured them. “The two of you have given Prince Beku the Beast God’s Guardian Cord, remember? He can’t possibly lose.”

“You’re right!” the two royals said.

The duo of younger siblings searched Beku’s arm for the amulet they had given him the night before. Since ancient times, it was said that the Temple of Garm in Albahal had possessed a claw of the Beast God—the item was shaped like a crescent moon and was commonly worn as a bracelet or an anklet by tying it on with a strip of leather.

Beginning the day after the first round of the knuckles divisional preliminaries, Zeu and Shia had been making daily visits to the Temple of Garm. They had prayed to Garm every single day, and yesterday, they had finally received the claw from a Beast clergyman. This item, which indeed had the power to protect its wearer, was considered a magic tool whose use was permitted within the rules of the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament.

The Analyzer realized this and reported it back to the judge while Beku spoke with Giru, who was also under strict inspection.

“Finally, we can fight each other,” Beku said. “I hope it’s a clean, fun fight.”

But Giru did not reply. After a few moments of silence, Beku tried again to strike up a conversation. The finalists had to undergo strict inspections, and the crown prince was bored with time on his hands.

“What did you think of Albahal’s Beast King Martial Arts Tournament?” he asked.

Giru huffed through his nose and said mockingly, “It was a disappointment, to say the least.”

“Pardon?” Beku frowned, unable to understand the intent behind the words.

“Did you not hear me? I said it was a disappointment.” Giru bared his fangs in a smile. “I thought I could test my skills, but it was hardly even a workout. Thanks to that, the skills and abilities I’d polished have grown dull over the past two weeks. But, well, I suppose I *did* expect this event to be rather...mundane. It’s your first time entering a tournament such as this, after all, Your Highness.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m saying that I’ve never heard of anyone who’s as spoiled as you are. Frankly, it’s unbelievable that you were named the crown prince

before the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. I have to actually *earn* that title, and I can only do that by defeating you.” Giru scoffed at how little it had taken for Beku to be made crown prince.

“Perhaps...it’s just a difference of Talent,” Beku replied through gritted teeth.

Giru grinned. “Yeah? Then why don’t you show me this Talent of yours.”

Just then, the judge announced, “After careful inspection, we have confirmed that neither participant shows any signs of cheating! We will now begin the finals of the knuckles division!”

“Finally, the match we’ve all been waiting for!” a pigkin announcer, who was a good distance away, shouted into their magic tool. “The battle that could change the history of Albahal is about to get underway!”

Even the audience outside screamed with excitement as the judge swung their arm down, declaring, “Begin!”

The moment the words left the judge’s lips, the two princes approached one another as though they were being drawn together.

“Super Heavy Blow,” the two muttered simultaneously as they launched the same skill. The sound of the air popping was deafening.

KABOOM!

Beku used his left forearm to parry Giru’s right fist before swinging his brass-knuckled left fist into his opponent’s face. Giru, however, directed the punch down with his left forearm and then threw his left fist at Beku’s face. The crown prince’s left fist made contact with the right side of Giru’s chest, and the Brysen prince managed to land a blow on his opponent’s right cheek. The two then jumped apart and landed on the sand floor of the arena. As they once again charged at each other, the announcer was unable to hide their excitement.

“For the first time, both princes have finally used a skill!” the pigkin shouted as the crowd’s cheers grew louder.

“Prince Beku, do your best!”

“Destroy the man from Brysen!”

But Beku broke out in cold sweat while he was being showered with encouragement. Both princes had used the exact same skill, but he found that Giru’s power was slightly greater than his own. Just a step before Beku had reached his foe, Giru had stopped dead in his tracks.

“You’re Liberated too, huh?” Giru said. “But a spoiled crown prince like you with only that level of Talent can’t do much even if you are.”

Beku was well aware that these were taunts meant to goad him into attacking, but he was unable to stop his arms. As he launched a straight punch, a hook, a body blow, a knee, and then an elbow, his face gradually turned expressionless.

Beku was nothing but serious, launching skill after skill. Meanwhile, Giru gave a mocking grin. The Brysen prince had been hit by every one of Beku's furious attacks, but his feet had never left the arena floor. His arms had moved at astonishing speed, successfully diverting even Beku's knee.

The crown prince leaped, aiming his right elbow at his opponent's head and his left knee at his chest. Giru blocked the elbow with his right hand and the knee with his left, turning the tables in a flash. Beku was now upside-down in the air. Giru then jumped and landed a flying knee into the chest of the confused Albahal crown prince.

"Gah?!" Beku gasped as he felt the impact of the blow. He flew in an arc before his back slammed into the sandy ground.

The crowd immediately fell silent. They and the announcer gazed on in astonishment as Beast Prince Giru strolled over to Beku, who was struggling to get back on his feet.

"Is this it for you? Is that all you've got?" Giru said.

Beku raised his upper body as he steadied his breathing, and he reflexively jumped back when he realized that Giru's voice was coming from dangerously close by. The Brysen prince stopped and grinned; Beku knew that if his opponent had attacked him without uttering a word, he would not have been able to dodge. It was crystal clear that Giru was going easy on him. For the first time in a while, Beku felt anger fill his heart.

"Don't you dare underestimate me," he growled.

"Hmph, so you can finally read the room," Giru replied. "If you were any denser, you'd turn to iron. I'm disappointed."

Beku listened closely, never taking his eyes off the mocking Giru. The arena again fell silent; only the sound of people breathing was audible, coming from the people who were watching his match. He was sure that his father, mother, and siblings were among them. On his left wrist was the Beast God's Guardian Cord, soaked with sweat. This was a battle that he absolutely could not afford to lose.

"I'm letting loose," he said, then closed his eyes and prayed to Beast God Garm. "Beast Mode."

His body started to bulge. Unable to tolerate this change, the strings

and belts of his adamantite chest armor, waist armor, and knee guards ripped apart. The pieces fell to the ground with loud thuds.

“Graaaaaar!” Beku roared. His body had become covered in fur, completing his transformation into a massive, bipedal lion.

“Amazing! Beast Crown Prince Beku has received the power of Beast God Garm! This will— Huh?!”

“Awooooo!”

Giru faced the heavens and howled, cutting off the announcer’s shout. His body started to morph and grow as his massive, clawed arms broke free of their mithril chain mail. When all was said and done, a colossal wolf was standing on two legs on the arena’s sand floor.

Beast Mode Beku charged in and swung his beefy arms down, hoping to sink his claws into his opponent’s shoulders and chomp down on his jugular. By the time he attacked, however, Beast Mode Giru had already dropped onto his back, putting his legs between himself and his foe.

“You fool,” Giru said in a muffled voice. “Did you think you were the only one who was holding back?”

A moment later, Beku felt a sharp pain in his stomach and was pushed back. He fell to the ground as blood spurted from his wound. When Giru stood up, his claws were tinged with red—he had gouged out a part of Beku’s stomach.

“Grah!” Beku grunted, clearly in intense pain. He sensed Giru’s presence and immediately rolled along the sand, using both arms to jog away and put some distance between them before he turned around.

Giru had already caught up with him, though, and he landed a powerful tackle. The Brysen prince sank the claws on both arms into Beku’s back and stood up, throwing him into the air. Beku flailed around desperately as the wolfkin launched a barrage of skills from below.

“Graaah!” Giru bellowed.

Beku’s body was pushed back upward by the attacks, and as he was about to make his descent, another series of blows assaulted him. The Albahal crown prince was unable to dodge or defend against any of them, and his consciousness started to fade away. Only when he fell to the ground with a loud thud did Giru finally stop his onslaught.

“Gah!” Beku gasped, coughing up blood as one of his cheeks sank into the ground.

The impact had helped him regain consciousness, but before he could get up, Giru stood over him and placed his foot on Beku’s other cheek.

This did not happen just once either. Giru waited for Beku to try to get up again before stomping his face back down. Every time Beku's face was stepped on, he gradually lost the strength to get up at all.

Giru was clearly taunting Beku. The audience started to chatter—some cheered for their crown prince while others booed Giru's cruel actions. As they grew louder, Shia's cries could be heard from the nobles' seats.

"Brother! Brother is going to die!"

She tried to jump over the railing but was quickly grabbed by Zeu. "You can't, Shia! This is a tournament!" But the Beast Prince's face was also stained with tears.

"No! Brother!"

It was then that Muza's sonorous voice echoed. "Silence, Shia," he said.

"But father!" Shia whirled around and saw Muza's icy, expressionless face, his steely gaze cast at the arena.

"Are you sure about this, Sir Muza?" Oba asked, staring at the Albahal king from beside him. "I'm certain Giru will win against your son, just like you said. But at this rate, he might die."

"You have nothing to worry about, Sir Oba," Muza replied. "Even if he does, I shall not blame you, nor will I allow any resident of Albahal to lay a finger on you. But of course, I doubt anyone could do such a thing. And should Beku die here, it simply goes to show how immature he is. That's all."

Beast Prince Zeu looked just as confused as Shia and voiced his concerns. "Father?! Were you aware that brother was going to lose?"

"I was," Muza replied curtly yet firmly. "Beku cannot win against Sir Giru. I had expected that to be the case and thus allowed Sir Giru to enter this tournament."

"But...it sounds like you *hoped* brother would lose."

"That's correct."

"But why?!"

"Zeu. Shia. I want you both to listen closely."

Shia was still stunned by her father's words, but she obediently turned to him. His face was twisted with pain and anger.

"Beku is strong. That much I will not deny," Muza began. "But that is why he does not know of defeat. He does not understand how vexing it is to lose and how joyful it is to stay alive. He does not know of the rage one feels toward the opponent who bested them, nor does he think of making

any effort to surpass that foe. A person like that will be frozen with fear if defeat ever crosses their mind. During times of peril, such a person won't be able to protect this country—rather, they won't be able to stand up and fight to protect the beastkin of this *world*. Someone like that cannot inherit the courage of our founder, Albahal.”

Zeu and Shia silently listened as Muza went on.

“And so, you must have faith in him. Even if Beku loses, you must trust that he will continue to cling to his life and that he will stand up with rage burning in his soul. Only then will Beku truly take his first step toward proving that he is the reincarnation of our founder.”

Shia was unable to look at her father, who had crossed his arms and sunk in his seat. She turned back to the arena.

Just then, there was a loud squelch. For the umpteenth time, Giru stomped on Beku, and the crown prince's limbs spasmed and stretched straight out for a moment before immediately going limp. His body shrank before everyone's eyes as all his strength left him. A sigh of despair ran through the crowd.

Beast Mode Giru crouched down and picked Beku up by the head. He peered into Beku's blood-soaked face and gave a look of surprise.

“How odd. I thought I'd accidentally used too much strength,” the Brysen prince remarked. Where Beku had fallen was a small white fragment tied with a leather strip. Giru chuckled. “Ah, I see. The Beast God's Guardian Cord saved your life.”

Just then, life returned to Beku's bloodstained eyes. “K-Kill me...” he croaked.

Giru's face contorted with anger and he tossed the crown prince aside like a piece of trash. “You want me to kill you? Are you so blind that you failed to notice that the Guardian Cord saved your life? You are a fool who's not worth killing. If you become stronger one day and let me have some fun, I'll be sure to end your life then.”

The judge rushed over to the field, glancing at Beku before raising their arm. “The winner is His Highness Prince Giru of Brysen!”

But the crowd was as silent as a tomb.

“Listen well! I am the Beast Prince of Brysen—no, I'm the most feared of all beastkin, Giru!” the prince roared, breaking the silence. “I'll slaughter anyone who dares to bar my path! If you have any complaints, come at me!”

He turned on his heel and strolled out of the arena. Beku was lying on

the ground, gravely injured and on the verge of death, but miraculously still alive.

* * *

The champion of the tournament was Giru. He defeated the representative of the knuckles division and climbed his way to the top. However, he forfeited the match against the Beast King, the champion of the previous year's tournament, and quickly headed home on the final day. While the reason for his actions was unknown, the Albahalans claimed that he was ridiculing the Albahal royal family and insulted him as he left.

The Beast King Martial Arts Tournament had thus come to a close. Two weeks had passed since then, but Beku refused to leave his room. Healers from throughout the nation had come to treat his wounds, so his body was fully healed, but since the day he was defeated by Giru, the crown prince had spoken to no one other than Captain Kei of the royal guards.

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness Princess Shia," Kei said with a troubled expression. "I cannot permit you to enter this room."

The little girl had no choice but to hang her head and walk away. She spun around and plodded down the corridor with General Rudo in tow, but he soon realized that she had not been heading to her room.

"Princess, wherever are you going?" Rudo asked. "Are you trying to leave the castle?"

"That's right," she answered. "I'd like to give my brother a present. Perhaps that will cheer him up."

"A brilliant strategy, Your Highness!"

"No need to shower me with praise, Rudo. Hmm? What's that?"

She walked out of the castle, through the courtyard, and was about to pass through the castle gates when she spotted the soldier on guard bickering with another party—an elderly person in slightly dirty robes with a large basket on their back.

"As I've said, I simply want to offer Crown Prince Beku my aid," the stranger said.

"How many times must I tell you before you understand?!" the soldier barked back. "The crown prince is alive and well! Even if something *had* happened to him, we'd never let a shady guy like you inside without confirming your identity!"

Shia jogged over upon hearing her brother's name. "What's wrong?"

“P-Princess Shia!” the soldier said, kneeling.

Behind him was the robed old man that she had seen. When she peered into his face, she saw that he was a very old goatkin.

“Ah, you must be Her Highness, Princess Shia,” the goatkin said. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Who are you? What business do you have in the castle?” Rudo demanded.

The elderly goatkin smiled brightly. “I apologize for my insolence. My name is Romu. I’m a wandering physician traveling across the Garlesian Continent.”

“Is that so?”

“I arrived in this country just the other day, and I heard that His Highness Crown Prince Beku sustained grave injuries during the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. I’ve come here to offer my aid.”

“I see. Your mindset is praiseworthy, but His Highness isn’t in any life-threatening danger. Leave at once.”

The goatkin looked around awkwardly and continued, “I can heal not only one’s body but their mind as well. Perhaps you’re in need of that instead?”

“What was that?” Shia asked, her eyes glittering.

Romu’s eyes shone as well. “Take just one pill and you’ll feel motivation well up from the bottom of your heart. Take a look! I’m old and my legs are frail, but I don’t feel at all tired despite traversing the continent!”

Romu twirled in place. He stood tiptoe on one leg, but he had impeccable balance and did not stagger even a little bit. Shia was delighted by his humorous twirl and leaned forward eagerly.

“I see. However, I have never heard of such a thing,” Rudo said firmly. “I request that you leave.”

Romu looked devastated for a moment before gasping and widening his eyes. He turned around, put down his basket, and started rummaging through it. “I-I know! I think it was here... Found it!” With trembling hands, he took out a scroll and handed it to the general.

“What is this?”

“Th-This is a letter of introduction from the minister of the Lehmciel Kingdom. I was in their care before I arrived here.”

“Hmm...” Rudo, who was familiar with the birdkin nation, thought for a moment. “May I read its contents?”

“Of course.”

The general undid the string around the scroll and started to read. It explained that Romu was a wonderful physician who had saved the Lehmciel royal family and that he had served numerous other royals in the past. Whenever he resigned from his duties with a royal court, he apparently always received a letter of introduction.

“I see. And now you’re saying it’s our turn?” Rudo glared at Romu, implying that the physician was trying to make Albahal indebted to him.

“Huh?!” Romu gasped. “No, nothing like that at all! I simply want to be of help to Crown Prince Beku.”

“Your words had best not be lies. I shall keep this letter of introduction for now.”

“Rudo, what will you do?” Shia asked.

The rhinokin glared at Romu and answered, “This letter states that the Bird King of Lehmciel’s night blindness, which he had been suffering from for ages, has finally been cured. We must first check if there’s any truth to that. You, take this physician to a lodge.”

After he gave his order to the soldier, he handed the letter to another. “And you, hand this to Sir Kei. Tell him to use the communication magic tool to confirm its claims with the Lehmciel Kingdom.” Rudo finally turned to the goatkin. “Romu, was it? Return to the lodge for now. I’ll let you know if there was any truth to your words later. Don’t leave the kingdom until then.”

Romu bowed furiously as he left the castle gates with a soldier and headed for the urban district. But beneath the hood of his robe, his face twisted into a conniving grin.

“Heh heh heh. Demon Lord, I, Shinorom, have made good progress in securing our sacrifice,” the goatkin whispered, his voice so faint that not even the soldier walking beside him could hear.

Side Story 2: Sophie and Luke Play Ogre

The Demon Lord Army's plans and the plague of Daemonism spreading across the Galiatan Continent had been stopped. Once Keel had been designated as the successor of the late Great Pope of Elmea, Allen and his party had followed Sophie, who had some business in Fabraaze, the village of the dark elves. They had just arrived at the Muharino Desert.

Fabraaze borrowed the power of water spirits to pull water from beneath the desert, and a man-made water source had created this oasis city. In its center was an enormous tree that covered the settlement like an umbrella, protecting the dark elves from the harsh sunlight.

A stone wall had been erected around the shadow. While walls were a common sight in large cities, the one surrounding the dark elves' village also had an evil-dispersing forest just outside it. This was the result of Allen having used his Grass A's Ability, Silver Bean, and Awakened Ability, Gold Bean. The trees looked like weeds compared to the colossal one inside the oasis city, but they helped cool the refugee camp where people gathered to flee from the terrors of the Demon Lord Army. They also helped repel the monsters that were lurking in Muharino.

Allen and his party teleported to the edge of this forest, in front of the only gate in Fabraaze's outer walls.

"We're here!" Krena shouted, jumping in place and kicking up sand.

"All we did was teleport, though," Allen said. Thanks to Homing Instinct, their travel time was practically zero.

"Yep!"

The rest of the Gamers laughed at their humorous exchange; they were not quite sure if Krena and Allen had just had a coherent conversation.

"Why don't we head for the shade?" Cecil suggested, fanning her face with her hand. "We'll get sunburned if we stay out here."

Once they reached the gate, they saw not only the gatekeeper but also a group of dark-skinned humans waiting. They were former residents of a different oasis in the desert who had fled the terrors of the Demon Lord Army. They were waiting for Sophie, perhaps having caught wind that she

had sent a message to the dark elves about her visit.

“I’d like to thank you, elf lady.”

“Thanks to you folks, we live to see another day.”

One by one, they thanked Sophie for her work, making it clear that they knew who their savior was. The elf princess kindly spent her time answering each and every word of gratitude while the Gamers merely stood around awkwardly.

“Seems like they can’t find any other refugee camps,” Allen said to Sophie. “There are a lot more refugees than before.”

She turned around with a troubled expression. “So it seems. What shall we do?”

“If they’re on board, we can gather residents for Hardcore User Island here.”

Her face lit up. “Great idea! Splendid, Lord Allen!”

He stopped her just as she was about to turn around and report the good news. “And I have some business with that big tree.”

“That’s right. I apologize for holding us up.”

She greeted the rest of the residents before walking through the open gate. The rest of the party followed her and stepped into the village, their backs showered with the refugees’ praise. Fabraaze, protected by the giant tree, seemed to be a completely different place from the desert. The harsh sunlight was blocked by the foliage, and the land below was not sand but dirt. Lush greenery inhabited the place and rivers flowed throughout the area.

Sophie led the way, walking along one of the rivers. These rivers flowed from a lake that had water carried up by spirits. The gigantic tree guarding the city had its roots in that lake too.

After about an hour of walking, the No-life Gamers reached the lake. The water was crystal clear, allowing them to see the entangled roots of the tree burrowing deep underground. A wooden bridge crossed the lake, leading to a shrine with a raised floor and pillars growing from the tree roots. A wooden terrace stretched out horizontally, wider than the shrine.

Sophie squinted her eyes in the lovely, cool breeze and called forth the juvenile earth spirit Korpokkur.

“We’re here, Korpokkur.”

“Yeah, thank you,” the juvenile earth spirit said, looking up at the massive tree from Sophie’s arms. His expressionless face blossomed into a smile. “Ah...”

As he let out a sigh, he floated from Sophie's arms into the air, approaching the thick trunk of the tree. Numerous particles of light jumped out from the trunk, surrounding Korpokkur as though welcoming him before they took on a humanoid shape.

"It's Korpokkur!"

"Welcome back!"

"Didn't know you were here."

It seemed they were spirits who had moved to Fabraaze with the dark elves.

"Ha ha, good for him," Rohzen said, lying on his stomach on top of Sophie's head. He gave a squinty-eyed smile.

Sophie and the party had first met Korpokkur in the suburbs of Rohzenheim, within a ruin that was once a city for the dark elves. The juvenile earth spirit had been waiting for the dark elves to return, as they had left during their fight against the elves. All alone, he had lain in wait and tried to rebuild the city. That was when Sophie had promised a future where elves and dark elves would once again work together. She still had a long way to go to fulfill her promise and would need quite a bit of time, but she wanted to guide him to the dark elves' village first.

Satisfied, Allen tried to head over to thank those who had joined the Allen Army. "All right, now that that's done, we should head over and greet King Olvahs."

"Hey! What're you guys doing?!" a shrill voice barked.

"Huh?"

Everyone whirled around toward the source of the voice. There, a young boy stood tall with both hands on his hips, glaring at the Gamers. The small dark elf had short, silver hair and golden eyes, as well as dark skin. He wore shorts that went down to his knees, and on top of his head was a weasel the color of midnight.

He reminds me of those suntanned bug catchers you'd see during summer vacation—the ones with the little insect cages slung over his shoulders. Saw a lot of them in my past life.

"And you are?" Sophie asked.

"Me? I'm Luketod!" The boy puffed his chest out proudly.

"Isn't he the son of the dark elf king?" Cecil whispered.

"Pretty sure, yeah," Allen replied. "He has the Sovereign of Spirits on his head too."

Sophie had mentioned that King Olvahs had a young son. This boy

must have been him.

“You’re the princess of Rohzenheim, aren’t you?!” Luketod asked demanding. “I’m not scared of you guys at all! Not one bit!”

Sophie maintained her smile as she stepped forward and gave a deep bow. “I said my greetings in the past, but please allow me to reintroduce myself to you, Prince Luketod. I’m the daughter of Queen Lenoatill of Rohzenheim, Sophialohne. These people here are my friends. They are members of a party that I am on an adventure with.”

“I-I’m the child of Olvahs, who rules over the dark elf village, Luketod!”

Sophie patiently waited for him to stop talking before bowing once more. “I apologize for my impertinence, Prince Luketod. Though I’m here to fulfill my promise with a spirit, it was rude of me to come without first receiving your permission.”

“Huh? A promise?”

Luke stared back blankly as Korpokkur returned. His reunion with his fellow juvenile spirits was apparently over.

“Why don’t we go somewhere else before we cause a fuss?” Allen suggested. While there were no other dark elves other than Luketod present, if the others noticed that the son of a king was making a scene, it would undoubtedly escalate into a full-fledged problem.

But Luke once more raised his voice. “Huh?! Hey, are you guys running away?!”

“No, nothing like that at all, but...” Sophie replied awkwardly.

“Kinda reminds me of you in the old days,” Allen said, turning to Dogora.

“Huh?! What are you on about?! I’m not like him at all!” Dogora replied.

“Ooh! You’re right! He’s just like Dogora!” Krena added excitedly, reminiscing about the past.

“Hey! What are you guys chattering about with my permission?!” Luke demanded.

Cecil saw the juvenile earth spirit in the elf princess’s arms. “Sophie, we’re done here, aren’t we?” she asked.

“W-We are,” Sophie replied. “Please excuse us, Prince Luketod.”

But the young boy spread his arms out wide, barring their path. “Don’t mess around! Fight me!”

“Fight you?”

“That’s right! You entered this village without permission! We’ve gotta fight!”

“Er, do you have a method in mind?”

Luketod once again puffed out his chest. “We’ll play ogre. You guys are the ogres, and I’m the villager.”

Cecil turned to Allen. “Hey, what’s he talking about? What’s ‘playing ogre’?”

“Uh, it’s something like hide-and-seek,” Allen started.

This children’s game had various regional names such as “playing goblin” or “playing orc.” The players were divided into, in this case, ogres and villagers. The villagers would hide, and the ogres would have to find and capture them. If even a single villager managed to escape being caught until the time limit was up, their team would win. However, if the ogres captured everyone before that, it would be their victory. In the event that there were multiple villagers, an ogre village was created where any villagers who had been caught would be taken. Up to two of these players could be freed were uncaptured villagers to sneak in and hold their hands.

Children from developing villages like Allen tended not to have any toys to play with. As a result, they were forced to come up with games that did not require any tools or money, many of which were passed down through the generations. In a world where monsters were rampant, games such as this were good ways to teach kids how terrifying those monsters could be. It seemed nobles such as Cecil had never played games like this before, however.

“Hmm... So if your head gets hit, it means you’ve been captured and eaten?” Cecil mulled, trying to figure out the rules.

“I guess when we fulfilled the juvenile earth spirit’s promise, we got hit with a bonus quest,” Allen said, comparing it to his games.

“Are we going to play ogre with Prince Luketod?” Sophie asked.

“We have to decide what happens when we win or lose,” Allen replied. “I’m sorry, Prince Luketod, but we’ll—”

“If *I* win, you guys’ll be my underlings! If you guys win, I’ll be your friend!” the prince said.

Allen thought back to his past. “I was told the same exact thing back in Krena Village. I’m calling this guy ‘Dogora Jr.’”

“He really is just like Dogora!” Krena agreed.

“I wasn’t like that at all,” Dogora protested vehemently.

“So we’re all ogres, and you’re the only villager,” Allen said, ignoring

his friend. "You must be really confident in your skills. All right, Sophie, let's accept his challenge. I've never lost in a game of ogre before."

"If that's your wish, Lord Allen, I don't mind," Sophie replied.

Luketod's eyes sparkled. "Ooh! Nice! You're used to playing this game, aren't you?!"

"I've never lost," Allen replied.

Luketod grinned. "I bet you can't say that for long. The range will be this terrace and everywhere inside of it. That includes the World Tree, this lake, and the shrine!"

"Are we talking inside the shrine too?"

"Yep! It's too late for you to be scared! The time limit will be one hour."

Just as the prince was trying to set a few more rules, a dark elf lady hastily ran up to him. "Master Luke?! What are you doing here?!" She looked so worried that Sophie tried to reassure her and smile.

Luketod, however, beat her to the punch. "I'm gonna beat them to bits at ogre! I won't forgive you if you tell father about this!"

"B-Beat them to bits?" the dark elf lady said, placing both hands in front of her mouth.

She rushed toward the shrine at tremendous speed. As Luketod watched her go, he pointed toward the entrance where the lady had just entered.

"I'm gonna hide, so wait here," he said. "The game will begin when Faable says so. Oh, and you can't use your skills!"

The young prince ran over the bridge connecting to the shrine while the Gamers obediently waited by the lake.

"That lady *definitely* told the king about this," Cecil muttered.

"If it's a problem, I'm sure some high-ranking people will come out and stop us," Allen replied.

"You're always so irresponsible..." she sighed. "Ah, here it comes."

The black weasel who had been atop Luketod's head came rushing back over the wooden bridge.

"He's ready," the weasel said, its voice sounding like a calm, elderly lady's.

"Is he the next king?" Rohzen asked. He floated from Sophie's head and descended in front of Faable.

"That's right," the weasel replied. "That child is the future of the dark elves. Didn't you see it for yourself?"

“Foresight isn’t something I’m very good at.”

Faable huffed and looked up at Sophie. “I’ve already told Olvahs. I leave that child in your hands.”

“Of course,” Sophie replied.

The Gamers crossed the bridge, walked through the shrine gates, and searched for Luketod.

“Well, we don’t have much time,” Allen said. “We should probably put our all into winning this thing.”

He had no intention of becoming Luke’s underling even if he lost, and he had no plans of losing in the first place, so he was going to go all out. As Luketod’s designated area was vast, Allen had decided that finding a boy without using skills would be a difficult task. Thus, his plan was to search the shrine, tree, and lake as a group.

“I guess we should tackle the shrine first,” Allen said. “There are plenty of places to hide in there.”

The party rushed inside and split up to check every room including the reception hall, dining area, and baths. They left no stone unturned, searching even storage spaces, under the flooring, and the attic. They looked in every nook and cranny. Needless to say, that also included the depths of the shrine such as King Olvahs’s office, located within a hole in the massive tree trunk.

“Pardon me,” Sophie said as she slid the door open.

The rest of the party stormed inside, searching the king’s bedroom and even his clothes—anywhere Luketod could be hiding inside. They ransacked his drawers as one of the Elders looked on with worry. The king, meanwhile, continued to quietly tend to his work.

“Not even Lady Sophialohne’s friends should be allowed to wreak such havoc...” the Elder whispered.

But the king did not even raise his head as he answered, “I’ve given them my permission.”

“I-Is that so?”

Just then, Krena jumped down from the attic, her face covered with dust. “He’s not here!” she shouted.

Allen checked the time using his magic tool. Twenty minutes had passed.

“We’ve wasted too much time on the shrine,” he said. “Krena, Dogora, search any other areas we’ve missed. Make sure to check the drawers too.”

“Gotcha!” Krena called.

“Leave it to us!” Dogora replied.

“Keel, Cecil, Meruru, search the terrace,” Allen ordered. “Sophie, Volmaar, and I will search near the World Tree!”

He rushed outside. He was not sure just how tall the towering tree was, and its thick trunk must have been over a hundred meters wide. Each branch was about the size of a person and branched off into smaller twigs that were full of large, healthy leaves.

“I can’t imagine that he climbed this huge tree, but could I ask you to check just in case, Volmaar?” Allen asked. “Also, I don’t want you to check just the branches and leaves. Look down every now and then too, and if you see a boy running around, call out to us immediately!”

“Got it,” Volmaar replied curtly. He clung to the trunk and started climbing up like a gecko.

“Lord Allen, what shall we do?” Sophie asked.

“I’ll check the roots of the World Tree,” he replied. “I’m sorry, Sophie, but could I ask you to check inside the lake from the terrace?”

“Leave it to me!”

After they parted ways, Allen ran around the tree in search of the prince. While the roots looked to be in the middle of the lake, they were actually burrowed at the bottom. They had dug themselves into the soil that the earth spirit had changed from sand, spreading beyond the boundary of the lake. The clear water allowed for an unobscured view of the roots, and the entangled ones that emerged from the lake had just enough space between them for a small boy to hide. Allen peered inside and searched the aboveground cave as another thirty minutes went by in a flash. He then reunited with Sophie, and the two of them walked along the terrace.

“Whew. I don’t think he’s here,” Allen said. “What about you, Sophie?”

“Shh!” she whispered, placing an index finger over her lips. She used her other hand to point toward a spot in the lake beyond the railing of the terrace.

Glub. Glub. Upon closer inspection, Allen saw small bubbles popping up from the lake’s surface near the terrace. About a meter below the bubbles was silver hair that resembled Luketod’s.

“Has he been underwater for a while?” Allen asked, keeping his voice low.

“I’m sure that he can remain underwater for much longer with the help

of the water and wind spirits,” Sophie replied.

“Hmm, I guess he isn’t here!” Allen called loudly. “Ugh! Where could he be?!”

He glanced at Sophie, who immediately caught on to his ploy and nodded. “I wonder. It seems he’s hidden himself quite well.”

Glub, glub. The bubbles on the water’s surface grew larger.

“Only three minutes left, huh?!” Allen shouted. “I’ll end up becoming Prince Luketod’s underling!”

“I hope he’s a kind boss,” Sophie said with a chuckle.

With a loud splash, Luketod emerged from the water. “Pwah! You guys are doing that on purpose, aren’t you?!”

Sophie smiled. “We found you, Prince Luketod.”

The boy could not help but smile back. “So you did. You’re not half bad.”

As he climbed onto the terrace, Sophie gently placed her hand over his head. “This means we’ve won, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. Ugh, I’m soaking wet! Hey, you’re dirty too. I’ll lend you our bath.”

Only then did Allen realize that he was covered in sand and dust from searching within the shrine and outside the terrace for the past hour. The trio met up with Volmaar, who climbed down the tree, and the four headed into the shrine to meet up with Dogora, Krena, and Cecil.

“Ah, you found him!” Keel said.

“Yep. Sophie did,” Allen said.

“Wow! Amazing, Sophie!” Meruru said while clapping.

“I didn’t do much,” the elf princess replied humbly.

Luke looked up at her and muttered, “Sophie, huh?”

“Did you call for me, Prince Luketod?”

“Nope!”

He quickly looked away, but then he locked eyes with Krena.

“Oh?” Krena said, peering into the boy’s face and causing him to turn away again.

* * *

The No-life Gamers borrowed the baths and cleaned themselves up before they were invited for a meal. In the wood-walled dining space, the dark elves sat directly on the carpet. Even a high dark elf like King Olvahs and an elderly elf who looked to be an Elder were in the mix. It seemed

rank did not matter when it came to meals, and everyone ate the same food regardless of status.

“Yummy!” Krena cried, a fork in one hand. She was shoveling forkful after forkful of food into her mouth.

Her full plate grew empty in a flash. She quickly stood up and headed for a large plate piled high with enough food for dozens of people and went for seconds with great enthusiasm.

“It’s kinda bland, but still pretty good!” Dogora said.

“Hey, don’t say anything rude!” Cecil scolded.

“I’ve never had anything like it! It’s really delicious!” Meruru exclaimed.

“Eat tons and grow up big, Meruru,” Allen said.

The Gamers chattered away like usual while they ate, and Luketod stared at them quietly.

“Hmm? Aren’t you gonna eat, Luke?” Krena asked.

“I’m not hungry yet,” the prince insisted, turning away.

She decided to mimic Allen’s earlier words. “Eat tons and grow up big, Luke.”

“Huh? And why’re you calling me ‘Luke’ like we’re buddies?” The boy looked down in embarrassment.

“But we won, didn’t we? Aren’t we friends with you now?”

Luketod blinked for a moment before his face grew bright red. He loudly said, “R-Right. That’s what I promised you guys, so I guess I’ve got no choice. Y-You can call me ‘Luke’ from here on out.”

The king and the elven Elder watched on quietly.

“Hmm...” Olvahs muttered with a slight nod.

Sophie smiled, placed her plate down, and knelt in front of the prince. “It seems Krena has beaten me to it. Since we’re friends, Prince Luke, please feel free to call me ‘Sophie.’”

She extended her pale hand toward him. Luke stared at it for a moment before he placed his plate down and stood up. As Sophie followed suit, the two shook hands.

“S-Sure, Sophie. You can call me ‘Luke’ too,” he said. His dark-skinned hand shook her pale one.

“What?! Preposterous!” the Elder cried, unable to hide his shock.

Though his village had been spared from the Demon Lord Army’s ploy, he did not care to see an elf from Rohzenheim in the village. Furthermore, the next queen, who had formed a contract with Spirit God

Rohzen, was shaking hands with the next king as recognized by Faable, the Sovereign of Spirits, without any prior reports. The Elder could not allow this.

“This is merely a greeting between two children. No need to fret,” the king quickly said to dispel the tension, and the Elder hung his head.

“So? What now, Luke? Wanna come with us?” Krena asked. Not even Olvahs could hide his shock upon hearing those words.

“Huh?” Luketod replied, confused.

Krena smiled. “Well, it looks like you want to tag along with us. Isn’t that why you wanted to be our friend?”

“H-Hey, Krena, what are you saying?!” Cecil said hastily.

“Huh, so I guess this was a quest for another member,” Allen mused, nodding away. “But to join the No-life Gamers, we first need to see your Talent and— Gah!”

Cecil landed a beautiful elbow to his gut, cutting the Summoner off midsentence.

“Besides, you’re so immature!” Cecil shouted. “You gave it your all during ogre, didn’t you? We’re already fifteen! Cut it out!”

“She’s got a point. That’s your bad, Allen,” Dogora chimed in with a grin.

Even Volmaar gave a rare faint smile. Luketod watched on enviously, but he sheepishly glanced back at his father.

“What are you looking at me for?” Olvahs asked.

“Um...” the boy mumbled. As he struggled to form words, a pale hand gently grasped his shoulder from behind.

“Luke,” Sophie said kindly. “We’re throwing ourselves into dangerous battles. If you’d like to come with us, it means you’ll find yourself in the midst of such peril. Do you have the resolve to fight with us?”

It sounded as though her words were offering him gentle encouragement. Luketod nodded slightly and turned back to his father.

“Father.”

“What is it?”

“I, Luketod, would like to go with Sophie’s party!”

Everyone in the room held their breath. Only King Olvahs remained calm as he placed his cutlery down, folded his arms in front, and closed his eyes without uttering a word. Silence filled the room.

“Ridiculous,” the dark elf Elder who had expressed his ire over the earlier handshake said. “To be friends with the elf princess? E-Even the

child of a king cannot be allowed such a—”

“Did the king not tell you to stop making a fuss earlier? Have you forgotten his order?” a burly dark elf interrupted.

“What?! General Bunzenberg, have you gone mad?!”

“I’m telling you to remain calm. This recent incident was perpetrated by the Demon Lord Army, and this small party was able to suppress the invasion. Perhaps Prince Luketod joining them would be good for him as well. Has that thought never crossed your mind?”

“B-But we have been at odds with the elves of Rohzenheim for several millennia! Your Majesty, please tell him off!”

The Elder likely thought that his conversation with the general was going nowhere, so he turned to the king for support. Olvahs slowly opened his golden eyes, peering into his son’s, which were of the same color.

“I also traveled around with friends in the past,” the king said.

Luke’s eyes went wide with shock. “You did?”

“Just like you, I knew only of this village, and many unexpected incidents occurred in the outside world. I saw things I’d never seen before. Nothing went according to plan, so I suffered quite a bit and braved through numerous struggles. And you will come to experience the same thing, I’m sure.”

“Yes.”

“You heard Princess Sophialohne’s words, yes? You’ll be throwing yourself into dangerous battles. It will surely bring you much pain and suffering, and almost nothing will go as you wish. Do you have the resolve to brave that harsh world and survive those perilous battles with her?”

“I do!”

Luketod gave a firm nod. Meanwhile, the king sat cross-legged, looking down at his knee. Faable, the Sovereign of Spirits, was curled up into a ball.

“Lady Faable, I leave Luketod in your care,” the king said, placing his hand on the weasel’s head.

“Sure thing,” Faable replied, slipping away from the king’s hand. Without making a sound, she ran toward Luketod’s feet and ran to the top of his head.

“Yay! You’re coming with me, Faable?!” Luketod cried joyfully.

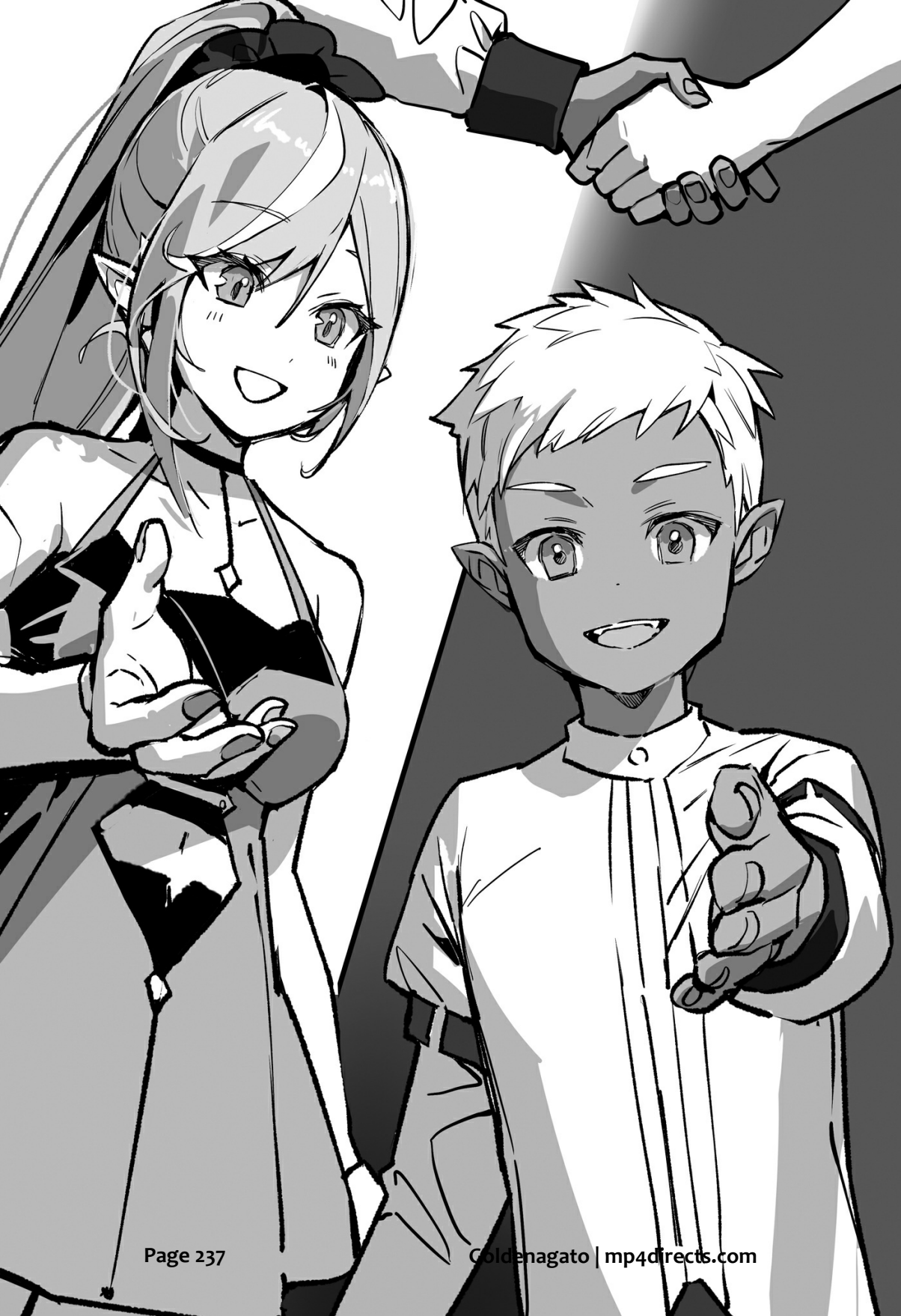
King Olvahs gave a small nod and cast a sweeping glance at the dark elves in the room. “Lady Faable has made her decision for our future. Please approve of her choice.”

The dark elves turned toward the massive tree and silently offered a prayer.

“Well, Luke, I hope we can get along,” Sophie said.

Luketod whirled around and offered his dark hand. “Yeah! I’ll be in your care, Sophie!”

Once again, her pale hand took his, and they exchanged a firm handshake. Everyone—including Allen, who was being clobbered by Cecil—watched the wholesome scene.



“All right! Time to celebrate Luke joining our party!” Krena shouted enthusiastically. “Let’s go all out!” She took her plate and ran over to the heaping pile of food.

“Woo-hoo! Come on, Luke, don’t hold back!” Meruru said, holding up her hand for a high five.

Luke looked a little troubled, but he held his up as well, and she gently but joyfully clapped them together.

“You guys are always celebrating something...” Keel said wearily.

As the dark elves burst out laughing, Sophie heard soft giggling from the roof of the shrine. When she looked up, she saw Korpokkur sitting on the joist, gazing down at the scene with a bright smile.

Side Story 3: Hell Mode Spin-Off—The Heroic Tale of Helmios (Part 2): A Natural Gift, Act 1

It was a lovely spring afternoon. Helmios, walking energetically, had just returned home to Cortana Village, which was bathing in the gentle rays of the sun. On his back was a basket around half his height that was filled to the brim with medicinal herbs, and behind him was his father, Lucas, dragging a sled that they were using to transport the prey they had hunted. Five small- to medium-sized monsters were piled on it. Lucas pulled this mountain of food with his one burly arm as he passed through the gate a few steps behind his son.

“We hunted a lot today too,” Helmios remarked.

“Yeah,” Lucas agreed. “I’m glad we made it back while it’s still bright out.”

“Mm-hmm. I won’t make mom worry anymore!”

They crossed the square that doubled as a market and headed for their home. As they reached a row of wooden houses, they spotted their humble, slightly lopsided abode. Their house tilted a bit to the left because when Helmios had been born, Lucas had built its base quite literally single-handedly; the new father had already been missing his arm, thus causing the unevenness. As Helmios had been raised within such a home, it did not bother him much—to him, this was what a home was. On the contrary, the boy loved returning to such a residence.

He slid the door open and stepped onto the dirt floor when his mother, Kalea, peeked out from the entryway to the living room.

“Welcome back,” she called.

“Mom?” Helmios asked. “Are you sure you can walk around?”

“Oh, no need to worry. I’m fine,” Kalea answered before going into a coughing fit.

She wheezed and released her hand from the entryway as she fell forward. Luckily, though, a small but powerful body was there to support her.

“Thank you, Helmios,” she said weakly.

“I told you to not push yourself,” Lucas said, entering the house. He had placed the sled of monsters outside.

Helmios rubbed his mother’s back and continued to support her as Lucas walked past the two into the living room. He opened an old drawer and took out a bit of powdered medicine wrapped in paper, then returned and handed it to Helmios. From there, he made his way back into the living room, poured some water from a jug into a wooden cup, and handed that cup to his wife.

“Phew. Thank you,” Kalea said.

Until the winter of last year, her medicine had always been in low supply, but they now had plenty of it. Things had changed that winter, when an illness had plagued the village and Helmios had decided to head to the western mountains to gather medicinal herbs for his mother. He had ended up defeating the goblin king who had created a nest in the mountain, and the villagers had given him plenty of medicine as a token of their gratitude.

With their boss defeated, the goblins had slowly left the mountains, allowing other villagers to safely collect medicinal herbs. The illness spreading throughout the village had been cured before the winter snow had melted away.

Lucas, who had seen his son kill the goblin king with his own eyes, was still working as a bodyguard, but whenever he returned to the village, he would take his son out hunting. He was convinced that Helmios had a Talent related to wielding a sword, and thus he had taught his son how to hunt monsters, use his sword, and live in the mountains if that became necessary. The man was trying his best to nurture the Talent his son had been bestowed.

“Dad, look after mom,” Helmios said, leaving his parents in the living room as he headed outside. “I’ll make us something to eat.”

The boy dragged the sled to the shed out back, gazed at the monsters that had already had their blood drained, and grabbed a horned rabbit. He returned to the dirt floor of his home, skinned the rabbit, removed its bones, separated the fat, and cut through its sinew. After cutting the meat into bite-sized chunks, he built a fire for the stove and placed a pot on top. He first added the rabbit’s fat into the pot and waited for it to melt. Then, he threw in the meat, making sure to season it with salt and a pinch of herbs. While occasionally stirring with a wooden ladle to make sure the

meat would not burn, he started chopping vegetables into small chunks as well.

He tossed the vegetables inside and fried his ingredients for a while. Once he checked and was sure that everything was thoroughly cooked, he went to grab some water from the jug. And so, as his parents stood in the entryway of the dirt-floored room with awe on their faces, Helmios skillfully made horned rabbit stew.

“I’ve only taught him once,” Kalea said. “He does it so well.”

“He’s a quick learner,” Lucas said. “I just taught him how to drain the monsters’ blood at the stream today, but he did about half of them by himself.”

Once Helmios was satisfied with the taste, he smiled and turned to his parents. “It’s done! Let’s eat!”

Lucas carried the pot of stew to the living room, and Kalea ladled it out.

“How does it taste?” Helmios asked.

“Delicious,” Lucas answered, much to his son’s delight.

“Thank goodness!” With a smile, the boy turned to Kalea. “What do you think, mom? Does it taste the same as yours?”

“Not quite the same, but it’s delicious,” Kalea replied, slowly carrying the stew to her lips. She smiled as her son stared back quizzically. “Both the meat and the vegetables are so soft and easy to eat.”

“Yup! I thought it’d be easier for you!”

“Thank you. And that’s what makes it different from the stews I make. I cook for your father, so I season them very well. It’s different, but that’s just fine. I have my style, and you’ve got yours.”

“She’s right,” Lucas agreed. “And they’re both delicious.”

Helmios nodded and changed subjects. “That reminds me. Mom, I found a spot where you can collect unusual medicinal herbs.”

Earlier that day, after hunting a medium-sized monster, the father and son duo had carried it to a safe stream with a clear view of their surroundings. While Lucas had been draining blood and removing the organs, Helmios had been on the lookout for any monsters that were attracted by the scent of blood. In looking around, he had found herbs growing between the rocks of the stream. He had immediately recalled a diagram of an expensive medicinal herb that his friend Gatsun had shown him. That friend, the son of the village pharmacist, had stated that the herb had analeptic properties.

“I hope you didn’t do anything dangerous...” Kalea said worriedly, her brow furrowed.

“We were fine,” Lucas explained. “There aren’t many monsters flying around during the day in the western mountains, and that steam gives us a clear view of things. If anything dangerous comes by, we’ll know immediately. Even if a monster were to attack, Helmios and I’ll be fine. Speaking of, he defeated a Rank C monster all by himself today.”

“R-Really? That’s quite amazing.”

Helmios felt uneasy under his mother’s gaze, but what Lucas had said was true. Though Helmios had been nervous, he had never thought himself to be in danger during the battle. He had felt himself growing stronger ever since he had slaughtered the goblin king last winter, and he earnestly followed his father’s advice. As a result, he always came home with nary a scratch.

Unfortunately, this did little to ease his mother’s worries. Would she be more at ease if he grew up? But Lucas failed to notice his son’s internal struggles.

“Perhaps you’ve been given a special Talent. A natural gift, maybe,” Lucas said.

“What’s that?” Helmios asked.

“Some people born into this world are bestowed Talents by Lord Elmea. You know that, don’t you? Among those Talents, there are some that are rarer than others. You might have been able to kill the goblin king because you were given that sort of natural gift—a special Talent.”

“We should find out during the Appraisal Ceremony in two days,” Kalea said.

Helmios turned and saw his mother smiling, convincing him that his actions had not been wrong. Three months ago, Kalea had been in such a precarious state that no one knew if she would live to see the next day. He had wished for his mother to survive long enough to attend his Appraisal Ceremony and learn what his Talent was. He had thought that would put her mind at ease.

That desire had led him to trek into the western mountains all by himself in search of starry grass, and ultimately, he had killed the goblin king and brought the medicinal herb back. He had known that his actions were reckless, and his mother had scolded him upon his return, which was unusual for her to do, but he was still glad that he had done it. Helmios believed he had made the correct decision that day.

“I know I’ve said this before, but I think he has the Talent of Sword Lord,” Lucas said. “It’ll cause a huge stir if that’s the case. An investigation team might arrive from the imperial capital, and even the emperor himself might allow us to enter the audience hall.”

As Lucas chattered on excitedly, Helmios stared at his mother, who was frowning once more.

“If that happens, it’ll be quite worrisome,” Kalea said softly.

“You think so? Why?” Lucas asked. “It’s an honorable feat. What’s more, our boy can go on to accomplish great things. He won’t just stop at defending a small village or becoming a bodyguard like me. He’ll do so much more!”

The boy noticed his mother glancing at Lucas’s left shoulder.

“The fief lord can look after him for a while,” Lucas continued. “I was there, so I know how safe it is. In fact, it’s much safer than here!”

When a child was found during an Appraisal Ceremony to have a Talent, they would leave their village of birth. The fief lord would take them in and raise them. But Lucas’s story only made Helmios more uneasy.

“I don’t want to leave this village,” the boy said.

If his father’s claims were true, he would be leaving his parents behind in this dangerous place. While they had plenty of medicine for now, it was not as though Kalea’s condition had been cured. Helmios was worried about his mother. Lucas would continue his work as a bodyguard, so with Helmios gone, Kalea would be left all alone. The boy’s face grew dark as he thought of the future.

“Oh dear, we mustn’t get too engrossed in our conversation,” Kalea said, raising her voice. “The stew will get cold. Helmios went through all the effort in making it, so we have to eat while it’s still warm.”

“You’re right,” Lucas replied.

Though the two went back to their food, Helmios’s anxiety only grew as he mulled over his thoughts.

The next day, Helmios went over to his childhood friend Gatsun’s home, carrying in the unusual medicinal herbs he had gathered the day prior. He then headed over to the only church in the village, where Dorothy was.

“Hey, Helmios. Here today too?” she asked.

“Yep,” the boy replied. “I won’t get in your way.”

“Okay.”

Aside from the days he went foraging in the mountains with his father, Helmios had started attending church every day. He was friends with Dorothy, who was busily helping the clergymen and apprentice clergymen. None of them seemed particularly bothered by Helmios's presence, instead hearing the villagers' prayers and listening to their stories as usual. The injured paid a fee to get healed.

Some days, Helmios would sit in a corner and gaze at the clergymen casting their healing magic, while on others, he would help Dorothy clean the church. Once the line of villagers had started to dwindle, the clergyman in charge of the church, Purcell, approached the boy. Purcell was Dorothy's father.

"You seem to be troubled, Helmios," the man said in a friendly manner as he sat down next to the boy.

"Yeah. I'm worried about my mom," Helmios confessed.

"I've heard her condition has stabilized."

"It has, but that doesn't mean she's cured. She has coughing fits every other day, and every five days she'll be too sick to get out of bed. I just wish she'd get better..."

"I see."

"When I asked Gatsun about it, he told me that if the medicinal herbs around here aren't effective, I should head to a bigger town."

"Then why don't you do just that? I've heard rumors about you. It sounds as though Lord Elmea has blessed you with a Talent, and if you go to the fief lord's city, you might be able to procure the medicine for your mother."

"But that might be too late."

In the morning, when Helmios had shown Gatsun's father the herbs he had gathered, the man had stated that they might not be enough to cure Kalea's sickness. "It's best if you go to the imperial capital and visit a large pharmacy that imports medicine from all over the world. There might be a cure for your mother there," Purcell had advised.

"Well, that's when I wondered if healing magic would do the trick," Helmios said.

Clergyman Purcell frowned. "But we aren't given enough power to heal your mother's ailment. It pains me to admit that I cannot be of much help to you, but surely you're already aware of that."

Indeed, over the past three months, Helmios had been selling any herbs, monster meat, and materials he obtained during his excursions, using the

money he earned to make donations to the church in hopes of curing his mother. However, Kalea's condition had not improved.

"But still, I want to do something for my mom..." Helmios muttered.

"Do you wish to learn Healing Magic, then?" Purcell asked.

"Yeah. Would you please let me watch you guys cast your Healing Magic for a bit longer?"

"Most certainly. But no matter what Talent you have, you won't be able to use magic right away. Your Talent will also change the effects of your Healing Magic. For example, I can't use much magic because I'm a Cleric. If I had a Talent on par with a Saintess, perhaps I could do much more."

"So even if I try hard, I won't be able to do anything if I don't have the Talent for it?"

"That's right. One cannot use Healing Magic without a Talent. But beyond that, even if you *do* have a Talent, some are better than others. I won't be the one deciding that, so please allow me to be present for the Ceremony." Purcell seemed to scold himself for speaking out of line as a mere clergyman who worked to spread the teachings of the God of Creation.

"Thank you," Helmios said.

No matter the case, he would not find out without trying. He raised his head with renewed determination, and as he did, he saw a group of five villagers enter the church. They were chattering away about a broken axle on an old cargo carriage. It had caused the carriage to flip onto its side, and three people had been thrown under the carriage and the barrels of liquor they had been transporting. They were suffering from broken shoulders and legs.

Dorothy and Helmios worked together to gently lay the one with a broken leg on the ground and those with broken shoulders on a chair. One of the men placed a few coins into the pot in front of an altar on a platform, then prayed to Lord Elmea.

Clergyman Purcell gave a small nod and crouched in front of the one with a broken leg. He placed his hand over the wounded area and chanted, "Heal."

Light gathered under the clergyman's hand, and the misty particles were sucked into the broken bone. The leg started to glow and let out a few crackles as it was restored to a healthy state. The injured man, whose face had been contorted with pain, now looked calm and serene.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore!” he cried. “Thank you, Clergyman!”

“You should be fine for now, but I suggest you take it easy for the day,” Purcell replied.

Next, the clergyman stood up and headed to one of the men with a broken shoulder. Helmios followed him and carefully observed as he cast Healing Magic over the man’s shoulder.

“Heal.”

Purcell placed his hand over the wounded area and chanted the spell, and light gathered under his hand before flowing into the injury. And presto, the wound was healed. Helmios stared intently at this process.

“Wow! I feel so much better! Thank you!” the man happily shouted his praise.

Purcell nodded and placed his hand over the other man who had a broken shoulder.

“Heal.”

All the while, Helmios continued to watch the process.

“I’m so grateful! I’m so glad that Lord Elmea and Purcell are with us!”

The group of five, including the healed trio, all said their thanks.

“Phew... I’m a little tired,” Purcell said, heading for the altar and reaching for the pitcher of water on the platform. He poured the water into a clay cup and gulped it down. Only he, Helmios, and Dorothy were left in the church.

Helmios sat down on an open chair, placed his right leg over his left thigh, and rolled up his pants to reveal a bruise that was blooming on his shin. The day prior, when he was gathering herbs by the stream, he had slipped and hit his leg on a large rock. Helmios placed both hands over his bruise and chanted as though he were praying.

“Heal!”

Nothing occurred.

“Rgh! Heal!”

Unfortunately, no healing came his way. But Helmios did not give up and chanted the spell three or four more times. Dorothy, who was watching, walked up to him.

“Are you practicing?” she asked.

“Mm-hmm,” Helmios answered.

“Is it something you can do with practice?”

“I don’t know. But you won’t know unless you try.”

Helmios envisioned his father training with his sword while shirtless in

the middle of the cold winter and his mother expertly preparing a meal.

“Both dad and mom said they could do things well because they practiced a lot,” Helmios said. “I also learned how to wield my sword thanks to dad, and I can cook like my mom. If there’s any hope of me using Healing Magic, I have to practice.”

Dorothy gave a small sigh at Helmios’s serious expression. “You think so? But I hope that’s the case.” She turned toward the altar, closed her eyes, and put her fingertips together. “Lord Elmea, please allow my friend Helmios to use Healing Magic.”

Helmios felt a tug at his heartstrings upon hearing her prayer. When he turned to look up at her profile, she was nothing but serious, and he felt like he had to repay her friendship in kind.

“Hmph! Heal!” he chanted to no avail.

He chanted five, ten, fifteen more times in hopes of casting the healing spell while Dorothy continued to pray.

Purcell noticed the two kids and approached them. “You really *are* practicing hard, Helmios.”

“Yup!”

“Then why don’t I teach you the method that the Church taught me when I was younger.”

Both Helmios and Dorothy widened their eyes in shock.

“Really?!” the boy cried.

“Healing Magic has one borrow the power of Lord Elmea. When casting it, you must imbue your hands with your strength as though you’re gathering the power of Lord Elmea, which permeates throughout this world. However, you must relax your body and try to send the power within your soul into the palm of your hand. You must envision creating an area where you may gather the energy and magic of Lord Elmea.”

“The power within my soul? And I use that to gather the energy of Lord Elmea? I have to picture all that in my mind?”

“That’s right. When you dig near a river, water will pour into the hole, won’t it? Just as you can expertly dig a hole to contain the water, you must also build a place for Lord Elmea’s energy to flow into. Do you understand?”

“I think so... I’ll test it out!”

Helmios nodded and envisioned exactly what Purcell had advised. He imagined the power of his soul flowing through his body and into an empty space before transforming into a healing spell. In that moment, his

body wavered as though enveloped by a heat haze.

“Huh? Helmios?” Purcell called out in alarm.

But the boy was too focused to hear his name. “Hrgh! Heal!” he chanted again, and a tiny light popped out from between his hands.

“Oh my gosh!” Dorothy gasped in awe.

“It can’t be... But that means...” Purcell muttered in shock before his eyes lit up with excitement. “Helmios, listen very carefully. Repeat what you just did and try to *push* that light toward your injury.”

“Okay!” the boy cried before gasping in astonishment.

When he did as he had been told, the light melted into his bruise. The spot felt somewhat warm for a moment, and the bruise faded right before his eyes.

“Wow!” he crowed excitedly, turning to the clergyman. “I can use Healing Magic! How was it, Purcell?! Did I do it right?”

“Undoubtedly so...” Purcell murmured. “But while this kind of practice could hardly be called a lesson, you were able to use it almost immediately. And what was that phantom that I saw?”

The clergyman could not hide his shock. All he had done was give a few pointers, yet unbelievable as it was, the boy was able to learn the spell. This went beyond just having a Talent or the fact that he was a fast learner—it was on a completely different level.

“Thank you!” Helmios shouted.

He bowed toward a stunned Purcell and headed out the church door. The boy leaped outside and practically flew into his lopsided house.

“I’m back!” he yelled.

In his excitement, he had opened and closed the door with all his might, causing the house to shake with a *bang!*

“Calm down, Helmios. You’ll knock our house down,” Lucas scolded, placing firewood next to the stove on the dirt floor.

“Sorry, dad! But I just learned how to use Healing Magic!” the boy cried.

In contrast to his excitement, Lucas maintained his cool. “Healing Magic? Did you really?”

“Goodness, what’s all the fuss?” Kalea peeked out from the living room. She had apparently been getting some rest.

“Helmios said—” Lucas started.

“Mom, I can use Healing Magic!” the boy gushed excitedly. “It’s true! Even Purcell said so!”

“Purcell did? I don’t think he’s one to lie...” Lucas muttered with a look of suspicion.

Helmios puffed his chest out with pride. “Just watch! Maybe I can heal your arm back too, dad!” He placed both hands over Lucas’s left shoulder. “Watch! Heal!”

Like before, a tiny orb of light burst forth from Helmios’s palms before melting into Lucas’s arm.

“Wow...” the man murmured. “That really *is* the light from Heal. Huh?! What’s going on?!”

While Lucas was in awe of having Heal cast on him, there was a loud crack and a snap. He felt an oddity in his left shoulder where his arm had been severed. His surprise at this development was clear on his face.

“Huh?! Look!” Kalea gasped excitedly.

“I-Impossible! This can’t be!” Lucas cried.

It had been many years since he had lost his arm, and his wound had completely closed since. His healed nub throbbed before an arm started to grow, making loud cracking sounds. In a matter of seconds, he had regained his lost arm in its entirety, all the way down to the tips of his fingers. He was totally healed.

“Huh?! Dad?!” Helmios yelped. The boy had only been half serious when he had cast his spell and had not expected to see his father’s arm regenerate. He fell to the ground in surprise.

“I simply can’t believe it,” Lucas said, clenching his left hand and confirming its existence. His mind was desperately trying to process what had just occurred. “I’ve truly got my arm back...”

“Awesome! Now it’s your turn, mom!” Helmios beamed.

“Me?” Kalea asked.

“That’s right! I learned this chant for your sake, you know!”

“Hey, I’m still celebrating my arm here!” Lucas said, requesting a bit more time to revel in the miracle he had been granted.

“Mom, I want to cure your illness!” Helmios declared with great enthusiasm.

“Thank you, my darling son,” Kalea said.

Tears streamed down her face as she smiled and approached Helmios. Lucas used his large right hand to give Helmios’s back a firm push. The boy nodded and placed both hands over his mother’s chest as she knelt before him, her eyes closed. He desperately wished for her health as he chanted the spell.

“Heal!”

A tiny orb of light popped out of his palms and flowed into Kalea’s chest. He instinctively gazed at his mother’s face to see that her cheeks had started to turn rosy.

“Mom! Your cheeks!” Helmios cried.

“Kalea, you’ve got a healthy glow! The color’s returning to your cheeks!” Lucas added in shock.

“Huh? Is that so?” Kalea asked. “But you’re right, my chest *does* feel warm...”

“Really? Thank goodness!” Helmios said joyfully, convinced that his mother had been cured.

“I can’t believe you actually learned how to use Healing Magic...” Lucas murmured. “But we don’t know if you’re fully healed yet, Kalea. Let’s carry you to bed just in case.”

“Right,” Helmios agreed as he saw his father carry his mother. Her cheeks looked pinker than ever before, however, so he confidently said, “I’m sure you’ll be all right now, though.”

Kalea was gently carried to her bed.

“Dear, you said that Helmios must have the talent of Sword Lord,” she said. “Can someone with that Talent use Healing Magic?”

“I don’t think so,” Lucas said, placing a blanket over her and tucking her inside. “If he’s skilled with both his sword and Healing Magic, he might be a Holy Knight.”

As far as Lucas knew, that was the only Talent that could use both weapons and Healing Magic. Those with the Talent were not adept at all forms of Healing Magic like Saintesses, but it was still highly coveted because it allowed for the use of both the sword and healing spells. A majority of Holy Knights ended up becoming the heads of the warriors guarding a Church of Elmea in a large city or were promoted to become members of the royal knights that protected the emperor.

However, Lucas was not sure about the capabilities of a Holy Knight. Certainly, they were not as skilled as Saintesses, but did they have the ability to regenerate a lost arm or cure Kalea’s disease, which had been thought to be all but incurable? He could not find the answer to his question.

“In any case, we’ll know tomorrow,” Lucas said.

“You’re right,” Kalea replied.

Helmios could hear the doubt that clouded their voices.

The following afternoon, the children who had turned five that year had gathered in front of the small church in Cortana Village. A total of thirty kids were there with their parents, forming a small crowd. Helmios and his parents were among them, waiting for the Appraisal Ceremony to start.

“What’s wrong?” Kalea asked, noticing her son gazing up at her.

“Nothing,” Helmios replied.

Kalea had been able to walk out the door this morning with more energy than ever before. It was as though she had never fallen ill. Helmios was convinced that the healing spell he had used the night prior had done the trick.

A while later, the church bell rang, signaling that it was noon. From the village entrance, three carriages made their way inside, guarded by knights riding on horseback. The insignia of the Church of Elmea embellished the side of these carriages, and each carried a clergyman who was tasked with performing the Appraisal Ceremony. Helmios remembered seeing this in years prior, but he felt like there were more knights on guard than there had been the previous year.

“What’s going on, dad?” Helmios wondered.

“I don’t have a clue. But don’t leave my side, okay?” Lucas replied.

“Okay.”

The boy was troubled by this discrepancy, and so too were the villagers. They were all clearly nervous about the knights who dwarfed their numbers. The knight leading the group dismounted his horse, and Cortana’s village chief approached him.

“Welcome to our village, Knight Captain Maxil,” the village chief said. “I must say that I’m a bit perplexed. Why are there so many of you?” The chief selected his words carefully, making sure to not express how worried he was.

“I apologize for not giving prior notice.” Maxil’s voice rang out clearly, reaching Helmios’s ears. “There have been more cases of Talent hunters running amok as of late, so we’ve increased our numbers as a security measure. We’ll begin shortly.”

“Dad, what are Talent hunters?” Helmios asked.

“They’re bandits who kidnap children who’ve been blessed with Talents,” Lucas explained.

“Huh? Why would they do something like that?”

“They kidnap these kids and sell them off as slaves.”

Helmios fell silent. To protect children with Talents from the Talent hunters' heinous crimes, the kids were sent to live with the fief lord for a while.

A few moments later, preparations for the Appraisal Ceremony were completed, and Helmios and the other kids were lined up in front of the church door.

"I am Knight Captain Maxil under Viscount Howlden. Residents of Cortana Village, it's wonderful to see that you're all in good health."

"Thank you, sir!" the village chief shouted, lowering his head. The other adults followed suit a moment later, and some of the kids bowed as well, mimicking their parents' actions.

"We'll have the children enter the church one at a time for the Appraisal Ceremony," Maxil said. "Parents are allowed to follow their own children inside, but no one else is allowed to enter without permission. Based on the results of the Appraisal Ceremony, children who have superb Talents will be escorted to Howlden's city before the end of the day. Including the children who'll stay in the village, I ask that you keep the results of the Ceremony a secret until the end of the day."

The captain spoke very clearly, and Helmios realized that this was to prevent anyone from being attacked by Talent hunters.

"Now, I'd like to have the first child to enter the church," Maxil said. "Village chief, if you would, please."

"Certainly. First to enter will be Chikum, the child of Harbay."

The first family entered upon hearing the village chief's instruction. Every family took a different amount of time; some came out quickly, while others were inside for quite a while. Gatsun, the child of a pharmacist, came out within a few moments.

"Hey, Gatsun's out already," Helmios muttered upon spotting his friend leaving the church with a smile on his face. Then, as if having heard him, Gatsun looked over at Helmios.

"Hey, Helmios!" the boy shouted. "I'm—"

"Hey," one of the knights guarding the church said, cutting him off.

Gatsun's father swiftly came up from behind and clapped his hand over his son's face.

"Mmph!" Gatsun cried in a muffled voice.

"I'm so sorry. My child is so careless," the father apologized. But it was clear that the boy had some sort of Talent.

If the knight didn't stop him, would Gatsun have been abducted by

some evil people? Helmios wondered as a shiver ran down his spine.

Dorothy was up next. Her mother accompanied her into the church, where her father already was. For whatever reason, Dorothy also came back outside within mere moments.

“Mom...” she said.

“Stay quiet, Dorothy,” her mother warned.

“Yup, I know.”

Judging from their conversation, she had a Talent, but she looked rather glum in comparison to Gatsun.

Is something the matter?

Even from a distance, Helmios could tell that the hand Dorothy was using to hold her mother’s was quickly turning pale. She faced the ground with a frown, and her mother looked rather lonely. Only then did Helmios realize that Dorothy was anxious about leaving her mother’s side.

Right, if the Talent’s good enough, you’ll be whisked away to the lord’s city today.

Helmios started to grow nervous as well. Until now, he had been elated by the knowledge that he surely possessed some sort of Talent, but things were not so simple. Joy was not the only feeling that filled his mind. If he had a Talent, he could hunt more easily and forage plenty of medicinal herbs, and he did not need to fear any monsters. However, that also meant he would likely be taken from his village. The boy looked up at his parents. Lucas was staring at the church doors, while Kalea was looking down at her son, locking eyes with him.

“You’ll be fine, Helmios,” she assured him. “Whatever happens, your father and I will be by your side.”

When he felt a warm hand over his shoulder, he heard the village chief call for him. “Next, Helmios, child of Lucas.”

“Here!” Helmios replied, and started for the dimly lit church.

Inside, all the windows were closed, and a crystal ball and a black plank had been placed in front of the platform used for sermons. Only the light from some candles illuminated the room. A total of six adults were waiting to carry out the Appraisal Ceremony: Clergyman Purcell, two of his colleagues, Maxil, and two knights.

When Helmios approached the group, the knight captain looked rather surprised.

“Why, if it isn’t Lucas! You’re in this village?” Maxil asked.

“Yes, sir. It’s been a while,” Lucas said.

“It certainly has, Sir Maxil,” Kalea added.

Helmios noticed that his parents were familiar with the knight captain.

“Hmm?! Huh?! Your arm!” Maxil gasped, shocked that Lucas’s lost arm had magically grown back.

“Oh, this? Well, you see, last night my child healed me...” Lucas began, explaining the events of the night prior.

“Is that so? Is he your child? What’s his name?”

“His name is Helmios, sir.”

“And what about you, Kalea? You’re looking quite healthy. Has your ailment been healed too?”

“I believe so, sir,” Kalea replied. “I can hardly believe it myself. I feel great.”

Maxil widened his eyes in shock. “Indeed? Then he undoubtedly must possess something akin to Saintess. Perhaps he’s the one the lord was talking about.”

“Has he mentioned something about this year’s Appraisal Ceremony?” Lucas asked.

“Quite a bit, in fact. When we were making preparations to set off to your village, he enigmatically told me to go with a squad of a hundred soldiers in tow. That wasn’t entirely possible since we’ve received monster hunting requests from all around the fief, though. Good grief... Ah, I suppose I’ve said too much. Let’s appraise this child, shall we?”

Helmios felt his father’s large hand push his back, and the boy stepped up toward the crystal ball and black plank.

“Place your hand on the crystal ball,” Clergyman Purcell instructed.

“Okay,” Helmios replied obediently.



The moment he did so, there was a brilliant flash of light, and the dark church was lit up like the sky on a cloudless day. Helmios and everyone present reflexively lifted their hands to shield their eyes. The light quickly faded, and the church grew dark once more. Silver letters then began popping up on the black plank.

“Wh-What is this?!” Purcell murmured in awe.

“What are you— Whoa!” Maxil gasped, equally shocked by what he was reading.

Helmios, unfortunately, had not learned to read just yet and thus could not understand what the letters meant. He turned around and approached his father, who stood frozen in surprise.

“What does it say, dad?”

Lucas gazed down at his son for a moment, silently peering into the child’s innocent face. He looked up and turned to his wife, Kalea, before giving a slow nod and crouching down to match Helmios’s eye level. Upon doing so, he stared directly into the boy’s eyes.

“It says ‘Hero,’” Lucas finally said.

“Huh? ‘H-Hero’? You mean...” Helmios stammered.

“You’re the Hero chosen by Lord Elmea.”

Lucas, Purcell, Maxil, and all the adults present had seen the result with their own eyes.

Name: Helmios
HP: S
MP: A
Attack: S
Endurance: S
Agility: S
Intelligence: A
Luck: A
Talent: Hero

“Indeed, it *does* say ‘Hero,’” one of the knights said in a trembling voice, swiftly checking the bound bundle of parchment. “But such a Talent is unheard of!”

“So many of his stats are S, and the rest are A...” the other knight murmured, tracing his finger over the glowing letters. He simply could not

believe what he was seeing.

“Dear...” Kalea said.

“I had no idea...” Lucas murmured. “I had no idea that Helmios had truly been given a natural gift. No wonder he was able to beat the goblin king back then. It all makes sense now.”

“The goblin king?” Maxil asked. “What do you mean?”

Lucas enlightened the knight captain about the events that had transpired three months ago, on a winter day in the western mountains. Maxil nodded firmly while listening intently.

“I see,” he said. “I suppose my lord knew about this. But how was he able to know about this beforehand? No, such an unprecedented result must certainly be the doing of Lord Elmea himself. Or perhaps the Church of Elmea had told my lord about this.”

“Sir Maxil, will Helmios—” Lucas began.

The captain nodded before the man could finish. “Indeed. I know that this is tough for you as parents and especially for your child, but he’ll be guided to my lord’s city with the other children later today. Speaking of... Hey! Bring it to me!”

“Yes, sir!” one of the knights replied, carrying a tray with several leather bags.

Maxil took one of the bags and handed it to Lucas. “This is a token of gratitude from the lord— No, perhaps it’s more of a symbol of apology.”

“B-But...” Lucas spluttered.

“We will be taking your precious child for the sake of the viscount, and by extension, the whole of the Empire of Giamut. Please take this as our acknowledgment of your sacrifice.”

“I’ve heard of no such thing before...” Lucas started before noticing his wife standing beside him and reaching out for the bag. “Kalea!”

Once she had taken the bag, Helmios heard the unmistakable clinks of money rustling around within.

“Since that day, I’ve known this time would come,” she said. “My husband and I have made our resolve.”

“Mom?!” Helmios cried in shock.

She looked down at her son, the light of the candles bouncing off the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes. “Don’t worry, Helmios. No matter what happens, no matter where you may be, your father and I are always by your side.”

As tears streamed down her cheeks, she managed to choke out her

words clearly. Her expression and words burned themselves into Helmios's mind; he would never forget them.

"So go on," she continued. "Go on and use your Talent to help the world."

A few other children had been appraised after Helmios, and the Ceremony had drawn to a close. Helmios, Gatsun, Dorothy, and one other unknown child were all ushered into a carriage.

"I guess you have a Talent too, Helmios," Dorothy said glumly.

"Yeah..." He opened the window of the carriage and stared outside.

The view of Cortana Village that greeted him was exactly the one he remembered. But he knew that he would be unable to see this sight again for a while. He was sure that he would return one day, but he was being sent off to the city today, and his belongings would arrive later. There was no knowing when he would make it back home.

As Helmios took in the scenery, he found his parents. Lucas, possibly not used to having his arm back just yet, was leaning slightly to his left, toward Kalea, while he waved. His slanted posture reminded the boy of the lopsided house he had lived in. Kalea stood straight up, supporting her husband's tilted body.

"People of Cortana Village, we're setting off!" Maxil said from outside. "You kids have been bestowed Talents by Lord Elmea. We swear on our lives and our honor as knights that we'll protect you on your trip and ensure that you make it to the city safely. You have nothing to fear."

The carriage creaked and clattered forward as it slowly made its way out of the village. As the familiar scenery grew farther away, Helmios could not help but lean out the window.

"Mom! Dad! Be well!" he yelled with all his might. It was all he could manage to say for now.

Guided by his natural gift, Helmios headed for the city of Howlden.

Afterword

Volume 8, which I'm calling the Daemonism arc, has finally come to a close. Thank you so much for reading this far.

Dogora, with his pent-up frustrations, has finally awakened, and we can look forward to his future feats! Bumpkin-faced Dogora was really popular, so I made him stand out quite a bit! To provide a bit more insight, Dogora and Allen usually directly contrast each other. While Allen has his memories from his past life and was blessed with an eight-star Talent while being in Hell Mode, Dogora's Talent was a mere one-star, and he wasn't even able to use his Extra Skill properly. The boy first appeared while stumbling over himself. You can call him one of the main characters who originated from this world.

Allen's friends each have their own roles and have joined his party with their own goals. Keel also differed from Allen's direction: should they save as many people as possible or only the ones in front of them? I'm sure they'll tackle more obstacles in the future, and Allen will continue his adventure while talking it over with his friends.

Please let me segue into an apology, or an excuse of sorts. There's a reason behind these volumes being divided like this. Until the fourth arc, I wrote so that each volume would contain one arc. But as I started to write about Allen's friends and other side stories to flesh out the world, it couldn't fit into one volume. I'm only allowed so many pages per volume. So there might be times when an arc will span multiple volumes, but I hope you understand.

Combined with the invasion of Rohzenheim and the theft of the divine vessel in the Heavenly Realm, we're getting inklings of what the Demon Lord Army is planning. How will Beast Crown Prince Beku get dragged into the affairs of the Demon Lord Army? It'd be great if you'd follow the side stories along until the end too. Please continue to look forward to Allen's battle against the Demon Lord Army.

Now, I think these afterwords have made it a custom to look at my past. I'll be frank, I'm just trying to fill out a word count here, but it'd be great if you'd just read along while thinking, "Damn, a person like him can write novels?"

This is the story of when I, Hamuo, entered my tenth year at a company. I feel like my true age might come to light soon (lol). At first, I was able to commute to my workplace from my home, and I had no reason to leave my parents' house, but within a few years, I'd been transferred to a different company. A pretty big one too.

By about my third year, I thought that I'd get chased out of my company, but it turned out that I had enough social skills to cling to my job. I transferred out of the prefecture a few times before returning to my hometown, and when that happened, what surprised me *wasn't* that my mother refused to let me move back in. That's right, I didn't have the mindset of "Ooh! Let me not pay rent if I'm back home!" I stood on my own two feet and became independent. Ta-da! So no one can yell at me for spending my bonus on gacha games.

A year after I'd moved back to the town I grew up in, I got a phone call from my father. "Hey, we're gonna forage for bamboo shoots next month," he said.

"Oh yeah, you told me something like that in December," I replied. "Sounds good."

After my father retired from the company he'd worked at for so long, he started to enjoy his hobbies. He probably had quite the list of things he wanted to do after he left. For starters, he rented a field nearby and started to frequently visit it. He was also renting a portion of a mountain with a bamboo forest and would forage for bamboo shoots. I was worried about sending him off into the mountains alone, so I tagged along.

"Whoa, did you get a new car?" I asked while I was waiting in front of the station.

My father came out of an unfamiliar vehicle. "Yep. At this age, I don't know how many years I have left to drive what I want, so I just decided to buy a new one."

I don't remember the type of vehicle, but I remember that it was a striking purple color.

"Huh..." I said.

It'd been quite a while since I'd spent some time alone with my father, and we talked about quite a few things. And though we had a bit of catching up to do, we eventually ran out of topics. If anyone else is planning on renting out a bamboo forest, I suggest you choose a closer location. My father was interested in all sorts of events in my life, but one of the big things was my job.

“Hamuo, have you become a subsection chief yet?” he asked.

“No, not yet,” I replied. I wanted to apologize for being a son who couldn’t be promoted, but I wanted to be praised for hanging in there for a decade. “When did you become one, dad?”

“Thirty-seven.”

I’d been employed in the same industry as my father, and it seemed he was a bit curious about my promotions. He said he became a subsection chief when he was thirty-seven, and I was about thirty-five when we had this talk...I think. And I was yet to write a novel. Back then, my father didn’t even dream that I’d be writing novels. I didn’t either.

“Is work not going well?” he asked.

“I think it’s going normally. I’ll just be patient,” I replied.

“I see. Well, you gotta listen to your boss’s orders.”

“Yeah.”

I was thirty-five and still getting lectured by my parents. I still had a long way to go, and I reflected on my actions. The car’s GPS indicated a restaurant on the way to the bamboo forest.

“This place is famous,” my father said. “Let’s get some ramen before we go foraging.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t tell your mom. She’ll get angry because this stuff’s bad for me.”

“Okay.”

My father loved his noodles, and he would apparently visit this ramen place pretty often when he went bamboo shoot hunting. As he’d hit retirement age and was living frugally, he’d gotten rather skinny, and this ramen place might have been one of his few joys in life. The soft noodles weren’t to my liking—I prefer mine to have more chew—but it’s a good memory. He told me to keep it a secret from my mother, and I did, but I figured I could put it in this afterword. Anyway, we gained energy after eating some grub as we headed into the mountains for our main event.

“Huh? Don’t fall off,” I warned. “I can’t even see the road through the window.”

The roads were so narrow that when I peered out the window, I could only see the slant of a cliff. One slip and you’d roll right down the mountain.

“Bah, don’t worry,” my father replied.

I felt like I had plenty to worry about, and I can still remember the dangerous mountain path.

“All right, could you get the shovels and gloves from the back?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Feeling that I should do the heavy lifting, I took out the shovels, gloves, and a large basket. I felt that it was my mission to fill this basket with bamboo shoots, so I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then got out of the car and started digging. He wanted to give some out to his neighbors too, so we wanted to dig up ten shoots or so.

The bamboo shoots poked their heads out between the brush and bamboo grove. Once you got the hang of it, they were easy to spot. I prefer bamboo shoots to mushrooms.

“Nice! You got a big one,” my father praised.

“Yeah,” I said, huffing loudly. “Phew, this is tough.”

My father did a little happy dance at the size of the bamboo shoot, and I desperately tried to catch my breath while slipping in a complaint. The grass and stems were in the way, and the dirt was hard to dig. The effort didn’t seem worth it. It probably would’ve been a lot cheaper to just buy them from a grocery store. I hope everyone can enjoy more peaceful hobbies postretirement and not drag their kids along for tough work.

Now that I’ve hit my word count, I’ll be calling it a day. Next up is volume 9, which is the last one before the big two-digit volume number. How long will *Hell Mode* continue? I’d be happy if you could look forward to the next installment. The manga version has also been chugging along. Please continue to support that as well. Till we meet again!

Bonus Short Story

Pelomas the Merchant Wants Advice

Everyone in the Kingdom of Ratash had heard of the Pelomas Whaling Company. It had been formed when Pelomas was still a student at a commercial school. He was rather famous within the industry, but the moment he graduated, he created new branches around the area to establish new trade routes with other nations. All the while, he processed foods for consumption, managed lodgings, and increased the number of items the company handled. His company currently had over a thousand employees, and there were a few hundred mercenaries contracted to guard items and provide security at all times. Recently, however, Pelomas's passion for his company seemed to have waned.

"A class promotion dungeon, huh?" He sighed while staring at a piece of paper. "And it's in Academy City?"

He was inside an expensive inn within Ratash, on the highest floor specially reserved for nobles. The floor was lined with plush carpets, and the balcony opposite the royal castle gave a stunning view of the royal capital below.

The inn stood in a prime location known as the royal castle square. It had once belonged to a wealthy merchant named Chester, who had decided to make his company a subsidiary of the Whaling Company. The inn was now Pelomas's. Now, whenever Pelomas needed a place to stay within the royal capital during his business trips, he used the room he currently occupied.

Just yesterday, he had met with the ministers of trade and finance to report his earnings and expenditures. Once the meeting was over, the Minister of Finance had handed him a piece of paper before taking his leave. It contained information about the class promotion dungeon that was set to open soon. Pelomas had ties to the royal family and had heard rumors about this dungeon during its early stages. He had asked the Minister of Finance to report to him when details about this became clear.

He was gathering information about this dungeon because of Fiona, a lady whom he loved one-sidedly. She had rejected him, stating that she

liked strong men, and he had never forgotten her words. Ever since his heart had been broken, he visited dungeons whenever he had the time between his duties managing his company. He had asked the adventurers Raven, Rita, and Milci—a trio he had employed since the founding of the company—to guard him as he attempted to overcome a Trial of the Gods and gain more power.

However, Pelomas was not sure if he could win Fiona’s heart even if he truly had become stronger. He had worked tirelessly to expand his company, and he had enough accomplishments to his name that even her father, Chester, had approved their marriage. Yet Fiona still turned him down. This pained him greatly, finding her rejection to also imply that all his efforts thus far had been for naught.

It was then that he had heard about the class promotion dungeon. Not only would clearing it make him stronger, but it would also allow him to improve the Talent God had given him. Pelomas saw a sliver of hope, wondering if Fiona would look his way if his Talent had been upgraded. But a part of him worried that all his hard work would once again prove meaningless, making it difficult for him to act. He had summoned Raven, Rita, and Milci to ask for their opinions, but Raven had not shown up yet despite it being two hours past their scheduled time.

“Academy City. That really takes me back. I wonder if going there would be a good change of pace for me,” Pelomas said, letting out a very loud sigh.

Rita, who was sharing a table with him, banged her fists on the table. “Ugh, just quit it already!” she bellowed. “How much longer are you gonna mope around?!”

“Now, now, Rita. It’s tough for him too,” Milci said, trying to calm her down.

“But he’s been sulking ever since he was rejected! That’s why nothing he does will go well! Men should be more... Oh, I met one at a tavern the other day.” Rita went on to tell Pelomas about a rowdy ruffian she had met recently.

“Does Fiona like men like that, then?” Pelomas wondered. Though he had devoted his life to business and his studies, even he was aware that some women like strong men who had a bit of a wild streak to them.

“That might not be the case, Pelomas,” Milci interjected. “The clergyman that I was indebted to was a splendid man who could calmly take care of any problems.”

“Here we go again. I’ve heard this story like a thousand times, Milci,” Rita said. One could practically hear her rolling her eyes.

“I haven’t told it *that* often!”

Despite Milci’s insistence, even Pelomas was aware that she had the Talent of Cleric and had undergone an apprenticeship within a church. She had met a clergyman in his sixties during that time, and he was her first love. Pelomas had heard about it quite a few times.

“But I don’t think that’s quite it either,” Pelomas muttered. He could not nod his head in agreement with either of the romantic tales the women in his party had told.

“What do you mean by that?” Rita demanded. “In the end, men should be reliable. Even the clergyman in Milci’s story was a ‘splendid man,’ wasn’t he? Pelomas, you just need to show how reliable and splendid you are. If even Chester approves of your marriage with Fiona, you can brute force your way into her heart! Practically push her down, no questions asked!”

“Not that again, Rita!” Milci scolded.

“Am I wrong, though? A man should be reliable! And men should be the ones to buy ladies drinks at a tavern.” Rita’s advice was filled with bias and stereotypes.

Milci tried to drown that all out. “Being forceful isn’t always it, Pelomas. There’s a time and place for everything, and it could do more harm than good! I think a splendid man should *never* be forceful and suppress those desires!”

Pelomas only pondered further. “I guess I’ll ask Raven for his advice too.”

“Hey!” Rita yelled. “Our passionate, fiery romance stories are *way* more useful, aren’t they?! Speaking of fiery, one winter day, when I had to leave the room because I received a delivery request—”

“Uh, no, I’ve heard enough,” Pelomas said, forcing the conversation to a close. He had heard thousands of her tales of romance, but he felt that none were useful.

“Oh, come on! At least hear me out!” Rita cried.

Just then, there was a loud bang as the door of the room opened with gusto. Raven practically fell forward as he entered. “Heeey, guys... I’m late, damn... Hic!” he said, slurring his words.

The three in the room were stunned for a moment as Raven staggered toward the table to grab a chair. He slipped and fell, lying face up on the

carpet. Milci hastily rushed to his side.

“Oh no, he’s injured!” she cried. “Whoa! He reeks of booze!”

“Yeah, at the square...” Raven mumbled.

Drunk out of his mind, Raven managed to tell his story. He had met a beautiful woman in the square of the royal capital and had wanted to be friends with her. His persistence ended with him getting beaten up by her guards, and he decided to enter a tavern to drink his sorrows away, leading to his tardiness. It took the others quite a while to piece it all together.

Rita looked at him wearily. “So, you made us wait for such a stupid reason. You’re an idiot.”

“C’mon, Pelomas...” Raven said, slurring his words as snot dripped down his face. “Let’s ditch this place. The ladies here are all snobs...”

It was then that Pelomas realized that no one here could give decent advice that would help ease his worries.

“Maybe I’ll consult Allen about it,” he muttered. “Oh, and by the way, there’s a class promotion dungeon coming to Academy City soon.”

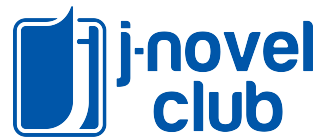
Raven stood up. “Class promotion! That’s it! We should get stronger and more important so we can get back at those hoity-toity women! All right, c’mon! Let’s drink! A precelebration pint!”

“Raven, weren’t you *just* drinking?” Milci asked.

“C’mon, don’t be so stiff,” Rita replied. “Pelomas, you’re sticking with us until we’re done, you hear?”

“All right, but don’t go too crazy,” he replied.

Thanks to his trio of guards, Pelomas felt like he had regained a bit of energy.



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