

3 DAIGO MURASAKI
Illustration by KURETA



DEMON LORD 2099

METR-UTOPIA CITY YOKOHAMA



A group of diverse anime-style characters stand together against a futuristic cityscape at night. In the foreground, a central character with dark hair and a white jacket looks directly at the viewer. Behind them are several other characters: a blonde woman in a blue jacket, a woman with blue hair and a red jacket, a man with long blue hair, and another woman with blue hair. The background features a large, glowing circular structure with concentric rings and a central spire, set against a dark, cloudy sky.

DEMON LORD 2099

3. META-UTOPIA CITY YOKOHAMA

DAIGO MURASAKI Illustration by KURETA

THE DEMON LORD IMPRISONED

META-UTOPIA CITY

Cell 045

190

180

170

160

150

140

130

120

110

100

190

180

170

160

150

140

130

120

110

100

Cell 045

"I snuck
into Yokohama
to conduct an
investigation."



**Hero
Gram**
The Hero of legend
who defeated Veltol five
hundred years ago. He
was hired to investigate
Yokohama, where he runs
into Veltol yet again.



**Aether Hacker
Takahashi**
A high schooler and skilled
aether hacker engaged in
criminal activity. Infiltrates
the prison island of
Yokohama with Veltol.



**Demon Lord
Veltol**
The legendary Demon
Lord who once ruled the
Immortal Kingdom. Came
back to life five centuries
after his defeat at the
hands of the Hero Gram.



**Yokohama Girl
Aoba 100F**
Serves the ruler of
Yokohama known as
the Progenitor. Meets
Veltol, Takahashi, and
Gram in jail, where
she's imprisoned under
suspicion of thought sin.



"And
this shitty
program
you threw
together?
It sucks.
You're dead,
asshole!"

"I'm gonna kill
you...and it's gonna
be so freakin' easy.
You toy with
people's lives and
make yourself out to
be a god when
you're nothing but a
shithead lowlife."

THE GOD-SLAYER GIRL

META-UTOPIA CITY

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DICTIONARY

META-UTOPIA CITY YOKOHAMA

A solitary island in the middle of the ocean, severed from the continent following the Fantasion, a diastrophic disaster in which two separate worlds fused. Yokohama's environs are distorted from the Fantasion, preventing any interference from the outside world. The island is shrouded in mystery; word has it that those who enter never return.

META-UTOPIA CITY
YOKOHAMA

The Black Dragon, Sihlwald
One of the Six Dark Peers and a legendary dragon who was the strongest being during the age of the dragons long ago. In a deep slumber beneath Yokohama.

DEMON LORD 2099

Retra-Utopia City Yokohama

3

Daigo Murasaki
Illustration by **Kureta**



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Give your power for hope.
Give your hands for your friends.
Give your emotion for survival.
Give your children for supper.
Give your eyes for your neighbor.
Give your heart for order.
Give your life for servitude.
Offer every last fragment of your very bones
for world peace.

—Excerpt from the Canon, author unknown

PROLOGUE

The Underworld's Ultimate Judgment

“Defendant Veltol Velvet Velsvalt is hereby sentenced to 2099 years in prison.”

A few minutes before the ruling...

There was a defendant.

A judge.

A stenographer.

A defense attorney.

A prosecutor.

Only the jury was missing; the sole person was the defendant.

The defendant Veltol sat at the stand but was not allowed to open his mouth. His entire body was constrained and most of his face covered. The only sensory organs he was allowed to use in this trial were one eye and both ears.

All others in attendance were machines. Upside-down buckets with lights flashing red and green like pre-Fantasion modems.

The mechanical prosecutor recited flatly:

“Arraignment.”

The artificial voice of a man echoed through the courtroom.

“Around eight PM this evening, the accused entered the Yokohama Progenitor’s domain unauthorized. All people and resources within the domain, including the defendant himself, belong to the Progenitor, and yet the accused acted as though he had free rein, thereby desecrating the Canon.”

The mechanical judge proceeded to read Veltol his rights:

“Defendant, you have the right to remain silent. You are free to not answer any question you do not wish to answer. You may answer, but anything you say may be used against you in this court of law.”

“...”

He had no way to speak even if he wanted to, for his mouth was covered up. Nor was he allowed to speak.

This trial was a sham. The result was decided before it started. A formality—a game of pretend where proper procedures did not matter.

“Defendant, do you have anything to say to the prosecutor’s statement?”

“...”

The defendant did not respond to the judge’s question.

He couldn’t. Naturally. His mouth was covered.

It was meaningless. Unjust. Laughable to even ask a muzzled person a question.

“It appears he has nothing to add. Prosecutor, you may make your opening statement.”

“Thank you. Well, then...”

Only the judge and prosecutor spoke.

Once the prosecutor's opening statement finished, the judge said:

“Defense, your opening statement.”

“...”

The mechanical defense attorney did not react.

Unlike the rest of the machines, the defense attorney had no flashing lights. It wasn't in operation to begin with. It was only natural it wouldn't respond.

They did nothing that made sense and reveled in the meaningless. An exercise in futility.

“Prosecution declares, in the name of the Progenitor, that the defendant has blatantly committed grave crimes against Yokohama, and no evidence is needed.”

No evidence is needed.

Folly. An affront to the concept of a trial. Yet no objections were raised.

Common sense was absent; instead, insanity took its place.

“The recommended sentence is as follows.”

And the absurdity continued.

“For breaking and entering—invading the Progenitor's domain: six hundred and sixty-six years.

“For rioting—disturbing the Progenitor's domain: two hundred and seventeen years.

“For escaping—being retroactively guilty of fleeing after entering the Progenitor's domain and thus becoming His possession: three hundred and thirty-three years.

“For silence—remaining silent before the judge's questioning: three hundred and thirteen years.

“For contempt of court—defiant behavior, not answering the judge's questioning: ninety-nine years.

“For non-contribution—neglecting his duty to contribute to the city despite being the Progenitor's possession: four hundred and three years.

“For insufficient TM—slovenly contemplation: twenty years.

“For Earth slander—neglecting to listen to Gaia's voice: twenty years.

“For worship obstruction—hindering the Progenitor's channeling:

twenty years.

“For violation of men’s hair code—having much longer hair than decreed in Yokohama: four years.

“For violation of men’s height code—being taller than decreed in Yokohama: four years.”

Guilty of remaining silent after being granted the right to remain silent and being robbed of the freedom to speak. Guilty of having long hair. Such inanity was unheard of in modern civilization.

A laughable demand from a joke of a trial.

Yet in this place of absurdity, everything proceeded seriously.

“Prosecution has no further demands.”

“Understood. Defense, you may speak.”

“...”

No testimony. No cross-examination. No defense to begin with.

This was not a trial. A trial occurred only when prosecution, defense, and jury worked properly.

Without an opportunity for defense, the judge was simply going through the motions of handing out the already-decided sentence.

A dignified facade of a trial.

“Any last words, defendant?”

“...”

“We shall proceed with the sentence, then.”

The defendant’s uncovered eye expressed brightly the emotions he was prohibited from putting into words.

“Defendant—”

Now we return to the beginning.

The sentence is given: 2099 years in prison for the immortal Demon Lord Veltol.

There was no shade of despair or worry on his face.

Placid.

Composed.

Calm.

Serene.

Still constricted and deprived of everything, he was not inconvenienced. He even seemed to be enjoying the situation.

Under the muzzle lurked a fiery grin. As though this was exactly what he wished for.

The Demon Lord should not have been able to utter a single word, and

yet despite his muzzle, he spoke with joy:

“Are you sure you can chain me...in this tiny prison?”

INTERLUDE

A cataclysm occurred: Out of nowhere, a void opened up in the heavens.

It ignored a variety of factors—longitude, latitude, altitude, elevation, rotation, revolution—and appeared high above all life-forms. Only one opening was found, but everyone on the surface could see it.

That was the precursor.

A tremor followed.

A spatial quake so bizarre, even the citizens of the earthquake-prone nation—or perhaps because of their familiarity with them—recognized it as exceptional.

Then two worlds fused into one.

Back when the cataclysm did not have a name, one island was separated from land and space through the change in the Earth's crust and the resulting spatial distortion.

Fear consumed the people from both worlds, and they despaired for the future. They were certain that no one could save them, and that the world was ending.

It was then that a man gave a speech to encourage everyone.

“This is a trial given to us by God,” the man said. “The end of times has come, humanity has perished, and we failed to board the boat of salvation.”

He spoke frantically, with a smile. One by one, all present began listening.

“But we will be saved!”

His every movement grabbed the eyes of the people; every word, their ears; every expression, their hearts.

“Let us keep up hope and hold hands in cooperation until the time comes! Differences in language, in skin color, in politics, in beliefs, in species—none of it matters! We have our hearts! All our souls have the right to reach a higher plane!”

Applause.

Yet his heart and mind were chilled to the bone. The man knew: There

were not enough resources to let everyone live.

CHAPTER ONE

Meta-Utopia City—Yokohama

Two people were in the dark room.

One was a man. Average build and dressed in a monk's robe; impossible to tell his species from his silhouette. He had no physical body—he was but a hologram projected into the air.

The other person was more of a mystery: unknown species, gender, and age. They wore black full-body armor, an overcoat with the design of a dragon holding a sword, and a large black sword on their back.

A voice came from the black armor. “*That's it for the report from the Guild. Any questions?*”

They appeared to be wearing an external audio output device. Their voice was masculine, muffled, and had heavy effects applied.

“Will he really come to the island? That Veltol you mentioned?” the man asked.

“*No idea... I just suppose he will because of the dragon.*”

“*I'd prefer to have more certainty...*”

“*Don't ask me. Whatever, I gotta go.*”

The armor turned around with a rustle of their overcoat and a metallic *clink*.

“Already leaving? I could serve you *saba* for coming all the way here.”

“*I'll pass. Would it even be edible for humans? I'm only here because the comms are cut off from this island. And us lowly grunts got a lot of work to do. Interventions in FEMU, the Illuminati, 3U, the Order, Sidonic Net... So many baddies to fight, so little time. And there's also the babysitting I had to take over from that Faceless idiot in Akiba. I'm just glad I had another mission near this place...*”

The armor turned their back on the man again, sounding irritated. Light entered the dark room the moment they opened the door. The armor walked out, leaving the room full of silence and shadow.

The Dragon Slayer died a martyr during the White Wolf Disaster in Shanghai; the Maiden gathered a new arcanum during the Red Moon Noon case in Los Angeles; and Faceless was demoted after failing to capture the

goddess of weal and woe in Akihabara.

The resulting changes in human resources brought him, the Progenitor, a promotion to Fourth Seat.

That was the report from the Guild—the Salvation Church.

None of that mattered. His job didn't change, no matter what number he was in what organization.

He belonged to the organization but didn't share their ideals. Their only relationship was making use of each other to further their goals. The organization provided tech and money, and he returned the favor with some help.

This relationship would end soon, as his plan was approaching its endgame.

“Just a little longer, everyone. I will take all of you to a peaceful world —to utopia.”

He spoke those words naturally.

“Huh...?”

He cocked his head.

“Who is ‘everyone’?”



She wanted a little sister.

Or rather, she wanted to be a big sister.

She was an only child and wished for a younger family member.

And that is why...

Stars twinkled in a chaotic sea.

Like comets or meteors, the Familia, computers, and servers beamed their traffic lights with dazzling trails connecting to other people and machines.

Each ray of light in this aether web was a technic that constituted magic.

People connected to the world through machines, and the immense construction of data formed from their connections was named as such:

“The aether network.”

A girl spoke the name of this magic.

The aether network was a composite magic built on various technics

and given form by many spells to connect machines to each other. One vast, chaotic sea.

The girl floated in the celestial sea of chaos. She wore a dwarven jacket over her qipao.

This was but an avatar in cyberspace.

People usually chose an avatar that looked different from their real-world selves, but she faithfully emulated her actual appearance—the only difference being that her face was covered in a bunny skull holomask.

This sea was an aethernet map created in her field of view through the terminal buried in her nape: the Familia.

The aethernet was the biggest form of magic in history.

“Chaos and paradox are this vast sea’s essence.” Arthur Daniels, *From Electronics to Aether.*

The girl didn’t know that quote. She was merely copying what her artificial spirit cited from the aethernet dictionary. A simple action, not a gathering of knowledge.

Magic was highly systematic. Normally, the bigger its scale, the stronger its logic, but in turn, it also turned unstable and harder to construct. One single missing or extra spell word could lead to a self-contradiction and crumble the construction, unravel its logic, and collapse the magic.

And so it was said:

“Magic does not permit contradictions.”

This was the first of the six great laws of magicology.

And yet spells and technics increased and decreased by the second in the aethernet, creating contradictions, all while maintaining its logic.

“Why doesn’t the aethernet collapse under its constant contradictions?” the girl asked the void. She knew the answer.

The aethernet had achieved the ability to support the contradictions of chaos by being in constant activation by a massive number of users.

That is to say, the aethernet was the only magic to have surpassed the first law. It corrected the incongruencies of the chaos born from its size.

In a way, the aethernet was alive.

If one tried to destroy such a massive and logically solid magic system, one would need power enough to annihilate the planet itself. That meant that the aethernet was indestructible.

“And this is where I feel most at ease...”

The girl swam through humankind’s biggest and greatest magic like a

jellyfish, enveloped in fuzzy drowsiness.

She had been in contact with it for as long as she could remember; it was her second home.

“What am I trying to do?”

The farther she moved away from reality, the heavier it weighed on her mind. Or perhaps it was an illusion to believe the aethernet wasn’t reality. This virtual world was merely an extension of the actual one. It was not material, but it was real.

Reality was harsh.

Bodies were brittle; the limbs and the mind didn’t extend beyond cognition; walking was limited to one’s stride.

Her physical skills were average, her mana reserve and release were below average; she didn’t want to take over the world, nor was she going to save it; she didn’t have the patience to spend five hundred years waiting, and she hadn’t thrown herself into the flames of revenge. She was just a little knowledgeable about the aethernet and had some proficiency with magic. Other than that, she was a normal young girl.

That’s me. And within such a vast, infinite space, I want to bask in this small world, the only place where I can feel invincible. If this is reality, too, then what’s so wrong with that?

She closed her eyes and listened intently.

“...shi.”

She could hear a voice.

“...hashi.”

Someone was calling her.

“...Takahashi.”

Someone was calling the girl.



“Takahashi? Hello? Are you listening?”

The girl, Takahashi, found herself being shaken, and she was forcibly logged out of her full-dive aethernet session.

She opened her eyes; her vision was momentarily blurry from the logout noise. Little by little, her view became clear.

The virtual retina display interface rebooted.

Takahashi was in a Chinese restaurant. It was small, dimly lit, and crowded.

The voices of the diners, employees, and the newscasters on the small holomonitors entered her ears as she looked around.

Faint orange lights; red, round, greasy tables; faded and creased posters; the handwritten menu:

烤羊肉串

蛋炒饭

锅贴

烧卖

All words she wouldn't be able to read without the Familia's translation software. Underneath the menu was a QR code one had to scan with their eyes or their PDA's camera to order or pay.

The mouthwatering smell of spices mixed with the eyewatering stink of synthetic tobacco and thermi-oil.

Takahashi was seated at a four-person table with three oolong tea glasses.

Before her was an unbelievably beautiful girl. Long silver hair, light-crimson eyes, and skin like snow. Everything about her harmonized in the crown of beauty. Although she looked like a regular human girl at first glance, she was a being beyond death—an immortal older than Takahashi by a mind-boggling number of years.

"I was about to be like, who's this hottie? But then I realized it's just Machina..."

"Huh...? H-hottie? G-goodness, Takahashi! Hee-hee-hee."

"Don't be fooled, Machina," said the girl sitting beside her. "She was deep in the web."

"Whaaa? No, I wasn't... You think I'd be full-diving in the middle of a chat with my gal pals? Please, Hizuki, I just zoned out for a little bit!"

Hizuki was just as beautiful as Machina. She had her long blond hair up in pigtails and pointy ears shorter than an elf's—proof she was a half-elf. What stood out the most, however, was her heterochromia: Her left eye was scarlet and her right gold.

She was one of the main actors involved in the incident that divided Akihabara in two; one of the former holders of the royal right to rule over Akihabara.

"Oh, you just zoned out... Hmm? Wait—isn't it plenty rude to zone out while talking to your friends?!" Machina cried.

"Hee-hee." Takahashi scratched her head, winked, and stuck out her tongue.

“Give it up, Machina,” said Hizuki. “That’s the kind of woman she is.”

“I can’t deny it...,” Machina replied.

She and Hizuki bumped shoulders and hung their heads.

Takahashi didn’t pay them much attention; instead, she was listening to the news coming from the holomonitor in the corner by the ceiling.

“FEMU has announced their plans to eradicate the Scream narcotic epidemic. G6 has stood firmly in opposition...”

“The Merchant Union’s got it tough, huh...?” Takahashi said, letting the information go in one ear and out the other.

News of illicit drugs had been the talk of the net as of late. The Far East Merchant Union was a business conglomerate not aligned with any of the Greatest Six, which included IHMI. It also had strong ties with the Yakuza Guild.

That was when Takahashi noticed that the person who had just been sitting next to her was gone.

“Wait, where’s Velly?” she asked.

The four of them had entered the restaurant, and Veltol had disappeared while Takahashi was on the web.

“Lord Veltol left for a stream after he finished eating.”

“Ohhh. Wonder what his next plan is. I guess it’s nothing urgent if he’s streaming,” Takahashi said.

“I doubt even he knows. He’s probably making it all up as he goes along,” Hizuki remarked.

Machina puffed out her cheeks. “He most certainly is not! Lord Veltol constantly has plans in mind. Plans we could only hope to understand...I think.”

“I know, I was just kidding.”

“Anyways, what were you guys talkin’ about?” Takahashi asked.

“*Moebius Protocol* season three,” Hizuki answered.

“Did you watch it?” Machina asked Takahashi.

“I binged it the moment it came out. You just can’t beat Oh Olau’s screenwriting, man. Nowadays, though...the show’s kinda lost a bit of its luster. Feels like it’s pandering for wider appeal. It lacks the edge it once had, y’know?”

“Shut up, nerd,” said Hizuki. “At this point, Veltol’s basically the only person who hasn’t watched the show. Machina, you’re a Sygin fan, right?”

“I couldn’t stop crying when Sygin died... Why do they have to kill my faves?”

“For real? I didn’t peg you as the type,” Takahashi said.

“I get it, though,” said Hizuki. “I’m a Moreau stan, but Sygin’s death still hurt.”

“Speaking of types, Hizuki is so predictable with her faves...”

“Totes,” Takahashi agreed.

“Wh-what do you care?!” Hizuki yelled.

The trio’s chattering added to the tiny restaurant’s din.

Machina put her hand to her cheek and sighed. “Sygin losing his mind and fighting his best friend... Moreau, desperate to find a way to save him while knowing there is none... Ugh... It was so painful to watch...”

“So true, so true! I can’t even talk about that scene without shedding a tear...”

“You know it, Hizuki!”

Machina and Hizuki gripped each other’s hands over their shared pain.

Takahashi raised an eyebrow and pouted. “Seriously? The whole time during that scene I was just, like, kill him already!”

The other two recoiled in disgust.

“That certainly sounds like you,” Machina said.

“I’m honestly not even surprised by your snobby opinions anymore,” Hizuki added.

“The heck?! Yeah, I’m a snob through and through!”

Takahashi gulped down her remaining oolong tea and crushed the half-melted ice in her mouth.

“I mean, look—I’m basically, like, a pragmatist, y’know? I can’t stand those melodramatic tropes where they’re debating whether to kill somebody. Just get it over with! Quit it with the half-assed compromises!”

“So you’re saying you would simply kill us without hesitation if we were in the same situation?” Machina asked.

“Heck yeah! I’d just put you out of your misery! Instantly!” Takahashi teased.

“So this is what our friendship means to you...”

“Snobs, I tell you...”

“Yep, that’s me! And I’d put you in the grave the moment you went berserk, so watch out!”

Takahashi flashed her teeth before pouring the remaining ice into her mouth and crushing it as she stood up.

“Wait, where are you going?” Machina asked.

“Out for a walk! And don’t you talk behind my back while I’m gone!”

“We won’t...”

“Who do you think we are...?” Hizuki said.

“I read on the web that when one woman leaves a group of three, the other two women will always speak ill of her!”

“Is that so? I’m not particularly well-versed in mortal matters... Did you know about this, Hizuki?”

“Don’t ask me... I never had many friends to begin with.”

“Okay, let’s stop talking about this before I start getting depressed!”

Takahashi turned around and left the restaurant.



“Phew...”

Once she was out of the tiny alleyway where the Chinese restaurant Xing Long was located, Takahashi stretched and massaged her hips, which were stiff from all the sitting. She then took a deep breath of the cold, fetid air. The ground was muddy and piled high with cases of beer. Thin cables stretched overhead, and the restaurant’s old, pink aether neon sign was blinking on and off.

Neither the alleyway nor the Chinese place was in Shinjuku. This was Goar—a city that used to exist in Alnaeth, named after the roar of a dragon.

It was south of Shinjuku. Veltol, Machina, Takahashi, and Hizuki had taken the only railway between satellite cities to get there.

Goar was a port city surrounded by steep mountains. There was the port district to the east, built upon reclaimed land, while westward was the mining district. The contrast between both sides of the city was staggering.

The port district used to have a city called Yokohama 1, which was merged with the mining district after City War II to become Goar. A case not dissimilar to Akihabara’s.

The wartime generation still called Goar “Yokohama,” and the Yokohama yen was still the currency in current-day Goar—a complicated yet fairly common situation among merged cities.

Takahashi’s group had arrived in Goar with a goal in mind, and they took a break at the first restaurant they found.

Takahashi’s virtual retina interface displayed the current air temperature, humidity, pollution, and aether density, among other measurements.

She glanced at the clock in the corner of her display. “Seven thirty PM. Guess I’ll join Velly.”

Takahashi opened a browser window via her Familia, accessed the video streaming site MIMIC, and flipped to one particular channel. The catalog marked the uploader as live, and she clicked on it.

There was a man with beautiful, long black hair, eyes the color of darkness, and a shapely face. The streamer with unparalleled good looks: Veltol Velvet Velsvalt.

He must’ve been streaming through his tablet’s camera. Behind him was the Goar landscape instead of a virtual background.

This was the invincible Demon Lord, revived five hundred years after his defeat at the hands of the Hero in the world of Alnaeth. And now...

“Whaaat?! I should’ve carefully proceeded with domestic affairs for the western expedition?! You amateur! You understand nothing! The right way to do it is to use your overwhelming military might to expand south! Sure, it all went down the toilet because of the natural disaster, but that’s only something you realize in hindsight... What?! I should be watching out for the RNG?! Stay cooped up at home and cry about how the sky is falling, you absolute buffoons!”

...he was arguing with his viewers over his last stream on a turn-based strategy game. As usual.

In times like these, Takahashi couldn’t help but doubt that this man was truly a tremendous being, even though she knew the truth and had witnessed his immortality and Demon Lord power.

“Same old Velly.” She nodded a few times.

Not only were they friends, but she was also a fan of his streams. And seeing him arguing with his viewers was already part of the routine.

“Where is he, though? Guess it’s time to find out.”

She booted up the 3D map app on her Familia and rewound the stream to load the background images. Her artificial spirit compared the data with the map and approximated his location.

Takahashi could have simply sent him a text or a Whisper call, but she had decided to never contact him during a stream unless it was a real emergency.

“Pretty much anyone could pinpoint where he is... Is he not afraid of getting rushed on the street?”

He certainly would not be.

Takahashi looked straight at the sky. “Same color here, too. Doesn’t

make a difference whether you're in Goar or Shinjuku or Akihabara."

It was soon to be eighty years since the Fantasion, and the effects on the Earth's crust, the weather, and the space itself remained immense.

Goar was no exception. Once a bountiful land with plenty of water and aether lines, the diastrophism enclosed it within steep mountains and turned it barren. It was said that the mountains surrounding Goar came from the mining veins that existed there originally.

"Some say the city got isolated within the mountains 'cause it angered a dragon god... They gotta mark this with [citation needed]," Takahashi said as she read the encyclopedia entry on Goar.

Although its structure and origins were similar to Akihabara's, Goar wasn't divided into two sections like Electric Town and Magic Town; the city's cultures had completely fused.

Goar was a key point for commerce as well as a cultural melting pot; the port district was particularly cosmopolitan, with a lot of different architectural styles melded together. Positively put, it was diverse; negatively, chaotic.

Takahashi went onto the main street where she was immediately overwhelmed with noise from the distance.

"Wowie-zowie," she said as soon as she saw the night cityscape.

An enormous, magnificent arch at the entrance to the main road. Numerous floating red lanterns with gold letters covering the sky. Old homes mixed in with classic imperial-style buildings and unassuming eastern dwarf constructions.

RAMEN BOUILLON DE RAIS

FULL BODY MASSAGES

KANEYASU WASTE MANAGEMENT: GOAR BRANCH

ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT

The multicolored aether neon signs were written more in Japanese, Chinese, and dwarvish than in the common tongue, elvish.

And soaring above all this: personal flying vehicles.

"Nighttime in Goar is totally different from nighttime in Shinjuku and Akihabara. It's like a whole 'nother world," Takahashi marveled.

Goar's buildings were shorter than Shinjuku's, while the alleyways were as intricate as Electric Town's in Akihabara. The crowds weren't as overwhelming as in Shinjuku, with its population of three million, but because of the narrower streets, Goar was a much denser city. The alleys were only wide enough for two people, at most—or one person, if they

were an ogre or an orc.

Takahashi read the sign on a streetlamp. ““Beware unlawful soliciting, leaflet distribution, and mernius peddling’...?””

The sign was next to a grilled mernius stall, where a young human man was hawking his cuisine to an elderly orc lady.

Takahashi looked to the side and saw a statue of a dragon; it was likely made out of ibrista, but it lacked the stone’s fiery luster. The statue was dirty from many years of neglected maintenance.

“Did they worship dragons here back in the day?”

Just looking at Goar was fun, but she wasn’t there for tourism.

Beneath the chilly sky, a phrase came to her mind. Nothing really brought it on; it felt like whenever a bad memory or embarrassing moment resurfaced, one that made a person want to kick and scream.

“*You’ve got it so easy, Takahashi. It’s like nothing bothers you,*” a friend from school had once told her.

Sure enough, she always seemed to be at ease and never really let her worries show, but she had her own anxieties, just like anyone else.

That said, anything on her mind was minuscule compared to a guy who seriously sought to take over the world, or a girl who’d waited faithfully five hundred years for said guy, or a girl who’d thrown her whole life away for the sake of revenge.

Besides, Takahashi wasn’t one of the many street urchins who filled the back alleys. Her parents were in good health; she had a home to return to; she had an education; getting enough food in her belly wasn’t a concern at all.

Aether hacking was also merely a hobby. Half rebellion against her parents, half fun pastime. She was sure of it: Nothing she did was serious.

“I’m here just for fun, too. Once it gets boring, I’ll up and leave.”

She could never be a Hero, nor a Demon Lord. She was some rando who’d never amount to anything big. A little rascal.

And she was fine with that.

Takahashi mulled this over as she walked to the end of the road and through the massive eastern gate until she arrived at the wharf in full view of the deep-black sea. The cold ocean was like liquified darkness.

“Brrr!”

Takahashi shivered at the skin-splitting wind and shoved her hands deep into her dwarven jacket’s pockets.

The jacket had long, thick sleeves with a cropped torso—it was tailored

specifically for dwarves working in the mines. Not only was it tough and warm, but it had also been enhanced with cold resistant magic, and yet even within the cryotolerance barrier, the sea air was blisteringly chilly.

She reached Veltol's location on the 3D map app. There were a few people around: some fishers and others gathering around a metal barrel fire to warm up.

"Oh, there he is."

Exactly where she'd expected. She also had the livestream on while looking for him, so she knew he'd just ended the stream.

Gazing at him from afar, Takahashi wondered aloud, "What's he doing...?"

Atop the blustery pier, Veltol was staring out into the ocean, one foot on a bollard and a hand on his knee.

Takahashi instinctively knew he was basking in nostalgia, although as a 2099 FE kid, she had no idea what that nostalgia was.

Cool pose, though.

His black jacket fluttered with the wind, exposing his Demon Lord T-shirt underneath. His outfit was far from being fashionable in any sense, yet with his attractive face and body, he somehow pulled it off.

Such was the Demon Lord Veltol—the personification of manliness.

"Velly," Takahashi called from behind.

He slowly turned around. "Takahashi."

"Wassup? Feelin' melancholy?"

"I was merely cooling down after a heated debate."

"Yeah, I was watching your stream. I wouldn't call it a debate so much as an argument, though..."

"Perhaps that is one way to see it. In any case, arguing gets both haters and fans riled up, which only contributes to my faith. Some fools say streamer and viewer should be on equal footing, but I can plainly see there is a prey and a predator in this relationship. That said, I do care for the people who contribute devotion and money to me."

"Uh, you act pretty grateful whenever people tip you..."

"A show of gratitude—if only for appearance—keeps the horde pleased."

Livestreaming was not merely a job for Veltol. Through his streams, he earned faith—the source of his power as a higher incorporeal being.



“You weren’t worried about getting doxed, streaming outside? I’m sure you’ve got fans over here, too.”

“Not a concern. I always use a slight cognitive barrier when I’m outside. The effects are weak against people directly meeting me, but no regular folk could see through it.”

“Huh. Anyways, how’s your faith gauge going?”

“It’s been increasing since I was exposed back in Akihabara. I haven’t confirmed it in stream, but this makes the rumors roll with a snowball effect. I am once again near my peak, albeit with some limitations.”

“Dang. What kinda limitations?”

“Let’s see, in total...”

“Uh-huh?”

“About one second.”

“That’s it?!?”

“Brief, I know... But I’ve unlocked some spells that necessitate sufficient output. The day I shake the world inches ever closer.”

“You make it sound like you leveled up in a game... But hey, your face was on full display back in Akihabara, and Hizuki still got way more buzz than you,” Takahashi said, booting up her virtual retina display.

She browsed an anonymous message board full of creeps and lowlifes where they posted photo and video collages of Hizuki flipping the bird. Without Hizuki’s consent, naturally. The impact of the whole ordeal and the image of the pretty girl giving the finger had turned her into an aethernet meme. They’d commodified her into the web’s latest main character.

“In any case, Takahashi.”

“Hmm?”

“You know the aim of our quest, don’t you?”

“Naturally.” Takahashi puffed out her chest. “The Dark Peers Records grimoires track the steps of all six peers, and in Akihabara, we successfully obtained the Black Dragon, Sihlwald’s, record—which brought us here! Correct, sir?”

Indeed, that was their objective coming to Goar. Veltol nodded in satisfaction.

“Precisely. So you didn’t stop here solely for sightseeing.”

“C’mon, who d’you take me for?!?”

“I’m joking.” Veltol laughed. “Unlocking the Dark Peers Records took far...far longer than I expected, but it is no problem now that it’s done.

And the coordinates...”

Veltol pointed eastward. Beyond the sea.

In fact, Sihlwald's coordinates were not in Goar. They were far away in the direction Veltol was indicating.

Beyond the nighttime darkness was the silhouette of a giant metal structure—an artificial island.

“Yokohama.”

Yokohama. Formerly Yokohama 2, different from the Yokohama 1 that fused with Goar. Whenever people spoke of Yokohama in the present day, they referred to the second one out to sea.

The only available information about this Yokohama were rumors on the aethernet.

Part of the pre-Fantasion Yokohama in Japan's Kanagawa Prefecture on Earth had been separated far from the continent following the deformation of the Earth's crust and the subsequent rise in sea levels. The people left behind *supposedly* lived on this island, but that was the extent of what was known.

The only thing that could be determined from this distance was the silhouette formed by the blurry red lights blinking like aircraft warning lighting. The blurriness was caused by the warped space around the island.

“So,” Takahashi began, “it's warped like that because of...”

“Yes, spatial distortion from beyondization.” Veltol nodded.

Beyondization—a type of spatial fluctuation. When beyondized, whatever used to exist in that space got warped, while still retaining its functions.

Earth's former Shinjuku Station and Alnaeth's former underground cathedral of Nelldor were beyondized with the Fantasion, warping Shinjuku Station and constructing a giant labyrinth.

Spatial distortion was born from beyondization and meant that one could not physically interfere with the space in question. It was one of the scars left behind by the Fantasion, such as the climate change with lower temperatures and the thick clouds covering the skies, or the elevation of the Goar mines surrounding it.

“Looks like it covers the whole city, too,” Takahashi noted.

There were degrees to spatial distortion, and it was the first time she saw one that enveloped an entire city.

There were no other abnormalities besides the spatial distortion, perhaps because it was beyondized on the ocean.

Most warped spaces needed correction due to affected routes, whether terrestrial, aerial, or maritime, and greatly increased transport costs. However, correcting one so big would be a monumental task.

Yokohama was not only a solitary island in the distant sea, but it was also in the distant *world* as well.

“And the Black Dragon, Sihlwald, one of the Dark Peers, is there,” Takahashi added.

Veltol nodded. “Yes. And it appears her location has been stagnant for a long time.”

“How do you survive in a place like that? And how’re we gettin’ there to begin with? We can’t, *physically*, right?”

“That is what we’re about to find out.”

“Ooh, investigation time!”

Then:

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

A loud scream and a crash came from near the city gate.

“Aiieee!”

“Whoa?! Watch out!”

People ran away, crouched and clutching their heads.

“Wow. Look at that, Takahashi. Quite an accident.”

“Oof. They hit the building...”

A personal flying vehicle had crashed into a building.

Glass and debris fell onto the street. Either the driver was distracted or the vehicle malfunctioned; it wasn’t clear.

Takahashi heard passersby talking amid the turmoil:

“I think the driver was a junkie. He looked stoned right before the accident and was screaming his head off.”

“These things keep happening... Is Scream that good?”

“Who knows? Besides, drugs always mess with your body. Better not even try it.”

“Yeah, I prefer the safe techno stuff, anywho.”

“You said it! Gah-ha-ha-ha!”

The two of them clapped.

Veltol also seemed to be listening.

“Scream?” he said to Takahashi.

“It’s a drug that’s been getting popular the last few years.”

“I see...”

“And it’s not techno—it’s actually illegal. It’s against the law to cultivate the main ingredient, red mandrakes, in the first place. There’s all kinds of mandrakes, but people use the red ones to make narcotics.”

Takahashi had quickly booted up the search engine on her Familia to supplement her knowledge on Scream. She basically skimmed a few news articles, but she wanted to sound knowledgeable in front of Veltol.

“Hmmm. Drugs, eh? Nothing to do with us, then,” he said.

“Nope. So, where should we go investigate first? They always go to bars in video games and stuff. Let’s give that a try!”

“No, we can just ask whoever passes by.”

“Huh? You don’t wanna copy the games?”

“Good grief. Do you think I’m some sort of addict who can only think in gaming terms?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Veltol brushed aside her response and went up to an old dwarf in a dirty outfit who was fishing on the edge of the pier.

It was too dark out to see into the water, but there were layers of dirt and trash visible.

“Are you catching anything?” Veltol asked.

“Nah. Only garbage like this. But I like staring at the sea with my rod in hand.” The old dwarf laughed and slapped a big jar beside him.

Inside it was a gooey red liquid and shriveled fruits like sponges. The bottle had a label that was a mix of kanji, alphabetic letters, and numbers.

“What is that?” said Veltol.

“Who knows? The stuff drifts over here from time to time. I throw out the inside and just keep the jars.”

“Hmm...” Veltol pointed at Yokohama in the sea. “If I may ask, is there a way to get to that island?”

“...What, you wanna go there?”

“Yes.” Veltol nodded.

The old man stared at the end of his rod as he scratched his cheek. “I dunno the truth, but I can’t say anything other than you shouldn’t. I’ve been here a long time...and I’ve seen a few oddballs go over there. None of ‘em have ever come back. All I know for a fact is that place used to be part of this city long ago.”

“So you’re saying that people have gone there before.”

“I have no idea whether they actually reached the island, but yes...

Perhaps it's not impossible."

Takahashi tilted her head. "Hmm? You can go there? But what about the spatial distortion?"

"Where do you think this came from?" The old man pointed at the jar.

"Wait, you mean...?"

"Yeah. They say these come from Yokohama."

Veltol connected the dots. "I see. In that case, what looks like one big spatial distortion around Yokohama is actually multiple layers of distortion. Perhaps it should have been obvious from the beginning, considering how such distortions occur."

"They say there's ferries coming here from Yokohama, so that means there's a gap large enough for a ship to fit through," the old man said. "And the distortion doesn't reach all the way to the sky; I've seen small planes coming and going a few times."

"Are there ships moored somewhere in Yokohama, then?" Veltol asked.

The old man nodded and pointed in the direction of a warehouse zone. "I keep my distance 'cause it's dangerous, so I dunno much, but word has it that Yokohama's got a designated port and warehouse. Can't recommend going there, though. That's Yakuza Guild turf."

"No need to worry. Thank you for the information."

Veltol and Takahashi headed in the direction the old man pointed. The warehouse zone was desolate and dimly lit.

"So," Takahashi said. "We're totally going there, huh?"

"We are. I expected to spend today only gathering information, but I happened to strike gold. Doubly so, considering you are here, too. So we shall go investigate."

"Shouldn't we call Machina and Hizuki?"

"We don't need many people simply to look into things. We would stand out, too."

"Makes sense..."

Takahashi had close to zero combat skills. Her mana release and reserve were below average, and her physical capabilities were just average. She had attack spells installed on her Familia, but she rarely used them.

Familia technology enabled everyone to use magic, a mystical power previously reserved for the chosen, but that did not mean that everyone was able to use every type of magic.

“You and I strike the optimal balance in terms of skills and manpower for investigation.”

Takahashi took that positively; at least he trusted her. Surely he only expected technical and not combat support.

“Kay, let’s do it.”

A few hours later, Takahashi would come to regret saying that.

They arrived at their destination shortly. A tall fence and imposing gate obstructed their advance.

“‘High Voltage.’ ‘Yokohama Territory—No Entry Allowed.’ ‘Trespassers may be shot without warning.’ Man, that’s violent,” said Takahashi.

All the signs had the logo of the Bouncer Guild.

Around the gates were multiple surveillance cameras and two magiroid guards. An ogre watchman sat inside the security booth, checking the cameras, half asleep.

“Takahashi.”

She knew what Veltol wanted: Open the gates.

She was surprised to realize she could read his mind at this point, but she didn’t hate it.

“I guess you can’t carry me and jump over the fence... They gotta have a barrier in place.”

Takahashi’s job meant that she commonly entered highly secured buildings and areas such as this. And going from experience, places like this always had pressure-sensitive, mana-sensitive, and multiple other barriers.

This sort of barrier, without defense power, specialized only for detection, was hard to dissolve or trick in exchange for allowing physical entrance.

“I could do that, perhaps, but since you are here, the best path would be to go in from the front. Besides, I need to level up my stealth skills, and I cannot do that forcing my way through. People always tell me I end up making brawlers out of stealth games.”

“Okay, boss. No comment on that last bit.”

Takahashi was an aether hacker. And what did an aether hacker do? Aether hacking.

“Go get ’em, Futaba.”

Takahashi booted up one of her three artificial spirits. A pretty girl avatar showed up in a corner of her vision and quickly opened and closed

several windows.

Futaba was in charge of data processing. It was a standard type installed on commercial Familias, but customized.

Futaba caught the comms status of the surrounding Familia and machines and showed them on the virtual display. Machines connected through the aethernet were displayed on her vision with light rays linking them.

The gate was managed entirely in the security room, which was isolated from any other communications. It wasn't possible to attack it directly from the aethernet.

This also meant they only had to take over the security booth.

"Pretty basic. Aoi!"

A new avatar showed up beside Futaba.

Aoi was an artificial spirit specialized in altering sight and video. Normally, booting up two or more artificial spirits at the same time crashed the Familia and shut it down, causing harm to the brain and, in the worst case, death. However, Takahashi's high processing ability let her boot up three simultaneously. She had no talent as an old-timey sorcerer, but she was a gifted tech wizard.

Only the gate's security was cut off from the aethernet. The cameras and the magiroids were online. Futaba traced a path to hack into them. A puny private security company's firewall was nothing to Takahashi.

"Piece of cake."

The cameras' and magiroids' security fell with ease, and Aoi changed their video feed to a loop and messed with the magiroids' hearing so they would be unable to notice they were there.

Takahashi walked toward the security booth as though she owned the place. She walked in front of the magiroids, but it was like she was invisible. She opened the booth's door and stood behind the sleeping watchman. No sign of him waking up.

His Familia was connected to the gate's terminal through a wire. It looked like the gate wouldn't open without his authorization.

Alongside the detection barrier, this was quite high security for a port warehouse. Too bad about the lack of alert of the henchmen.

"On you go."

Takahashi took a cable out of her jacket's pocket and connected one side to her Familia and another to the watchman's open port.

"Buh?! Th-the hell?!"

“Whoa there, don’t get up now.”

He awoke the moment the cable was connected, and she sent the Sleep spell through the wire.

“Uhh...”

The watchman went right back to sleep, like a doll turning off.

Aether hackers were not omnipotent. They couldn’t connect to something off the aethernet wirelessly—physical methods had to be taken.

Breaking through logic barriers wirelessly was a “superpower” of Takahashi’s. Regular aether hackers used social engineering if wiring was not an option. Once wired, logic barriers were meaningless. One became defenseless to the effects of magic.

“Using Sleep doesn’t work for me, unless I’m wired. Then they just drop like flies.”

The cable connecting Takahashi’s Familia to the guard’s was made of the same thing as the aether pseudonerves and allowed her to directly control his Familia. She used it to access the terminal and watched out for traps as she got it under control. The impenetrable gate then opened automatically.

“Mission complete.”

Takahashi disconnected the cable from the watchman’s Familia and wiped the connector with her sleeve before leaving the security booth.

It was a dull job, and she knew it. Things like when she got Veltol’s faith to rise in Shinjuku were rare. But being inconspicuous meant you did a good job as an aether hacker. Still, that didn’t fulfill her craving for self-expression and approval, but she had made peace with it.

“Splendiferous,” said Veltol, waiting beside the booth.

It also meant that having Veltol praise her job was a great delight.

“Aw, shucks.” She then tried to hide her bashfulness. “Anyone can do this much, though.”

“No need for modesty. I’m quite aware of your skills. Job well done.”

“...You can give me simple tasks like this anytime, really.”

Being trusted by Veltol filled Takahashi with inexplicable joy.

“Heh-heh.” She elbowed his side.

“What’s that for...?” Veltol frowned.

“You really can’t do anything without me, eh?”

“Ha. Do not underestimate my power. I am constantly growing. Perhaps I am not to your level, but I am studying the basics of aether hacking.”

“For real? You’re gonna put me out of a job! Anywho, we’re out of Goar and in Yokohama territory now.”

“It appears so.”

They crossed the border.

“That said...nothing’s different from Goar,” Takahashi noted.

“Indeed. No signs of any people or magic as of yet.”

They went into the nearest warehouse. It was full of plain boxes and nothing else that stood out. Takahashi ran up to one of them, placed her hands on the top, and bounced like a rabbit.

“What’s inside this thing?” she wondered aloud.

“Shall we open it?”

“Yeah!”

It had only simple magic and one physical lock. Veltol poured some mana into his bare hands to break the lock and open the box.

“Hmm...?” Takahashi peeked inside. There were lots of transparent bags full of small red crystals. “What’s this?”

She took out a bag and got an artificial spirit to look it up based on its appearance. Results came in right away.

“We’d have to actually analyze it, but I think this is Scream...,” she said.

“Hmm... It’s all falling into place.”

“So Scream comes...from Yokohama?”

“Yes, and I surmise the Yakuza Guild is the broker between—”

“Warning.”

A mechanical voice came from behind.

This is the Progenitor’s domain. Trespassers are liable to arrest, captivity, and trial. Resistance will be met with divine punishment.”

Takahashi turned around to find multiple IHMI magiroids holding automatic magi-guns. But the droids had no skincover—they were antiques from the Second City War. The ones on guard outside were miles better.

Go, Velly! Take ‘em out!

They couldn’t possibly stand up to him. Even Takahashi could handle them herself.

She glanced to her side and found him using his tablet.

He doesn’t even need to look at them!

He soon finished using it and said, “Very well.”
Takahashi could never have expected his next words:

“I shall surrender.”

Veltol raised both hands and got on his knees.
“Yeah, you tell ‘em—Huh?”
No resistance. He took a knee.
“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”
Takahashi’s scream echoed through the warehouse.



Meanwhile, Hizuki and Machina waited for Takahashi’s and Veltol’s return to the tiny Chinese restaurant.

“They’re sure taking their time,” Hizuki said.
“What could they be doing?” Machina wondered.

They were next to each other, in the same seats from before Takahashi left.

“Mind if I order some *youlinji*? ”
“Go ahead, but you sure eat a lot, huh, Hizuki? That’s your third plate of fried chicken...”
“What can I tell you? It’s just that good. Anyway, I wonder when they’re coming back.”

“Oh! I just got a text from Lord Veltol.”

Machina pulled up the message from Veltol’s tablet on her retina display while taking a sip of oolong tea.

“Bffff!”

Then she spat it out.

“Eww...” Hizuki groaned.

“Wh-what?!” Machina tipped over her chair as she quickly stood up, her eyes wide open.

Everyone in the restaurant turned to the source of the noise, and Hizuki pulled Machina’s sleeve with embarrassment. But Machina was in no position to notice; she was shaking.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Her scream echoed through the restaurant.

“Wh-what is it?” Hizuki asked.

“Lord Veltol...”

“Yeah?”

After a few seconds, Machina turned her head toward Hizuki with a mechanical *creak* and said:

“Lord Veltol left for Yokohama...”



She was dreaming.

Down. Down.

Someone screamed. Yelled at her to fulfill her soul’s duty.

Someone called for her.

Down. Down. Outside. Outside.

She could see something.

Something big and strong.

Something as frightening as it was awe-inspiring. But she didn’t know what.

The five o’clock alarm rang.

The girl Aoba 100F always woke up at the same time. Not a minute, not a second of difference.

The spotless white ceiling always greeted her. The same white sheets, the same white curtains.

Upon confirming it was her same room, she sat right up and stretched. She could tell that the ends of her shoulder-length hair—exactly the length regulated for women—were frizzy.

“Mmmmm. Fwaaah.” She yawned and sighed.

She usually woke up without an ounce of lethargy, but not today. The reason being...

“It’s the last day I get to be a child...”

Tomorrow was Aoba 100F’s birthday.

Upon coming of age in this city, not only were people assigned a job but also a level of contribution to fulfill. All by the city’s god, the Progenitor.

The children were the city’s treasures. They couldn’t bear any sin; they

were pardoned from anything. Upon becoming an adult, one had duties of happiness and servitude, and became accountable for sin.

It was the last day she could spend as a child.

Aoba 100F could not yet understand an adult's responsibilities, and simply thinking about it depressed her.

She stood up and put on her slippers before opening the curtains and reciting one of the Progenitor's verses in the Canon: "All is right with the world."

Aoba 100F left her bedroom and crossed the hallway and the living room to the kitchen. Her house was big but plain. All houses were. The only furniture was the minimum supplied.

However, no one wished for more.

No desires before victory.

Another of the Canon's verses.

She had no idea what she needed to do to obtain "victory."

Aoba 100F took a bottle of *aqa*—water—from the fridge and poured some into a cup she carried to the table.

Yokohama's upper stratum, according to the Canon, was the only and final utopia in this world. Aoba 100F's house was in the west side's residential area.

"All right! It's almost time for prayer."

She gulped down the *aqa* and got ready. The moment she opened the door, her neighbor did the same. The adult man greeted her with a smile.

"Good morning, Aoba 100F."

"G-good morning, Aoba 022M."

"Are you attending prayer, too?"

"Yes. A-and it's my birthday. It's my last morning prayer as a child."

"Oh, so you're already coming of age. It feels like just yesterday that you were *this* little... How fast time flies."

"Please don't..."

She got red all the way to her ears, hearing about her childhood. The memory was fresh—her childhood wasn't that long ago, after all.

"Life is so short. Work hard to serve our god the Progenitor and contribute to the city. It is the law of the world that those with low contribution get kicked down first."

"Y-yes!"

The degree of contribution to the city and the Progenitor was calculated on an individual level according to one's attitude in life and work

achievements.

Once a person came of age in the upper stratum, if their contribution reached a low enough level, they were sent to the lower stratum. If their contribution fell further, they were sent to the re-service area.

Even those who contributed exceptionally and escaped being sent to the lower stratum, if they became unable to continue contributing in old age, they were sent to the re-service area. It was a place where one could contribute to the city even in old age or after sinning.

“Who knows how long *I’ll* get to stay in the upper stratum,” Aoba 022M mused.

“P-please don’t say that...”

“People age. One’s performance drops, contribution lowers, and falling to the lower stratum and the re-service area is inevitable... To submit body and soul to the city and the Progenitor...is a citizen’s duty.”

“Yes. I will work hard not to fall to the lower stratum.”

“The sad part is that someone must always fall after coming of age.”

“Yes...”

“It was just recently that Izumi 078F was demoted to the lower stratum due to thought sin, remember? They say we Aobas and the Izumis tend to have higher instances of dangerous thoughts. Be careful, Aoba 100F.”

“D-don’t worry.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

Thought sin was a great crime against the Canon. A single infraction kicked you down to the lower stratum.

Aoba 100F said good-bye to Aoba 022M and left for the spacious park on the outside rim of the upper stratum.

The church was nearby, and she thought to have her morning *saba*—meal—before prayer. She received her hot dog and a paper cup full of coffee at the automatic supply spot at the park’s entrance.

Aoba 100F found the park to be a symbol of peace. Natural earth and grass, small flowers blooming, children running around with smiles on their faces, adults watching over them, the wind caressing her cheeks, flying vehicles advising the citizens to live happily, and the elderly being carried on stretchers and taken into the capsule elevators to the re-service area.

A peaceful sight, as always.

She leaned against the edge of the park and ate her provided hot dog.

“Tasty.”

They said the sausages in real hot dogs were made of magar cattle used for Communion, but Aoba 100F did not have the opportunity to try Communion items. The sausage she ate was made of “re-serviced items.”

She looked down from the edge.

“So high up...”

Yokohama was composed of the lower stratum with a rusty iron base and the upper stratum plate supported by the 296-meter-tall black pillar—the Atlas that rose from the center of the lower stratum.

Seen from the side, the artificial island of Yokohama was shaped exactly like a capital *I*. Aoba 100F could see part of the lower stratum’s base.

According to the Canon, this place where low-contribution or sinner adults were sent to was a prison.

The upper stratum had a population of two thousand people, while the lower stratum held eight thousand sinners.

No one had ever come back to the upper stratum from the lower stratum. These people were said to toil away until the end of their service.

The people on the upper stratum always feared the possibility of falling to the lower stratum.

Aoba 100F raised her head, and, beyond, she saw...

“The outside...”

The outside of Yokohama could be seen from the upper stratum. Beyond the warped panorama were the blurry lights of the city outside.

The Canon said that a cataclysm struck as punishment for the sins of the people of the past, and the outside world was left in shambles. Those out there were sinners who failed to get on the Yokohama ark. This city was a holy land protected by a holy curtain—the last utopia.

And so the citizens had a duty to thank and serve the Progenitor, who guarded the city.

Everyone in the upper stratum said those lights were lights of sin, but Aoba 100F had deep yearning for them. She wanted to go outside one day.

“N-no...!” She quickly shook her head to drive the thought away.

The teachings of the Canon were absolute. Adherents were taught the verses *before birth*.

No one doubted the teachings, and doing so amounted to thought sin.

“But...”

Although she couldn’t explain why, Aoba 100F had this hunch that the existence of Yokohama itself was unnatural.

When she closed her eyes, she could see the sky, the land, the sea, the vastness of this world she had never seen. She had no memory or record of it, yet she knew. So she suspected. She had doubts.

“Is this...really the last utopia?”

The question was a clear thought sin against the Canon and the Progenitor. She didn’t want to think so anymore, but the idea, the admiration for the outside, circled around in her mind.

And, most unbelievable of all: She wanted to go *down*.

The desire to go down was different from her admiration of the outside; it was an impulse from the pit of her stomach.

“Why would I want to go to a place full of sinners and despair...?”

Although she wanted to go “down,” she didn’t want to fall to the lower stratum. Contradictory feelings boiled within her.

“Ah.”

She realized her coffee was cold.

A bell rang in the sky of Yokohama.

“O-oh no, I’ll be late.”

The bell notified the citizens that the time of one of their duties, prayer, was close.

She gulped down her coffee and threw the trash into the disposal chute nearby before leaving the park.

Children faced no punishment even if they were late or absent, but she had heard that their teacher was penalized for lack of supervision. She couldn’t be late. She was taught that causing trouble for others was bad.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

The people she passed by greeted her. It was the same sight as always. The sight of peace.

“*Folk, be healthy.*

“*Folk, be honest.*

“*Folk, be happy.*

“*Big Brother is always watching over us.*

“*Let there be peace in the world.*”

The same verses as always came from the speakers.

She headed to one of the many chapels in the upper stratum. There was the central cathedral where the Progenitor lived, and multiple chapels. Each chapel was big enough to hold everyone in the zone, and the cathedral was big enough to hold everyone in the upper stratum.

Lion-dog statues and a mechanical torii gate were placed at the grounds' entrance, with multiple holographic torii adorning the path to the church. Garden lanterns lined up on either side of the path, and beyond them was a pure sacred ground of white gravel.

A white building stood at the end of the path—one of the upper stratum chapels of Yokohama. The inside of it was dimly lit, with holographic stained glass on the ceiling, rows of benches, and a pulpit at the end, before the icon of the Progenitor.

“Save us, Father.”

“Watch over us, Big Brother.”

“Forgive us, Mothers.”

Laser beams of various colors crossed the dark space as a low hymn that reverberated to the pit of the stomach was accompanied by holy verse recitals.

The sound, lines, and verses robbed the power to think from those inside. They always carried their Canons but never opened them, as they were made to memorize the contents before anything else.

The Canon was everything in this city—the guideline of life.

“Let there be peace in the world.”

As Aoba 100F recited the verses, she wondered, *Is this really all right? Outside. Outside.*

Down. Down.

The thoughts swirled in her head.

“Of course it’s all right.”

She shook her head to get rid of the notion. Simply thinking it was sacrilege.

“We were born to serve the Progenitor and atone for the sins of the world.”



Midnight, as soon as the date changed:

“Aoba 100F! Open the door!”

A loud voice and knocking came out of nowhere, waking Aoba 100F. She jumped out of bed and went to open the door, where she found multiple adult men in robes and armed with guns. She knew who they were.

“Officers...?”

They belonged to the Law Office, the Progenitor's "arms" who maintained public order in Yokohama and enforced the law.

Aoba 100F's mind went blank with shock, fear, and confusion.

"We received a report from a concerned citizen," the officer plainly stated.

"A-about...what?"

"You are suspected of committing thought sin."

There was a tip-off system in the upper stratum. Anyone who reported criticisms of the Progenitor or thought sins received a boost in their contribution level.

Aoba 100F had no idea what could have brought this on. She never expressed her desire to go outside to anyone.

"I-I'm innocent!" she cried.

"That is not your decision to make. Your transgression may escape Big Brother's eyes, but our laws are never wrong."

"Big Brother..."

One of the first things children were taught was to avoid doing anything bad, because Big Brother was always watching.

"D-d-d-do you have any proof that I-I've done it? The whistleblower could be wrong or lying..."

"The people have a duty to be honest—they would not lie. Ergo, they speak the truth. There is no need for proof. So says the Canon."

"H-huh? B-but that...doesn't quite make sense, does it? I-I'm a citizen, too, so d-doesn't that mean that I-I'm not lying, eith—?"

"Shut your mouth!"

The officer slapped Aoba 100F. Her heart pounded at the sudden act of violence.

"This is all the Progenitor's will! There is no logical contradiction in His words! The Aobas have a tendency for thought sin, and most of all, as you've demonstrated by your doubts of a citizen's report, you thereby doubt the Canon. That proves your thought sin!"

"B-but...I just d-don't understand—"

"Do—not—talk—back! Sinner! Sinner!"

The officer slapped her multiple times again until she collapsed. Her throat was dry and her hands trembling.

Aoba 100F had never thought about it—how the system was so flawed that a person would be arrested automatically the moment they were snitched on.

“Aoba 100F, you are under arrest for suspicion of thought sin. You will be tried today in the Last Court of Yokohama.”

“No! I haven’t done anything! Please believe me! A-and I’m still a child... So...”

The children were the city’s treasure. They were pardoned from any sin —so long as they were children.

“You came of age the moment midnight arrived. You’ve lost all your rights as a child and will be judged as an adult.”

They handcuffed her.

“Take her in.”

Aoba 100F was held down and dragged away in her pajamas.

“No! I didn’t do anything!” she screamed, but no one listened.

The neighbors heard the noise and opened their doors to see what it was about. Among them peeking from the gap in their doors was Aoba 022M. His eyes met hers.

“I’m sorry, Aoba 100F,” he said, looking away.

Only Aoba 100F heard him.

“My contribution level is low, and I might get sent down once you come of age. But I can boost it if I hand you to the authorities. I’m sorry.”

Aoba 100F was so disoriented, her memories of what happened after were unclear.

The machines judged her at the Last Court beside the cathedral, and she could do nothing but listen to the charges in silence.



“Verdict: Aoba 100F is sentenced to four years in the lower stratum for thought sin.”

She was then handed a prison uniform, handcuffed, and sent to the elevator to the lower stratum.

The forsaken land of iron, rusted and worn by the sea breeze.

She’d never heard of what life was like in the lower stratum. There was no way to know what it was like without living there yourself. The Canon simply said it was a prison for sinners.

I’m scared...

Her hands trembled, chills ran down her spine, she felt like there was lead in her stomach, and she could barely keep standing.

Fear of the unknown. Vague anxiety.

The lower stratum, where 80 percent of the Yokohama population lived. Sinners banished from utopia. Hell. A place full of demons castigating the sinners. That was the Canon's description.

She was taken to a shabby building and made to walk down a dirt corridor.

A stinging cold never seen in the upper stratum. People in prison uniforms hunkered while holding their heads as law officers beat them with batons.

The sound of their flesh and bones getting smashed echoed through the hallway and clung to Aoba 100F's ears.

Why...me...?

She shivered in fear.

I never should've thought to go outside. I never should've thought to go down. This must be divine punishment for thinking that, even though I knew how scary the lower stratum was...

Regret tormented her as much as terror did.

The law officer dragged her for a while before stopping before a dirty metal door with a plate that said CELL 045 and a rusty barred window, furnished to a half-crumbled bluish-green wall. He unlocked the door with the key attached to his side, then unlocked Aoba 100F's handcuffs.

The door opened with a heavy *creak*. The interior was dark, hard to see from outside.

Aoba 100F's spine froze and her legs shook, simply from her thinking of what sort of villainous sinners could be inside. Although, having been brought up in the upper stratum, which lacked entertainment, she had an imagination too poor to picture them.

"Get in."

The law officer shut the door the moment she stepped inside. The loud noise and shaking paralyzed her.

Her eyes soon adjusted to the darkness. The floor was of rusty metal, the walls of crumbling stone, and there was no window.

There were two dirty, shabby bunk beds with rusty frames. The beds were placed in an L-shape.

There was one toilet. Shoddy and placed in a corner of the cell without any walls.

The worst part was the cold, though. Wind blew through the gaps in the crumbled wall, and there was no hope of heating. Although Aoba 100F

didn't know this, the entire lower stratum only had the absolute minimum cryotolerance barrier to sustain life.

The fear of having to live in such poor conditions was blown away immediately.

“...!” She gasped as her eyes got glued to the bed before her—specifically, to the man sitting on the first bed.

His hair was long, his face handsome, and the aura oozing from every pore of his body so lively, it shone even in this hellscape. Even though he wore the same plain prison uniform she did, it looked like tailor-made luxury clothing on him.

She could tell right away that he was the boss of this cell.

“My, a new inmate?”

He stood up and extended his arms. “Veltol Velvet Velsvalt is my name. Welcome to Team 045, fellow prisoner. Make yourself at home—as much as you can in this tiny cell, that is.”



INTERLUDE

“Oh no.”

All living things had to eat.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no.”

It had been a few days since he became the leader. He couldn't hope to feed everyone with what they gathered.

The huge differences in appearance and language between species were already a source of conflict. Having to fight over food could only annihilate the order already hanging by a thread.

He held his head at the issue. There was too little food. The most important resource. Hunger robbed people of good judgment, and without it, the little sense left here would crumble. He couldn't let that happen.

“But what can I do...?”

His hands trembled from the weight of the responsibility.

Then someone softly placed their hands on his.

“D-don't worry... I know you can do this.”

He had an ally.

Meek, introverted, yet kinder than everyone. A descendant of the dragon-faithful priestess. A sorcerer from another world.

She held his hands.

“Please...make peace in this tiny world.”

Her voice alone rid him of his trembling.

“Make the world peaceful.”

Her voice absorbed his mind and heart.

This was his origin.

His memory was already lost to oblivion.

The words were carved into his soul.

CHAPTER TWO

Stand Back, Prisoner.

Some time before the girl met the Demon Lord in Yokohama...



A few hours after Veltol and Takahashi were captured in the warehouse, Hizuki Reynard-Yamada was in trouble.

She was in a cheap hotel in Goar. Machina's room. They had booked one room for Veltol and Machina, and another for Takahashi and Hizuki.

Hizuki sat down on the bed and looked at the person beside her.

"O-ohhhh..."

Her friend, Machina, was wailing and sobbing. The reason?

"Lawd Veltowl... Why diyou leave me behind...?"

Her lord's disappearance.

A few hours prior, they'd received a message on their Familia from his tablet:

"I'm going to Yokohama with Takahashi. Machina, I leave Hijiki in your care. Do as you see fit."

That was it. No further explanation.

"Geez, stop crying already..." Hizuki held Machina close and patted her head.

Machina buried her face in Hizuki's chest, clinging to her and sobbing.

Machina looked Hizuki's age, perhaps even one or two years younger, but she was an immortal—she had lived far longer.

Hizuki had only known about immortals from books, so they didn't feel real. Doubly so when she saw one in this state. But after what happened in the two Akihabara factions and the short time she had spent with Machina and Veltol ever since, Hizuki came to recognize that the pair really was immortal.

“Also, you’re not worried about Takahashi at all?” Hizuki asked.

“Huh? I’m sure she’ll be fine with Lord Veltol by her side...” Machina raised her head. Her tears and runny nose were no more, and she wore a blank expression.

“Wow, that was fast. Creepy.”

Hizuki had heard about Veltol, Machina, and the immortals, including about how Machina had waited five hundred years for Veltol’s revival.

Her reaction makes sense, considering the person she spent five centuries waiting for went away again...I guess?

Hizuki was a half-elf with a human father and an elf mother. She had a longer life span than humans but a shorter one than elves. She was still very much a mortal and was still in her teens. The City Wars and the Fantasion were far-off history to begin with—she couldn’t grasp the scale of five hundred years.

“Veltol didn’t leave you behind because you drag him down or because he doesn’t like you,” Hizuki said, gently rubbing Machina’s back. “I’m sure he saw an opportunity to sneak into Yokohama and didn’t have much time, so he decided it’d be better to go in with fewer numbers. I think Takahashi can do a good job supporting him.”

“Ohhhh... I know... I know that, Hizuki... Takahashi has talent I lack, and she’d be of great help, and I realize veeeery well that Lord Veltol made the rational choice... But still! I can understand the logic—but it still hurts! Uwuwuwu...”

“There, there... First time I ever heard someone cry like uwuwuwu...” Hizuki patted Machina’s head again as the immortal cried into her chest. “This might actually be my fault,” Hizuki added.

Machina raised her head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve nothing to do with your goals, right? The only reason a stranger like me is with you is to get closer to *my* goals, so there’s no reason for him to take me with them, is there? And even if I went with them, I wouldn’t be able to do anything. I had to stay behind, and I needed someone to babysit me... In which case, that would mean Veltol didn’t take you along because of me.”

“That’s not true,” Machina assured her. “You’re not to blame for this whatsoever.”

“But—”

“Of this I’m sure. For starters, you’re not a stranger. You’re one of us. It’s only natural for us to assist you with your goals. And you shouldn’t

feel in debt because of that. We're doing it because we want to."

"..."

Honest eyes. Honest words.

Hizuki couldn't speak. She wasn't used to such frank, direct remarks and feelings. She looked away, like always. She couldn't be sincere. She lied even to herself. This was the most she could do at the moment:

"Thanks..."

Machina smiled, satisfied by that answer.

"If you say I'm not a stranger...then I want to do something for you, too."

It pained Hizuki how weak she was. So...

"I want to be stronger. I want to be able to fight...at least enough not to get in the way."

"Shall we do the usual, then?"

"Yeah... Please."



Hizuki and Machina stood before each other in a white space with black lines in a grid.

Hizuki held a sword, while Machina was barehanded. Their clothing remained the same.

Hizuki swung down her sword to slash Machina into two, but it did not reach her. She was sure it would hit, yet she only cut the air.

"Agh...!"

She aimed for her neck from a low stance, but Machina dodged it within a hairsbreadth. Hizuki knew she wouldn't hit her by swinging aimlessly, so she restrained her every movement for the sake of the one slash.

She stepped her left foot forward for a feint, aiming for the neck from the right...

"Ah."

Machina grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm so she dropped the sword. She swept her off her feet, and Hizuki spun once in the air before crashing to the floor.

"Gweh!" She coughed and instinctively shut her eyes.

When she opened them, Machina was holding the sword and pointing its tip at her.

Now's the time...

Defeat was absent from Hizuki's eyes as she stared at the blade's point. But then she was stabbed in the face.

"Training program over."

Hizuki was logged out as soon as she heard the artificial spirit's mechanical voice.

"Gaaah! I can't wiiiin!" she screamed, arms held up to the ceiling as she lay on the same bed in the same room of the same hotel.

Hizuki had been training with Machina occasionally. She felt she needed strength to fight, more than anything, in order to accomplish her goals.

Takahashi had given her—whether legally or illegally, she didn't ask—a combat training program that used virtual space on the aethernet.

"I can't be beaten by a teenage girl now, can I?" Machina said to Hizuki.

"Ugh... This won't be easy. But, well, it's amazing we can just practice anywhere, huh?"

"Bless Takahashi's soul. I think this is a military simulator."

"Should we be using it...?"

"If Takahashi said we can, then it's fine. It is incredibly convenient. What better place to train a soldier than in cyberspace? Although, keep in mind that this is merely an elaborate simulator, not real combat."

"Real combat...," Hizuki repeated as she touched the Familia on her nape.

Her mana reserve had been depleted following recent events, and she could use only the basic functions of her Familia until recently. It was a blessing and a great outlet for stress that she could now use programs like this that ate mana up.

She turned to Machina's bed and saw her face from up close.

How do you get to be this cute?

Hizuki was aware of her own good looks, but even so, she was overwhelmed by Machina's breathtaking beauty.

Machina sat up. *"You have improved considerably, I will say."*

"Really?!" Hizuki opened her eyes wide, still lying down. *"I'm strong now?!"*

"No."

"Oh..."

"I'm serious. Perhaps you'd be able to beat a girl your age, but you

don't have hope against the lowest thugs you'd find on the street.”

“That bad...?”

“Don't worry about it. That is only natural. No one... Well, none but the very select few can become strong overnight. I wasn't so different from you.”

“Wow. I figured you were strong from birth.”

“No way. Even dragons need to be protected when they are babies. Not to mention I was a hick from the sticks.”

“Hick from the sticks...”

“I never fought before becoming an immortal.”

Hizuki felt like she was finally grasping Machina's strength that seemed so vague even after their training. But she had only arrived at the foot of the mountain that was Machina and gotten a sense of its scale—the peak was still far beyond her sight.

“In any case, I'm well aware now that I can't beat a veteran.”

“Knowing the extent of your power is very important. But I don't think it's very fruitful to always practice with swords... It'd be more efficient to try your hand at magic or shooting.”

“I practice magic here and there... No guns, though. And I do swords...because I think they're cool. They're like the symbol of strength for me.”

Hizuki wasn't lying.

Machina placed her hands on the bed on either side of Hizuki's face, getting on top of her. Her long hair draped down as her crimson eyes gazed deep into Hizuki's.

“Hizuki, are you hiding something?”

“Huh?”

“You showed no resignation even as I showed you my power a moment before your defeat. Your hostility remained even as you knew the difference in power between us. That is something those with an ace up their sleeve do. And your failure to hide this reinforces how amateurish you still are.”

“Man, you're incredible... You can tell that much.”

“It's just experience. I am an immortal, after all.”

“Umm, but...”

“But?”

“Assuming I have an ace up my sleeve, a secret technique or whatever, should I tell you guys?”

“Huh? As you see fit. You don’t *have* to tell us.”

Machina got away from Hizuki.

“R-really?” Hizuki said.

“I mean, I haven’t told you all of my secrets, have I?”

“I...guess...”

“As allies, it’s important for us to know each other’s capabilities. But there’s no need to know everything about each other. You can save it for whenever you think is the time.”

Machina’s voice was gentle in her lecture.

“Information is the most important thing in magic battle, even more than mana. Strategies become easier to devise when you have a hold of your opponent’s powers. If I were to know your secret, and someone read my mind with magic, that could be fatal to you. So you don’t have to tell me.”

“I’d rather the right time never comes... Machina, do you have a mentor? Is it Veltol?”

“A mentor? No, Lord Veltol didn’t give me much guidance. If anything, I would say my mentor is...Lady Sihlwald.”

“The Dark Peer we’re here for, right? So this Sihlwald is strong?”

“Yes, perhaps superior to Lord Veltol and Sir Zenol in hand-to-hand combat. The gap is so big, I would say I learned from the sheer number of defeats I experienced.”

“Stronger than Veltol?!”

“Under certain circumstances. The Six Dark Peers are immortals who have surpassed Lord Veltol in some skill or another.”

“Wow, and that includes you? What’s your talent?”

“That’s...a secret.” Machina placed her index finger in front of her lips and winked.

“You set me up...”

“Hee-hee. It is my trump card, after all. Lord Veltol used to shower me with praise for it back in the day. Ahhh... What could he be doing right now...? And Takahashi, too.”

Hizuki got the signal that Machina’s mood was crumbling again.

“Yeah, I wonder what they’re up to... I hope Takahashi’s all right.”

“She should be. Lord Veltol is with her.”

Hizuki figured Machina must have been right, as she’d known Takahashi for longer.

“Okay, I’ll go back to my room now,” Hizuki said as she stood up.

“Get some sleep, okay?”

“I will. Good night, Hizuki.”

After leaving the room, Hizuki headed to the 24-hour shop at the hotel entranceway to get something to eat. The lobby wasn’t big, and there was only one reception magiroid and a couple sitting on the sofas facing each other.

“FEMU, huh...? That’s one big job,” the man said.

“It’s all thanks to the contacts I made at my previous employer,” the woman replied.

“You’ve got contacts in dangerous places... So, what’s your plan? The mission sounds pretty hard. You think you have a shot?”

“*You’re* the one who should have a shot. It’s your job.”

“Mine?!”

“I secure the gigs, and you carry them out. Simple, yes? We’re always short on resources, and I have to take care of the rest of the business. This is the least you can do.”

“I might as well quit!”

“We’re only short on resources because you help people without monetizing the situation.”

“I...I apologize for that, but c’mom...”

They seemed to be having a work chat.

Hizuki had nothing to do with it, so she ignored the pair and walked over to the shop.



Back in Yokohama’s lower stratum, the moment Veltol and Takahashi met Aoba 100F after she was arrested and sentenced.

The members of Team 045 finished introducing themselves, while Aoba 100F remained befuddled.

First astonishing factor: Veltol. He was tall. Like, two heads taller than she was. That had to be against the men’s height code.

He is a man...right?

She wasn’t sure, because his hair was exceedingly long. Set aside the men’s hair code, this was against the women’s hair code.

His awfully good looks also made her doubt he was a man for a second. His way of speaking was quite idiosyncratic, too.

“Hey, you’re scaring the poor girl with your gigantic size, Velly.”

The girl who introduced herself as Takahashi elbowed Veltol’s side.

Aoba 100F had never heard of identifiers like “Veltol” or “Takahashi.”

“You misunderstand. She is simply in awe of my might.”

“I really don’t think that’s what’s going on here... Also, I forgot to mention it until now, but I’m shocked you can speak Japanese.”

“Ha. Who do you take me for? I eat languages for breakfast.”

“Well, I know that you only learned it to play untranslated Japanese games...but it’s still amazing. That way we can talk with folks like these who can’t speak elvish.”

“Cough, cough!”

The old man on the lower bunk bed got into a coughing fit and curled up into a ball. His name was Izumi 012M. He had trouble speaking, so Veltol had introduced him.

Takahashi walked up to Izumi 012M and rubbed his back. “Whoa there, Gramps, you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, *cough, cough!* Sorry, Takahashi...Veltol...”

“Do not worry about it, sir.”

“Thank you,” Izumi 012M said between coughs.

Aoba 100F and these three were the prisoners of Cell 045—Team 045. *Wh-what is it with these people?* Aoba 100F wondered.

Nothing strange about Izumi 012M. The old man was probably headed for the re-service area, due to old age getting in the way of his contributions, but he was a regular citizen.

Veltol and Takahashi were clearly different.

“Anywho.” Takahashi turned to look at Aoba 100F. “I’m so glad we got another girl. Being the only one is kinda awkward. Weird that the cells aren’t divided by gender, right? What with the one open-space toilet in the room and stuff. The digs here suck, but it’s nice to meetcha.”

“Th-the pleasure is mine...”

Takahashi’s smile was so bright, Aoba 100F had to squint.

Takahashi’s hair length was within the code, but it had one streak of red. Aoba 100F wondered for a moment whether that was against the code, but no, length was the only thing it established.

“Umm, and what’s your name?”

“Huh?! Name...? You mean my identifier? Aoba 100F...”

“Aoba...One-Oh-Oh-Eff...,” Takahashi mumbled, with her arms crossed and head tilted. “Everyone here’s got weird names, huh? ’Kay, I’ll

call you ‘Aoba.’ Way cuter.”

“Huh?” Aoba 100F—Aoba—grew wide-eyed at Takahashi’s remark.
“B-but then how will you tell me apart from the other Aobas...?”

The names—identifiers—of Yokohama’s citizens were composed of one of eighteen designations, three numbers, and one of two letters. After one fell to the lower stratum, a new individual with the same identifier was replenished to the upper stratum. As a result, there were multiple people with the same identifier in the lower stratum.

“Don’t worry. You’re the only Aoba to me. Got it?”

“O-okay...”

She was sociable and had a bright voice and look on her face.

Everyone on the upper stratum was also a “nice person,” but Aoba felt this was different.

“This will be your bed.” Veltol pointed at the one before her. “You’re under Takahashi. Have her teach you how to fold the sheets. They check them.”

“Y-yeshh.”

“To think Velly would really follow the rules and make his bed...”

“Ha. I esteem order above everything. I follow the rules a prisoner must follow. Not to mention, nothing beats the joy of finding a hole in the rules to break them.”

“You’re talking about games again?”

Aoba walked up to the bed to grab the sheets and found a book on top of it. A book she could recite from memory. The compilation of the Progenitor’s teachings.

The Canon.

On its spine was one of its verses—words of salvation.

Let there be peace in the world.



“Wake-up is at five. Keep breakfast short, because we must be at the church by six, and they won’t feed us if we arrive late.”

Veltol offered Aoba this warning while eating a ration bar.

“Y-yesh!”

A soft bell's melody woke her up back in the upper stratum, but the alarm in the prison was shrill and earsplitting. Aoba ate the same thing in a hurry. *Saba* unlike anything she had seen in the upper stratum.

The cell teams took turns distributing the *saba* to all others. There were far more prisoners than officers, so it inevitably had to be part of their prison service.

They were provided three *saba*: morning at the cell, noon at the service workshop, and evening at the dining hall.

Morning *saba* was only this solid bar and a cup of *aqa*.

"A dazzling beauty like me will slim down to nothing if this's the only thing we can eat," said Takahashi. "When I first heard them say *saba*, I thought they meant the mackerel fish... Is this like *sanmamen* without the *sanma*?"

Aoba had no idea what she was talking about.

The ration bar was a bit sweet, so not bad, but it was so dry, it felt like it would take away all her mouth's moisture, and gulping it down was a trial.

"Cough, cough!"

"Gramps! Don't try to wolf it down all at once!"

"Ahh... Sorry..."

"C'mon, no need to apologize."



"Six o'clock is prayer time. Not that I know who or what we're praying to."

Veltol said this as if he couldn't care less.

Inside the grounds at the prison's south, mechanical torii gates lined up. The chapel beyond them was of far poorer quality than that in the upper stratum.

Izumi 012M didn't attend. He was too old to walk this much. He wouldn't take part in the service work afterward, either.

Halfway through the way to the chapel, Takahashi tugged on Aoba's uniform.

"Aoba, Aoba."

"Y-yes?"

"I've been wondering something since we got here. What's that?"

Takahashi pointed at a towering building.

The 296-meter-tall landmark supported the circular plate of the upper stratum.

Although the upper stratum was smaller, it still covered much of the sky. It was dark in here even at noon.

“Oh, that’s the Atlas.”

“You mean the titan that holds up the heavens? Y’know, from Earth mythology? But that’s a chapel... Pretty weird mix, huh? No way that thing holds the upper stratum on its own. There’s gotta be some magic at work... Although I can’t imagine the scale for it to support that much weight without breaking...,” Takahashi mumbled, rapid-fire. “Anyways, what’s this Atlas’s deal?”

“It’s a sanctuary where they keep the Progenitor’s holy vessel. No one is allowed inside or anywhere nearby. They also say the re-service area is underneath it.”

“So what’s this re-service area I keep hearing about?”

“I don’t know the particulars... They say it’s a place below the lower stratum where people who can no longer serve the city due to injury or illness are made able to serve once again. It is a citizen’s duty to submit body and soul, after all...”

“Hmmm. This whole Progenitor thing is pretty dumb.”

Aoba could not believe her ears. She had never heard someone say something like that.

She looked around. If an officer were to hear her disrespecting the Progenitor—their god—they could punish her like she saw on her way to the cell.

Thankfully, no one seemed to notice.

“...I-is it dumb?” Aoba asked in a whisper.

“Ah, sorry. It’s what’s normal for you, right?”

Aoba’s heart raced.

“Yeah, I’m just gonna be frank with you. It’s dumb. I don’t care if that’s what you and everyone else in the city believes. I *hate* this sorta thing. No offense.”

“D-don’t worry.” It took Aoba courage to even utter those two words. To not worry about her going against the systems that defined her life. “B-but still, you shouldn’t say that to anyone else...”

“So I can say it to you?”

“Ah, y-yes. I...I also find it...strange...,” she confessed for the first

time.

She felt like she shouldn't be doing this, but at the same time, she felt liberated.

Her mentality changed; if she was already a prisoner anyway, then being disrespectful wouldn't change things much at this point.

Aoba looked ahead and spotted Veltol talking with someone from another team.

"Good to see you again. How was the correction chamber yesterday?"

"Veltol. Horrible... It's so small and stinky, and there's no food... I'm sick of getting sent there for collective punishment."

"Sounds hard."

"Oh, no, I had it relatively fine, thanks to your testimony. The actual perpetrators had it even worse."

"I would like to ask you some questions. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

Aoba wondered what they were talking about as she entered the chapel.

The inside was not so different from the one on the upper stratum, save for lower quality. Benches, a pulpit, light rays clearing the darkness, and a bass-heavy hymn. The crowd was jam-packed, be it because of the lower stratum's higher population or the chapel being smaller than the upper stratum.

"Looks more like a slums bar than a chapel, eh?" Takahashi quipped.

Aoba had no idea what she was talking about.

Prayer was the same as it was on the upper stratum. Reciting the Canon with the overpowering bass sound. The only difference was that the mood here felt much lighter than in the upper stratum.

Veltol was particularly casual—to an offensive degree.

Everyone had to stand during prayer. Yet he was reclined back, exceedingly long legs crossed, knee on the bench's armrest, jaw on the back of his hand, staring ahead with tedium. Meanwhile, Takahashi had her forehead on the back of the seat in front, somehow dozing off in the middle of the loud noise.

"...?!" Aoba was shocked to see the extent of blasphemy before the Progenitor.

Sitting down—let alone dozing off—in the middle of prayer was unheard-of for her.

There were no officers here. They all assumed it was obvious that people in church would be praying appropriately. There was no one there

to chastise them.

The people around them seemed unconcerned, or rather, they were looking the other way. Calling him out would mean that they weren't focusing on prayer, either, and no one wanted to get involved in trouble in the first place.

C-can they do that...?

Blasphemy. Sacrilege. Heresy. This was taboo for any citizen.

Yet despite her worrying, Aoba found their lack of restraint liberating.



"Service work begins at eight AM. There's a break at eleven thirty, and then work ends at four PM."

Service—prison work assigned to teams.

"Team 045 works at the landfill," Veltol added. "Watch out for the inherent dangers of the job."

"Y-yes!" Aoba replied.

Takahashi still seemed sleepy.

Work was easy: disposing of the garbage collected from the upper and lower strata. The landfill had a makeshift ceiling but open walls; one could see the other teams work from there.

"Our job is to bring the trash here with the cart and throw it there. The end." Veltol pointed at his feet, where cylinders with uneven teeth rolled to crush and grind the garbage. "Quite the easy task."

"I-isn't it dangerous...?" Aoba gulped as she stared into the grinder.

The machine resembled a monster with its mouth open. A single slip and it was over.

"Naturally. Other teams say that work accidents are incessant. They do not think about workplace safety at all. I will take care of throwing the garbage; you focus on bringing it to me."

Aoba and Takahashi got to work.

They worked on one cart together. The team in charge of transporting the garbage loaded it into the cart, and they took it to Veltol to throw into the grinder.

Takahashi pulled the cart from the front, while Aoba pushed it from the back.

"You're such a lifesaver here, Aoba. I had to do this on my own

before!” Takahashi said. “So, anyways, what’s this?” She pointed at the trash with her chin.

“Umm...magar?”

“I can tell as much!”

Magar corpses lay on the cart. Common cattle in Alnaeth.

They had twisted horns and stiff fur. They were similar in bionomy and uses to Earth’s sheep, and there was a time when their name was simply translated as *sheep*.

The corpses were relatively new, before putrefaction.

“And we’re throwing this away?! What even is up with this stuff?! Is it real? This isn’t what we threw away yesterday! And it’s kinda oversize, don’tcha think?!”

“I think it might be leftovers from Communion.”

“Communion?” Takahashi repeated.

Aoba nodded. “*Saba* offered to the Progenitor. Only consecrated things can be used in Communion, so the rest gets thrown away...I suppose. I always wondered where the leftover consecrated magar went.”

“Isn’t that a waste? Couldn’t we get better food if we handed it out to people here? It’d definitely be better than that bland paste...”

“Everything within the domain is the Progenitor’s... Even taking things that are not consecrated is forbidden in this city. We can only eat what the Progenitor bestows us.”

“Oh, piss off. This is mad heavy, too! Maybe if I ask Veltol to switch places... No, wait, that’d probably actually kill me.”

Veltol, meanwhile, pointed at the grinder, calling out to a man from a different team working nearby. “Kanazawa, do you mind?”

“Veltol. Thank you for your help before. It was thanks to you that no problem happened in the end. Everyone else is grateful, too.”

“Please, don’t mind it. Now, I have a question. Where does this go?”

“Ah, it leads to the sewers that connect to the ocean.”

“I see. So this is why Goar’s sea was filthy...”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know much else, since I don’t belong to the maintenance team.”

“Hmm... Do you happen to know which team does? I would like to ask further questions.”

“Maintenance is 003, 028, 107, and 171’s job. Should I get you in contact with the team leaders?”

“I would appreciate it.”

Takahashi kept towing as Aoba observed the conversation.

“What are they talking about?” Aoba asked Takahashi.

“Dunno, but you can bet Velly’s scheming something. He’s doing things pretty grassroots this time... I guess due to all the restrictions. Anyways, just let ‘im take care of things.”

Takahashi wore a serene smile.

“Y’know, there was this big turf war vibe when we got here, and folks were super leery of us. But then Velly solved it in one day. Said the best way to do stuff was to get everyone’s trust first.”

“He does seem very friendly.”

“The guy’s a master at rallying people up.”

Finally, they got the cart to Veltol.

“Gosh, I’m pooped. Velly, we’re here!”

“Good job,” he said, before throwing the refuse in the grinder.

The flesh was torn apart, the bones crushed, and blood splattered as the grinder consumed it.

Aoba fainted at the sight.



“Eleven thirty. Time for our lunch break. We must go back to work at twelve, so don’t take it too easy.”

The team in charge of rationing at the service workshop brought them their afternoon *saba: aqa* in a pouch and a box of partitioned vividly colored paste, the C-tier *saba* sometimes handed out in the upper stratum.

“I really don’t like this...” Takahashi frowned as she removed the spoon from the back of the box’s lid and grabbed a mouthful of pink paste.

Her frown deepened once she gulped down some *aqa*.

“The pink one’s got this chemical sweetness and awful texture to it, the blue one tastes like toothpaste, and the white one’s just bland. You don’t like this stuff, do ya, Aoba?”

“E-ermm...I am used to it. Hee-hee...”

Aoba turned to look at Veltol. He was already wolfing down the paste with gusto.

“It’s not bad,” he said.

“You just like anything so long as it’s edible!”

“I must admit, compared to what I had to eat during my worst times, all

the food here is quite appetizing.”

“You gotta raise your standards, man!”

The last word echoed throughout the wide landfill—“man, man, man...”—as Takahashi threw herself backward onto the rusty floor.

Aoba listened to everything they said with great interest.

Takahashi rubbed her nape, with a big sigh. Aoba hadn’t noticed before, but she had some metallic thing there.

“I’m gonna lose my mind here without my Familia...”

“Too bad they took it from you as soon as we arrived.”

“U-umm... What is this...Familia?”

“Ahh, err, well...”

Takahashi lowered her head to show Aoba her nape.

The protection cover shielded the nerve connector. Her Familia was supposed to be connected on top of the cover, but it had been confiscated when they came to Yokohama.

“It’s a machine you put in here, and it’s super handy. The culmination of civilization and an absolute must for life in the modern era.”

“Huh...” Aoba tilted her head in confusion.

“My artificial spirits were parallel copies, and it was my outing device, so no big deal, but, like, I’m an artist, y’know? I’ve got my quirks for my gadgets.”

“Okay, okay. I was already thinking about buying you something with the reward. I shall get you the same as the one you lost,” Veltol said.

“Whoa! Seriously?! Get me a new one, then! The one that’s releasing soon!”

“Heh. Opportunist.”

“I was fine taking it off for class in Akihabara...but not having it at all here is givin’ me some serious withdrawal...”

“Perhaps they should regulate Familias before Scream. In any case, without magic, I can’t connect to the aethernet.”

“There’s still tons of stuff you can do offline... Can’t you pull something off with magic?”

“I just reminded you: I cannot use magic here. Not because of any interference, but due to the overwhelming lack of aether.”

Aoba didn’t know about magic to begin with, so she had no way of knowing that there was little aether in the lower—and upper—stratum. Veltol and Takahashi had noticed this deficiency as soon as they arrived in Yokohama.

Magic—the means to control the aether in the air with mana and bend the laws of reality to re-form phenomena.

Aether was needed to create mana, too, and even with some reserve, it was impossible to manipulate and transform what wasn't there. It was the most important element of magic.

Aoba continued listening to their conversation, wondering what this *magic* thing was.

“Even the facilities are all electrical. It's not so bad that I can't maintain my immortality, but performing any magic is impossible. Here, at least.”

“Are we gonna be okay?”

“Worry not. I have a plan.”

“Then let's ditch this dump quick and get back home. No worries about my attendance, thanks to the program I wrote, but Hizuki shouldn't be missing her shifts.”

“Easy. There is a process to this, as there is to everything. It is foolish to challenge the dungeon's boss without proper preparations.”

“You never beat 'em on your first try even when you do prepare!”

The tranquil break went by.

Although she didn't understand the slightest thing about what they were saying, a smile popped onto Aoba's face as she heard them talk.



“It is now four PM. Service work is complete. Time to go back, exercise, and shower before six o'clock. Dinner is at seven, and lights-out at nine.”

Once their work was over, exercise and shower time went by quickly before dinner. Evening *saba* was served in the dining hall furnished with long tables and chairs.

“This place is like a school cafeteria,” said Takahashi.

Aoba had no idea what she meant.

Most prisoners in the southern zone gathered there. The place was terribly crowded, and the mere act of eating was an ordeal.

Aoba sat between Takahashi and Veltol.

“U-umm... A-are you not eating?” Aoba timidly asked Veltol.

It was C-tier *saba* again, but Veltol wasn't touching his.

“No. Izumi doesn't get lunch and dinner because he is unable to go to

work, so I'm saving mine for him. I cannot leave a roommate behind."

"Gramps's gotta be hungry," Takahashi said.

"B-but then wouldn't that make you hungry, Veltol?"

"Although food complements mana nutrition and makes my reserve more efficient, I mostly do it for enjoyment rather than necessity."

Again, Aoba did not understand a word of that.

After eating, they headed to the cell.

The time before lights-out was boring. There was nothing to do, so Aoba skimmed the Canon. The verses she could recite with her eyes closed had degraded to simple words that slipped away from her heart.

Takahashi was on the bed above hers. On the lower bed beside was Izumi 012M, already asleep after eating. Above him was Veltol, crossing his legs to fit into the bed, also reading the Canon. His bed used to be below Takahashi's when they first arrived, but she insisted he give it over to Aoba.

"Aoba," Veltol called as he looked away from the Canon.

"Y-yesh?!" Her voice cracked.

"I want to ask you something. Have you ever heard of Sihlwald or the Black Dragon?"

"Sihl...wald...?"

She had never heard of it. It was nowhere in her memory.

"Down..."

And yet a sound came to mind.

Something within her. Deep within her. Someone yelled. Shouted at her to go down.

The urge was similar to when she was in the upper stratum. She subconsciously understood that it didn't mean the lower stratum, but even lower. The impulse became stronger after she fell here.

"Aoba?"

"Ah!" Aoba came back to her senses. "S-sorry... I don't...think I know it..."

"I see. That is fine."

"O-okay..."

"Aobaaa! Talk with me, too!" Takahashi popped her head upside down from the bed above.

"Eep!" Aoba jumped in surprise. "H-h-hey..."

Today, she had learned that Takahashi, while a prisoner, was not a bad person. Being a sinner should mean being a bad person, and yet Aoba

couldn't see her that way.

"We're roomies now! Let's be friends, 'kay?"

"Umm..."

"Hmm?"

"Wh-what should I call you...?"

"Just Takahashi. That's what everyone calls me."

"...Takahashi." *Takahashi, Takahashi*, she said to herself. "I-I've never heard that name before."

"I doubt there's Takahassis here. Everyone has similar names in this joint."

"I-it's pretty strange. Erm, could it be...that y-you're from outside?"

"Yeah. You can tell?"

Takahashi leaned over her bed and twirled in the air by supporting herself from the edge to sit down on Aoba's bed.

"Guess it's obvious, huh?"

"Yes... There is something different about you."

"I'd imagine. Everyone here's, like, all uptight and polite. I'm sure me and Velly are an oddity."

"I thought Veltol was a woman when I first saw him... There are no men with hair that long, because of the hair code..."

"Y'know, they shaved him bald when we came here. But then his hair just grew back in an instant. They gave up."

"My! Is everyone from outside like that? Can you grow your hair that quickly, too, T-Takahashi?"

"Nah. I'm normal. It's just that Velly's an immortal."

"He's what?"

"He can't die."

"...There really are people like that?"

"Eeyup. I've got another immortal friend, even."

"Really?!"

"She kinda resembles you, in a way."

"Um, Takahashi, why did you come here from outside?"

"I... Well, Velly had something to do here... Wait, should I be telling you this? Eh, he didn't ask me to keep quiet, so whatever. He would've said so if I shouldn't."

Aoba was engrossed by Takahashi's rapid chatter.

Talking to her was stimulating like she had never felt before. It was like a desire burning within her got stronger and stronger.

“Um, Takahashi, may I ask you something?”

“Whassup?”

“Erm... I—I...” Aoba hesitated.

“What is it? Just tell me! We’re friends now.”

The remark gave her courage.

“Could you tell me about the outside?”

She was worried that asking about it would be forbidden, since the Canon said that those outside were sinners who didn’t get to enter the utopia.

One could see the outside from within Yokohama. The lights of the city beyond the blurry panorama.

But those weren’t real lights. To Aoba, the real lights were these people here with her.

“I...”

Takahashi watched as Aoba hesitated whether to say it.

“I want to visit the outside world, too.”

Takahashi blinked and smiled. “Heh-heh-heh. Sounds great! Let’s hang out outside. I gotta tell you all about it first. C’mere, let’s have girl talk.”

During the short time before lights-out, Takahashi told her about all sorts of things. About herself, about Veltol, about her friends, about the city outside, about the foods that were tastier than the paste.

Simply hearing about it gave Aoba more, so much more joy than the mandated bliss from the upper stratum. It was perhaps the happiest she had ever been in her life. She couldn’t help but wish this moment could go on forever.

Izumi 012M heard the talk, too, and laughed between coughs.

“Wh-what’s the matter?” Aoba asked.

“Oh, nothing. Your conversation was just that fun,” he said.

“Wanna join the girl talk, Gramps?” Takahashi asked.

Izumi 012M shook his head. “No, it’s enough for me to hear you talk. I also used to have this wish to see the outside. Which is why I fell to the lower stratum... But hearing you talk about it now, I’m sure I wasn’t wrong in thinking that.”

The old man smiled.

“Aoba 100F.” He looked at her. Then he spoke as if he was entrusting her with his wishes. “You go to the outside. For me. Please.”

The next day, after Aoba, Takahashi, and Veltol returned to Cell 045, Izumi 012M was nowhere to be found.

He had been sent to the re-service area.



Although they didn't show it, the folks at Cell 045 were considerably impacted by Izumi 012M's sudden disappearance.

After evening *saba*, Takahashi and Aoba sat shoulder to shoulder on the lower bed, when Takahashi said, "Hey, Aoba."

"Y-yes?"

"What's the re-service area?"

"I—I don't know a lot myself... They only ever told me that it's the final place where those who could no longer serve the Progenitor go, so they are able to do it once again."

"I see... Then maybe he's doing fine over there."

"Yes... I'm sure. I'm sure he is."

After a while of silence in the cell devoid of the old man's coughing, there was a violent knock on the door, followed by an officer's shout:

"Stand back, prisoner! A new inmate has arrived at Cell 045!"

Takahashi and Aoba looked at each other.

"Wonder what they're like..."

"H-hopefully they're not scary..."

"Do not fret. There is nothing that can surprise you anymore, remember? Not after knowing us irregulars. Keep your head up," Veltol said as he jumped off the bed and stood tall with arms crossed to welcome the new inmate.

"Get in, Ryal," barked the officer.

"I know. You don't have to push me like that..."

The new prisoner entered Cell 045.

He was a man. Human. Young, perhaps not even twenty. Blond.

The man's eyes opened wide the moment he saw his new cellmates.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!"

"YOUUUUUUUUUUUUUU?!"

Veltol and the blond man reacted the same way and shouted each other's names:

"Veltol?!"



“Gram...!!”

They harmonized in their every exclamation.

“What’re you doing here?!”

“What are you doing here?!”

It turned out the new inmate had defeated Demon Lord Veltol five hundred years prior, after which he received the blessing/curse of eternal youth from the goddess Meldia.

The Hero Gram.

INTERLUDE

A punch.

A crowd surrounded a helpless, cringing human man to beat him up, some barehanded and some with metal bars.

The feel of his flesh tearing apart and his bones smashing to bits was disgusting, but they could not stop.

It was punishment. Discipline.

He deserved it for stealing valuable food.

So he, the leader, had to beat him more than anyone else.

“Huh?”

By the time he realized it, the man was no longer moving. He was no longer warm.

“Ah.”

Penalties were unavoidable. Crime necessitated punishment. And there was no graver crime than stealing what little food they had.

But he didn’t want to kill him.

“...He’s dead?”

The man was but a lump of meat now.

Which sin was graver? Stealing? Or killing?

But now this meant that he would not hunger again; he would no longer do any wrong. It was all good from there.

“Oh, I see.”

He had a revelation—an eye-opening like the Copernican revolution.

“If there’s not enough food to feed all these mouths, then we just need to reduce the number of mouths.”

The ice was broken. He had no qualms about killing anymore.

The violent ogres went out first. Although strong, they couldn’t resist the power of the sea.

Then it was the sly therians. They endured the cold with their fur.

Then it was the orcs. Those weren’t tasty.

Then the goblins, then the dwarves, then the elves, until only humans remained.

“Thank goodness. Now there’s peace.”

CHAPTER THREE

Life in a Flask

Heavy silence enshrouded Cell 045.

At the middle of the hush were two men, sitting cross-legged before each other in the middle of the room.

The two girls, Takahashi and Aoba, watched from the former's upper bunk bed.

“U-um...Takahashi.”

“Yeah?”

“Wh-what’s the relationship between those two?”

“Uhh... That’s a good question...” Takahashi cocked her head.

They were...not friends. That much was certain.

That said, they weren’t enemies at this point. Although they once fought to the death, she had seen them reconcile to work together already.

So if one were to describe their relationship in one word, it would be...

“Acquaintances...I guess?”

Takahashi went with the safest bet.

“Gram,” said Veltol.

“What?”

“Your scowl is terrorizing Aoba,” Veltol barked, scowling.

“Hmph. I’m not scowling... And anyway, you’re also—Actually, you’re right.”

Gram stood up and turned toward Aoba. He bowed with a friendly smile.

“I’m sorry to have scared you. I should’ve been more considerate. I was just surprised to see someone I knew in the cell. My name is Gram. Nice to meet you.”

“H-hi. I’m Aoba 100F...”

Aoba peeked half of her face from the bed before pulling back in.

Takahashi thought about how adorable she looked like that. She was similar to Machina, although Machina was like a loyal dog, while Aoba was closer to a kitten. So Takahashi scratched the kitten’s chin. The kitty-girl blinked repeatedly in confusion.

“Well then, Gram,” said Veltol. “What are you doing here?”

“I...” He glanced at Aoba.

“Pay her no mind. Although she is a Yokohama citizen, she will not report us. I guarantee that.”

“If you say so...”

“Let us exchange information, shall we? I suspect you are not here for sightseeing. What is your objective? If you happen to know anything about this place, please do tell.”

“Haah...” Gram sighed before acquiescing. “I’m here for a job. I snuck into Yokohama to conduct an investigation.”

“A job...? Investigation...?”

“Yes. A contact of mine started a business, and I work there now, so...”

“Stop. One second. You have a job?! Hero Gram has sold his soul to a corporation to become a *man* with a *salary*?! How did you even get one when I couldn’t for the life of me?!”

Veltol clutched at his hair before holding out his hand in front of Gram.

“It appears I’ve grossly mistaken you... I thought you were more of a...a freelanced soul... That’s what I wanted you to be... But time is not a compassionate mistress... I see... So you’ve become a wage slave...”

“What do you care? Not like it’s that much different from before. I used to be in the knights order.”

“The knights order is not a private enterprise!”

“What’s the difference?!” Gram cut the topic short and cleared his throat. “Anyway, our chief director has some contacts, and we got a tricky job from FEMU.”

“Hmph... Is it about Scream?”

Gram’s eyes grew wide. “You knew about it?”

“It was only a shot in the dark. Continue.”

“...FEMU fears Scream will become an epidemic. They turn the other cheek when drugs are sold and bought under their control, but this one has gotten out of hand. They need to crush the manufacturer. They already got the trading location.”

“Yeah, we found boxes with what looked to be Scream in Yokohama’s warehouse,” Takahashi added.

“You knew about it, too? But that’s not enough decisive evidence. With the Yakuza Guild, the G6, FEMU, Goar...there’s too many players around Yokohama, and they can’t interfere directly. I heard they tried to

sneak in multiple times before, but... Veltol, have you seen anyone else from the outside here?"

"No. Although I heard rumors about someone, but they got killed after they resisted and tried to escape. In any case, it appears it's only us, at least so far as the lower stratum goes."

"...I thought so. That's where I come in."

"A third party entirely unrelated to the G6 and FEMU. So you came here to look into the source of Scream."

"Yes. FEMU's troops are on standby. With the number of hands at work here all intricately strung together, they need decisive, direct evidence. So I was hired to search for it. What about you?"

"I'm here looking for Sihlwald."

"Sihlwald...the Black Dragon?"

"Indeed."

"Here? But why...? No, I suppose I better not pry further. Hold on—shouldn't I try to stop you? I can't let you expand your forces. There's no way you're up to any good."

"Silence. Instead, I have a proposal for you." Veltol's smile widened as he stretched his arms. "Let us join hands."

He had a haughty look on his face.

"It will be but a short alliance while we remain on the island, of course," he added.

"Ugh..." Gram frowned.

"...Why are you looking at me like that? This is isolated enemy land. An unusual environment. Having allies can only be a good thing. I get more hands, and you get information. Indeed, this is what they call a win-win. Am I wrong?"

"You make a lot of sense, but I can't say I like having you ask me to help you out..."

"What? You don't trust me?"

"I don't!"

"Hmph..."

Nobody noticed that Veltol was pouting slightly, hurt by Gram's response.

Veltol sincerely wanted to collaborate, no schemes. But he and Gram were once enemies. It was only natural that the Hero would be suspicious of the Demon Lord suggesting such a good idea.

"...Isn't it a good idea?" Veltol asked Gram.

“I mean, it’s not bad, but...”

“I’d also feel at ease with you on our side, Grammy,” Takahashi said cheerfully.

“I-if Takahashi says it’s okay, th-then I...agree...,” Aoba added, confused.

Gram kept frowning.

Takahashi surmised that he might not feel so bad about it if only it wasn’t Veltol suggesting it, and Veltol probably realized that, too.

“Then we shall once more form an alliance.”

With that, Veltol held out his right hand.

“Okay, but only because they asked, too.”

Gram did the same, forcing a smile.

The Hero and the Demon Lord shook hands.

“It’s been a while, Takahashi,” Gram said. “I guess we’re back at it again.”

“Yep!” Takahashi waved from the bed.

“And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Aoba.”

“Y-you too!”

“That aside.” Gram turned to Veltol again. “I gotta say I’m shocked.”

“About what?”

“About you wearing a uniform. I’d figured you’d rather die.”

“Ha. Why would I make it harder for myself to intrude into my destination?”

“How did you get here anyway?”

“We snuck into Yokohama territory in Goar, and after some turns and twists, we arrived here.”

“So you got arrested.”

“...You could also put it like that.”

“Oof. That sucks.”

“What?! This was my plan all along! I let myself be captured! How did you get in here?!”

“Ugh. I—I snuck onto a Yokohama ferry...”

“And?”

Gram looked away and continued, his voice even lower.

“...Got arrested at the port.”

“Ha! Pathetic! Oof! Big oof! They should extend your sentence! Add

idiocy crime to your tally!"

"It was my Plan B, anyway! You just went with the flow!"

"Shut your mouth, you insolent fool!"

"Ow! Ow, ow! Get off, you jerk!"

The two grown men—both over five hundred years old—grappled each other like squabbling children.

"T-Takahashi, Takahashi..." Aoba stammered.

"Yeah?"

"Are they...on bad terms?"

"Uh... Hmm..." She thought for a solid ten seconds. "I think they're good friends."

The two kept fighting until an officer heard the ruckus and yelled at them.



The day after Gram arrived, he and Veltol went to wash up after work. They removed their uniforms and entered the abhisheka showers.

The lower stratum showers did not have the luxury of being divided by gender, nor did they have personal partitions. It was all out in public view.

As they could choose the time to do it, they had decided that Veltol and Gram showered before Takahashi and Aoba used the room.

The abhisheka room had a cracked tiled floor and was big enough to fit twenty people. Other citizens came and went during their shower.

"We can have a private talk here. No one understands elvish."

"...I see."

They could have simply spoken elvish in the cell, so this implied that Veltol did not want Takahashi to hear what he was about to say.

Gram turned the valve, and lukewarm water trickled down. The room had no soap or shampoo—nothing more than water. At least they had a shower. Not bad compared to his life up to now.

Veltol by his side had to crouch a little, as the shower head was shorter than his own head.

Never actually considered it, but of course this guy takes showers... Drying all that hair looks like a drag..., Gram thought, shooting him a sidelong glance.

Gram had no big scars from his neck up, but everywhere else was plastered with them, big and small. Including those from his fight with

Veltol five hundred years back.

Meanwhile, Veltol's body was immaculate. Such was the difference between Gram's eternal youth and Veltol's immortality.

"So," Veltol said. "What did you think about your first day?"

"Well..." Gram pondered.

The iron island dominated by the "god" Progenitor and the absolute law of the Canon.

Gram gathered his thoughts based on what he'd heard from Veltol and what he'd seen that day.

"To be quite honest...it's more normal than I thought. I pictured it more stagnant and unsalvageable."

Gram had been locked up at an elf kingdom prison once by mistake, and the terrible conditions and constant fighting between inmates and prisoner heads, not to mention the corruption among warders and the spiteful punishment they handed out, was something he would rather forget.

In comparison, the order and cultural standard in Yokohama's lower stratum was utopian. He had imagined something more like the former before he came here.

But that also gave him the creeps. It was *too* peaceful.

"Because the inhabitants are so good-hearted and obedient, correct? Although some of them dominate others through violence, they are few and far between."

"Other thing that catches my attention is how scattered the aether is. I think it has to be artificial... But wouldn't it be too excessive to thin out the aether on the whole island just to keep the prisoners from using magic?"

"The whole island... Heh. You haven't realized? I suppose it shouldn't be surprising, as aether detection requires finesse. Of course a man like you wouldn't notice."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm an oaf."

"From what I can tell, the lower you go, the denser aether becomes. The aether levels on the island are not zero. Not only did they set up a barrier to block out the outside's aether, but they've put in place a filter so it won't flow upward. Perhaps the most natural method, considering the reality of Aoba's people. That is to say, there is something down there."

"...Hold on. What do you mean by 'the reality of Aoba's people'?"

Veltol's jaw dropped in disbelief, and he looked up at Gram

incredulously.

“Wh-what?” Gram stammered.

“You haven’t realized? Heh. What can you do?” Veltol brushed his hair up, sending drops of water flying, like when a dog shook itself dry. He smirked. “I shall show you the answer, ignorant Hero.”

“Stop wasting time and spit it out already.”

Veltol closed the valve.

“Aoba’s people—the ten thousand citizens of Yokohama—are not *people*, per se.”

So said the Demon Lord.

“...They’re not people?”

“Do not misunderstand me. I respect them as individuals, and I am not talking about the current times’ ethics. This is simply my viewpoint according to my knowledge of the magical arts.”

Veltol brushed his hair to his back and grabbed it into a bunch by his nape, after which he wrung it dry.

“They are homunculi.”

“Homunculi...”

Artificial life-forms created through alchemy, a type of magic. They were made by mixing people’s physical composition data and souls with alchemic materials. They had low immune systems, no reproduction capabilities, and high compatibility with magic.

As Veltol said, in the field of sorcery of Alnaeth, homunculi were not recognized as people. This was not based on biology, ethics, morals, or societal norms; the logic was simply that, as the gods did not give their blessing of this taboo, they were not people.

And in the modern world...

“That is a huge violation of the code of ethics...,” Gram muttered.

All mediumship, including necromancy’s soul cloning and alchemy’s homunculi, were taboo in modern sorcery. They were established as ethical code violations in most cities and corporate treaties. Simply put, it was a crime.

Additionally, the boundaries between homunculi production and regenerative medicine like organ cloning were blurry, and due to the conflicting ideologies—mostly from neo-naturalist elves—such fields of medicine were behind in progress, giving rise instead to magiborgs.

"So they thin out the aether because homunculi can use magic naturally," Gram said.

"I have no solid proof of this. It is but a guess born from the data gathered by my special skills."

Veltol took a deep breath to collect his thoughts. "There are eighteen types of souls and thirty-six types of bodies in this city. I imagine they reverse engineered the souls of the original humans to modify their biological information and create two types of models: F and M. They added eighteen types of souls to each of them, and were given eighteen different names... That is the reality behind this city's homunculi."

"Soul cloning on top of homunculi... This is far more serious than Scream. Ethic code violation is enough of a reason to give FEMU rein to force an investigation. But we still need absolute proof."

The two of them left the shower room and headed to the lockers.

"Homunculi... So that's why there are no other species?" Gram said.

"Hmm? You hadn't noticed?"

"Oh, give me a break. I thought that just happened to be the population here... In any case, why make homunculi?"

"They are consumables."

"What?"

"Catalysts, materials, offerings, spares. Call them whatever you want. Sacrifices made to gather faith. The brainwash-like education and the daily prayers are good proof of that. Faith set to a specific orientation gives greater results than vague feelings. And being homunculi that cannot reproduce makes them easier to manage as well."

"Faith... So the Progenitor really is a divine being?"

Fundamentally, faith came from the positive feelings of beings of lower spiritual levels toward those of higher levels. Beings on the same spiritual level could not give faith power to each other. Thus, it stood to reason the Progenitor was divine.

"If we're going by theory, yes."

"...What do you mean?"

Veltol put on his cheap prison-issue underwear as he continued. "Their souls are of one level lower than humans'—that is to say, their soul composition is more similar to that of demons."

The demons he meant were a bit different from the evil beings with horns and tails from religious depictions.

Spiritually lower beings that fed on negative faith, that is, negative

emotions such as anger, sadness, or fear, were called, in sorcery studies, demons. They lived in a world on a different layer than people lived in, and fundamentally, they could not intervene with people. People had to call the demons to have communication, and they were seen as the polar opposites to the spiritually higher beings that were *gods*.

“I have not magically observed their souls, to be certain, but I doubt my deduction is wrong.”

Gram didn’t doubt him, either. This man had to have grounds to think so.

“Question, then: Why would the Progenitor do something so bothersome so as to lower their spiritual level?”

Gram pondered while putting on his uniform.

Veltol was an exception in his capability to obtain faith from both positive and negative sources. Fundamentally, one could only earn positive faith from a lower being to a higher one.

I’m reminded once again that this guy’s cheating.

Why would he need to lower the homunculi’s spiritual level? Gram already had his answer.

“...Because he can’t get faith otherwise!”

“Exactly. Were the Progenitor a spiritually higher being than man, a god, he would have no need to. No extra steps needed to earn faith. Ergo, the Progenitor is no god, but a human.”

Veltol nodded. “There are two ways for people to obtain faith—particularly positive faith. Either raise their own spiritual level or earn it from those lower. The former is no easy task. The latter is more realistic in comparison. No demon would normally have faith in a person, but it is not impossible through a contract.”

“But what does the Progenitor want, going to such lengths?”

“Hmm... It appears I’ve overestimated you, Hero Gram...”

“Huh? What? So you know?”

“I do,” Veltol responded immediately.

“The Progenitor wants to truly become a god.”

Gram cocked his head. “How can you know?”

“What else could be the goal of one trying to raise their spiritual level through faith but to become a god?”

“But didn’t you do the same?”

“Fool. My spiritual level rose as a side effect of my overcoming my demise. I was not looking to become a god. Also, in this game I played recently, the last boss was such one guy trying to become a god.”

“Gosh. All speculation and you’re using games as your source...”

“Games can teach you anything. I doubt you’ve ever given them a fair shake. You give me your contacts once this battle ends, and I shall send you my top selection of games.”

He’s really adapted to the times, huh?

“And there is one more secret to the homunculi of this island.”

“What?”

“I could tell you, but you will have to lend me your hand in my escape from prison.”

“Fine, fine. I can’t say no anyway. Just tell me.”

“Heh. So you understand. Very well, then. I shall tell you the secret.” Veltol patted down his uniform. “The operation time of this city’s homunculi—that is, the life span of Aoba and her brethren is...”

“Four... years...?”

Takahashi dropped her towel.

She had just finished a pleasant shower with Aoba and had put on her underwear. It was right as she was putting on her uniform that she heard that. The details had poofed out of her mind from the shock, but after she just asked her birthday, the conversation led to Aoba saying she had a four-year life span.

“That’s it?! But how?! Why?!”

“Wh-what can I say? W-we are produced in a flask where our mothers provide us with the necessary education, and then operation begins once we’ve grown enough. The span of operation is four years. We come of age at the age of two years.”

“Wait, then how old are you now?”

“Two...”

There was no gravitas in Aoba’s voice. She was merely explaining the facts. Which only made Takahashi sadder.

Life spans varied. One didn’t have to be immortal or eternally young—human lives were short from the point of view of elves. But even so, giving a span of only four years to a manufactured life was too short.

“You see, I’m...seventeen.”

Cruel words. Something she shouldn't say to an innocent, oblivious girl. Something she normally wouldn't have said. But as she hesitated whether to do it or not, the words just came out of her mouth.

"Huh...?"

"I...I want you to live longer... Aoba... Aoba...!"

Takahashi held Aoba's thin, ephemeral body. Her warmth communicated the fact that she was alive.



The next day, during service work.

"Hey, Velly...," Takahashi began timidly, bringing Aoba with her to the grinder where Gram and Veltol worked. "Is it true that Aobas only have a life span of four years?"

"Hmm? Oh, did she tell you? I've asked multiple people now, so it must be true." Veltol's voice was unchanged, in contrast to the severity in Takahashi's. "I know not whether it was to maintain this number or if it was a secondary effect of manipulating their souls to drop their levels, or perhaps both, but indeed, I hear they begin aging rapidly after turning three. Apparently, Izumi was three and a half years old."

"...But we just became friends... It's not fair that she'll die in two years..." Takahashi's face grew dark.

"Takahashi..." Aoba looked at her with worry.

Four years was too short even from a human perspective.

"I want to be with you, too. But...this is my destiny..."

"Can't you...do something about it?" Takahashi asked Veltol.

"Yes."

"You can!?"

"What!?"

Takahashi's and Aoba's jaws dropped at how easily he said it.

"The corporeal information—what they call *genes* in this age—haven't been directly modified."

"So it's not about, like, telomere length or whatever."

"It's not the body but the soul that has been altered through magic. As the both of them are closely linked, by manipulating the spiritual information, naturally, the body is affected as well. It is close to a witchcraft curse. That, along with the soul cloning... Quite the skill for the manipulation of souls."

Veltol paused.

"That means that we would need the appropriate facilities...but dispelling the curse is possible. Her body is no different from a regular human's, so dispelling it should put her back on the regular life span."

"...I get to...be with you...for longer..." Aoba clasped her hands together at her chest.

"It appears my goal has changed... Or rather, my list of objectives has grown," said Veltol.

"How so?" Takahashi asked.

"In addition to retrieving Sihlwald, I shall defeat this Progenitor, and liberate—nay, dominate—the souls of all citizens on this iron island."

Takahashi and Aoba were shocked.

That meant...

"I shall establish my nation upon this land and use it as a base for conquering the world."

Veltol said this with absolute seriousness.

"That is my additional objective for this quest."

Aoba tilted her head. "Establish...your nation?"

She did understand the concept of a nation. It was a land with diplomatic ability that was greater than a city. She also understood how difficult that would be.

"B-but...that can't be possible."

It was too ridiculous. Any sane person would think he was joking.

"The Progenitor is absolute. A-and we have a fixed operation time... You can't just...give us hope like that."

Nonetheless, she couldn't bring herself to laugh it off. No matter how ridiculous and unrealistic it was, when it came from this man's mouth, somehow, it felt possible.

"It is possible. I shall personally liberate you from your curse. Although we will need big-scale preparations first."

His words deeply resonated in Aoba's heart, like rain falling in a desert.

"It'll all be okay, Aoba," Takahashi said. "I'm sure Velly can do it if he says so. Everything will go all right."

A light shone in Takahashi's eyes.

Aoba felt something for Veltol, something different from the faith she had in the Progenitor. Trust, perhaps? She couldn't quite name it yet.

“So live, Aoba. With me.”

“Yes... Yes!”

Takahashi hugged Aoba tight, and she hugged her back.

Veltol observed with satisfaction while throwing the refuse into the loudly spinning grinder. “And to establish a nation, what I find the most exciting is the creation of commercial routes. I do not plan on exporting illegal drugs, but there must be many loopholes for a city so special. Strategically—”

“Hold on—what’s all this about founding a nation you’ve been talking about?” Gram paused his work to rain on Veltol’s parade. “Are you being serious, Veltol?”

His voice lacked his usual softness—it was sharp and cold. Hostile.

“G-Grammy?”

“Gram...?”

Takahashi and Aoba were taken aback by his harshness.

Veltol responded with equal intensity. “You ask if I am being serious? I am *always* serious. This place is self-sufficient and inhabited. The Progenitor has built a perfect foundation, so why would I not take advantage of it?”

“And what’re you going to do once you take over the island?”

“Aim for my greater goal, naturally.”

“World peace? You still haven’t let go of your pipe dream?”

“Pipe dream? Nay, I call it my ideal. Pipe dream is what you call something impossible to achieve. I was one step from realizing my ideal when none other than you broke it.”

“And I shouldn’t have?!” His paralyzing yelling shook the air around. “Your way always involves sacrifices! What’s the point of an ideal that only comes from trampling on others?!”

“Nonsense.” Veltol grabbed Gram by the collar. “There is no way to achieve the ideal without stepping on others.”

“I am never letting you do that!”

Gram pushed Veltol’s chest.

The Demon Lord stepped back and...

“Ah.”

...fell into the grinder.

The violent noise of blood splattering, flesh tearing apart, and bones

crushing followed.

Veltol's body was literally ground to nothing.



The whole team had their contribution points deducted for the work accident, and they were all sent to the correction chamber.

“...”

Aoba sat in a corner, hugging her knees.

The chamber was small even for one person. She couldn't lie down comfortably.

There was no bed; nothing except for the crouching toilet in the corner. The place was filthy. It was more like a bathroom than anything else.

It hadn't been long since she fell from the upper stratum. Back there, everyone had one room for themselves, so she spent a lot of time alone. They were alone most of the time since manufacturing, to begin with. So she thought she was used to the loneliness—but not now.

She was scared of being away from Takahashi and the rest. So big a space they had taken in her heart.

“I want...to be with all of you...forever...”

But now she had already lost one of her friends—at the very least, she considered Veltol a friend—and the one who said he could free her from this curse, at that. But it was the loss of her friend that made her shiver more than her own curse.

Then, as though in response to her words, she heard a *clang*.

The toilet before her eyes shook and blew up.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”



* * *

From the resulting hole in the floor, between Aoba's legs, rose a cackling face.

"Eek!"

Terrified, she automatically opened her legs.

"V-Veltol?!"

The man who had fallen into the grinder was there.

"Apologies for the delay, Aoba!"

He crushed the floor with his bare hands and crept up, all moist and filthy. Instead of his uniform, he was wearing black armor.

Tears spilled from Aoba's eyes at the sight of him.

Veltol smirked and declared, "This is my escape route! As a result of my investigation, I got a grasp on the structure of the sewage, its connection to the correction chambers, and the officers' routes and schedules. Then I proposed this little act to Gram and fell into the grinder so that I could reach you in the chambers and..."

Aoba automatically jumped into his arms. "I...I—I th-thought you were d-dead!"

Aoba held him tight as tears rolled down her cheeks and hiccups rushed through her throat.

Veltol did not resist her embrace as he listened to her. "Takahashi didn't tell you? No need to worry. I am immortal. I do not die."

"I—I heard you were immortal... B-but even so! How *couldn't* I be worried?!"

"Perhaps that was too dreadful to show to you. I apologize for the lack of consideration. And by the way, I am quite filthy. You will be, too, at this rate."

"N-no! Y-you're not filthy... You're not filthy!"

Veltol let slip an awkward smile, but it went unseen.

Aoba cried for a while, and once she calmed down, Veltol said, "I suppose it is late, but still I must point it out. You have the right to make a decision. Whether to stay here or not. That said, I ask of you: Come with me."

"Yes." Aoba nodded. "I'll go. I have to go."

There was no hesitation in her eyes.

"I have this wish to see the outside, but more than anything, I've had this impulse telling me to go down. And this goes back. I think from even

before I was born.”

Only solid determination—a strong sense of self.

“I don’t remember this Sihlwald you mentioned, but I think I know about them.”

“It could be the influence of the memories of whoever became the model for your soul.”

Veltol held Aoba in his arms and went down through the sewage. It was just warm enough not to freeze over.

Takahashi and Gram were already waiting there. Veltol had taken them out of their chambers, just like he did Aoba.

The sewage was one that existed in Alnaeth before the island got separated from the outside world; it was plain rock.

“Velly, you stink.”

“You really reek.”

Both of them pinched their noses.

“You two are very fragrant yourselves...”

He had gone through the sewers ground to pieces, so the filth clung to his entire body.

“Laugh all you like. But do not claim that I would refuse to get down in the dirt to save my friends and subjects.”

“Aw, sorry, dude. I think what you did is super awesome.”

“...”

Aoba noticed Gram’s eyes waver at Veltol’s remark. She didn’t know well what the deal was between the two, but she was sure the feelings between them were something special.

Gram closed his eyes and shook his head before putting his hands on his hips and letting slip a soft smile. Takahashi also wore a frisky grin.

“You sure had me there for a second, guys. You should’ve told me it was part of the plan!” she said.

“The fewer people know about this sort of thing, the more effective they are. I apologize,” Veltol replied.

“Still, grinding yourself to dust? I know you’re immortal, but still. I commend your guts,” Gram said.

“Heh. You put on a pretty good act, by the way.”

“...It was only half pretend.”

“Ha! You are free to think so, but I’ll let you know now, Gram. Upon the dawn of my nation, I shall have a special seat reserved for you.”

“That’s...interesting?” Gram chuckled. “I apologize, too, Aoba. I

imagine that must've shocked you.”

“O-oh, no! Not at all.”

So it was all an act, despite how gruesome it was. Aoba felt relieved to see peace returning between them.

“By the way, you can use magic here, Velly? You got out your armor,” Takahashi noted.

“It does seem like aether is denser here down below. We should assume there’s a barrier on the whole island creating a ‘flow’ so that it gathers in one place. It’s still sparser than outside, but this should be enough for anything other than ultimate magic.”

Gram cleaned everyone with the Create Water spell—which he did chant, since he had no Familia—before they went forward through the sewers.

“How...did you do that?” Aoba asked, raising her hands and twisting her body to look at her clean clothes.

“Huh? Magic... Oh, right. You’ve never seen magic. I used to be an adventurer, so I’m pretty good at this.”

“Can I do magic, too?”

“I don’t know if you can learn immediately, but I can teach you how to do this.”

“And there’s also the Familia! Although they took ours.” Takahashi rubbed the cover on her nape.

“Aoba, do not waste your time with that man, and allow me to teach you magic. I am far more skilled than he could be.”

“You nasty...” Gram shook his fists.

Aoba smiled. “Hee-hee. I’ll accept both your offers.”

“First, let us go over our objectives one more time.” Everyone turned to look at Veltol. “My objective is to find the Black Dragon, Sihlwald. Gram’s objective is to obtain evidence of the illegal drugs so FEMU can force an investigation... Which I could also use for my negotiations with them once I’ve taken control of this place.”

“Ehh, we’ll see...”

“And finally, the goal is to take the Progenitor down and make this island my nation and base to take over the world.”

“You know where Sihlwald is?” Gram asked.

“Indeed. *Forq.*” As he said that, a window of black light popped up on the palm of his hand.

The window had a sinister, intricate design and was full of letters Aoba

could not read.

“I had a stab at visualizing Sihlwald’s coordinates according to the unsealed Dark Peers Records. Look, this line shows this dimension’s coordinates.”

“Yyyeaaahhh, I can’t read shit without my Familia,” Takahashi said.

“Can’t you make it into a map or anything that anyone else could understand?” Gram asked Veltol.

“Hmmpf... This is something that should be impossible for you to see in the first place, and yet you ask for more...” Veltol sighed and closed the window. “The coordinates are nearby. We could make a map with the same magic Gram used before, but it’d be for worse if any detectors caught it.”

“By the by, I never asked. What’s Sihlwald like?” Takahashi said.
“You met ‘em, Grammy?”

“Mmm, I don’t really know, either.”

“Whaa? No way!”

“I’ve seen the Black Dragon from afar, but we’ve never interacted directly. Sihlwald was the biggest dragon I’d ever seen; anything else I know is hearsay,” Gram added. “Between the age of the gods and the age of giants and heroes was the age of the dragons, and Sihlwald was one of the elder dragons who built it. The oldest dragon and oldest immortal.”

“The age of the gods, the age of the dragons, the age of giants and heroes, and the age of humankind, was it?”

Those were the four periods of Alnaethian history. The age of humankind was merely a blip compared to the rest, even including after the Fantasion.

Aoba listened intently with eyes shining bright. “What was the age of the dragons like?” she asked.

“That...would be a better question for Veltol,” Gram said.

“Surely you can explain just fine,” Veltol told him.

“Okay.” Gram cleared his throat bashfully. “The age of the dragons is the time when five powerful dragons—direct descendants of the Founding Dragon—vied for power.”

He raised his fingers one by one.

“Rathbent the Colossus, the Green Dragon; Pearlia the Healer, the White Dragon; Shivah the Mad Reminiscer, the Blue Dragon; Wilmnil the Thunder Catcher, the Red Dragon; and Sihlwald the Darkness Devourer, the Black Dragon. These five and their kin and believers fought in the Five

Dragon War. The champion devoured the other four and thus became immortal. That is the Black Dragon, Sihlwald.”

Gram continued.

“After that, Sihlwald literally became the strongest creature on the planet. So the gods made a proposal: ‘*We shall allow you to rule the surface, albeit for a fixed period of time.*’ To which Sihlwald responded, ‘*The age of the dragons shall end once my first scale falls.*’ The gods thought it wouldn’t be long before this happened, and they accepted the deal.”

“Hey, I know this one! ‘*By the time it takes for a dragon’s scales to fall!*’” Takahashi cut in.

Gram nodded. “Right. That’s the origin of that Alnaethian saying; it means ‘a very long time.’ Indeed, it took two thousand years for Sihlwald’s first scale to fall. The gods could only stand back and watch as the sly dragon ruled over the surface. Then the age of the dragons ended, and with a long winter arrived a wicked outsider god and their followers, the giants—thus, the age of giants and heroes. Then came the age of humankind.”

“That sounds very grand...,” Aoba said.

“And why’s such an epic dragon working for Velly?” Takahashi asked.

“That I don’t know. Any comments, Veltol?”

“Nothing lacking in your explanation. As for why she became my subject...”

Veltol paused before saying:

“That would be because she is my older sister.”

Plain and simple.

“Dang, so she’s your big sis,” Takahashi said.

“You had a sister, huh? And it’s Sihlwald...,” Gram said.

“...”

“...”

They shut their mouths immediately.

The two of them were frozen in silent thought. Aoba simply looked at their reaction with curiosity, while Veltol kept walking as though nothing had happened.

Then Takahashi and Gram screeched in unison:

““Your sisterrrr?!””

Aoba jumped, with eyes wide open at their shouting.

“Velly! You had a sister?! You never mentioned it!”

“I’d never heard of it, either... Really...?” Gram managed to say. “A sister... *His* sister...”

“Naturally. You never asked.”

“Hmm? But wait,” said Gram. “From what I saw, Sihlwald was just a dragon.”

“She is my sister, but we are not related by blood. As you say, she is a real, authentic dragon.”

“Oh, well, that changes everything. So she’s just a sister in name only, then?” Takahashi asked.

Veltol nodded. “Sihlwald was the first I got to join me after becoming immortal. There were no Six Dark Peers back then.” He sounded nostalgic. “After the end of the age of the dragons, she became immortal yet weaker than in her prime, so she went into retirement. When I asked her to join me, we made a vow: for me to obey three of her requests. Her first request was for me to take her in as my older sister.”

Takahashi raised an eyebrow. “Why your older sister, though?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps she had something in mind, perhaps not. I have never managed to understand her.”

“Uh-huh. So, what’re the other two requests?”

“She’s only used two of them. The second one was for her not to participate in the Immortal War’s final battle. She can still make one more request, and I am worried she might ask for something odd...”

“I see. So that’s why she wasn’t there...,” Gram said.

“We could have won had she been there... But I had it all planned with her absence in mind. I asked her to join me not so much to have her fighting on my side but to avoid having to fight her as an enemy.”

“She made you call her sister, but then she up and disappears when you most need her. I’ve never met a dragon before, but that’s pretty insane.”

“I would say there are few dragons as human as she is, but it still stands that she is a dragon, in the end. Everything is but a game for her. I doubt we could ever see eye to eye. As I said just now, I’ve never understood her. As they say, a dragon might become familiar but never domesticated. One cannot measure them by our standards. Which is why I can never tell how things might go, depending on her whim. That said, she is still my

valued subject and sister. Dragon or humanlike, doesn't matter. I owe her much, and I have been through a lot... Perhaps more than equivalent, for her, but it is thus to be a brother."

Veltol gazed into the distance, as though into the past.

Takahashi turned to look at Aoba's face. "What's wrong?"

Aoba walked beside her, head down, fidgeting with her fingers. "I—I know what a sister is, by concept...but I don't know what it's like."

Being a homunculus, she was raised as an individual, disconnected from the concept of family.

Takahashi grabbed her hands and held them tight as she looked into her eyes. "I'll be your sister, then!" She beamed. "I'm also an only child and always wanted a little sister!"

"Really? Having you as a sister would make me very...happy..."
Takahashi."

"Hee-hee. You can just call me 'Sis' now!"

"Hee-hee. That would be lovely."

Takahashi pulled Aoba's hand and walked ahead.

Watching her back, slightly taller than hers, Aoba truly felt like she'd found a sister in her.



The outer rim of the lowest stratum, south Yokohama.

Going farther down from the sewers under the Yokohama lower stratum, they reached zero altitude land.

"Here it is."

No pursuers came; they arrived so easily, it was underwhelming, in a way.

Gram felt something was off about this. Was Veltol's escape plan really that perfect? Or...?

No, just focus right now.

Gram shook away his suspicions.

Before them was a giant metallic double door. A wall, actually, at that point. It was more than twenty meters tall; clearly, it wasn't meant to be opened frequently. Its iron construction contrasted with the old Goar stone structure of the sewers.

There was an old console on the wall, and above it was a placard with Japanese text in the Mincho typeface:

“‘Remote Shrine...’” Gram muttered, reading the placard aloud.

He turned to his side and found Veltol touching the giant door sealed under multiple locks.

“The aether up ahead is strong,” Veltol noted.

“You can tell?”

“Not because of any leakage: It’s airtight. That said, there is a particular pressure here. It feels like touching a carbonated drink bottle that’s been left alone and swollen.”

Gram found the analogy hard to understand; he sharpened his senses to try to feel it, to no avail. Veltol’s aether sensitivity was truly admirable.

“Akihabara’s underground treasury had a similar seal to it. I doubt it is as tough to break that it necessitates a mythic armament of legend like that one, though. This isn’t so much a door to divide two rooms, but an entrance to an isolated barrier... Something akin to a cage... That must be why the aether is so strong. In any case, the quirks of this technic...”

“I suppose we can’t just break it... The whole building would collapse. Takahashi, can you do anything over there?” Gram turned to look at the console.

“Mmm, not when I don’t have my Familia to connect to it directly.”

“...Hmm? Directly...?” Veltol pondered for a few seconds. “Takahashi.”

“Whassup?”

“If I remember correctly, the cable you used to hack into the guard at the port is a pseudonerve made of aether, right?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

“Hmm... We shall give it a try.”

Veltol used a short chant to bring forth the Dark Sword Vernal forged from his soul and switched it to its second form, the blade of light, Vernal Diel.

“That’s so pretty,” Aoba said, eyes shining bright at the sight of the Dark Sword’s silver gleam.

“Yes, it is. You have good taste.” Veltol smirked.

“Wh-what’re you doing?” Takahashi said.

“My sword in this state is made of pure aether. I will try to define it as a vehicle not unlike the pseudonerve so as to directly intervene with the seal’s technic. The seal in Akihabara was preposterous with its requirement of three mythic armaments of legend, but I think this should be enough for this one.”

“I see... Using an aether blade like what’s used to connect to the Familia and magiprostheses... That is theoretically possible,” Gram said, impressed.

Veltol stabbed the light blade into the door. “Yes, this should work.”

A ray of light ran across the giant iron door of the remote shrine.

A quake that shook the entire city followed. The locks on the door spun and opened with a loud *clang*.

The seal was undone.

“That’s amazing, Veltol! You opened such a giant door!” Aoba exclaimed.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha! Yes, Aoba! Extol my name! The technic was very simple! A little overwrite was all it took! This is aether hacking... Or rather, a primitive simulation of it. In any case, my abilities continue to grow!”

Veltol’s magical know-how made good use of the pure aether blade, Vernal Diel’s power to understand how to function with the flow of mana of what it touched—Sage Eyes.

This would not have been possible on Earth, where locks were mechanical.

The security weak point was found in all magic methods, as being based on the use of aether meant they could be tampered with.

Takahashi looked glum as the heavy door opened noisily.

“Is something wrong?” Gram asked her.

She flashed a self-deprecating smile. “No, it’s just... I’m useless without my Familia, huh...?”

She was always so cheerful, but now Gram was beginning to think maybe she was just as naive as one would expect from someone her age.

“Sorry,” she said. “I know it’s not the time to grumble.”

“Don’t worry. And besides, you can be sure Veltol finds you reliable.”

“You think?”

“I do.”

A stinging cold gust blew from the other side of the door.

“Whoa?! What...is this...?” Takahashi shivered.

They could see their breath.

“Ah...”

“Are you all right?” Veltol propped Aoba’s shoulder up as she stumbled, pale in the face.

“Th-thank you... I got dizzy outta nowhere...”

“It must be aether sickness. A common affliction among people not acclimated to aether-dense areas. And that is one strong current.”

There was the precedent of Earthoids getting nauseated and throwing up due to the sudden surge of aether after the Fantasion, as Earth was light on it when Alnaeth’s came rushing in.

“There was barely any up there, so your body needs to get used to it,” Gram said sympathetically.

“Sorry... I’m okay now.”

“You shouldn’t force yourself. Would you rather wait outside?”

Veltol objected to Gram’s suggestion. “That won’t do. We shall take her inside.”

“But it’ll hurt her if she goes in there.”

“It’s likely that they have noticed our undertaking after the quake. She would be in greater danger if left behind.”

“Well... Yeah, but...”

“I-I’m okay... Let’s go.”

Takahashi ran up to her and grabbed her hand. Gram decided to respect her decision and didn’t object further.

The four of them entered the remote shrine, and the door closed just as noisily.

It was a big, empty space. Most of it was filled with water, on top of a mystical mood all around.

“Interesting. This does seem like a shrine,” Gram muttered.

He shivered, but not due to the cold. The denseness of the aether reminded him of the Demon Castle, where he fought five centuries ago.

Simply being reminded of the Demon Lord’s second form sent shivers down his spine. He barely managed to win through a chain of miracles—not because of his strength alone.

Gram looked around to take his mind off the memory. There was some footing surrounding the walls and at the center, but the rest was deep water.

There, in the middle of the circular foothold, lay a dragon.

“Sister...”

Beyond Veltol’s gaze was a girl.

INTERLUDE

“Off with your hand!”

He chopped a thieving child’s hand off. There was no need for thieving hands.

“Off with your tongue!”

He tore out a liar’s tongue. There was no need for lying tongues.

“Off with your legs!”

He sliced off the legs of a man unable to work. There was no need for unproductive legs.

Much blood was spilled.

It was necessary to keep order. It was necessary to create peace.

He killed the denizens of the other world out of fear for their distinct appearances. He killed the unproductive elderly. He killed the parents who couldn’t keep their children in check.

The more blood was spilled, the more obedient everyone became. The more blood was spilled, the more he lost his humanity.

Only the humans were obedient and truly devout.

In this place, at this time, faith was essential for survival.

So he hanged them to make an example out of them, but soon, he ran out of rope. The strong regulations meant to keep the necessary order to survive eventually bent and twisted, in essence.

He realized he was losing his reason for the extreme circumstances, and yet he couldn’t stop the gears already set in motion, no matter how wrong it was.

It wasn’t meant to be like this. But it was already late. So he insisted: all for the sake of peace.

It was fate.

He wanted them to be healthy, to be sincere, to be happy, and for that, he guided them. Because they wouldn’t survive if they didn’t unite.

“Work for the sake of everyone.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Legend Descends

Gram saw the Black Dragon, Sihlwald.

It was not the giant dragon in his memories but a little girl with tan skin and long black hair. Adorned with horns on her head, a small pair of wings on her back, and a tail coming out of her waist.

The black-dragon girl was unclothed, her arms held by chains, and a red seal adorning her chest.

As he came back to his senses, he noticed Aoba sobbing silently beside him.

“Aoba...? Are you crying?”

“Huh?! Wh-what?! That’s...a good question. I don’t...” Aoba wiped her tears right away. “That’s Sihlwald? Veltol’s...sister?”

“She doesn’t look like a dragon, though,” Takahashi said.

Veltol nodded. “Just as once they studied the magic of Dragon Shift to turn into one, this is its opposite. She liked resembling a human. And finally seeing her alive gives me relief, even though I already knew she was... She seems to be doing all right.”

The sealed girl in the middle of the freezing cold chamber didn’t look anything but dead, but as far as Veltol was concerned, she apparently appeared to be in good health.

“The aether’s even denser than I thought,” Gram grumbled, almost choking.

“As dense as it was in the Immortal Furnace in Shinjuku... Although it is not gluey, as it was there. Not to mention...” Veltol scooped a handful of water at his feet. “Liquid aether... No, simply water with aether.”

Liquid aether and water with aether were greatly different. The former was a phase change of the aether itself, while the latter was just as it sounded.

Water with high contents of aether had a dramatically lower freezing point. The logic was similar to why it rained in Outer Shinjuku, where the effects of the cryotolerance barrier were low: because the rain had high aether content.

The aether inside the remote shrine was dense, and its air temperature was below the freezing point, and yet the water remained unfrozen, due to the aether.

“This much aether in the water explains the density...”

“Yeah, yeah, but hey, we can’t go over there like this. What now?”
Takahashi said.

“That’s no problem,” Gram replied. He initialized magic and began chanting the spell. “Water, my step, you shall not impede.” Three incantations, activating “*Water Walking*.”

A layer of mana covered his body, making him able to walk on water.
Gram used the spell on himself, Takahashi, and then on Aoba.

“Gram, hold on,” Veltol said as he watched.

“Hmm?”

“Are you not forgetting something?”

“Huh? What?” Gram looked genuinely confused.

“Use it on me, too.”

“Whaa...?” His face contorted in disgust. “You can do that yourself.”

“It works best when someone else does it. Be quick.”

What a pain, Gram thought as he cast Water Walking on Veltol as well.

“I see. There is room for improvement in construction and handling...
but this shall work. Keep practicing.”

“You cheeky little...!”

They bickered while walking toward sealed Sihlwald in the middle of the chamber. Her eyes were closed, her skin was frozen, and her arms chained to the void.

“...” Veltol looked at her fondly. “Sister.”

The Demon Lord knelt before the Black Dragon.

“I’ve come for you.”

The chains binding the Black Dragon, Sihlwald, were a type of seal arts. They were difficult to cut off for the shackled one, but easy for a third party.

“The seal binding her should be undone once we slice these chains off.”

Veltol stood up and summoned the Dark Sword Vernal to swing it against the chains. With one flash, the shackles collapsed and vanished in the air.

Sihlwald fell forward as she was let loose, and Veltol softly held her up.

“Mm...m...,” the freed dragon mumbled. Her empty golden eyes reflected Veltol’s face. “Vel...tol...?”

The voice slowly coming out of her mouth was unlike the image of a dragon—cute, soft, and delicate, like first snow.

“It has been a long while, Sister.”

“Veltol...?!” Sihlwald launched herself at him. “Awwww! I wanted to see you so bad!!! After you were defeated, I...I...I heard you returned, but I couldn’t believe it up until now!”

The naked girl clung to Veltol’s armor and kissed his face with a smile again and again. Veltol, meanwhile, acted as though a pet was licking him.

Then, nude Sihlwald set her lips upon Veltol’s.

“Whoa!”

“Oooh...”

“Goodness...!”

Gram, Takahashi, and Aoba all exclaimed.

Sihlwald pulled herself from Veltol’s face, and a ripping sound followed.

“Whoa?!”

“Whaa?!”

“Goodness!!”

Blood dripped from Sihlwald’s mouth. She had bitten off part of Veltol’s lip.

“Yes... There is nothing more luscious than my brother’s lips. I feel energized now,” said a satisfied Sihlwald.

Veltol caressed his lips; the wound had already closed. “...I am glad to see you wake up with such vigor. I daresay you should cover your body.”

“Mmm... You’re right.”

Sihlwald shook her arm, her ritual motion materializing her soul armament resembling black scales, and her long black hair tying up into a ponytail.

It was too revealing to be called armor.

“You didn’t need to do this to recover, either... Not to mention immortal flesh won’t do good to your stomach.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been back for five seconds and you’re already nagging... That aside, who are these people?” Sihlwald languidly pointed her gaze at them.

She's...not what I expected, thought Gram.

Takahashi and Aoba were of the same opinion.

“Hmm?” Sihlwald grunted. “You...”

“Y-yes...?” said Aoba.

Sihlwald stared at her. “No, nothing. I’m not functioning well, from the cold and from having just woken up. Now, where are the rest of the Six Dark Peers? Dead? No, you can’t kill those guys! They’re immortal!”

“About that, Sister...”

Veltol cast a translation spell on Sihlwald and explained what happened.

About how five hundred years had passed since Veltol was defeated.

About how Machina wasn’t there because of the abruptness of the situation.

About himself.

About his friends.

About Shinjuku and Akihabara.

About how he was there to rescue her.

About how he was teaming up with the Hero Gram.

And about Yokohama’s current state.

He put it all concisely, without hiding anything.

“I...see,” Sihlwald muttered with a tinge of desolation. “I got the idea. I fell to my slumber not long after you were defeated. I am not very unlike you. I didn’t have much interest in the earthly world, anyways. However, Veltol.”

“Yes?”

“So that girl is native to this place, fine, but Gram... You mean *the Hero Gram?*! Why’s he here?!”

“I just explained it, Sister.”

“Oh, you did? This pretty boy really beat you...? He doesn’t look that strong... Veltol, this man... Where’s that thing? That so-called Holy Sword? Does he have it?”

“Ah... Hello, Sihlwald. It’s an honor to meet the legendary Black Dragon. The Holy Sword is not in my hands at the moment, due to extenuating circumstances.”

“Oh... That’s boring...”

Stop derailing the conversation, Gram thought.

“Anyway, you, woman. The one with the black hair with a dash of hot poppy.” Sihlwald pointed her chin at Takahashi.

“Huh? Me?”

Sihlwald didn’t even nod. “Veltol, what were you thinking making an ally out of her and bringing her here? She doesn’t look immortal, or strong. You should’ve brought Machina instead. I wish to meet her soon, too.”

“Wha?! What did you just—?! I can’t show my skills at the moment, but—!”

“Ha. So you are aware of your frailty.”

Gram tried to talk back to Sihlwald, but someone else objected first.

“Sister, has your slumber dulled your senses?”

“Mm? What, Veltol? You mean to say this little girl is useful?”

Veltol nodded, as if the answer was obvious. “Yes. Takahashi has a rare, extraordinary talent. She’s saved me countless times. Her talent just so happens to be different from the strength that we know of. It’s a gift that gets to shine in this modern era.”

“Agghh... Hearing you shower her with praise really gets under my scales. You little girl! I am neeeeeever going to give you my blessing! Got it? My scales will fall off before that ever happens!”

“You tiny little dragon! Stop yapping!”

“Tiny?! Argh! You’ll pay for this disgrace! Jerk!” Sihlwald looked the other way.

“Don’t mind her, Takahashi. My sister is jealous because she values muscle over anything else. There is no malice in what she says...probably. Forgive her.”

“I mean, it’s true that I haven’t been useful so far...” Takahashi forced a smile.

Veltol said nothing more; this was his own way to prove he trusted her.

“Now, Sister, why were you sealed in here?”

“...Does it matter?” Sihlwald replied haltingly.

“Very well. We have no further reason to be here, so let us go. We still have things to do, and I would like your help, Sister.”

To that, Sihlwald...

“No.”

...refused.

What a pain!!

Gram resisted the urge to shout this thought. Clearly, their common

sense wouldn't work with a dragon—and not just any dragon, but the legend who built the age of the dragons.

"Sister...?"

"I'm happy to be reunited, even more so that you personally came here for me. However, I cannot...I will not leave."

"But..." Veltol's tone changed—from a brother speaking to his sister, to the Demon Lord talking to one of his Six Dark Peers. "Even if I command you to do so?"

"Yes. And if you won't accept, then I'll give you my third and last request. If you want to take me out of here, then fight me and win, Veltol. That is my request. I shall obey your command if you defeat me."

Force her obedience by defeating her. Her last request from the vow Demon Lord and Black Dragon forged.

Veltol sighed. "Fine."

No objection. He didn't ask why, either. There was no point, since it was part of the deal.

"May I prepare myself first?"

"Of course. Take your time."

"I'll be back. Let's go, Gram." Veltol's cape twirled as he grabbed Gram's shoulder.

"Wait, me?"

"Naturally. We are allies. Keeping up with my sister's games is too heavy a burden for me alone to carry."

"That's oddly sheepish of you."

"If I were to put it in a simple strength ratio, it would be eight to two."

"Eight? Then you're okay, right?"

"Fool." Veltol spoke with utmost seriousness. "She is the eight."

Gram was shocked. Both at himself for naturally believing Veltol had the upper hand, and at how sincerely he admitted to his disadvantage.

"Fine with me...but can we fight two to one?" Gram looked at Sihlwald.

"I don't mind. You've fought dragons before, haven't you, Gram? I suspect you were not alone then."

"Mmm, now that you mention it..."

"She accepted. Let's go." Veltol tapped his shoulder.

Gram turned around as well. He glanced back one more time and saw Sihlwald standing proud with both hands on her hips. She truly felt like his sister, even though they were not related by species to begin with.

The four of them returned to the closed door.

“We’ll have to fight. You two wait here,” Gram said.

Aoba and Takahashi nodded.

“Y-yes.”

“Okie-dokie. We can’t fight, that’s for sure.”

Gram chanted a spell: “*Sanctuary*.”

A cone of light surrounded Takahashi and Aoba.

“I know it’s small, but bear with it. Sorry. You’ll be safe here.”

Gram had used a defensive barrier spell. By preventing interference from the inside, it also stopped it from the outside, and reducing the area of effect reinforced it. It had high resistance to physical and magical damage, but it could be undone easily. Gram didn’t think that was going to happen in the middle of this battle, though.

“Gram, you go in the vanguard. I shall support you from behind,” Veltol said as he approached Sihlwald.

“Huh? I mean, sure, but since you’re immortal and all, shouldn’t you be in the front, too?”

“It is true that she has few options to completely kill me, so we could have two vanguards...but my skill in the front position falters behind yours and hers. The gap would create trouble in our coordination, and the smallest opening before her is fatal. It’s best we keep a front-and-back formation to stay in sync.”

Demon Lord Veltol readily accepted he was inferior to the Hero Gram on the vanguard. Proof that he valued pinning down a strategic advantage against Sihlwald more than his own pride.

“I see. She’s that strong, huh?”

“Worry not. I can already see victory in our future.”

“That’s good to hear. I was thinking you wanted to stay back so you could have it easier.”

“Ha.” Veltol stabbed his Dark Sword at Gram’s feet with a chuckle. “That sword was forged from my soul. Think of it as me when you use it.”

“So you mean I can be rough with it?”

“Gram...you should watch your back.”

“I’m kidding.” The Hero pulled out the Demon Lord’s sword.

Gram could summon the Holy Sword Ixasorde even from afar, but as it wouldn’t teleport so much as literally, physically fly over to him, it was no use trying it underground.

“Will I be all right? It’s not cursed or something? It looks super

cursed..."

"Part of what you need to master in the fight."

"So it *is* cursed..."

"Why wouldn't the Dark Sword be cursed? It's not like your piddling Holy Sword."

There was a clear measure between these two swords: whether they presented a risk.

Holy Swords chose their owner but implied no risk in their use. In contrast, anyone could use the Dark Swords, although at a price. The stronger the Holy Sword, the harder it was to claim ownership; the stronger the Dark Sword, the bigger the price.

"Hopefully, you don't let that sword kill you."

"I take it you trust I can do it?"

"Fool. I need you to do it. I cannot spare my focus to controlling Vernal while facing my sister."

"But what if I can't control it?"

"Then you die."

"Of course..." Gram dropped his shoulders, staring at the ominous mana emanating from the Dark Sword.

"Indeed. A high price must be paid to earn high power. The stronger the curse, the stronger the sword. Naturally, the highest price becomes life."

"But you don't die, right?"

"Indeed, for I am immortal."

"That voids the price... Is that fair?" Gram gripped Vernal tight.

The mana in his hands formed a tornado so powerful, it could tear his body to shreds if he faltered even once. But he could keep it in check.

"While we're at it: *Vestum*." Veltol cast a buff on Gram and himself.

"You were right. It's better to have someone else cast it."

"Also..."

Veltol put his hand on Gram's chest, and his black armor disappeared. The next moment, Gram was cloaked in casual black armor with a cape. The design was not like Veltol's but closer to what Gram normally used.

Veltol's robe, meanwhile, had very few metal parts.

"I shall lend you part of my armor. Feel honored."

The Hero looked at his black armor with a strained smile. "...Not to my taste, sadly."

"Don't be picky."

And so the two of them returned to Sihlwald.

“Nice. Go get ‘em, tigers!”

“G-good luck!”

Takahashi and Aoba cheered for the Demon Lord and the Hero.

Veltol stepped forward and gave a slight wave, while Gram turned around and flashed the pair a reassuring grin.

“Ready?” Sihlwald asked from the footing at the center.

“How courteous,” the Hero said to the small dragon lording over them.

“Ha. You’re fighting a dragon, kid. You have the right to get fully prepared, and I have a duty to give you enough time.”

“You’re right. We always secured enough prep time before taking on a dragon.”

Sihlwald rotated her arm. “First time we’ve fought like this, isn’t it, Veltol?”

Gram was surprised to hear that. He assumed Veltol had made her submit by defeating her in battle.

“Indeed. After all, I got you on my side precisely to avoid this.”

“Heh. Now I get to have you *and* the Hero who defeated you. This is exciting...although a bit lacking, knowing you’ve lost your power and he’s missing his Holy Sword.”

“I reckon you underestimate us.”

“She definitely is. In any case, what’s our winning terms?” Gram asked.



“You’re one cheeky rascal, you know? And do you really need to ask that? What else is there other than death or resignation?”

“Wait—! Aren’t I the only one at risk of death?!”

Veltol and Sihlwald ignored Gram’s remark.

“Do not kill her, Gram.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The immortal dragon bared her fangs in a grin. “Ha! You’re really going for my neck? Pretty optimistic of you, kids.”

“I am quite confident in this man’s strength, for sure,” Veltol said.

“I’ll try to live up to your expectations,” Gram replied.

“I commend your spirit,” Sihlwald said.

She took a firm step, making a splash.

She leaned forward, every muscle in her upper body relaxed. Her tail stood straight, in hunting position.

“Come, puny humans. I’m hungry. Try not to become what fills my belly.”

Her golden dragon eyes exuded sharper hostility than any human eyes could.

Gram’s hair stood on end, and his spine froze. His soul told him he was merely this hunter’s prey.

Over his five hundred or so years of life, he had battled many dragons and won.

Zeidram the Field Blazer.

Jabby Jabby the Mad Successor.

Garland the Death’s Glare.

All well-known, brutal dragons. None of them had been easy to defeat; all of them were like hatchlings in the face of Sihlwald’s overwhelming aura.

An immortal beyond any other who lived far in the past, even before Demon Lord Veltol’s birth. The champion of the Five Dragon War and descendant of the Founding Dragon.

She killed and devoured the Thunder Catcher, the Mad Reminiscer, the Colossus, and the Healer. She ruled the world for two thousand years before a scale on her body fell. The top of all living beings. The apex predator.

The Dragon Emperor, the Wings of Darkness, the Solar Eclipse, the Anti-Dragon Slayer, the Consummate Dawn, the Fourth Law Crosser, the Darkness Devourer.

Sihlwald.

The next moment...

“Keep your eyes peeled.”

...Sihlwald disappeared from Gram's sight.

“—?!”

No, she did not vanish.

Not a second later, the water by Sihlwald's foot splashed.

She got within range in the blink of an eye, spun in the air, and unleashed a kick he could barely see.

No teleportation, no invisibility. Simply rapid movement. Traversal of a different kind from Kinohara's electric magic. This was simple, perfected motion.

“Kuh...!”

That'll blow me to bits if it lands.

Gram wielded Vernal to slash Sihlwald's leg mostly on reflex. Blade and flesh clashed with a sound as though the latter was also metal.

“Hard as a rock...!”

She stopped the Dark Sword, capable of slashing through dragon scales as though made of tofu, with only the toughness of her body and the mana enveloping it.

She was faster to begin with, and the lack of a weapon only made her more lithe. She was already in stance for a follow-up attack.

“Take...this!”

He tried blocking the punch with the sword.

“*Ver Guard!*”

A black mana shield slid between the fist and the sword before they clashed.

“*Dell Ray!*”

A black flash ran between Sihlwald and Gram.

Gram used the momentary opportunity to backstep.

“Thanks.”

“Stay on your toes, Gram. She may look like a charming little lady, but that is a dragon. She will gobble you up in a second.”

Sihlwald's ears twitched. “A charming little lady...?”

Did that make her mad? Gram braced himself.

“I—I won't be softer on you no matter how hard you try to flatter me.”

“I'm glad to see you haven't changed, Sister.”

Sihlwald coyly placed both hands on her cheeks, while Veltol smiled

softly.

I can already tell that's how he's put her in a good mood for centuries.

Meanwhile, Gram chanted, "Wind, you shall tear apart my enemies."

He omitted the first and third verses of the normally five-verse-long incantation. He couldn't do chantless magic like Veltol, but he could abbreviate some of it.

He proclaimed:

"*Wind Cutter!*"

A gusty blade sliced the air.

Vernal had the function of a staff and boosted the effects of the spell, making it powerful enough to behead an adult dragon.

"Subpar."

Sihlwald dismissed it with a slight swing of her hand. The same special effect to repel magic that a dragon's scale had.

"Dragonscale Effect... Of course the Black Dragon would be able to use it, even in human form."

Sihlwald started running. Without using magic, she sprinted across the water with her tail held level.

"*Dell Ray!*" Veltol activated the spell by simply proclaiming the maginom.

The rapid black flash hit Sihlwald and triggered an explosion. She slashed through the smoke, unharmed.

"You sure love that spell, Veltol!"

Sihlwald ran on the walls, while Veltol responded with another maginom.

"*Agra Hydra.*"

Veltol lowered his arms, pointing both palms up. Water whirlpools formed around him, and multiple water pillars surged and wriggled like snakes as he pointed them at Sihlwald.

"There we go!" she said.

Veltol's Agra Hydra controlled the water around the user to attack. Its power depended on the volume of water, and as it was abundant and full of aether here, its force was raised to its limits.

Dragon scales repelled magic, but they did not nullify the mass of things created or controlled through magic. The strategy was to combat the Dragonscale Effect by using a vast amount of water.

"Still...it won't work," she added.

Sihlwald slashed the snakes' necks with a chop or a kick, returning

them to splashes of water that rained back down as her golden eyes gleamed.

“She can even repel Veltol’s magic...”

Dragonscale Effect was not invincible. Its power to repel was oversaturated with strong enough magic, making damage possible.

Veltol was capable of releasing more mana at once than Gram, and even his Dell Ray and Agra Hydra were not capable of breaking through her scales.

“Indeed. Her scales do not *repel* magic like a regular dragon’s. They repel anything that could damage her. In any case, the Dragonscale Effect doesn’t *nullify* magic, so keep using it at a midrange.”

“Right. We have an advantage in range.”

Sihlwald descended on the center footing and cackled. “Ha! That’s a good joke!” She then curved her torso backward and took a deep breath.

“Dodge, Gram!”

The attack came before Veltol’s warning.

“*Va Ror!*”

What came out of her mouth was not so much words but a bellow.

The water at her feet splashed away as *something* shot forward.

Gram immediately took a defensive stance, but it was useless. He was unable to stand his ground and got blown away like a leaf in the wind before smashing his back on the wall right beside Takahashi and Aoba.

“Gah!”

Veltol used a spell to make a mana cushion between the wall and his back before impact, but it wasn’t able to cut down the entire shock that punched the air out of his lungs.

“Grammy?!”

“A-are you okay?!”

He couldn’t speak, but he raised a hand and smiled. He couldn’t worry them.

Sihlwald’s magic was beyond human reach. It was sheer power rooted in the source of magic techniques.

Most dragons could only breathe fire or cold, but some higher-level ones were able to complexly control aether in a way similar to magic.

“Dragonbreath... I knew about it, but forcing the power off its course to blow me away’s got to be cheating!” Gram yelled as he turned back to

look at the dragon.

He saw something black and round flying at him. He caught it on reflex.

“Nice catch, Gram. Thank you.”

It was Veltol’s head.

“WHOAAAAA?!”

“AIIIEEEEEE?!”

“EEEEEEEEK?!”

Gram, Takahashi, and Aoba screamed after Veltol’s head spoke in his hand. Gram juggled it in shock.

While Veltol covered Gram’s crash, Sihlwald kicked his face, sending his head flying.

His headless body jumped and landed beside him, then grabbed his own head and put it back on.

“I’m gonna throw up...”

“Please. You’re hurting my feelings.”

The two of them ran back toward Sihlwald.

Gram launched an attack while Veltol backed him up and Sihlwald received it. Veltol went one step ahead, Gram followed his lead, and Sihlwald crushed their attempts.

Hero, Demon Lord, and Black Dragon’s orchestral sonata.

The air around them split, the water splashed, the arms clash shook the air, and the aether lapsed into chaos.

Oh no.

Gram couldn’t hide his smile as he faced the Black Dragon, Sihlwald. As a swordsman and warrior, Gram also found joy in the thrill of the fight.

The problem was, as much as it pained him to admit, his senses were uplifted by fighting side by side with Veltol. Not to mention...

This is too smooth.

Not fighting the dragon before his eyes.

Collaborating with Veltol.

He had fought in teams, both vanguard and rearguard, and this was the smoothest collaboration he had ever experienced.

He never would’ve thought that letting this man back him up could feel so comfortable.

They were too compatible.

He had a full grasp on his aim, and he could tell his without a word. They had a mutual understanding only possible after fighting to the death.

And still, they could not reach the Black Dragon. They hadn't landed a clean hit yet.

Immortal Veltol aside, the longer the fight dragged on, the lower Gram's performance would fall.

But even taking that into account, Gram felt that victory was possible alongside Veltol.

Then his feeling was crushed.

"Finally, I'm all warmed up!"

Sihlwald's mana exploded in black lightning all around her. The rising temperature of her viscera evaporated the water around her. They said dragon viscera was as powerful as a high-output mana furnace.

"She can get even more powerful?!"

Gram clicked his tongue at how naive he was at gauging Sihlwald's might. Of course the legendary Black Dragon would not be easy to defeat.

Sihlwald's smile grew deeper in response. "I taught the immortals how to fight. Allow me to give you a lesson."

Her small wings doubled, tripled in size, bent like bows, flapped, and raised her into the air. She turned around, just barely brushing the ceiling, and folded her wings to take a nosedive into the water.

"Watch out, Gram!"

No need for a warning. Gram was on the water. He ran to the center footing where Veltol was.

Quicker than he could run, Sihlwald rose from the water.

"Agh!"

He reacted by swinging his sword, clashing into her fist.

"*Swords to the skies!*"

Blades materialized around Sihlwald.

Remote armament casting. A spell relatively new for Veltol, who was over five hundred years old at this point.

Veltol closed his fingers, making the blades attack Sihlwald.

"Ha."

Sihlwald turned around in midair and crushed the blades in an instant. Gram swung the Dark Sword, aiming for her landing. The sword's trajectory was perfect in its aim, yet as it hit, Sihlwald vanished into thin air.

"Above you!" Veltol yelled.

Gram looked up. Sihlwald had appeared there, swinging her tail down and a hairsbreadth away from piercing Gram's head.

Veltol's support wouldn't make it.

Gram's thoughts sped up, stretching the instant. He could clearly see each drop of water.

"*Rush.*"

The incantation flowed from his lips in the shortest, most compact form possible.

Veltol had said that the Black Dragon's scales repelled anything that could damage her. He gave himself to this sudden revelation. This gamble.

"*Acceleration.*"

A buff that increased the target's speed temporarily.

He cut down the activation time to its limit. It would only work for a moment. And it was already too late to dodge, even accelerated.

But he wasn't the target.

"Oh?"

He'd used Acceleration on Sihlwald.

Her tail went out of pace for a moment and struck faster than she expected, grazing Gram's nose.

As Sihlwald fell before him, Gram kicked her to get away.

"Are you all right, Gram?"

"Yes. Somehow." He wiped the drop of blood from his nose.

"That was interesting! So you *can* do something! Keep it going!" Sihlwald laughed despite having failed to bring him down.

Buffs work. Attacks and debuffs bounce off, but buffs work.

He got the idea from Veltol's description as *anything that could damage her*. He bet on Sihlwald's unusual Dragonscale Effect. It was more effective to cast Acceleration on her, as she was already mid-attack, than on him, who wasn't ready to dodge or block. As a result, the usually advantageous spell of acceleration messed with her pace and made her miss.

Does it discern the harmfulness of magic automatically? That worked because it was out of the blue; she might stop it next time...

Something else caught his attention more, though.

"What was that she did before? I was sure I hit her."

"Leaping Haze," Veltol said.

"What?"

"You disturb the movement of the aether around to create an

afterimage like in a heat haze and get over the enemy's head. A tactic she created for her human form. Also the same move she teaches her pupils first."

Sihlwald threw out her chest. "It is basically acrobatics. Machina couldn't do it naturally, so I developed it as magic."

She said it like she was lacking in talent, but being able to do that without magic *was* magic.

Gram certainly couldn't do it.

The corners of his lips curled upward as he realized he truly was fighting a legend.



Not bad at all..., Sihlwald thought of Gram.

His bearing, his sight, his gut, all of it was high-level. He was a good fighter, and that wasn't just it.

He didn't aim for the vitals, but for her eyes, her joints, the ends of her limbs. He was trying to temporarily incapacitate her. He knew how to fight immortals.

He also remained just outside the reach of her hands, feet, and tail. He had experience fighting dragons.

Just over five hundred years old and such a cheeky brat.

"I see... It wasn't only the Holy Sword that defeated Veltol."

She looked at Veltol. She was slightly disappointed at his decay.

She loved her little brother; that remained unchanged.

Sihlwald herself was once revered as a goddess, had set one foot in the domain of the gods, had felt the effects of faith. But the influence of faith on her own power was negligible. Within the margin of error.

Such was not the case for Veltol. Having been revived as invincible, he was close to a god incarnate, depending heavily on faith.

Veltol was far weaker than five centuries back. And the reduction in faith only plunged him further down.

His source of power was positive and negative faith. And he was not feared throughout the world as the head of evil, like back then.

Sihlwald's power had also decayed since the Five Dragon War, but Veltol's was far too great, knowing him in his prime.

Don't you have any power to surprise me with? Was I expecting too much?

Her beloved little brother had the potential to match Sihlwald's unparalleled strength, even in her human form.

Strength was lonely. He was the only one who could fill that void.

Her foolish little brother wanted to take over the world to bring it peace.

As she had ruled over the world before him, she knew: World peace was impossible. The essence of all living beings was conflict. So his dream was foolish—yet beautiful.

She loved him.

Was it in the same way as men loved their pets? Or as dragons loved other dragons? She didn't know anymore.

"Say, Veltol." Sihlwald paused. "What do you plan to do by having me join you again?"

"What?"

"Will we kill families, subjects, citizens again? Ahhh, that was a fun time. Very, very fun. How could it not be, when you declared you would break the country that birthed and raised you!?"

Everyone else turned to look at Veltol.

Sihlwald alone knew this story, and Veltol had never spoken of it.

"That is why I went along with you! How exhilarating it was! How enjoyable it was to ruin the pure nation of Altemud that exiled you as an immortal and slayed your friends!"

"Sister..." Veltol whispered ever so quietly.

"Wasn't it, Veltol?" Her voice changed as she hung her head with a sad smile. "But I can't go with you. I do not have the right to join you... By staying on the sidelines of the battle between mortals and immortals, saying that there was no future for the immortals were they not able to triumph without me, I trampled your dream."

That was her second request.

Sihlwald was a being beyond the immortals—beyond the world.

She thought that it would be wrong to interfere with the crossroads of fate, if she truly cared about the immortals and, more than anything, Veltol. She knew not whether that choice was correct.

But after such a long life, it was the first time she ever regretted a decision. She wished she could have ignored such reasoning and fought by his side.

"It is over now, Sihlwald," he said, quietly, warmly, but firmly. His words were not from brother to sister, but from Demon Lord to Dark Peer.

“I told you then, when you declined participating in the final war, that I would not blame you for it. It is not your fault that I lost. It was all due to Gram’s strength. Not to mention, it does not matter what you think. I want you, and that is reason enough. Is it not? So come back, Sihlwald. I need you.”

Silence.

After a long, long silence, the words came hoarse out of Sihlwald’s mouth.

“Is that so...?” She raised her head. “Then...try and defeat me.”

“That has been my intention all along, Sister.”

The Demon Lord glanced at the Hero, who nodded back.

Clearly, he was up to something. But it didn’t matter. She simply had to force him down. No holding back. No consideration. If he could not defeat her, there was no meaning to her coming back.

There were few ways to kill an immortal barehanded, even for Sihlwald. But there was a way to defeat one without killing them.

Joint locks.

By restraining or crushing the joints necessary to move one’s body, one could incapacitate them without destroying them. But this only worked with immortals with slow regeneration. Although Veltol was weakened, he could regenerate right away. Which meant the most effective method was a chokehold.

People’s consciousness faded quickly once you stopped the supply of blood to their brain. The point was to knock them out without killing them. Killing them would mean they could resurrect immediately, but knocking them out completely incapacitated them, even if they could still recover quicker than mortals.

To summarize, grappling techniques were the most effective barehanded fighting method against immortals.

So it was time to put an end to this.

“Ah *Shiva!*” Sihlwald roared as she stepped forward.

Cold spread radially from her foot, creating an ice needle from the unfreezable aether-imbued water. She ran across the surface of the water.

Her aim was to separate Demon Lord and Hero.

“Whoa!”

“Agh...!”

Veltol and Gram jumped to the side to dodge the ice, successfully splitting them up.

First one to fall would be the Hero.

Sihlwald spread her wings and flew.

They were already reacting to her movements. She chose to dive into the water again and launch a surprise attack from there, even though she wasn't used to moving underwater yet.

But the moment she took a nosedive...

“Water Walking!”

...the Hero activated a spell.

Not to him. Not to his buddy.

To Sihlwald.

Her scales repelled harmful magic, but buffs or supporting spells, such as Water Walking, went through. That was already proved moments ago in the midst of battle.

As a result, Sihlwald did not dive but bounced off the water and slipped back toward the center island.

“Ha! You won’t get me with this.”

Although surprised by the suddenness of it, she immediately got back up.

The Hero was already on his next move.

“Light, sound, burst!” He shortened the incantation for *“Provoke!”*

Beads of light shot from Gram’s fingers.

“Ha! No magic will...” work on dragons, she couldn’t finish.

Before that, the light beads popped, unleashing light and sound that filled the entire remote shrine and sealed Sihlwald’s sight and hearing.

“Tch! Dirty little tricks!”

Provoke was a simple non-damaging spell that drew the attention of the enemy with light and sound, but as Gram launched it with all his power, it turned out to be more effective than a stun grenade. Dragonscale Effect did not protect her sight or hearing.

Sihlwald focused on the wavering of the aether behind her. No mana reaction from Veltol.

She could ignore him for the time being. The only thing that could damage her without hurting his ally as well was Gram’s Vernal.

Sihlwald’s sight gradually came back, and she launched herself forward.

The Hero was before her eyes. Something felt wrong. She kicked his midsection and blew him away.

It was then that she realized what was wrong.

Gram wasn't holding Vernal. And Veltol's presence had vanished from her back.

Where?

She looked all around, cleared her ears, sensed the motion of the air.

Where is he?

A black gust blew.

Shivers. A sensation that she had felt very few times in her life.

Not overbearing like the Green Dragon's.

Not depraved like the White Dragon's.

Not mad like the Blue Dragon's.

Not catastrophic like the Red Dragon's.

The mana overhead was unlike any other in her memory. She looked up.

"Veltol, you..."

Her eyes grew wide.

Veltol held Vernal in his hands.

He used Leaping Haze. That alone wasn't enough to trick her eye, but by using Gram as a distraction, he could use it as a chaff for the aether wavering and jump above her. To defeat her with a technique she created was his way of repaying her.

By giving Gram the Dark Sword and placing him on the vanguard while keeping himself to rear support, he pulled Sihlwald's focus away from himself, thus setting the stage for this role switch.

Vernal and the black armor were soul armaments forged from his soul. He was free to pull them in or out at any time. He could return them to his hand even while Gram had them equipped.

There was no sign of communication for the switch. The strategy was only possible without a word exchanged, thanks to their experience in battling to the death against each other.

But that wasn't what surprised Sihlwald—the strategy itself was no big deal.

"That form..."

Veltol was wearing a horned mask like the skull of a dragon. That was not his second form as when he fought the Hero Gram or the Duke of the Bloody Arts Marcus. His size and armor remained the same, the only difference being the dragon skull.

The aether density in the remote shrine was enough to activate his second form, but as he lacked the faith, his transformation was limited.

This was the Demon Lord's limited second form. Active for only one second.

"It's time to end this distraction, Sihlwald."

He reserved the switch with Gram in order to make the most of that single second. Had he used it from the beginning, used the limited transformation without enough consideration, Sihlwald would become wary of it.

The secret technique available only during his second form—proclaimless magic. Myriad black lances appeared in the air. They pierced through Sihlwald's Dragonscale Effect.

Defeat inched so close in one moment. Still, a smile remained on Sihlwald's face. "Ahhh! Now *this* is the little brother I know! Demon Lord Veltol! However...!"

She stared into Veltol overhead as she took a deep breath.

"*Goh Arr!*"

Black flames surged from the dragon's roar.

Black Dragon, Sihlwald's, real Dragonbreath.

The root of magic—a simple hit of mana as heat.

The flames pulled off part of Veltol's mask, unveiling one eye.

Their glares clashed.

The Black Dragon then sensed her defeat.

"Exult in the silver skies: *Vernal Diel*."

The silver gleam of the Demon Lord's Dark Sword stabbed the Black Dragon's scales. With a single strike, the Demon Lord emerged victorious.



"*Weak human, immortal brethren, I shall allow you to name yourself.*"

"I now call myself Veltol."

An old memory, from back when the age of the dragons came to its twilight and the age of giants and heroes began to dawn.

A young human recently turned immortal arrived at her nest with a black gale. He crossed terrain too harsh for humans, traversed the dwellings of darklings and dragons, and made it to the home of the god of the dragons.

"As in evil omen? Heh. Quite the peculiar name," said the giant

dragon. “*This is the first time humankind has come to this place. The mere fact you crossed the Velvar Sierra to stand before me now makes you a legend among men. Now why are you paying my home a visit, brave Veltol?*”

He was tiny, physically. A single swing of her forelegs could crush him, and one breath could send him flying away.

“Join my army, Sihlwald.”

She liked his arrogance.

“*Bwah!*” The dragon laughed. “*Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You are one funny lad, Veltol!*”

Her laughter whirled the aether and swayed the man’s long hair.

“*I thought of devouring you were you to rant folly, but now that tickles my scales! I like the guts you show me! The apex predator has finished its part as head of all living beings. Soon enough, the heroes shall defeat the giants crowding the land, exterminate them, and bring forth the age of humankind. We dragons are no longer calamities but mere creatures. Perhaps it would be amusing to follow one of such men, then.*”

“I am no human.” He stared boldly into her eyes. “Serve me.”

“*You bring me no end of amusement... But what do you want me for?*”

“Someone as powerful as you would eventually get in the way of my rule. The best course of action would naturally be to have you join me before such a time comes.”

“*That is to say, you want to avoid fighting me?*”

“I shall make my wish come true, even if I must sip mud to achieve it.”

“*I fancy your avarice. Very well. But I have something to ask in return. You will listen to three of my requests. That will be our vow.*”

“Requests?” He furrowed his brow.

“*I won’t ask you to bring me Virtuosa. Nothing reckless like that Red Dragon’s lightning. No, what I want is for you to indulge me in my little whims.*”

“...I accept. Let us make this vow.”

“*I will have my first request fulfilled now. From now on, you will respect me as your elder sister.*”

“My sister...? That’s it?”

“*I said you will respect me.*”

“...I will, Sister.” He bowed his head.

“*Good. Now, what do you want me to do as part of your army? Anything foolish and I will gulp you up.*”

“For starters, I would like you to destroy a nation.”

“Which one?”

“My...homeland.”



The silver Dark Sword pierced the dragon’s scales as though sewing her to the ground. Even stabbed by the soul-tearing immortal execution blade, Sihlwald was undefeated. Her soul’s strength was extraordinary even for an immortal, and Veltol knew that using the execution blade would not bring her demise.

Veltol held her in his arms, softly pulling the blade away.

“Let us look over everything said with this.”

The blade was meant to be used to execute criminal immortals. Now that she had received punishment, it was all forgiven.

“Not very kind to your sister, are you?”

“If your request is to be treated kindly, I will gladly oblige.”

“Heh-heh-heh... I like it a bit rougher.” Sihlwald left Veltol’s arms and sat down. “I lost.”

Sihlwald remembered what Veltol said to Gram before the battle: “*I can already see victory in our future.*” He had predicted this.

Demon Lord Veltol and Hero Gram.

Perhaps Sihlwald would have lost even in her prime.

Not to mention Veltol’s secret power: His dragon mask...

“That looked like me.”

...it resembled Sihlwald’s dragon form.

Veltol’s second form was the incarnation of man’s primal fear, meaning that the fear of the apex predator, the Black Dragon, Sihlwald, was carved into the souls of her prey. The dragon skull resembling Sihlwald’s was Veltol’s highest expression of respect.

“Is there anybody else who could embody life’s primal fear?”

Now I understand...

She finally realized the meaning of her feelings toward her brother and master: love—personal, on equal footing.

“Hero Gram, you did remarkably. I can see how you could defeat Veltol. You are the true Hero.”

The greatest praise a hero, a swordsman, could receive from the dragon of legend. What higher honor could there be?

So Gram, too, showed reverence to the king of the dragons by kneeling and bowing his head.

“I do not deserve the praise.”

“That said.” Sihlwald leaned back. “I would have pummeled you if I hadn’t just woken up.”

“Not at all, Sister. You are an early riser. The results would have been the same.”

“I would’ve won in my dragon form! I just stayed like this because the place is so tiny and I would’ve felt bad for you!”

“Sore loser...”

“You two are identical...,” said Gram.

Veltol reached for Sihlwald. “Should we go, then, Sister?”

“Uhh, about that...” She raised a hand awkwardly. “This is really hard for me to say...especially after I just lost... But don’t get mad, okay? Promise? I wanted to fight you, for sure, but there is one extenuating reason as to why I asked you for that...”

She twiddled her pointer fingers, her eyes upturned and tail wagging as she hesitated to explain.

“I cannot promise I won’t get mad before hearing it first...,” Veltol said.

“Of course.” Sihlwald averted her gaze and whispered, “I can’t leave this place...”

“...Hmm?”

“...Huh?”

Veltol and Gram exchanged confused looks.

“And...why would that be, Sister?”

“Erm... To put it very simply, after the Immortal War, I was wandering about and found believers of mine in a village here.”

“Yes?”

“And it was a barren land, and I was down because you weren’t here, and it made me glad to see believers still around... So I activated the ley lines here to make the land bountiful. I became the lynchpin.”

“I see... So the Progenitor made use of your activated aether lines to keep the flow of aether and make the barrier in Yokohama.”

“I heard Goar was once a bountiful land of dragon faithfus. So that’s because Sihlwald took root as the keystone here. I saw the statue of a dragon in the city. That’s why you can’t leave?” Gram asked.

Sihlwald nodded and tapped the seal on her chest. “I made a vow to

have the shrine maiden liberate me when the time came that my blessings became unneeded. So you can't completely break my seal unless you are from the shrine maiden's bloodline."

"Then what was the fight for?!" Gram's yell echoed through the shrine.

"I knew you'd get mad! That's why I was gonna win! Then I'd have an excuse to send you off!" Sihlwald panicked apologetically. "But wait. There might be a way. I'd be free already if all my believers were dead. But I'm not, so that must mean that they are still there. Just bring them."

"So there was the physical seal on the wall blocking off the shrine, and the vow with your believers. But what about the chains?" Gram asked.

"I'm not sure, because I was dozing, but it must have been Marcus. I have vague memories of him doing something."

Veltol touched his index finger to his lips. "It is true that the quirks of the seal were reminiscent of Marcus's... He was unable to use you for the Immortal Furnace because of the seal, so he must've placed a further one to make sure you would not get in his way. Again, it's a shame that he ended up my foe."

"But what now? We can't just leave her here, can we?"

"Hmmm..."

The three of them cocked their heads in thought.

"A vow with your believers..." Veltol muttered before raising his head. "Gram, free the girls."

"Huh? Oh, right."

He did as told, and the two of them walked over to the center.

"How'd it go? Seems like the battle's settled, at least."

"Is something the matter?"

Veltol stood before Aoba and grabbed her hand.

"Aoba."

"Y-yes?!"

Her cheeks grew rosy.

"You are the key."

Aoba didn't understand what he meant.

"Huh? Huh?"

"Sister. She is a homunculus."

"Hm? And?"

"Her soul is a copy, which means..."

“...I see where you’re going.”

“She might be a copy of the body and soul of a descendant of the shrine maiden who made that vow with you five hundred years ago.”

Only a shrine maiden from Sihlwald’s believers’ bloodline could completely undo her seal, and if Aoba was a copy of their soul, then, magicologically speaking, she should be recognized as her believer.

“Aoba’s original was a descendant of the shrine maiden?” Gram repeated.

Veltol nodded. “Very likely. Aoba, do as I say, please.”

He then gave her a couple of instructions.

As he taught her, Aoba reached her hand out to Sihlwald and said, “Black Dragon, Sihlwald, I relay to you the news of the completion of the vow to my soul.”

The moment her hand touched Sihlwald’s seal, the memories rushed into Aoba’s head.



The memory of a girl; a memory handed down through the generations across five centuries; the memory of Aoba’s original soul.

She saw through the eyes of that girl. Before her was Sihlwald in her human form, keystone seal on her chest.

The girl in that memory wore the shrine maiden dress as the other girl sat in the middle of the beautiful shrine.

“Are you sure about this, Sihlwald?”

“Just do it already. I know it’s only for complacency and won’t serve as real atonement, but I’d feel at ease, if only a little, if I can repay my believers. And... Well, I’ve grown tired... I know I chose this for myself, but it is the second time I lost something I hold dear.”

“Heavens! Black Dragon, Sihlwald? But my grandmother and my grandmother’s grandmother and her grandmother all talked about how Sihlwald was the bravest, most powerful in the world. I would’ve never thought she would be such a little, delicate girl.”

“Ha! Like you didn’t wet yourself when I descended in my dragon form.”

“How couldn’t I be shocked seeing a dragon for the first time? You’re quite adorable like this, but I prefer your other formidable appearance. Would you like to switch it?”

“This place is too small for that form.”

“That makes sense. And...what about this book?”

“Hm? Ah, I don’t need it anymore.”

“Oh, then I know a merchant who likes this sort of thing. May as well make some money from it.”

“You’re selling it?! You’re supposed to keep it after this sentimental good-bye! Ehh, do as you please...”

They both smiled.

“And good-bye it is. I believe the death of your descendants will come sooner than them waking me up, I’ll say. Mortals are so frail.”

“No,” the shrine maiden said. “I’m sure people who believe in you will exist no matter how much the world changes.”



Then she came back to her senses.

Before Aoba’s eyes was the dragon girl, exactly the same as in the memory.

“Our deal fulfilled, there is none that binds my wings further.”

With the clear sound of thin ice cracking, the seal on Sihlwald’s chest vanished.



“So you were the last key... I don’t remember human faces...but I do feel like I’ve seen someone like you before. In any case, I thank you, descendant of the shrine maiden, for persisting until this time came, Aoba.”

“Sihlwald,” she replied softly. “I’m sure I was meant to meet you.”

The girl’s face displayed a bright, natural, organic smile.

INTERLUDE

Everyone died.

The elves, the dwarves, the goblins, the orcs, the therians, the ogres.

Everyone but the humans died.

Being of a different species was enough reason for discrimination.

Differences in country, language, skin color, faith, that alone brought conflict—it was only natural that being in an extreme situation with different species would lead to the majority, humans, prioritizing themselves.

In a way, one could say that it was thanks to the presence of other species that the humans were able to unite.

If everyone surviving or escaping was impossible, then at least them.

He and another eighteen humans remained.

Most of them were not leading good lives, as most resources went to keep the man alive.

The woman supporting him said, “Everyone sacrificed themselves for your ideal.”

The mage was deft at alchemy and soul technics.

“Everyone was sacrificed for your teachings.”

They had decided on a way for the humans to survive on this island.

“At the very least, make it...”

Soul cloning. Homunculi production.

“Make this world peaceful. I shall sacrifice myself for that wish, too.”

She made two types of homunculi based on the soul and body information of the eighteen humans, and helped him manage this last utopia.

With the power of faith, she made him into the final and only god.

This was the Utopia Project.

They were fortunate to have discovered the shrine where they sealed the Black Dragon who activated the aether lines. These became the foundations of the project. The only pity was that, had they discovered it sooner, the sacrifices might not have been so many.

The clock didn't turn backward. There were no regrets. They had to move forward to make good on everyone's expectations.

"Yes, I've succeeded everyone's will, and I will make the world peaceful."

CHAPTER FIVE

And Thus, He Reaches Heaven

“Lady Sihlwald! Lady Sihlwald!”

A tall man walked down the long skullia hallway. He had an intrepid look on his face and a mostly human appearance, save for the wolf ears and tail—signs of his half-therian genes.

The half-therian man wore ceremonial armor and carried a thin ceremonial sword. Clear sunlight came in through the windows on his left-hand side, making the dust shine.

“Hmmm. Finding her will be an ordeal... But going against His Majesty’s commands would be unthinkable... Piling achievements in battle would be so much easier.”

Another man appeared with languid steps from the corner before him.

He had long silver hair, pointy ears, and brown skin. He wore a red vampire robe and a nervous and timid look on his face.

“If it isn’t Sir Marcus.”

The dark elf’s expression brightened upon seeing the half-therian.

“Ohh! Sir Zenol! Good to see you here!”

The half-therian man, Zenol, raised an eyebrow at Marcus. “If you’ll excuse the courtesy, Sir Marcus...what are you doing?”

His confusion was only natural, as Marcus had a tall familiar’s cage covering his head.

“Good question, Sir Zenol!” Marcus flashed a big smile from behind the cage’s bars and hurried up to Zenol.

But on his way there, the cage got caught on a candleholder sticking out from the wall, and he fell over.

“Ugyah?!”

Marcus stood up, smile unchanged, and ran up to Zenol.

“This is my newly developed magi-gadget. A prototype for a magic-assistance device! No name for it yet, though! As we’re considering

allying with the ogres and orcs, I figured they would be of great help if they were able to use magic with ease! However, it is still too big, and it only works as a weak staff for those who can already use magic at the moment... If we can't find a way to add some technological advancement to magic, then it'll remain the same no matter how many centuries..."

Zenol was ignorant about magic. Although he could use it, he couldn't keep up with the talk of a genius like Marcus, not to mention he always talked so rapidly, without a care for the listener. He was an overexplainer.

"That sounds too technical for me to understand, but I'm sure His Majesty will be glad to see your contribution and wisdom. That said, I don't think you should show yourself like that before him."

"Show myself to him? Why? Did I do something wrong again?"

"No, but he called for me and you, Lady Sihlwald, Ralsheen, Machina, and...what was the name of the new recruit?"

"Ahhh, I've forgotten it, too. But I know who you mean. The exiled one."

"Yes, he wants us in the palace as soon as possible."

"What a curious selection... I doubt it's about the planned subterranean Demon Castle's inverted keep... But if he's called for you and Lady Sihlwald, then it can't be anything peaceable..."

"Only he can know."

"Yes, I cannot present myself before him like this. I must get changed right a..."

Marcus grabbed the familiar cage and shook it up and down, but it only rattled.

"...I can't take it off."

"...Just find a way before coming, Sir Marcus." Zenol walked past him.

"Hey! Wait! Please! H-h-help me, Sir Zenol! The king will kill me!"

"It was a joke. Calm down. If you can't take it off, then we can only smash it. Should I?"

"Y-yes. It's a failure, after all."

"Well, then." Zenol grabbed his ceremonial sword.

"I know I can't die, but don't decapitate me, okay?!"

"Don't worry."

Three rings.

A gust.

The clang of sheathing.

Then the clunk of the familiar cage falling to the ground, split

vertically.

Marcus praised him, astounded. “That is the number one swordsman in Alnaeth for you... Excellent, a clean draw even with a ceremonial sword... I could not even see the movement. I can only imagine what it takes to do that, as someone inept at the art of the sword...”

“Oh, it’s nothing. And number one in Alnaeth is too much. I’m far from the Paladin Althia.”

“Ha-ha! But isn’t that a fairy-tale hero? No need to be humble. Thank you for your help, Sir Zenol! My friend! Now I shall rush to meet the king!”

Marcus carried the familiar cage by his side and ran away.

“He’s one excellent engineer, but too careless. Although he acts so serene before His Majesty... Ah, I forgot to ask him about Lady Sihlwald...”

As Zenol remained paused in thought, a graceful voice called his name from behind.

“Sir Zenol?”

He turned around to find two people.

“If it isn’t Machina and...”

Machina, in red dress armor and with her long, beautiful silver hair unusually tied up to one side, bowed courteously. She was yet to be given a noble title, but even Zenol had her in his sight as a comparatively new recruit with great achievements.

Behind Machina was a quiet girl shorter than she was, wearing white-and-blue dress armor.

“Maaay! Greet Sir Zenol!”

The timid girl clung to Machina’s back as she popped up her head to peek at Zenol. They looked like sisters together, but May was far younger as an immortal than Machina. According to his lord, she was basically as old as she seemed.

“...”

Machina pushed her to the front, but May quickly ran back behind.

“For goodness’ sake! I’m so sorry, Sir Zenol... I’m still teaching her manners... I will lecture her later. Please forgive her...”

“Ha-ha! No, it is ruder of me to make a woman greet me first.” Zenol bent a knee to the floor to meet May’s eye level and smiled. “I am Zenol, appointed Duke of Swords by His Majesty. May I ask your name, little lady?”

“...Okay.” She stood to face him. “I’m May.”

“May. Very nice name. As servants of the same lord, we will sooner or later stand together in battle. I look forward to you having my back.”

“...Yeah.” May nodded before hiding behind Machina again.

“Considering your outfits, I imagine you already know about the summons?”

“Yes, Ralsheen told us, along with giving us these armors... We are on our way to the palace.”

“I see. By the way, have you seen Lady Sihlwald? His Majesty asked me to tell her about it.”

“Lady Sihlwald? I’m sorry, I haven’t seen her.”

“...I saw her laughing out loud while running through the main street this morning,” May said from behind Machina’s back.

“Main street? I’ll have to go to town, then. Thank you.”

“Should we help you look for her?”

“No, this is my job. You head over to see His Majesty.”

“Very well.”

Machina and May bowed before leaving.

Zenol looked out the window receiving the warm, soft sunlight.

“I must work hard to aid His Majesty’s efforts so this tranquility can continue forever.”

It was a story from a long, long time ago.



Ramen places in Goar were currently divided into three styles: industrial, domestic, and everything else—traditional Chinese noodles, *sanmamen*, *tanmen*, et cetera.

Machina and Hizuki visited a place that served domestic-style ramen. The smell of the synthetic pork broth reached all the way out across the short curtains.

“Come on iiin!” the restaurant clerk yelled.

The shop was jam-packed, and the workers were hectic.

Machina and Hizuki bought a ticket at the machine in the corner via their Familias. They were both issued small colored plates. Machina bought a regular bowl, and Hizuki, a large bowl with rice.

“You order so much every time,” said Machina. “You’ll get fat.”

“Mmm, I never really gain weight no matter how much I eat.”

A smiling orc clerk came over. “I’m so sorry! All tables are taken at the moment; would you mind sharing one?”

“What do you say, Hizuki?”

“Sure, that’s fine. I’m starving.”

“Then if you could show us to the table, please.” Machina handed the plates to the clerk.

“Thank you! Any special requests?”

“Hard noodles, strong broth, extra fat,” said Hizuki.

“Everything regular for me, please,” said Machina.

“Showing two clients to their seaaats!”

“Come on iiin!”

They were shown to a table in the back of the small restaurant. On the left, front side of the table for four was a human woman. Her hair was tied up at her nape, and she was wearing a suit.

“Excuse us!” the orc clerk said.

“Go right ahead,” the woman replied.

They bowed to her, and Hizuki took the farthest back seat, across the table from the woman, while Machina sat beside Hizuki.

The woman was eating her ramen when she glanced at them, and their eyes met.

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

Machina knew her.

“I-i-it’s you...!”

“*Mmmg! Hafghafgrgha!*”

“Swallow before speaking!”

The woman gulped down her food and served herself water from the pitcher before taking a drink. After that was done, the two of them pointed at each other.

“You... You’re Marcus’s...! What was your name, again...?”

“You... You’re the Demon Lord’s...! I can’t remember your name...”

They recognized each other, but Machina never heard her name, and the woman didn’t remember hers.

The woman was the secretary of Shinjuku’s IHMI’s CEO, one of the Six Dark Peers, the Duke of the Bloody Arts, Marcus, and opponent of Veltol and Machina in the incident surrounding the Immortal Furnace. Her

name was Kinohara.

Machina considered getting on guard but then remembered they were at a restaurant, and while she was hesitating, Kinohara stood up and took a business card out of her breast pocket, which she then handed to Machina with a bow.

“My name is Kinohara. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, yes... The pleasure is mine. I’m Machina.”

Machina’s animosity evaporated, and she glanced at the card. It stated Kinohara’s full name in Japanese, as well as the name of her company and a QR code for her contact info.

Hizuki received one, too, and read the company name out loud.

“Hero Staffing Agency Valhara’...?”

“We outsource a variety of niche jobs, from missing pets to private investigations to cheating spouses to Yakuza Guild raids.”

“So you’re a glorified handyman?” Machina asked.

“Perhaps from a macro perspective.”

“Uh-huh... So you know her, Machina?”

“Yes! That’s right!”

Machina lowered her voice after noticing that everyone in the restaurant was looking at her for shouting.

“That wasn’t a ‘yes!’ to your question, Hizuki. I was just trying to get us back on topic.”

“Uh-huh, sure. So?”

“I don’t actually know her. Remember what I told you a little while back? About what happened in Shinjuku?”

“The thing about using immortals as fuel, right?”

“She was one of the ringleaders!” Machina pointed at Kinohara, who glared back.

“I don’t hold any grudge toward you or the Demon Lord. It’s true that I was indebted to the director, and that I’m in my current situation because of you... However, it would be pathetic of the loser to resent you for the results. Revenge isn’t creative. Although if you intend to fight me, then I will take you up on it.”

“...”

Zenol’s face crossed Machina’s mind, as did Ornared’s, Palmlock’s, and the other immortals’.

Kinohara hadn’t killed them herself. Marcus was the executioner, the main culprit. But Kinohara had been involved with him.

Even so, reason won out. This was not the place to fight.

“A large, hard noodles, strong broth, extra fat ramen with rice, and one regular coming up!”

The ramen arrived at the table.

Tonkotsu *shoyu* broth, medium-thickness soy noodles, green edible film, synthetic seaweed, seasoned eggs, and mernius. The most standard domestic ramen.

Hizuki and Machina switched their focus from Kinohara to the ramen. Ramen was a serious matter.

They heard the clerk speak to a new diner:

“I’m so sorry! All our tables are taken; would you mind sharing one?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Thank you! Showing one client to their seaaat!”

Yet another chance encounter.

Machina and the newcomer exclaimed in unison the moment they saw each other:

“Ah.”

“Oh.”

Finding Kinohara here was already a bombshell, and now this?

A girl in black nun-like clothes wearing a visor. A member of the Guild, marked by the emblem of a dragon holding a sword. Alias Ange.

One of the Six Dark Peers—Duchess of the Mournful Firmament: May.

Hizuki slurped her ramen while looking at the person sitting diagonally across from her.

It was a short girl. Half of her face was covered, but she looked younger than Hizuki. But appearances didn’t matter, since she was an immortal.

She awkwardly drew the noodles to her little mouth.

She eats ramen, huh? Hizuki thought. *I had this image of her as a magiroid or something.*

That girl was a member of the same organization as Hizuki’s nemesis, and the terrorist who had occupied her school.

Calm down.

Hizuki took a deep breath and focused on the slurping at hand.

She had extra garlic. No big deal, since she wasn’t planning on meeting anyone. There were few people she would talk to anyway.



Having to talk with Veltol with garlic breath would be upsetting, though—the thought took over as she slurped her noodles.

That girl wasn't the target of her revenge, and she wasn't getting in her way at the moment. Machina said she was an old friend or coworker or something, but then she was brainwashed or hypnotized or something, and she was like an entirely different person now. In that case, nothing was to be gained getting on the offensive. The most fruitful course of action would be to capture Ange with Machina's help and ask her some questions.

Hizuki tried hard to contain herself, but the more she thought about the possibility of getting intel on Faceless, the more restless she got.

"Hizuki," Machina said while rolling the spinach-like edible film with the synthetic seaweed. "I know how you feel, but this isn't the time. Let's eat our food."

"...Yeah."

Machina's warning made Hizuki regain her cool.

Helping Ange—May—was Machina's goal. Hizuki's and Machina's destinations were the same in the end. If Machina got to save May, Hizuki could get intel on Faceless.

The best thing to do right now was to fill her belly and procure energy.

She thought perhaps having a full belly before battle could lower her performance, but there was no way that could happen after eating some domestic ramen full of nutritious salt, water, fibers, proteins, and garlic.

Hizuki gulped down the broth and wrapped the soggy synthetic seaweed with edible film and artificial rice to get a mouthful. In this moment, there was nothing else but eating ramen and rice. She had to eat ramen and rice.

They had been touring ramen places for the last few days, but it was no problem to her, since all the fat went to her breasts and butt. Last time she told Machina that, she headbutted her chest without saying a word.

"May..." Machina whispered pleadingly.

Ange did not respond, for she wasn't May.

"Ange..."

"What?"

"Could I ask a question?"

"Okay," Ange replied, making a mini ramen in her spoon.

"We fought back in Akihabara, but I'm not sensing any animosity now. Is there a reason for that?"

“I’m on a different mission at the moment. And it doesn’t include fighting you.”

“So you don’t intend to fight unless it’s for a mission?”

Ange nodded.

“You didn’t think I could attack you?”

“I imagined it when I saw you, but considering our last fight, I thought you wouldn’t want to fight inside the restaurant. I could tell from your estimated mana reserve and output that you try not to harm your surroundings.”

“...Meet me after you’re done eating. I want to talk.”

“Understood. I expected that, too. I was told not to attract attention, so I will focus on getting my nutrients for now.”

The two kept quiet.

She doesn’t think she’s attracting attention being a little girl with that weird outfit and bulky visor...?

Hizuki Reynard-Yamada couldn’t help but worry about the associate of her nemesis.

“Okay.” Machina put down her chopsticks, stood up, and looked down at Ange. “So you’ll do what I ask?”

“Depends on what you ask.”

“Let’s meet at the harbor. There are too many people here.”

“...Understood.”

Hizuki hadn’t known her for long, but she knew what Machina was thinking. She wanted to take May back from Ange.

But that would be difficult. So her plan was to get ahold of Ange. It could be that Veltol had a way to turn her back.

Hizuki stood up as well, determined to help her friend in whatever minor way she could.

Only the owner of the restaurant, who had lived through City War II, could sense the tension in the air around the table at the back.



Kinohara asked herself, *Wait, what am I doing here again?*

The answer could only be that she let herself go along with the flow.

Maybe she could find an opportunity for profit.

She needed money in order to fulfill her ambition of buying the rights to Ishimary, IHMI’s mascot. The other reason was that it looked fun.

Kinohara walked right behind the other three ladies. Machina led the way, followed by the visor girl Ange, and then the blond half-elf.

Kinohara had seen the blond on the news. The only daughter of the Reynards and the figure at the center of the incident involving the Three Great Houses of Akihabara. She looked her up on her Familia; the girl's name was Hizuki Reynard-Yamada. The related images showed her flipping the bird, and lots of ensuing memes. Poor girl, becoming an aethernet meme at her age.

Kinohara didn't know much about the visor girl. Apparently, she had history with Machina. Kinohara honestly felt a bit left out after how her encounter with Machina was brushed off the moment another acquaintance came in.

That didn't matter now, though. What Kinohara was most interested in right now was who made that visor. At the very least, it wasn't in the G6 catalogue. She figured it had to be a new model or from some minor maker.

The four of them arrived at a desolate pier.

At the edge, with the sea to her back, stood Ange. Machina and Hizuki faced her, while Kinohara remained behind.

The waves crashing into the tetrapods played a forlorn melody.

“Ange.”

“What?”

“Would you come with us?”

Machina's voice was serene, but Kinohara heard a tinge of supplication.

“Where to?”

“Let me rephrase that. Would you join us, as friends?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It's not part of my mission, and besides...” Her words were the final nail in the coffin. “You're my enemy.”

Machina let out a deep, deep sigh.

Heat. Kinohara felt sparking heat on her skin.

The aether around her reacted to Machina's mana and sparked with heat.

Machina took a step forward, leaving a scorched footprint behind.

“Warning,” Ange said as the chilling gust made her skirt flutter. “I will strike back at any aggressive behavior.”

“You’re sharp. Yes, I’ll tie you up here and now.”

Machina’s and Ange’s animosity filled the air.

Wait. They’re going to fight? I suppose I should have seen this coming after the words they exchanged at the restaurant. What am I doing? My curiosity is getting the better of meowmeowmeow.

Kinohara’s thoughts were helter-skelter.

Hizuki didn’t seem like she’d try to stop them, either. Quite the opposite: She took a step forward, too.

Clearly, there was more to lose than win here. Better to sneak out and go home.

But as soon as Machina and Ange got into combat stance, Kinohara noticed it first.

“Look up!”

She jumped away after the warning, and without a moment’s delay, Machina grabbed Hizuki, still lost, and retreated.

It fell top speed from the sky and crashed into the spot they had been standing on. The ground cracked loudly, and a dust cloud shot up.

“Wh-what the hell?!” Hizuki yelled, to no response.

The dust cleared.

There was jet-black armor there. It stabbed a large black sword on the ground and knelt with its back to Ange. Its eyes and a circuit pattern all around its body lit up.

Kinohara had seen that black armor before.

“Alternative...?!”

“‘Alternative...’?” Machina parroted.

“IHMI’s fifth-gen prototype MG. But...”

The Alternative magi-gear prototype was developed concurrently with Zerobase.

In contrast with Zerobase’s steady design, Alternative was developed with as many features as they could fit into it. It produced a load too heavy even for an A-class licensed driver like Kinohara, or a physically resilient species like ogres. It was declared impossible for mankind to handle and lost to the in-house competition to the Zerobase before being sealed away.

Kinohara had experience test-driving both the Zerobase and the Alternative. It could not be a human in that thing if it was full-spec.

It does look quite different, though...

The base was clearly IHMI’s Alternative. It had a tight form like the Zerobase, being more like a *suit* than an *armor*. But the general silhouette

was different from what she remembered.

It had IHMI's dual sensors and MAGTEC's visor sensors on top, with additions to its pectoral armor. The armor had a black Feyenoor-made offensive exhaust dragoncell coating and one M&B xeno launcher on each shoulder. All modified beyond warranty protection.

It was like a chimera mixing various weapons from various manufacturers.

The Alternative rose to its feet and pulled out the sword from the ground to carry it on its shoulder. Although Kinohara hesitated to even call it a sword. It was more like a cannon with a blade.

She assumed that strange weapon had to be an Armory product, but she wasn't sure.

“Ange, what the hell are you doing?”

A muffled, mechanical voice came from the Alternative.

“Why are you with them? What about FEMU’s mission? You forgot you’re not allowed to fight? You gotta listen to your superiors, kid.”

“I am not attacking them. We ran into each other at the ramen restaurant and came here en garde. Besides, the mission is complete. The Union Army is mobilizing. So there’s nothing to worry about, Superior.”

“Okay, then. But wait, then that means you went for ramen looking like that?”

“Affirmative. Why?”

“Should you really be wandering outside and getting into ramen places wearing our uniform...?”

“I was only told not to enter restaurants with this outfit in Akihabara. No instructions for Goar.”

“*You... Don’t take orders so literally!*”

“It’s not in the regulations. No problem.”

“*You sure...? Hmm.*”

Kinohara was baffled by the freaks’ casual exchange.

However, she could tell from his manner of speech that the driver was a young man.

“Who are you? Depending on your answer, I will have to—”

“*Woman,*” the Alternative said, interrupting Machina. “*Tell Veltol I will kill him. Me, no one else. Zenol.*”

“What?! ” Machina’s jaw dropped, and her eyes bulged.

Zenol. Kinohara knew that name. It was one of the higher-ups in the Demon Lord Army five hundred years ago. One of the Six Dark Peers. The Duke of the Karmic Sword.

The Hero Gram's nemesis, Zenol had lost to him in a duel during the Immortal War. He had also been on the list of the Immortal Furnace's firewood.

"Sir Zenol?! No, that can't be... He's not this sort of person..." Machina said in confusion.

Impossible for her not to be confused when the person before her had been supposedly burned in the furnace.

"God's Utopia Project will soon begin in Yokohama, and that island will disappear."

The armor calling itself Zenol ignored Machina again and spoke whatever it wanted to speak.

"God...? Utopia?" Hizuki said.

"As someone in the organization, I cannot directly put a stop to that man close to godhood. However, I would personally not have Veltol defeated. There is a reason why it has to be me who kills him."

"What're you even talking abo—?"

Zenol interrupted Hizuki: "So I'll give you a piece of advice. If you plan on going to that island, make it quick."

"Swordman," Ange told the armor. "What you are saying goes against the intel management regulations. And there is no point to the code names if you simply give them your name."

"So now you're lecturing me?"

"Negative. Simply a reminder to my superior. This isn't part of the mission."

"Fine. Let's go."

Machina, Hizuki, and Kinohara were absorbed in trying to make sense of what was happening and couldn't say anything back.

"See ya, you immortal fuck."

A magic circle expanded at their feet.

Kinohara had no way of knowing this, but it was the same teleportation magic circle Machina et al. saw in Akihabara.

"Wait—!"

They disappeared before she could finish.

"What...is going on...?"

Machina looked into the distance.

FEMU airships flew above the iron island beyond the black sea. Even all the way here, one could feel the ominous pulsation of the aether.

Kinohara spoke to Machina's back:

"I'm not precisely following, but from the look of that aircraft, it appears that our client is trying to force the investigation without consulting with us. My subordinate is there, and I've prepared a way to get there in cases of emergency such as this." Kinohara took a card key out of her pocket. "And I believe our interests align, as business partners."

It was a key for a private airship.

"Would you like to come along?"



Veltol's group had left the remote shrine and was walking down the long, narrow stone corridor.

The five pairs of footsteps echoed.

"So what're we going to do?" Sihlwald asked blithely from behind.

Veltol and Gram walked at the front, followed by Takahashi and Aoba.

"We just talked about it, Grandma," Takahashi said. "We cleared our initial mission, so now we gotta take down the Progenitor, take over the island, and lift the curse on the Aobas' life spans!"

"Don't forget about my goal here."

"...What was it, again, Grammy?"

"Wha—? Uhh, well... Investigate...whether they're making Scream in Yokohama..."

"Oh, I kiiinda remember hearing that? Maybe?"

"What is this Scream?" Aoba asked.

Gram, bummed out, answered, "An illegal drug. There's an epidemic going on outside."

"...The people outside are suffering because of it?"

"Pretty much."

"I see." Aoba's expression darkened.

"So anyways, that's that. Got it, li'l miss dragon?" Takahashi said with deliberate cheer.

"Hmph. I was only testing you. I already knew. I knew! So where is this Progenitor?"

What an airhead... Takahashi rolled her eyes, but the elderly dragon didn't care.

"Aoba was a resident of the upper stratum until recently, and she doesn't know," Veltol explained. "We can only be sure that he must be in the upper stratum or in a similar central place, so for starters, we will go directly to the foot of the Atlas. We just talked about this, Sister."

"Did we?"

"The dragon's got one too many quirks, man..."

"Shut up, brat! I know what we're doing here! Beating up the fool calling himself a god and taking over the place, right?"

"You have the general gist of it, but violence is only our last recourse. If they are willing to listen. But in any case, I want you to keep to yourself, Sister."

"What a drag."

"I-I'm so sorry... I can't contribute anything... Th-they don't tell us about the Progenitor's location..."

"It's fine. Nothing that you have to apologize for."

Sihlwald locked arms with Aoba. She was oddly chummy with her; perhaps out of gratitude for being an important factor in breaking her seal? They looked like grandmother and granddaughter.

"Sheesh, don't be too clingy with her." Takahashi locked arms with Aoba, too, on the opposite side.

"Shut up, you useless brat! Get away! She's mine!"

"Ha! You'll be full of regrets once you get a look at my super-cute hacking wizardry!"

Takahashi and Sihlwald stuck their tongues out at each other, sandwiching Aoba. Meanwhile, Aoba was torn between bliss and embarrassment; she just wanted them to get along.

"U-um, where...are we, roughly?" She changed the subject into a plea for help, to escape their pressure.

"About below the Atlas," Gram said.

"Y-you can tell?"

"Yeah. I'm good at making maps of buildings and stuff in three dimensions... Or rather, I was forced to become good at it," he said, looking into the distance.

A memory best forgotten.

"It must've been so hard..."

"So much happened in the past..."

"I would like to hear about your past."

"I can tell you once we're done with this. I have plenty of stories to

tell.”

“Heh. Not as many as I,” Veltol interjected.

“Well, I’d imagine! And why’re you making this a competition?!”

“Hold on, you two! Isn’t it obvious I would win?! You’ve never seen any of the other four dragons, have you?! If only you knew Rathbent! That size! Like thiiiiis, I’m telling you! You keep your mouths shut, rascals! I win!”

“...Sure enough, I doubt many have as many stories to tell as you, Sister...”

“You got some from all the way back to the age of the gods. It’s not fair. Anyways, are all darklings this competitive?”

“This dragon doesn’t have a scale of maturity!”

“Pff-ha-ha-ha!” Aoba burst out laughing.

This is so fun, Takahashi thought. *Being with Aoba, with Velly, with Grammy...and even Sihlwald.*

She couldn’t wrap her head around the idea of building a country and using it as a base for taking over the world, but she felt Veltol was capable of pulling it off. And she was sure it’d be fun.

She got new friends; they had hopes of solving the issues of one of them. Everything was going right, and it’d keep looking up. She had no reason for believing it, and yet she did.

Suddenly, the old stone corridor switched to a modern one of linoleum and concrete. The feel of something out of place filled the air, like it did back in the remote shrine.

They arrived at a room right below the Atlas. Two old magiroids with guns guarded the entrance.

Veltol looked at the magiroids from the shadows of the hallway and quietly said, “The guards must mean this is a critical spot. I wondered why the magiroids at the port didn’t use magi-guns, but I see it must be so they could remain armed in areas with low aether. Fire weapons work better here.”

“Automata? They didn’t look this sleek back in my day. Anyhow, let’s stop dawdling and move,” Sihlwald said.

“Yes, but they would send reinforcements if we were fo—”

Sihlwald disappeared before Veltol finished talking.

She ran up the wall to the ceiling, and, from the same blind spot magiroids suffered due to their humanlike shape, she swept her tail to chop off their heads, then pierced their chests to crush their mana engines with

her bare hands. All of this in the blink of an eye and mostly silent.

“Ahh! Their heads!! Like Veltol back there!!”

“Don’t worry, Aoba, they’re just machines... And you don’t need to worry about Velly, either.”

Sihlwald squeezed the magiroids’ heads like lemons while strolling back to the team. “Get rid of them before they see us and we don’t have to worry about reinforcements,” she said.

“A swift and appropriate decision... And aren’t you sharper than before, Sister?”

“To an uncanny degree...”

Veltol and Gram each broke out in a cold sweat at the sight of her movements.

The plate on the automatic door the magiroids were guarding read CULTIVATION ROOM.

“Moving on,” Veltol said.

The group waited with bated breath as the door opened and revealed a wide space with rows of steel racks. Planters filled the five-ledged racks, illuminated with strong white aether neon lights. A self-propelled machine with arms moved restlessly along the rows. The pots held water-cultured plants with red leaves.

“Is this...?” Gram grabbed one of the leaves and pulled on it, revealing a reddish-purple rootstalk that looked like a face and limbs. “It is. Red mandrakes.”

The main ingredient of Scream, the drug causing an epidemic in Goar.

“You imbecile! Don’t uproot the mandrakes! Could you not stop to think they might scream?!” Veltol yelled, plugging his ears.

“Mandrake selective breeding over the past hundred years made them not scream anymore. And even if it were a wild screaming one, you just have to cut off their mouth,” Gram argued back in annoyance.

He looked at the armed machine systematically giving nutrients to the mandrakes and harvesting the flowering ones.

“So it’s a red mandrake cultivation plant... That’s proof and reason enough for FEMU to intervene. This is the perfect environment for cultivating it in secret, too.”

“So this is how they make Scream,” Veltol said.

Gram put the red mandrake back and nodded. “Yeah. There must be a separate room for producing it.”

“And the Progenitor rules over the island while overseeing its

production.”

“I’d imagine. Handling a plant this big has to be costly... Say, Veltol.”

“Yes?” Veltol grabbed the red mandrake Gram put down and stared intently at it.

“What’re your plans for these facilities once you get to the island?”

“Get rid of them, naturally. Producing and using such things can only be a thorn in the side for a ruler.”

“...I see.” Gram sighed in relief.

Aoba stared at the red mandrake Veltol was holding. “This...is making the people outside suffer? There really is...no righteousness for what we believed in...”

Looking at the truth behind the object of your faith had to feel like having your entire life boycotted.

She looked so frail, she could fade away at any moment, and Takahashi wanted to show her support. She gripped Aoba’s hand tight, so as to keep her by her side.

“Hey, there’s another door over there.” Takahashi pointed at the end of the corridor.

Outside that room was a console like the one in the remote shrine, with another plate. Takahashi read it out loud:

“‘Re-service Area’...”

The place where those who could no longer contribute to the city were sent.

Veltol stroked his chin. “This re-service area must be the core of the city. It is most convenient to have such a top secret facility like the red mandrake plant so close to the nucleus of operations. As they say, hide a treasure in a dragon’s nest.”

“Veltol. Don’t tell me you’ve actually hidden treasure in my nest,” Sihlwald said.

“...”

“Look me in the eye!”

“Wait, that’s the place where they send everyone. Is Gramps gonna be here?” Takahashi asked.

“I—I wonder...” Aoba fidgeted before the door.

Takahashi and everyone else were also on edge, in their own ways.

Their way there had been too lax. There was basically no security.

Veltol touched the re-service area door. “There is a seal here. Not as strong as the remote shrine’s, so forcing it open would be possible, but...”

“But what? Just blow that up and move—”

The door opened by itself before Sihlwald could finish talking.

“What? How?” Sihlwald babbled.

“...Looks like it’s inviting us in,” Veltol said.

The five of them set foot into the re-service area. It was shrouded in darkness.

“I can’t see...”

“Hold on, I will light—”

Just as Veltol was activating an illumination spell, all lights in the re-service area turned on.

The place was one-fourth of the remote shrine’s size.

Takahashi’s eyes opened wide. “What...is this...?”

The walls were covered with jars.

“Those...are human brains.”

Sihlwald was right. Brains and part of the spine stabbed by multiple cables floated in the red liquid inside the labeled containers.

The closest one read KANAGAWA 033M.

You couldn’t see the walls, so covered were they by the sheer number of jars.

Takahashi’s eyes were drawn to one of them. It was no round brain but a spongy, shriveled fruit. There were a few more with similar contents.

She recognized it. It was the same thing the old man fishing at the Goar pier had caught.

The fruit jar’s label read ISOGO 085F. The lamp shining on it turned red, and an arm furnished to the wall took it away before replacing it with a new jar.

This one didn’t have a fruit but a human brain.

Ah, so it wasn’t a fruit that we saw at the port. It’s gotta be one of this after they threw it out into the sea...but...

“What the hell...is this place?” Takahashi’s voice trembled.

One person responded:

“The re-service area. That’s what the sign said.”

Takahashi turned to look at the speaker. “Huh?”

It was Aoba. But she looked strange. She was frozen solid, her eyes not blinking and emitting a faint blue light.

“Aoba...?”

She slowly moved to the front of them. “You’re late. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Wait, what’s gotten into you, Aoba?”

“I am not Aoba 100F.”

From Aoba’s mouth, with Aoba’s voice, it said:

“I am this city’s administrator. They call me the Progenitor.”

“The Progenitor...? A-Aoba, what in the world are you—?”

“Calm down, kid.” Sihlwald put her hand on Takahashi’s shoulder. Shivering hostility oozed from her every pore as she glared at Aoba. “She’s not Aoba now.”

“Correct. I am currently speaking to you through Aoba 100F’s body.”

“Aoba’s body?! Fuck you! Let her go!”

“Excuse me?”

The Progenitor’s voice was serenity itself, contrasted with Takahashi’s spitting anger. He spoke as though guiding a lost child or lecturing a naughty one.

“No, you don’t get it. This body and soul are my creation, my belonging, and I have the right to do as I please with it. I find it curious, though. How despite having the same soul, the same container, the same education, the same environment, for whatever reason, small differences arise little by little... There are cheerful ones, introverted ones, obedient ones, rebellious ones. Despite the similarities, there is a healthy amount of diversity.”

“Progenitor,” Veltol said, not letting him talk further. “You mentioned you were waiting for us. You knew we were coming here?”

“Yes, I knew. God observes it all, through the Big Brother surveillance system. It works even under very low aether levels and transmits my citizen’s sight to the system, allowing me to share what they see.”

“No hiding from you, then. But why let us come so far if that is the case?”

“Two reasons.”

“Two...?”

“One: to get you to break Sihlwald’s seal. She activates the aether lines, and I used their aether to manage the city, but as the keystone affects the land directly, it gets in the way of the spell I need to achieve my plans. I had to get rid of it.”

Veltol raised an eyebrow upon hearing the word *spell*.

“However,” the Progenitor continued, “she is too great to get rid of. She could have ruined my plans, so I had you unseal her instead.”

“You used me, huh...? And what’s the second reason?” Sihlwald asked.

“The second reason, my other plan, was fulfilled the moment you unsealed Sihlwald.”

“What...?”

“You cannot interfere with my plans after unsealing her. So I didn’t mind letting you roam free. You were dancing in the palm of my hand from the very beginning.”

Gram took a step forward. “You’re processing the sight of everyone in the city all by yourself?”

“No, even I am not that omnipotent. That would be impossible. Big Brother requires massive processing power. Which is why everyone takes care of it.”

“Everyone...?” Takahashi said.

The Progenitor nodded. “Can’t you see?” He made Aoba extend her arms wide. “The paralleled brains of the citizens are the city’s management and arbitration mechanism: the Mothers.”

“This... They’re...all...?” Takahashi spoke hoarsely as she looked at the massive number of brains.

How could she process the fact that they were all this city’s people?

“Those who become unable to contribute to the city and me are brought here to do away with their bodies and turn useful again—that is the re-service area. They age too quickly due to the makeup of their souls, but their brains are different. They are not as greatly impacted as their bodies. And they have the duty to serve until the very last drop of blood. After too much load, their brains shrivel up and, unfortunately, must be discarded. They cannot be used even for food at that point.”

“Then...Gramps...?”

“Yes. Naturally, Izumi 012M is here, too. He is serving again. They all serve with great glee. They bathe in the stimulant, filling their brains with ecstasy and letting them use multiple times more power than usual. This is

their paradise. How wonderful Scream is. Not only is it a source of income, but it helps them help me.”

“Th—that’s... You’re...” Takahashi covered her face with both hands as she listened to the Progenitor’s deeds.

“And then?” Veltol asked. “Let me hear it, Progenitor. What is your goal? Surely not just pretending to be god on such a tiny island?”

“You should know what I’m planning, Veltol.”

“...What?”

He knew.

The verse written on the spine of the Canon.

The final goal of the Progenitor.

“World peace.”

The same thing one Demon Lord purported.

“World peace. Interesting,” Veltol repeated with a self-mocking smile.
“And how would you bring it about?”

“Is there any other way? World peace cannot be achieved without absolute rule. Or do you find my answer risible?”

“Far from it. I believe just the same.”

“Is that so? Then that makes us comrades, doesn’t it? Things should go smoother if you could give me a hand.”

“...”

Only Gram stared at Veltol instead of the Progenitor.

“Fool,” Veltol scoffed. “I am looking for peace under my rule. A sham of a god who only sees their folk as tools cannot possibly achieve a peaceful world.”

“Sounds like you’re saying you’re different, but is that so? Aren’t we the same?”

“What?”

“Have you done anything for all the people who believe in you? Have you given them thought? Have you thanked them from the bottom of your heart?”

“...”

Veltol did not respond—or could he not?

“You haven’t, have you? Of course. You may feel grateful, but no one thanks water or oxygen from the bottom of their heart. That is what receiving faith is all about—it’s like food. One who feeds on the sacrificial

sheep, on the magars raised for slaughter; the eater doesn't hold special feelings for their food. Becoming an object of faith means becoming a resource. Our existence alone creates mutual aid. There is no need for thanks."

"You mean to lecture me?"

"My, we've gone off course. I'm sure you must have your thoughts on this, but in any case, it's true that I'm not a god in a spiritually higher meaning. I can't receive faith from humankind yet."

"Whatever you might be planning, I will put an end to it. I shall take you down and claim this island."

"Good. You can do as you please with the island. I will give it to you. I don't need it anymore."

"What...?" Veltol raised an eyebrow.

"But put an end to my plans? No, no. I just told you. They're already complete. I have sufficient faith, and the dragon is free. All that's left for me now is to become a real god."

"What do you—?"

"Listen, my dear ten thousand citizens."

He proclaimed:

"Enriedo-Gongujodo."

The maginom's proclamation activated the remote spell.

The Atlas unleashed the aether it absorbed from the upper and lower strata all across Yokohama in the blink of an eye.

Aoba's body was enveloped in blue light.

"Huh?" Released from the Progenitor's influence, she noticed what was happening. "Takahashi."

She instinctively reached out for Takahashi, and Takahashi tried to grab Aoba's hand.

"Help—"

But it was not to be.

Aoba's body vanished into particles of light.

Her hair disappeared first; then her eyelids, exposing her eyeballs; then her lips, exposing her teeth; then her skin, exposing her muscles; then they vanished, too, to reveal her organs, her nerves, her bones; she crumpled as she lost all support and spilled out and evaporated before touching the ground.

Her uniform fell to the floor. The only remnant of Aoba's existence.
It all happened in a single moment.

“__”

Aoba's body turned to aether before she could utter her last words.



The cathedral on Yokohama's upper stratum—two thousand people were gathered under the Progenitor's orders.

They all vanished into light as they prayed.

Aoba 022M, the individual who reported Aoba 100F to the Law Office, felt his own body and consciousness fade among everyone else's as he said, “This is my punishment for kicking another person down...”

All life evaporated from the upper stratum, leaving only the ringing of the bell behind.



Yokohama's lower stratum.

Conflict broke out between the eight thousand prisoners and the few law officers.

Veltol's influence lit the fire of rebellion among some of them, provoking their first protest.

“Listen to the Progenitor! Silence! Be still!”

“Did Veltol really die?!”

“Release them from the correction chamber!”

“Huh? My body...”

But it was all for naught.

Everyone in the lower stratum faded away.



“Huh...? Why...?”

Aoba had just vanished into light.

Takahashi staggered and picked up Aoba's uniform from the floor. It was still warm.

“What...what just...?” Takahashi muttered weakly.

“The Final Service.”

The echo of a man’s voice responded.

“The Final...Service?”

“*Why do people fight?*”

He—the Progenitor—began to preach.

“There are many reasons. Hunger, disparity, inequality. The distress over it is the root of conflict. Chronic disease and karma. The source of worldly desires is because souls are trapped in the impure land.”

“The what?”

“Then what is one to do? Escape it, of course. Get rid of the body pinning us down. Then the souls trapped in the impure land will be released from worldly desires, all will gather under the same faith, personal boundaries will disappear, the herd will meld into one, and the world will achieve peace. This is what will bring us to divine enlightenment, my redemption, and their Final Service. This island in a box was a test for that.”

“Stop blabbing about shit no one gets and actually explain what’s going on!”

“By releasing the Black Dragon, Sihlwald, I was able to activate this spell to trigger the curse in their souls and turn their ten thousand bodies into aether to extract their souls and transform them into data.”

“...What?! You can’t transform people’s souls into—!”

“Yes, you can,” Veltol interrupted Takahashi’s yelling.

His voice was the same as always, yet it sounded so cold as to ingrain fear in those who heard him.

“The technology to turn souls into data was already done five hundred years ago.”

“Indeed. Your friend told me. The invincible reincarnation: Methenoel. That is where I got the idea from.”

“Marcus... I did tell him about the ritual. A man of his level would certainly be able to analyze Methenoel, if within limits.”

“I transformed the bodies of the ten thousand citizens into aether and stored them in the six-realms mechanism inside the pure Atlas. Then their souls are turned into data and the direction of their faiths forced one way. They become fuel for faith that transforms my soul, embedded into the Atlas, into godhood.”

“Your soul is embedded in the Atlas? So you’ve turned even your own

into data already?”

“Yes. And from its main system, through the servitude of all my citizens, I reach godhood. At the same time, the Atlas itself has become a perfectly imperishable divine body. This was already set in stone. It’s already too late, for you, for the Far East Merchant Union surrounding the island after receiving a tip, and even for the Guild.”

“What? When did FEMU...?”

Before Gram could finish his question, the re-service area shook.

“An earthquake?!”

Gram held Takahashi up.

The shaking didn’t stop; it only grew stronger.

“Farewell, intruders. In your last moments, celebrate the advent of the new generation’s god. Extol the absolute world peace that comes beyond the rule of terror and destruction.”

The ceiling collapsed.

Debris fell with a thunder, and the brain jars fell to the floor and broke, their contents spilling out before getting crushed under the rubble.

The collapse extended beyond the re-service area.

The entirety of Yokohama crumbled.

INTERLUDE

The 296-meter-tall tower rising from the center of Yokohama's lower stratum and holding the upper stratum—the Atlas.

Atlas was the name of the titan in Earth mythology who was sentenced to hold up the heavens.

Red light ran across the tower's surface as its walls came apart. From within appeared a black-iron mechanical god, 296 meters tall.

Titanic magi-gear Atlas.

The true form under the tower shell, the creation built on the vast earnings from the illegal drugs—the Progenitor's divine body.

By breaking the bodies of the ten thousand citizens of Yokohama into aether, absorbing their souls, and using them as fuel, the mechanical god awoke.

As the Atlas's divine body booted up, the barrier that expanded from it and supported the upper stratum dispersed, letting the stratum break, crumble, and fall.

The crumbled upper stratum crushed the iron lower stratum and plunged the artificial island of Yokohama into destruction. The box dissolved with the wish for a new beginning.

The man with his consciousness synchronized to the mechanical god awakened by ten thousand sacrifices took a step forward.

To achieve his goal, to create world peace.

For whom? For what? The root of his goal was long in oblivion.

He could only move forward. Memories of the past and motive lost.

It could be he no longer knew who he was, to begin with.

The only thing propelling him was a mad desire to fulfill his goal.

World peace and nothing else was his *raison d'être*.

Inside the steel cage, the spiritually higher being—the god—laughed.

“Let us begin the realization of world peace. The Utopia Project.”

The words were once meant for someone, but now he didn't know for

whom.

It was the beginning of the journey to slash the worldly desires of all mankind and enlighten the masses, realizing them from this impure world.

The mechanical god raised its first cry, like a whale's.

CHAPTER SIX

Deus Ex Machina

An old dwarf was fishing off the Goar pier. A fleet of airships had just flown past toward Yokohama.

“Wh-what the...?”

The old man’s confusion grew as he saw the awakening taking place in the middle of the collapsing iron island. Larger as he heard the cries of the iron island under the warped night sky.

In the middle of the geyser produced by the collapse of the island’s corpse...

“A giant...?”

...stood a figure roughly three hundred meters tall—a mechanical titan.

Its silhouette was fuzzy from the warped space dividing Goar and Yokohama, but it clearly had a human shape.

The mechanical god was slim, with long limbs, its entire body flickering with lights that resembled kabuki stage makeup, and a sword in its hand so giant, it paralleled its own height.

Light radiated from its back, as divine as it was sinister, and it rotated faster and faster to make up a ring of light.

The next moment, red rays shot from its left eye.

The mechanical god shook its head, and the ray followed its path to raze the airships flying around the island. Most of the dozen aircraft were engulfed in the light and vaporized with an explosion. Only a couple were left, but not due to a miss or mercy on the part of the mechanical god.

It was because those left were unarmed.

“Wh...? Wha...aaa...?”

Although the old man had no way of knowing any of its reasoning.

He threw away the rod, and the bucket fell and spilled its contents into the sea as he crawled away. The face of the black-haired man who said he wanted to go to that island crossed his mind.

The mechanical god took a step forward.

Forward to uniting mankind under the name of the Progenitor, for the sake of world peace.



The bodies of all citizens of Yokohama were turned into aether and their souls into data that the mechanical god, Atlas, absorbed. Yokohama collapsed in the blink of an eye without the Atlas to support it.

From underneath the rubble escaped Veltol, Gram, Sihlwald, and Takahashi in Gram's arms.

They opened a hole overhead with attack magic and used the rubble as a foothold to escape before the debris could crush them.

The four of them saw the Atlas's red rays engulf the airships flying in the sky.

The light had a name.

And it was...

“Gungnir?!”

Gram shouted it out.

“Gungnir?” Sihlwald repeated, confused.

“I've heard of this... It's the spear of a god in Earth's mythology, correct?” Veltol said.

“Yeah,” Gram replied. “This is an antiaircraft magiweapon developed during City War II, named after the spear.”



It was also known as the mana railgun.

With its exceedingly long range and precision, its impact near-simultaneous to fire, and its tremendous destructive power, it, along with the thick polluted clouds, crashed the effectiveness of aircraft during the City War. It was the cause behind City War II dragging on.

"It needs so much mana, you have to connect it to an aether reactor. Which means it's relegated to base defense," Gram explained. "You're not supposed to be able to move it."

"The Progenitor is equipped with mana from the faith of the ten thousand citizens he absorbed into his six-realms gizmo, and now he's turned it into a mobile cannon," Veltol said.

Gram nodded. "And the craft he shot down are FEMU's...? They always intended to launch their investigation without waiting for my results?"

A few aircraft remained, but the Atlas didn't use Gungnir against them and kept moving.

It seemed to be using a spell like Water Walking, since its feet didn't sink underwater.

It was heading to Goar.

"Wh-whatever, guys!" Takahashi looked around. "D-did...did anybody survive...?"

Only dust, iron, debris, destruction were left behind. Even if someone had escaped the soul conversion, they could not have survived this. It was but a wasteland of despair.

Takahashi fell to her knees. "A-ahhh... Why...her...? Aoba... Aoba..."

She hung her head and stuck her hands into the rubble and tore it apart as loss and powerlessness consumed her.

She closed her eyes and could still see Aoba's terrified expression as she vanished, engraved on the inside of her eyelids.

It had only been a few days since they'd first met. It was but for a short time, but she was her friend.

There was no blood. No corpse. Aoba had vanished into light.

It didn't feel real.

All that remained was a hole in Takahashi's heart.

"Stand up, Takahashi," Veltol demanded. "It's not over yet."

A scolding. Harsh words for her. Too cruel to throw to an exhausted teenager.

But at the same time, they proved he recognized her as more than a teenage girl. A comrade.

“We must kill God. This will be our friend’s funeral—Aoba’s funeral.”

Takahashi looked up at Veltol. His eyes were set on the mechanical god.

Gram and Sihlwald also silently looked at the Atlas, one emotion within them: anger. Ire emanated from their every pore.

Aoba’s body had turned into aether and her soul into data; she was effectively dead.

Takahashi had heard about the spell that re-formed Veltol’s body from aether. She wanted to ask him if he couldn’t revive Aoba using Methenoel, but she couldn’t. If there was even an infinitesimal chance of saving his friend, this man would do anything—bathe in mud, bow down to his enemies, anything—to achieve it. And yet he had just used the word *funeral*.

That, more than anything, made Takahashi understand that Aoba was dead.

She stood up and glared at her friend’s killer. The mechanical god.

Veltol initialized his mana. Mana so powerful, it blew away the rubble, and dust surrounding him surged, and black lightning crackled around him.

He opened his palm and pointed at the heavens.

The Demon Lord prepared his biggest large-scale annihilation spell.

The magic unlocked by his rise in faith—the star of annihilation that invited despair in all who saw it.

He closed his fingers, grabbing the void, and swung his arm down as though pulling the sky as he proclaimed the maginom:

“*Dell Stella!*”

A star fell.

A giant rock engulfed in black flames fell from the sky, blowing away the thick clouds and compressing the air underneath it with its colossal mass and speed as the aether irradiated black.

This was the ultimate magic only Demon Lord Veltol could use. Dell Stella.

It summoned a huge rock made of vast mana in the stratosphere and pulled it down with the acceleration of gravity, bringing about a destruction born from the synergy of the speed, its mass, and mana.

Smashing something big from a high altitude. It was simple yet powerful, and thus, hard to protect against.

But the Atlas showed no sign of defense or evasion. No resistance.

It kept walking indifferently, as though flaunting its power.

Dell Stella landed a direct hit.

An explosion engulfed the Atlas, and the shock wave reached all the way to Veltol's group.

And yet...

“...Unharmed.”

The Atlas kept walking among the explosion as though nothing had happened.

Veltol bent a knee.

The ultimate magic was a mix of multiple spells; the mana consumption was great even for someone like him. Even now, with faith high enough to allow him to take on his second form temporarily, it took away almost all his mana.

“Even with your Dell Stella...? How in the world did he do it...?”

“Getting out of that spell without a scratch can't be possible.”

Sihlwald and Gram knew about Dell Stella, and their shock was only natural. Nothing could remain unscathed after receiving all that mass with all that speed and all that mana. There had to be a trick behind it.

“I got it after that hit. He did not protect himself. It simply didn't work in the first place,” Veltol said with shallow breath from the mana insufficiency.

“It didn't work...? What do you mean, Veltol?” Gram asked.

Veltol stood up. “He became a spiritually higher being with a mechanical body. God. And at the same time that it is a mechanical body, it is independent—a living magic with its own will. From what I can tell, the scale and logical strength of the Atlas spell rivals the aethernet's.”

One would need power enough to annihilate the planet itself in order to destroy the aethernet. If this was on the same level, then it was physically, magically impossible to destroy.

“The six-realms mechanism he mentioned, it points their faith toward him, without rest, fueling him with an unbelievable amount of power. More than mine five hundred years ago. Only that explains how he can maintain a technic on that scale.”

“Spare me the details. How do we defeat it?” Sihlwald asked.

“Doesn't sound like we're enough to take it down,” Gram said.

“Then what? We turn tail and flee?”

“Don’t worry...,” said Takahashi. “Velly...I’ll do it.”

Her words were unwavering.

“*I’ll* kill it.”

Her voice was cold.

“You have a chance?” Veltol asked her.

“Yeah. But I can’t do it on my own. I can’t get close to it, and my Familia...”

Then one of the aircraft flew past the warped space from Goar.

And something fell from it.

“AIIIEEEEEEEE!”

Two people.

Machina jumped from the air, holding Hizuki in her arms.

She killed the impact of the fall with magic to land.

“M-my life flashed before my eyes...”

“Thank goodness Kinohara’s got that airship. She’s quite skilled. To think she even knew how to fly.”

“But why’d you jump off!?”

“What else could we do? There was nowhere to land after the island collapsed, and we need to keep Kinohara waiting on the ship.”

“And what’s that thing anyway? I thought we were dead meat after it shot down the others... Also, who are some of these people?”

“Lord Veltol! And Lady Sihlwald! Thank goodness you’re all—”

The tension in the air surrounding the other four overwhelmed the joy, surprise, and relief of their reunion and made Machina and Hizuki hold back their words.

They couldn’t greet Sihlwald. They couldn’t say why they were there, nor ask what was happening. Machina simply knelt before her lord, while Hizuki stood at attention.

“Your orders, Lord Veltol.”

“...Yes.” Veltol looked at the machine. “Kill God.”



“It is big and cannot fly. It can walk on water, but slowly. Let us hope it will take the Atlas some time to break through the space warp,” Veltol

said.

Gram nodded. “The Atlas’s Gungnir compresses the mana in the magiweapon’s muzzle. It is precise, powerful, and long-range. We need a way to get past it if we’re going to get close.”

“We have a way to deal with aether weapons. Machina.”

“Yes, sir!”

“You have my permission to release your arrow.”

“Understood, Lord Veltol.”

“Arrow?” Hizuki asked. “Is that Machina’s trump card?”

“Yes.” Machina nodded. “It was used as deterrence in past conflict.”



Machina thought back on the strategy meeting to kill the god.

She swung her arm, and the ritual motion summoned the armament stored in her soul, enveloping her whole body in flames and black armor.

She initialized her mana, and it flowed into her silver hair and scarlet eyes to turn them a vivid, burning crimson.

Machina looked at the enemy. A big man-shaped piece of iron. It walked on the ocean straight toward Goar with a metallic creaking.

She did not know what it was.

She didn’t have the time to enjoy her reunion with her beloved mentor, feared immortal, comrade and friend, Sihlwald.

She didn’t know why the Hero Gram was with her lord.

She didn’t know why her lord and friend were burning in anger.

She didn’t know what happened to them on this island.

And she didn’t need to know.

“I need only follow his orders.”

No need to question.

“Fill the black skies.”

Machina’s short chant called her soul armament.

“*Versolegia.*”

A jet-black bow without a string, larger than she was tall, appeared in her left hand.

Machina’s soul armament forged from her soul: the Dark Bowstaff

Versolegia.

Special armaments such as Veltol's Vernal and Machina's Versolegia needed a short chant on top of the ritual motion to summon.

She stabbed the spearhead connected to the bow's lower tip into the ground to fix it in place, then pulled a red string created with mana.

There was no arrow to nock on it.

"Ash and soot, bone and dirt, scrape out the cinders, dance in delirium with red iron shoes."

Machina pulled the string as she chanted, and a flaming arrow appeared in her hand.

Although she wore a Familia, she turned off the chantless feature and spent the processing power on controlling the magic. Her soul armament was a weapon exclusively for releasing one magic arrow.

It was a staff with the shape of a bow.

"The charred steel withers, the seething sky passes, the scorched sea decays."

If the constructed spell rampaged and collapsed, worst-case scenario, it blew up the surroundings.

It was not one to be used alone. Machina had helpers to aid in the construction, expansion, and incantation of the ultimate magic, but they—Ornared and Palmlock—were no longer of this world.

"Dazzle, blaze, devour the sun."

Mana converged in the flaming arrow, and as its heat and luminance rose, its color turned from red to white. In sync, Machina's flaming eyes and hair radiated white as well.

Her black armor was undone, turning into a beaming white dress to aid her exhaust heat.

"My enemies, with no exception, you shall burn to ash."

As she continued the incantation, her arm nocking the arrow began to carbonize from the elbow. Her immortal powers healed it before it cracked again, and the cycle repeated as flames gushed from her wounds.

"...!"

Even with a body dull to pain, it stirred her brain and charred her nerves.

"Calcination, rebirth, flight toward death."

The mere act of using this magic threatened her immortality.

She was only able to withstand the pain that would knock out any regular person thanks to her mental strength born from her loyalty to her

lord.

“Surge until the end of life!”

The incantation ended, and, before she could activate the spell, the Atlas, who didn’t glance at Dell Stella, turned to look at Machina.

The pattern that foretold the firing of Gungnir appeared all over its body as light gathered to the barrels in his eyes. Did it notice the oddity about her magic, or was it only turning to execute a fool who dared pull a bow against a god?

Machina’s spell wasn’t ready yet. She wouldn’t make it.

Red light gathered in the Atlas’s eyes.

The plan would be ruined if it shot Gungnir before Machina could activate her spell.

So...

“Back me up...”

A man stood before her.

“...Hero Gram.”



“Getting close will be nigh impossible if Machina’s arrow gets blocked. However, she needs time to prepare it, and she will be defenseless in the meanwhile. There will be nothing we can do if it aims for her. Nothing but to let you guard her, Gram. You’ve seen it. You can do it. You stop that god’s spear.”

“I know,” the Hero replied, his voice cold but shuddering with rage. “I will.”



Gram felt the heat on his back.

He was fighting alongside the Demon Lord and protecting one of his Six Dark Peers now.

Fate sure was a whimsical mistress.

But enough sentimentality.

“Come, Ixasorde!”

Responding to the summoning, the rusted Holy Sword with the name of the silver sun opened its path through the clouds and left a glowing trail in the heavens before stabbing the ground at the Hero’s feet.

The Atlas's eyes glowed.

The godly spear could easily fulminate the Hero and the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze. But before that could happen, he placed his hand on the Holy Sword's pommel and said:

"Ixasorde Signalia!"

The Holy Sword buried in the rubble glowed.

The light expanded in a circle, and, simultaneously, a barrier with a geometrical pattern was deployed at the front.

The Atlas's red Gungnir crashed into the barrier and set off a big explosion, but it only blew the debris up. Gram and Machina were unharmed.

Ixasorde Signalia was the Holy Sword's function, to turn it into its sealed state. Once sealed, the space around Ixasorde became an impenetrable holy zone, rejecting all kinds of physical, magical, conceptual, and even divine intervention.

The holy zone became a barrier that Gram used to block Gungnir.

They got more than one shot, but it wasn't over yet. The Atlas immediately prepared for a second.

Gram gripped the hilt. "I will...wield my sword powered solely by the ire of losing a friend...!"

He pulled out the Holy Sword and undid the seal.

Dinoah Luz: Verifying Hero.

A Stra Ros Aran: Unleashing Holy Sword of Salvation.

Words from ancient times to release the Holy Sword emerged on its blade.

Dys: Unsheathing rejected.

But the text turned red in an error message.

He was denied use of the Holy Sword.

He knew why. His indignation was personal.

Ixasorde only chose true Heroes. It was the strictest of Holy Swords. True Heroes did not fight out of personal ire; the Holy Sword had responded in Shinjuku, for he was helping others.

The world would fall under the Progenitor's rule if they didn't beat the Atlas. That was reason enough to unsheathe the Holy Sword.

"But more than that, right now..."

Gram's anger at the loss of his friend was winning out.

The Holy Sword's verification system only allowed unsheathing under what Ixasorde defined as Hero and Justice.

It refused to be used for personal indignation.

Dys: Unsheathing rejected.

The unending rejection spell came to a halt. The red text vanished, a new script taking its place.

Lez Ixasorde: Unsheathing approved.

His ire hadn't dissipated. It still burned within him.

And yet he was approved for unsheathing.

"Forceful unlocking of the Holy Sword of Salvation via administrator permission. Unsheathing permitted."

A voice echoed in Gram's head—one that he had heard many times before, but not in a long time. It was the Holy Sword Ixasorde.

"Thank you, partner," the Hero told his too lenient sword.

"Just this once. Prove I'm better than Black Sky's Demonic Blossom. Execute the justice you believe in."

"I will."

The Hero held the sword low as the mechanical god aimed Gungnir.

“Hear my call and shine...Ixasorde!”

A crack opened in the rusty blade, and light leaked out.

The crack grew bigger, breaking and doing away with the rust, returning the blade to its shining platinum form.

“False god! Realize the wrongness of your ways! Burn this into your eyes! This light born from the wrath of my loss...!”

The Atlas fired its second Gungnir shot. The annihilation spear slashed through the air in the blink of an eye toward its enemies.

Gungnir hit almost at the same time it fired.

But that was all. Nothing the Hero couldn’t strike down.

Ixasorde’s power was to cut through any phenomena. Absolute Slash. Gram yelled the name of its light:

“*Alwing!*”

He scooped the sword upward in a silver curve that clashed with the red spear of the god.

“RAAAAAAH!!”

He followed through the swing with an angry yell.

A silver light that slashed concepts apart.

A simple beam that flew at the speed of light was nothing the Holy Sword couldn’t deal with. The Hero effortlessly struck it out.

The silver slash, multiple times brighter and more powerful than the attack back in Shinjuku, sliced and dissipated the aether and the red beam in its path.

“Magnificent,” Machina said as she completed her magic.

Sihlwald was the most powerful in combat out of the Six Dark Peers, but Machina had the highest mana output, which granted her the biggest firepower.

That was her secret. Her trump card.

Gram remembered this somewhat fondly. The Nation Scorcher—the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze.

Her firepower was too great, and its full potential was only seen when she didn’t have to worry about harming her surroundings.

Ruin incarnated. A strike so powerful, it could fell the Iron Wall, the fortified city of Van Vern.

Alongside Veltol’s Dell Stella, it was the spell that mortals did anything to prevent from launching during the Immortal War five hundred

years back.

Flames of ruin that meant defeat the moment it launched.

The arrow nocked to soul armament Versolegia that had only been seen three times in history since she became immortal.

Its name...

“Dell Soleige!”

The white arrow was fired.

The moment she let go, Machina’s carbonized arm crumpled with a spark from the recoil, the heated excess mana inside it gushing out like blood or lava. Her dress evaporated like water into the fire, and she returned to her regular form before falling to her knees.

The white flaming arrow slashed through the dark night.

Countless warriors had been drowned before the brilliant white fire.

The Atlas reacted. The six-realms mechanism’s mana supply made Gungnir possible to shoot as many times as wanted. No need for cooldown or reloading.

For the *n*th time, light gathered in the mechanical god’s eyes, and the godly spear was shot to strike down the white arrow.

“It’s useless. That’s not enough to stop my arrow.”

Dell Soleige and Gungnir clashed.

Without resistance, the white arrow devoured the red light. The fire of ruin charged forward toward the Atlas and struck the titan.

An explosion followed.

The blast blew away the thick clouds covering the sky, and, with light so intense it would melt one’s eyes if seen directly, flame petals engulfed the thousand-foot giant.

The light and heat were as though a star had materialized on land.

Immediately, before the thunder and shock wave reached them, Gram used Water Walking to rush across the gelid sea toward the Atlas.

“Thank you,” Machina, on her knees and without one arm, said to his departing back.

Was it for protecting her from Gungnir? Or for helping Veltol rescue her in Shinjuku? Or...for both?



Dell Soleige's explosion made the sea boil with an upward air current. Huge ripples formed in the water as a mushroom cloud rose to push aside the thick clouds in the sky and reveal the approaching dawn.

The air and instantly heated aether turned into plasma, and a red flash glinted in reaction to Machina's mana.



The mechanical god offered sincere praise: “*Magnificent power.*”

Such a mighty heat; such destructive force.

“*And yet...that is not enough to harm me. What a shame. Even your last desperate attempt was futile. All of it is meaningless. All's right with the world.*”

And it still didn’t work.

His body was originally metal. It should not have been able to withstand Dell Soleige’s heat, and yet the armor remained unscathed.

The faith earned from the six-realms mechanism made its composition almost entirely magical. No physical damage worked, and with a logical strength on the level of the aethernet—the whole world—no magical effects worked, either. Not even ultimate magic like Dell Stella or Dell Soleige.

The ten thousand souls stored inside the six-realms mechanism were forced to point their faith toward the Progenitor, and they ran through their life spans 4.32 billion times faster than normal, repeating a cycle of life and death as their faith was turned into mana, constantly observed, and thus establishing the Atlas’s magic and existence.

A rough estimate of the time it had until all souls were worn out from the repeating cycle and lost their value as complete data—that is, until the six-realms mechanism stopped—was of about 311 trillion 40 billion years.

Enough time to create a peaceful world.

God’s logic was the world’s logic. No individual could overturn it.

“*Now receive divine punishment.*”

Punishment to the fool who dared aim a bow at a god.

The pattern of light ran across his whole body.

Yet Gungnir did not activate.

“...*What?*”

The six-realms mechanism and the Gungnir launcher on the Atlas’s orbits were functioning correctly.

He immediately ran a scan, and the situation was made clear. The divine body itself had no issue. The issue was within the surrounding aether.

It wasn’t as sparse as it was in Yokohama. It was zero.

That was Dell Soleige’s side effect and the crux of Veltol’s plan: aether incineration.

The moment Dell Soleige hit, the airborne aether within several kilometers was burned in a chain reaction, momentarily bringing the aether

levels to zero.

Gungnir functioned by using the aether in its straight-line aim. Without aether around the Atlas, activating it was impossible.

Dell Soleige was never meant to defeat the Atlas—only to prevent it from using Gungnir.

Its mana detection was also nullified by the surrounding aether disappearing.

Once the aether returned, it showed countless mana reactions.

“*What...?*”

They came from overhead.

The Atlas looked up.

“*It’s all useless...*”

A black meteor shower coming from the other side of the hole in the sky opened by the flames of destruction.

Dell Stella, split in hundreds.

Among the meteor shower hid one dragon.

One giant dragon and three people on its back, descending.

To kill God.



“We can block Gungnir, but what about that sword?” Gram asked. “The Atlas’s sword...if we can call it that...is no regular sword. We should assume it has some sort of magic to it.”

“Should I stop it with my body?” Sihlwald suggested.

“No, that would not work,” Veltol replied. “Blocking it directly can only mean trouble so long as we don’t know what magic it holds. And I want you in top form, Sister.”

“There’s no one but me, then,” Gram said.

“Your job is to protect me until I finish my spell, remember?” Machina retorted.

“She’s right. And since we will have my sister’s assault hidden among Dell Stella’s mana, I will need some cooldown time as well. We need to fill that void somehow...”

The Hero, the Demon Lord, the Black Dragon, and the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze went back and forth, when one person timidly raised their hand.

“Umm...”



The dragon fell.

A giant black dragon fell among the black stars from the sky opened by the flames of destruction.

Using the split Dell Stella as a decoy, the dragon dived from overhead toward the mechanical god.

On its snout stood one girl, her long blond hair fluttering in the wind.

She, Hizuki, looked straight at the iron titan, while behind her waited Veltol and Takahashi.

Veltol's magic prevented them from being thrown into the air so long as they remained in contact with Sihlwald's body.

"Okay..." Hizuki said as she brushed her hair to the side and traced her finger across her nape. No Familia there, as she had lent it to Takahashi.

Her mission was to block the gargantuan titan's attack that would come during their approach.

She thought back on the strategy meeting.

"Umm..." Hizuki timidly raised her hand. "We just have to stop that giant sword, right? In that case, I can probably do it..."

"...Are you sure?" Machina asked.

She knew better than anyone else about Hizuki's power. Naturally, she wondered if she could truly execute such a tall order.

"Y-yeah. Probably. I think... No." After initial doubt, Hizuki spoke with determination. "I will. Trust me."

Her eyes of distinct colors showed as much anxiety as confidence.

"Understood." Veltol nodded. "It's in your hands, then, Hizuki."

Machina didn't object further, and the plan was set. There was no need for her to say anything once her lord had decided on it.

No suspicion. No discussion. No one opposed it, and no one asked how.

They all trusted her.

Thinking clearly about it, this wasn't something a teenage girl could deal with. Hizuki had little experience in combat, and even she realized how big this enemy was. This was not a foe she could defeat.

But as far as *blocking the skyscraper-sized sword of a thousand-foot*

giant came, Hizuki did not find it impossible.

She could do this. Maybe. Probably. Most likely. She had to.

She didn't find it impossible, but she had no certainty she could do it. She only had a vague feeling she just might.

Yet no one there doubted her affirmation that she could perform such a feat.

No one asked why, nor how.

“And I cannot fail after he said it's in my hands now...”

She didn't get the current situation, and there was no time to ask about it. Even the fact that she was riding a giant dragon was irrelevant.

She felt her friends' anger. That was reason enough for her to risk her life.

The *power* inside her screamed. It told her it was possible. It told her she could do this.

Why? She could feel the oddly specific reason of wanting to show her power, her best side, to the man she liked.

“Weal and woe, come to my hand.”

A short incantation; a short prayer.

She called the name of the *power* that lived within her—that which ruled over joy and misfortune.

“*Meldia Install!*”

The Crown adorned her head, the Orb in her right orbit shone gold, and the Blade graced her hand.

“That's...”

“*Meldia's vestiges?*”

Takahashi and Veltol spoke behind her.

They were copies of the goddess. The three regalia stored in Hizuki's soul manifested to call the goddess of weal and woe into her body.

As the remains of the power of the goddess Meldia temporarily possessed her body, Hizuki's scarlet eye turned golden.

“Let's do this.”

The Atlas noticed the approach of the Black Dragon and received the decoy Dell Stella as it swung the giant sword in its hand.

“That thing's attack won't be a simple slash,” Hizuki muttered, her voice with more elegant timbre than usual.

Her right golden eye perceived details normally invisible.

On the tip of the sword was a spell to release vast amounts of mana in the shape of a fan.

Unlike Gungnir's straight-line aether mediation, the aether incineration had little effect on this simple mana output. It lagged behind Gungnir's range and precision but overcame it in destructive power.

However, none of that mattered to her.

"How could a newly born god defeat me...?!"

The words came out of Hizuki's mouth, with her unawares.

Hizuki's clothes did not change like they did in Akihabara, nor did the goddess's conscience overtake hers. It was only a vestige of the goddess inside her, but even still, it was strong enough to influence her.

The golden blade shone even brighter. It then grew bigger. To be precise, a light-gold edge enveloped it.

Everyone on the battlefield and the onlookers from Goar saw the mirage of a gigantic golden sword.

"Grraaaaahhh!"

Hizuki swung the golden sword, radiant under the night sky, its scale not behind the Atlas's.

The copy of goddess Meldia's blade clashed with the Atlas's sword.

Thunder shook the air.

The manifestation of the fate-bending might of the goddess.

The absolutism of fortune.

The power to make the foe's roll of the dice marginal and their own roll maximal. The cheat to force a 1 while she got a 10.

The concept of certain victory, no matter the foe's power, so long as they were upon the same game board.

The antithesis of common sense of weaponry. It was only natural an old god defeated a new one.

The result—the Atlas's destructive mana wound up a dud.

The Atlas had the upper hand in mass and mana output, yet it was blown back from the clash. The possibility of a man sliding through a wall upon crashing against it. It became reality.

No magic. The might of Heaven. The uncanny power of God.

Hizuki could tell the mechanical god was taken aback by the result.

So she said:

"Serves you right."

Most of Hizuki's mana was held back when Meldia remained sealed back in Akihabara, but her real mana reserve equaled that of the Six Dark Peers. With Meldia's added to that, it easily surpassed the comparison.

It didn't reach the level of her full incarnation in Akihabara, but Hizuki

had succeeded in pulling a shred of the goddess's might sleeping deep within her soul once a day.

“Now then...”

There was only one downside to this power, coming from her inexperience.

The balance tipped back to misfortune, to counter the received luck.

“Phew... What should I do now...?”

The descent disconnected, the regalia vanished, and the loss of the goddess's might left her floating in the air.

Then came the free fall.

In counterbalance for blocking the attack, misfortune struck, and Hizuki slipped off the dragon's back. The gelid sea awaited below.

“I-I'm gonna die...!”

The girl carrying the old goddess fell down.



Sihlwald flew in sync with gravity, downward.

Not a fall. She deliberately flew toward the sea.

Her two twisted horns pointed to the heavens as her giant body flew. Jet-black scales and crust, giant wings, sharp claws, sturdy jaw, long and thick tail, golden eyes.

This ferocious form was the Black Dragon, Sihlwald's, true nature. Not the shape of a little girl. Her original form.

Flying with that body, with this planet's gravity and atmospheric density, was impossible.

Her mass, her frame, the shape of her wings—the flight of a dragon went against the laws of physics. A dragon should not be able to fly. And yet she did.

That disregard for all laws of physics was real magic.

There was only one explanation for a dragon being able to fly: because it was a dragon.

By her flapping her wings, the aether around produced lift, and by moving in the same way as flying magic, she was freed from the curse of gravity and lured to the skies. A dragon did not fly through the sky—the sky flew through the dragon.

People called that the Dragonwing Effect.

“Excellent work.”

Sihlwald silently commended the screaming blond girl as she saw her fall, from the corner of her eye.

There was no time to catch her in the air, but surely the girl who achieved such a grand feat would be all right.

And grand a feat it was. The only other ways to stop the Atlas's sword would be with the Hero's Holy Sword or Sihlwald's body. Gram had to protect Machina, and, even if Sihlwald could take it, if Takahashi and Veltol got embroiled in the hit, the plan would fail.

She liked human women. Even more so if they were strong and beautiful.

For Sihlwald, this feeling for humans was similar to what they felt for pets and other small animals.

Beautiful hair; good boys and girls; strong; pleasant.

They were merely objects or protection, or food. With only one exception, dragons and men were not equals.

Aoba was not such an exception.

"And even so."

It didn't change the fact that she was her disciple, the successor of her believer's soul.

"You will pay for killing her, false god."

Her only objective was to get rid of the Atlas.

She flapped her wings and accelerated beyond sound. Maintaining the momentum, she crashed into the mechanical god.

"Goh—"

Her front limbs, hind limbs, claws, tail, fangs, every part of her attacked it.

"—aaarrrrrrr!"

The Black Dragon roared as she bit and clawed at the god.

The timbre of the steel tearing apart echoed across the ocean.

After it withstood the stars and flames of annihilation, for the first time, wounds appeared in the Atlas's body. The claws and fangs of the one worshipped in ancient times as the god of the dragons could harm even the principles of the world itself. And yet despite wounding it, she didn't get far enough to kill it. It was only a matter of time before it flung her off.

So...

"Go!"



“Go!”

Pushed by his sister’s voice, Veltol held the Dark Sword in one hand while holding Takahashi in the other and jumped off Sihlwald onto the Atlas’s head.

From the Atlas’s point of view, Veltol and Takahashi were flies. It could ignore them, but having them fly around was annoying. Still, the mechanical god couldn’t swat them away while the dragon’s bite kept it in place.

Most of the aether surrounding the Atlas had returned, so it initialized Gungnir to shoot away the flies.

“I won’t let you!”

The dragon’s giant fist held the Atlas’s hand and twisted its head upward. Gungnir burned off a bit of Sihlwald as it pierced the skies.

While feeling the wind, Veltol thought. Everyone was carrying out the plan perfectly. It was nothing complicated. Dodge all of the Atlas’s attacks, get Takahashi on top of it, and destroy the magic that composed it from within. That was it.

Veltol felt no great significance from this battle.

His aim wasn’t to stop the god from ruling the world. His only drive was his personal feelings. His wish to take revenge for his friend.

“Exult in the silver skies: *Vernal Diel*.”

The Dark Sword in his hand turned into an aether blade, shining silver.

He stabbed it into the Atlas’s head as he landed. They would use the Dark Sword as the connection terminal, the same way they did for unlocking the seal on the remote shrine.

The blade dug into the body incapable of receiving any attack, physical or magical, having changed into an immortal-like composition and obtained logical strength on the level of the aethernet.

If the Atlas, being live magic, couldn’t be affected by the aether, then naturally, it shouldn’t be able to affect the aether. Which meant it wouldn’t be able to use Gungnir, as it used aether as a medium.

The fact it did meant that aether *could* affect it. The common standard of magic that defined it as coming from interference with aether created this security hole.

Veltol ground his teeth. He had the easiest job.

His hacking skills were mere child’s play compared to those of the girl standing beside him. Only she could take care of what came next. It was the wizard’s limelight.

He gulped down his impotence and let her take care of the rest.

“Takahashi. It’s your turn.”

“Yeah,” she replied, nodding.

Takahashi touched the Dark Sword’s pommel.

Fumbling control over it could mean death, and Veltol was keeping it under control.

Takahashi connected to God through the sword.

“It’s in your hands, Takahashi.”



A sensation like falling.

Takahashi used the Familia she borrowed from Hizuki to dive into the Atlas’s technic through Vernal Diel. There was no Black ICE, no logical barriers upon diving. She quickly reached the core of the program.

Diving was life-threatening, so one usually wore additional defense units, such as Scapegoats or Pebble Raincoats, but there was no time to prepare them. Fortunately, security was like paper here.

The Familia loaded the program composing the Atlas as visual data and showed it as a virtual space.

If one were to describe the aethernet as a chaotic sea of stars, then the Atlas’s program was like an artificial whirlpool in the middle of the ocean. Like a celestial body time lapse, light mixed and spun rapidly in the middle of the hollow sea, forming a vortex.

Since the Atlas’s program was on the level of the aethernet, she had already expected the software to visualize that the latter would be compatible with the former.

What differed from the aethernet was that the light vortex didn’t come from communication between machines but from forced faith—from the souls of the citizens of Yokohama turned into data.

“*What...? How...did you get in?*”

The incorporeal voice of the Progenitor echoed in Takahashi’s head.

His confusion was only natural. He thought he was perfect, and a foreign agent intruded.

“*Get...out of me!*”

Part of the light vortex turned into a wave and enveloped Takahashi’s body. A vast data stream that could fry her brain. The only security

method the Progenitor had.

Takahashi's extraordinary processing power, however, withstood the brain-frying storm. This was the gift of the girl who was untalented in magic battle.

"What are you trying to do?! Stop! Sinner! Don't get in the way of world peace! Of my wish! I'll correct the cruelty and chaos of this world! This is justice!"

"Shut up." Her voice came out colder and more hostile than she had ever heard. "You couldn't pay me enough money to sit through one of your lectures. I'm here to kill you. Stop struggling, and it'll be over quick."

"W-wait! If you kill me, the ten thousand citizens—!"

Takahashi muted the Progenitor's voice and immediately constructed a program to protect herself from the data stream.

She had a full grasp on the skill gap. The Progenitor was an absolute noob in hack warfare. There was no need for decoys, masks, spoofing, wicker man, not even bargaining.

Takahashi's job was simple.

"I'll kill you."

Kill all these people, including some acquaintances and one friend.

Massacre the ten thousand souls of the Yokohama homunculi.

Destroy this vortex.

"I'm gonna kill you...and it's gonna be so freakin' easy. You toy with people's lives and make yourself out to be a god when you're nothing but a shithead lowlife. And this shitty program you threw together? It sucks. You're dead, asshole!"

Takahashi typed on the 3D keyboard and the telepathic keyboard at the same time, opening myriad windows to execute the virus she improvised —the god-slaying poison.

The malware deleted part of the spell that composed the technic and modified other parts of the program to wreck the logic of the magic. It was compatible with any sort of program.

A toy for aether hackers *outside* of Yokohama that the standard security software in a Familia could deal with.

"Too bad you don't have one. You can't even stop this little toy...! And it's gonna be this flimsy code that kills you!"

Were this the aethernet, which overcame the first law by tolerating contradictions, it would be like throwing a pebble into the sea. The

aethernet could repair its program automatically.

But the Atlas's "perfected" technic, while obtaining a sturdy if uniform logical strength through faith, had not overcome the first law. It did not allow for contradictions.

She was sure of it the moment she plugged in. While on the same scale as the aethernet, it lacked its chaos.

A change in one word of the spell could cause the magic to throw an error, and with a domino effect, the rest of the logic would collapse, and the vortex would vanish.

As a result, the six-realms mechanism powered by this vortex of faith would come to a halt, stop supplying mana, and the magic of the Atlas would evaporate.

The moment Takahashi heard the words *Progenitor*, *faith*, and *technic* on the scale of the aethernet, she knew how to slay the god.

The Atlas was invincible to attacks from the outside, but defenseless from the inside. It was only Takahashi in this world who could have figured it out. She simply had to execute the virus. That was it. Victory was in her hands the moment she survived the counterattack. Everything would be over the moment she pressed the enter key.

"Push it..."

Regret. No. Don't. What if? What if you could save her? What if a miracle happened? I don't want to kill you. Aoba, Aoba, Aoba—the words revolved in her mind.

What if Aoba could recover her body?

What if they could put her soul in another container?

What if some sort of miracle happened?

What if everything went right?

What if, what if, what if, what if, what if?

But upon seeing the vortex, in the back of her mind, Takahashi knew. Extracting one fruit from a juice mixed from ten thousand was impossible. Saving Aoba was impossible.

She was dead. Her skin, her flesh, her bones turned to light right before her eyes.

So at the very least, it had to be her.

"PUSH IT...!"

How many times had she fumed whenever she saw a character hesitate in moments like this in works of fiction?

She believed she would never. That she would not let herself be driven

by selfishness or emotion and would only do the most rational thing.

She scoffed at the characters for hesitating to kill their friends turned monsters, their families deprived of their will, their lovers better off dead.

It was just fiction. She could do it if she were in their place.

And now she was. Time to prove it.

They'd only spent a few days together. Other than that, she was a stranger.

She could do it. Why hesitate?

Takahashi didn't say it, nor did anyone mention it, but everyone knew that stopping the mechanical god would mean killing Aoba and the rest of the citizens of Yokohama. They all believed in her unconditionally, and she thought she could do it herself.

But the moment push came to shove...

"I can't..."

It was too tall an ask.

"I can't...kill a friend..."

How lame. Pathetic.

The words she said to Machina and Hizuki in that tiny Chinese restaurant that day came back to her.

"Seriously? The whole time during that scene I was just, like, kill him already!"

"I'm basically, like, a pragmatist, y'know? I can't stand those melodramatic tropes where they're debating whether to kill somebody. Just get it over with! Quit it with the half-assed compromises!"

"Heck yeah! I'd just put you out of your misery! Instantly!"

She thought making the immediate choice was the cool thing to do in such moments. And that was why she would never amount to anything.

She couldn't be a Hero or a Demon Lord. Not even a minion.

She told her she would show her the world.

She promised her they would go outside together.

She wanted her to live, to see so many things, to enjoy so many things.

Her smile came to mind, and her hand shook and paused. She was only two.

"Takahashi."

She heard a voice. A familiar voice.

An individual piece of data coming from the melted-together vortex.

"I..."

Takahashi looked up and saw a girl she knew very well.

Was it a mirage brought about by the exposure to the excessive data stream?

A bug born from the cache of the souls in the cycle of reincarnation?

A delusion her overwhelmed brain was showing her?

Or...a miracle produced by the irregularity of the homunculus created from the soul of the dragon's shrine maiden with the most individuality of all?

No one knew. Not even God.

However, Takahashi understood—not by logic, but by gut—that this could not be a miracle.

“I didn’t like you.”

“...”

“You were so cheerful, so knowledgeable, so kind. I was jealous. I envied you... I felt so small whenever I was near you. It made me painfully aware that I had nothing... But you grabbed my hand and showed me hope... Honestly, I’m bitter. I’m so bitter that I’ll never go outside with you.”

She wasn’t being sincere.

Takahashi knew she was only saying that to make her dislike her. To encourage her, to steel her resolve, so she would do it without hesitation or regret.

She spoke spitefully, obviously forcing herself, clearly unable to hide what a good girl she really was.

Takahashi was furious. How could she be mindful of others until the very end?

“So please. Even though I hate you, I can only ask you. Please...put an end to us. To me. I want it to be you. No one else. You, Takahashi.”

The words she’d once said came to mind:

“I want to visit the outside, too.”

“Really? Having you as a sister would make me very...happy... Takahashi.”

Takahashi wanted a little sister. Or rather, she wanted to be a big sister.

She was an only child, so she wanted a younger family member.

Ahhh... And...Aoba felt like a real sister. I was so happy.

“Ah...”

It was just a short time, but she connected with her.

“UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAH!”

The lingering attachment, the regret, the hope that a miracle could happen and she could be saved—the despair.

There were no such things as miracles.

Takahashi did away with all that, slashed through the emotions, and pressed the enter key on the 3D keyboard, activating the virus Iconoclast.

A single word in the Atlas's perfect spell was deleted.

Then the first of the six great laws of magicology materialized:

Magic does not permit contradictions.

The domino pieces fell over, the block tower collapsed. The logical contradiction in the technic caused a chain reaction.

It vanished.

It evaporated.

The light vortex disappeared.

The ten thousand souls returned to the sea of aether.

The moment all the data was deleted, Takahashi heard a voice.

Thank you, Sis.



The steel god crumbled.

“This can't be.”

Without the technic to hold it up, the Atlas was nothing but iron scrap. It fell under its own weight as its parts crumbled.

The steel remains falling into the ocean splashed up the water much like the city it destroyed.

“...This simply cannot be.”

One small child unraveled the god.

“...This can't be possible!”

It was preposterous.

“I'm a god! A perfect being! I cannot lose! I carry the faith of my ten thousand people! How can I possibly lose?!”

He couldn't die yet.

“Hya-hya-hya... G-gods don't die.”

Before the divine body collapsed, he uploaded his datafied soul to his true body.

The armor protecting the true body was purged. He pulled the cables from inside the liquid aether and revealed his human body.

An old man, frail like a newborn fawn.

“If I die...then who...who will guide the world to peace?!”

He had to run. Across the vast, empty sea.

He could still do it all over. Because he was God.

“We’ll take our world back from this mistake! Let’s go to Paradise!”

His ambition was put to an end.

The Holy Sword of the Hero who ran across the surface of the water.

The kick of the Black Dragon who was back in human form.

The Return of the Black Dragon will be And the Demon Lord's Dark Sword.

They chopped his head off, crushed it, and pierced his heart.

His thoughts sped up as though time had stopped right before his consciousness was cut off.

Can't remember Can't remember Can't remem...
ber

Who was I doing this for?

There would be no need to **fight** one another over food if peace came.

There would be no need to **██████████** neighbors and friends if peace came.

Yes, I did it for everyone.

Tossed friends into the sea to save what few resources remained.

parents to let the children live.

the minority to let the majority live.

Saved the data of the souls and bodies of eighteen people, both from Earth and from the other world, to get them to survive.

Everything was to protect this land, to protect this world, to repay everyone.

Yes. I—I...I did it for everyone... For her... For world...peace.

He inherited the will of everyone who died from the cold and hunger and guided them to salvation. There was no other way to bring peace to the world but to become God.

He reached out to the void—and faded away.

The Demon Lord shot the man a pitiful glance.

"Rest assured. You said it yourself: You and I share the same goal. I shall bring world peace to fruition."

EPILOGUE

Tracing the Scar

After the collapse of the boxed island of Yokohama and the defeat of the Atlas, Kinohara picked everyone up and returned them to Goar on the airship. It was just before dawn, but naturally, the clouds hid the sunlight.

Although the shock waves of the battle had opened holes in the sky, it was already back to normal.

After blocking the Atlas's sword, Hizuki fell from Sihlwald's back and, having lent her Familia to Takahashi, had no way to stop her fall to the ocean.

Fortunately, Gram was running toward the Atlas and caught her. He cast Water Walking on her, and she returned back to the ruins of Yokohama with Machina. She had been spared from being crushed under the Atlas, but now the city of Goar was in an uproar.

“Mmm, yeah, should've expected it.”

She looked through news sites from her Familia, which Takahashi gave back after the battle.

The collapse of Yokohama, the mysterious light that struck down the FEMU troops, the appearance of the giant, the meteorites, the explosions, the dragon, the giant swords—so much happened that the aethernet was overflowing with discussion and conspiracy theories.

“I mean, even I don't know what in the world was going on, and I was there...”

Now wasn't the right time to hear her out.

Her hotel roommate, Takahashi, was worn out, and she decided it was best to leave her alone, so Hizuki went out for a walk around Goar before the time came to return to Shinjuku.

As she set foot on the pier, someone called out to her.

“Uh, you...”

“Yes?” She turned around and was astounded.

It was the Hottie of Light. The one who saved her from falling into the gelid sea.

Unlike then, Gram wore light armor and a blue cape, with a rusty

sword hanging from chains on his waist.

By the way, Veltol's designation was the Hottie of Darkness.

Next to Gram was the pretty woman Hizuki had met at the ramen place: Kinohara.

"Ah. Um, thank you for saving me back there..." said Hizuki.

"Oh, it's nothing. Sorry, Director. I want to have a word with her..." Gram told Kinohara.

"I believe it is against compliance to hit on a schoolgirl..."

"Who do you take me for?! That's not what's happening here. C'mon."

"...Very well. There is a pile of work waiting for us, though. Keep it short."

Kinohara lightly bowed to Hizuki before leaving.

"Let's walk," Gram said.

"O-okay..."

Hizuki followed by his side.

Th-this is awkward...

Between yin and yang, Hizuki was yin. Between light and darkness, she was darkness. Having lived in the shadows back in school in Akihabara, she was sensitive to this extro/intro divide.

And the blond man next to her was light itself.

The fact that he adjusted his walking speed to Hizuki's pace was bigger proof than anything. In contrast, the Hottie of Darkness, Veltol, was the kind of man who walked at his own pace, without a shred of care or consideration.

Standing next to a being of light was painful for a woman of darkness and low self-esteem like her.

And more than anything...

He's the guy Meldia's in love with.

Hizuki placed her hand on her chest.

The power within her, so strong until a while back, was now entirely quiet. Was it because she had used up her daily shot? Or was it from embarrassment?

Hizuki's gut told her it was the latter.

Mmm, but I'm not a good talker. Even worse with someone I barely know...

She would like to talk with him, but the only topic of safe conversation she had was *Moebius Protocol*. That said, this guy didn't look like he watched it.

Hizuki bet on it with the biggest, brightest smile she could force.

“H-hey! Have you watched—?”

Gram came to a stop as she spoke haltingly.

She stared at one point beyond the sea. The ruins of Yokohama.

Goar and FEMU airships flew above it to investigate.

There was a dark tone to Gram’s gaze as he saw it.

“Sorry, I haven’t introduced myself, have I? I’m Gram. Now I’m just a salaryman.”

“Ah, umm, I, well, they told me about you. Ah, I’m Hizuki. Hizuki Reynard-Yamada.”

Gram mouthed the word *Reynard*. “Should I call you Reynard or Yamada?”

“Ah, no, just Hizuki!”

She immediately regretted it.

What are you saying?! I hope he doesn’t think I’m a creep.

“So, Hizuki,” Gram began, unaware of her thoughts. “Your power... That’s the goddess Meldia, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Ah, yes.”

“...I see.” Gram turned to face her. “I’m sorry.” He bowed deeply.

“Huh?! Why?! For what?! ”

“I heard about what happened in Akihabara. You got that power and Akihabara ended up like that because I escaped from my responsibilities. I know it’s not something easily forgiven, but I’m sorry.”

Hizuki knew that the Hero Gram was once the feudal lord of Lu Xel, and that he abandoned his duties. But that was long-gone history for Hizuki. Something from the textbooks. Even if it eventually led to what happened to her, she didn’t see it as a direct cause.

To begin with, she simply couldn’t see the man before her as someone who had anything to do with it. She didn’t mind, or rather, didn’t care, but it looked like he couldn’t not care.

He sure is clumsily sincere.

“Ah, no, I don’t mind. You don’t have to apologize, really.”

She realized how bad she was at comforting him.

“I...see...” Gram raised his head and looked at Hizuki. “Also...I don’t think there’d be any point in asking you, but...”

“Ah, yes?”

“Does she...Meldia...?” Gram squeezed the words out of his throat, as though peeling off an old scar. “Does she resent me?”

Hizuki couldn't act like this had nothing to do with her. She had a duty to tell him.

"It's okay. She's self-righteous, overjealous, and stupid..." The medium of the goddess who loved the Hero smiled from the bottom of her heart. "But she'll always care about you."



"And that is what happened while you went to Yokohama, Lord Veltol."

There was no reason to stay in Goar after Yokohama collapsed.

Sihlwald was rescued, and Veltol's immediate goal was completed—though he did not get to establish a nation.

Back in Shinjuku, at Veltol's streaming room, Machina gave a report of what went on while he was gone. Her chance encounter with Ange, her meeting with a black MG pilot calling himself Zenol.

She should have told him sooner, but she decided it was best to do it once things calmed down a bit.

Machina's arm, which she'd lost from the use of the ultimate magic, was already healed to no discomfort in daily life by the time they reached Shinjuku.

Veltol leaned back on his gaming chair, wearing his usual Demon Lord T-shirt and black tracksuit, and closed his eyes as he massaged his brow.

"First May, now Zenol..." he said tiredly.

Machina had heard a summary of what happened in Yokohama.

The closely managed city in a box, its administrator calling himself a god.

And the death of their friend.

They beat the Atlas, but that didn't mean victory. The fact that they couldn't save their friend still weighed on them. On Veltol, on Takahashi, on Sihlwald, and on Gram.

"About that... I feel like it might not be the real Sir Zenol," said Machina.

"...What do you mean?" Veltol lifted his head.

"I felt traces of May's mana when I first met Ange, but as far as the man calling himself 'Sir Zenol' goes, not only did I not sense any of his mana, but it also didn't look as though his memories and personality were being manipulated like in Ange's case. There is something about his manner of speech and the aura about him... Not to mention, he had this

clear animosity toward you—unthinkable of the loyal Sir Zenol.”

“...We do have precedent for betrayal, sadly. I can hardly trust my popularity now.”

“Lord Veltol! Marcus was a nincompoop, but you have to trust Sir Zenol’s loyalty!”

Machina puffed out her cheeks in reaction to Veltol’s self-mockery.

Zenol was a man Machina respected for his loyalty, which at times bordered on extreme.

Machina realized how strong her loyalty to Veltol was, but if one were to ask who was the most loyal among the Six Dark Peers, everyone would agree it was Zenol.

“It was a joke. Forgive me. I don’t mistrust Zenol’s loyalty, but...he became firewood, according to Marcus. He could have been lying, of course, but I suspect it was the truth. Let us make our current aim to rescue May and investigate this man using Zenol’s name.”

“Understood. By the way, Lord Veltol...where is Lady Sihlwald?”

Sihlwald had come with them to Shinjuku and would stay over at their apartment. Machina was thinking of going out with her to buy her share of daily necessities, although one had to question whether she needed them.

“She said she was paying Takahashi a visit.”

“Takahashi? I see... I wanted to talk about a few things, but oh well. We will have more time to talk later.”



“...”

Once Machina left the room, Veltol silently booted up his PDA and opened the streaming app. Checking the mic sensitivity, adjusting the audio mixer, checking the camera angle—he skipped every step he never did for preparing his streams.

The stream title was, in elvish, “Doing something.”

Veltol’s rule was to not stream when he didn’t feel like it, and yet he was clearly doing just that.

“Hmm...”

Even his greeting wasn’t on point before he opened a side scroller.

Naturally, his viewers were confused as to what happened. It was obvious he lacked his usual spirit.

One annoyed viewer commented:

JUST STOP IF YOU DON'T WANNA DO THIS.

That caught Veltol's eye.

He would normally ignore them or take the bait and argue with his viewers.

“You...”

But this time, he swallowed his words.

“Forget it.”

The only thing in his mind was the friend he failed to save. That, and the Progenitor's words about faith and those who gave it.

“Everyone.”

The life of Aoba and the concept of faith that he saw on the secluded island made a clear change in Veltol's outlook.

A change in viewpoint regarding those who pointed faith at him.

“Uh, erm, well... You always... Err, there's something I want to tell you.”

His words were faltering and detached.

He didn't know how to show respect for someone whose face or name he didn't know.

The Progenitor said there was no way the feeder would have any special feelings for the food.

That had to be wrong. He had to show it was wrong.

So Veltol said, to everyone who offered their faith to him:

“Thank you.”

The majority of the viewers understood the will behind the expression.

That these were no businesslike, mechanical words of gratitude. They came from the bottom of Veltol's heart.



Nighttime in Shinjuku, after everything in Yokohama was over.

Takahashi was on the rooftop of a building.

The same place from where she hacked the holodisplays around Shinjuku in order to temporarily raise Veltol's faith.

“Haaah...” She sighed, leaning back on the railing and staring at the

nighttime lights.

She'd been doing the same thing ever since she came back to Shinjuku. Nothing. Just staring at the city.

She heard wings flapping, followed by a voice calling to her from behind.

“So you were here.”

Takahashi slowly turned around. “Hey! Sihlsy.”

It was the Black Dragon in human form.

Sihlwald floated in the air, flapping her wings, before landing and folding them back.

She was wearing a tracksuit and a shirt that read “dragon.”

Where did they sell those things? And could she extend and retract her wings at will? Takahashi wondered.

“You’re the only one who has ever called me that and will surely be the last... Very well. I’ll allow it.”

“Thanks.” Takahashi laughed, dryly, weakly. “So? Whassup?”

“Mm, well, I... Veltol told me you were here.”

“Really?”

“For pity’s... What’s with that lack of spirit?! It’s so obvious, I’m getting depressed just looking at you! At least pretend to be all right.”

“Whaa? I’m perfectly all right.” Takahashi giggled weakly. “Sorry.” The smile vanished from her face. “I’m really not all right.”

Sihlwald stood next to her and popped her head through the railing to look down at Shinjuku.

“From the ground, it’s such a terrible, dirty place full of idiots,” said Sihlwald. “So why is it that, when seen from above, the lights of their lives look so beautiful? I think this all the time with the passing of the ages, but it underlines how much the world has changed.”

Sihlwald looked at Takahashi.

“As a dragon, and I’ve related with people for a long time... And I still don’t understand your feelings completely. Yet even I know that it’s not good to hold your worries to yourself. Speaking to somebody about it might lighten the load, even if it doesn’t solve things.”

“I’m not...”

Takahashi stopped herself.

“Yeah...,” she said. “I was thinking about that moment. When I... killed my friend. When I killed Aoba and the souls of everyone in Yokohama.”

She hung her head, and the words came out one after the other.

“I killed a friend, I killed so many people, and I don’t feel regret, and no tears come out. Did I not care about her? Do I not have a human heart? Did I think of them as just data? Were we not really friends? Would I do it again if the same thing happened to Machina or Hizuki? Without tears, again?”

She forced a smile.

“So, yeah. Stuff like that. The usual.”

“What?” Sihlwald furrowed her brow. “What’re you talking about?”

“Huh? Whatcha mean?”

“You did not kill Aoba.”

“Huh...? But she was—”

“You *saved* her and everyone else from that imbecile calling himself a god.”

Takahashi was thunderstruck.

“The only one you helped kill was that evil and tyrannical iron god. And only you saved your friend. Get it right. No wonder Veltol doesn’t come, either, when you’ve got such mistaken ideas in your head.”

“...”

“Ugh, I was wondering what you were worrying about, and it was such trifles. Be proud of it. Of course you wouldn’t cry. You want to shoulder the sin of killing a friend on top of that of slaying a god? You really are a little girl, to mistake saving for killing. Grow up.” Sihlwald shrugged. “Hold your head high, Takahashi. You destroyed the evil god and saved the soul of your prisoner friend. You are a hero. That I guarantee you.”

Words of salvation. The anxiety bubbling up inside her dissipated, melted away.

Finally, tears flowed from Takahashi’s eyes. Her soul, too, was saved in this moment.

“Yeah... Yeah...!”

Sihlwald gently embraced Takahashi.

The girl sobbed in the dragon’s arms. She prayed for the peaceful repose of her friend’s soul.



AFTERWORD

I'm sorryyyyyyyyyyyyy!

I was so late, I'm sorryyyyyyyyyyyyy!

I have excellent news, but before that, I think I should apologize. I'm sorry we're starting with apologies.

I'm sure those who just recently got into the series are wondering what the heck I'm apologizing about. The thing is, the gap between Volumes 2 and 3 was...pretty big.

Light novels taking so long to continue is (unfortunately) quite common. I got mad at it myself back when I was in school.

To think I would be on the other end of the equation now... I am so sorry...

Uh, if I'm allowed an excuse, I want to assure you it was not because I was slacking off or because I lost motivation for my writing or passion for the series! Please understand!

Not that it changes the fact that I made you wait so much.

I'm sorry. I'll try to do better.

Now then, let's move on to the good news! It probably says this somewhere in the book already, but I want to give you the news myself!

It was announced in AnimeJapan 2023 that *Demon Lord 2099* would be receiving an anime adaptation!

The teaser visual of Veltol that Kureta drew looks so amazing!

It's getting an anime! An anime!

Can you believe that?! No way, right?! Are you surprised?! Shocked, even?! Because I definitely am!

As someone working on this, I always had this hope, this yearning for an anime. I'd play my favorite music and imagine what the OP would look like. Everyone does this, right? Right?

There's not a lot I can tell you yet, but I think it will end up fantastic, so I hope you can show your support!

You can take a look at the official website or the social media account

for *Demon Lord 2099* to get the latest info on the anime. Please give them a follow!

Your support is absolutely essential, so I hope that, together, we can bring the world of *Demon Lord 2099* to life.

And also! More news! *Demon Lord 2099* is getting a manga adaptation in Shonen Ace Plus!

It is a wonderful adaptation, so please give it a look!

I also have a new novel on sale now: *Gillotine Bride*! It's pretty good, so if you see it at the store, please consider giving it a chance!

Too many “!”s?

It's okay. We're here to celebrate, after all.

Finally, some special thanks.

Kureta, I am so honored to be working with you again. The cover illustration for Volume 3 is fantastic yet again. Thank you, as always.

My editor, as I am writing this, I'm regretting not getting a *kaisendon* for myself, too. Please take me to that restaurant one more time.

My assistant editor, I was going to buy you something when I saw you for my proofreading pass, but I only had the *tori paitan* ramen on my mind the day of, and I forgot about it. I'm sorry.

Finally, you, my reader. I wouldn't be here without you.

I truly believe there is no writer without a reader.

I get some fan letters, and they fill me with motivation. Thank you.

Once again, I realize how fortunate I've been in so many ways with this series. I hope you'll continue to support *Demon Lord 2099*.

Daigo Murasaki

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