



**THE WORLD OF  
OTOME GAME  
IS A SECOND CHANCE  
FOR BROKEN SWORDS**

**The World of Otome Game  
is a Second Chance for Broken Swords**

**Story Starts**

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**Chapter 5.3 -  
Cosmic Dungeon**

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Angelica surveyed the vast expanse of the sixth floor, and the sheer scale of it struck her with renewed force that made her breath catch in her throat. Unlike the previous chambers, which had towered vertiginously overhead—fifteen to eighteen kilometres of vertical space that made her head swim and stomach lurch when she'd first taken the reckless dive alongside Olivia and her group, that initial plunge into the dungeon's depths that had felt like falling forever.

Here, the ceiling loomed only about three kilometres distant, yet the horizontal stretch sprawled across fifteen to twenty kilometres. The proportions felt somehow more oppressive despite technically containing similar volume to the previous floors—as though the weight of all that space pressed down sideways rather than from above.

Leon had already begun marking the perimeter with his bow and arrow, establishing the boundaries of the battle to prevent anyone from being suddenly boxed in during the chaos of combat. Each arrow he loosed embedded itself in the crystalline, transparent walls with perfect spacing, creating a visible boundary line that glowed faintly where the projectiles pierced stone.

She watched him work from her position near where Olivia was organising their supplies—provided by the floating ball of lost technology who didn't want to be called a familiar, who insisted on being addressed by name as Luxion despite the clear parallel to contracted spirits.

She noted the sheer size of the bow—easily as tall as he was, possibly taller when fully extended—and the strain it placed on the one wielding it, muscles in his arms and back visible through his tight-fitting black coat that left his arms bare, the reinforced material clinging to his frame in a way that suggested it was designed for mobility rather than protection. The coat's high collar and silver clasps caught the chamber's ambient light with each movement, whilst the crimson inner lining occasionally flashed when he drew the bow, revealing the contrasting colour beneath.

His clothing had been torn badly in the aftermath of the second-floor boss—she remembered the shredded fabric, the blood—but was now repaired through his magic, restored as though the damage had never occurred.

The choice was unusual—most students favoured the modern firearm as magical focus with melee weapons as secondary, the standard doctrine taught at the academy and reinforced through years of tactical instruction. The progression was considered natural and efficient, the culmination of centuries of military development. Bows felt anachronistic in this context, something out of a history text rather than modern dungeon delving, relics of an age before magical engineering had revolutionised combat and made such weapons obsolete.

Yet during their descent through the previous floors, clearing the spawned creatures whilst the main force engaged each boss in carefully coordinated assaults on the levels above, she'd come to understand why he favoured it,

why he relied on this archaic weapon and the technique that allowed him to fire swords as arrows, assisted by more bladed projectiles following their sword-arrow's lead in a deadly rain of steel.

Those arrows—which he'd explained during one of their brief respites between floors were swords converted to be aerodynamic through some technique involving conjuration and modification she didn't fully comprehend, something about projection and structural alteration—travelled distances that her own rifle, with all its technological and magical sophistication, all its expensive enchantments and precision engineering that had cost her family a small fortune, couldn't hope to replicate even with the most powerful mana reserves backing each shot.

The trajectory remained impossibly clean, cutting through air resistance as though it didn't exist, as though the very physics of flight bent to accommodate his will rather than following natural laws. And the devastation they wrought upon impact, the explosive force that could shatter crystalline constructs or pierce through multiple targets in a single shot...

The efficiency their small group had achieved was remarkable, bordering on incredible given their limited numbers. Just the eight of them—Leon, Olivia, herself, and their guardian spirits Meltryllis, Durga, Sella, Leysritt and Illya—had cleared floors three, four, and five with startling speed, moving through chambers that should have taken hours of careful, methodical combat in what felt like minutes of coordinated destruction.

She'd watched Olivia's hair-based constructs weave through the air like deadly ribbons of light, her movements fluid and graceful despite the violence they unleashed, alongside her guardian spirits' coordinated assaults—Illya, Sella, and Leysritt moving with synchronised precision that spoke of deep

connection with their contractor, attacking from complementary angles with the kind of teamwork that suggested shared consciousness.

Meltryllis danced at their centre as she switched between defensive and offensive with her water constructs at a moment's notice, creating barriers one second and launching pressurised cutting streams the next. Leon and Durga's projectiles rained down from impossible distances, each one finding its mark with unerring accuracy that defied probability, whilst she herself provided supporting fire and tactical coverage, her rifle cracking out measured shots that eliminated threats before they could close the distance to their position.

Their teamwork was extraordinary, and in Angelica's opinion—based on her admittedly limited combat experience—was relatively easy to meld into, the rhythm natural despite having only worked together for hours rather than the months or years such coordination usually required.

Though she recognised with clarity—the kind of tactical awareness her tutors had drilled into her during strategic instruction—that the strategy wouldn't translate to traditional dungeons, that what they'd accomplished here was unique to this environment and couldn't be replicated elsewhere. The cosmic dungeon's open three-dimensional space—this vast horizontal and vertical freedom, this absence of restrictive walls, passages, and hallways that normally defined dungeon architecture—allowed their group's range and mobility tactics to shine, to reach their full devastating potential in ways that conventional dungeon layouts would never permit.

In standard dungeons like the capital's hundred-floor complex that she'd read about in tactical assessments, with its walls and corridors and confined spaces that funnelled movement and limited sight lines to chokepoints and killzones, such efficiency would be impossible. The format would limit

everything that made their approach effective, would force them into grinding close-quarters combat like everyone else, negating Leon's range advantage and their ability to maintain distance whilst dealing damage.

She found herself thinking about the theoretical limits of what a single combatant could achieve with sufficient skill and power. If one person could coordinate strikes across this entire chamber, could saturate the space with projectiles from any position whilst maintaining that impossible accuracy, could manage battlefield awareness across a several kilometres...

*'He'd be a one-man army,'* she thought, and the assessment should have been purely tactical, purely academic. The assessment raised uncomfortable questions about frontier security that her political education forced her to consider. Frontier nobles typically held loyalty only to whichever kingdom proved stronger, their allegiances fluid and pragmatic, switching sides if Holfort's strength came into question or if another power offered better terms.

With his range, he could harass any approaching army before they could bring their forces within usable range of his territory—could rain destruction on supply lines, command posts, artillery positions, all whilst remaining safely beyond conventional retaliation. No wonder the Kingdom had positioned Margot Bellefleur there—a proven adventurer, one of the four strongest in the entire kingdom, placed strategically to observe, to ensure the Bartfort baron remained aligned with Holfort interests rather than being tempted by neighbouring powers.

*'Perhaps I should ask Father to arrange a marriage alliance,'* Angelica thought, the political calculus coming automatically after years of training in statecraft. A marriage between one of their vassal families' daughters and the Bartfort baron would create obligations of blood and honour. Then she felt an

unexpected pang at the notion, something twisting uncomfortably in her chest. She dismissed it as fatigue from the expedition, nothing more.

The situation hadn't unfolded as she'd originally hoped, as she'd envisioned when Olivia first approached her with that peculiar invitation days ago. When Olivia had invited her on this adventure—what had seemed like a simple expedition, a chance to experience real exploration before her duties consumed her entirely, before she became bound to the court and its endless political machinations—Angelica had imagined they'd group together as a unified team: herself, the prince and his entourage, Leon and Olivia.

A proper adventure with suitable companions, people of similar standing and capability, the kind of expedition that would make for excellent stories at court and demonstrate her worth as future queen.

But Marie's presence had complicated everything, had poisoned that possibility like rot spreading through fresh fruit. The prince had, again, publicly rebuked and dismissed her in favour of that woman. He and his retinue formed a small group surrounding the interloper, making it clear where his priorities lay.

At that time, publicly humiliated for the second time—the first being at the academy in front of everyone, the second at the dungeon entrance before this expedition—Angelica felt a surge of anger and sadness at why the prince was treating her this way, why Julius was throwing away their betrothal, their years of carefully maintained alliance.

But eventually, Olivia managed to cheer her up with that irrepressible optimism and genuine kindness, whilst Leon provided silent support and encouragement as he diverted her attention to today's adventure—the food

he'd prepared also was quite uplifting, his cooking skills surprisingly refined for someone of his background.

For now, she couldn't complain as she'd enjoyed this adventure immensely—more than she'd expected, more than she wanted to admit even to herself—and was thankful for accepting Olivia's proposal, for saying yes when that peculiar girl had asked if she wanted to experience something real rather than the sanitised, controlled exercises the academy usually provided.

She'd always read about adventurers in her family's extensive library, had devoured accounts of her ancestors' exploits with the hunger of someone trapped by expectation, and dreamed of experiencing several such expeditions before she eventually took up her role as future queen of this kingdom—or at least as the wife of the crown prince, assuming that arrangement still held after recent... complications, after everything that had happened with Marie and Julius's inexplicable obsession with the woman.

The king and his queen were still relatively young, after all, barely out of their mid-thirties and in the prime of their reign.

Time enough to prove herself through achievements like her father, who had gone out on his own at her age—barely eighteen—and conquered a dungeon himself, bringing it into their vast territory, which had accumulated over their family's history through generations of conquest and careful management—

"Here, I'm laying out the bottles of potions surrounding us," Olivia said beside her, her voice cutting through Angelica's spiralling thoughts and bringing her back to the immediate situation on the sixth floor, back to the present rather than dwelling on past humiliations or future uncertainties.

"Melt shall take care of replenishment as the battle progresses, making them readily available when needed. Health potions on the left, mana potions on the right, stamina in the middle. Colour-coded caps so you can grab what you need without looking, or you can also ask Melt for it directly if you're predisposed—if you're busy fighting and can't reach them yourself."

The situation had shifted considerably after the second-floor encounter, the plan evolving under pressure and necessity when the original strategy proved insufficient. That battle had exposed the plan's fragility—once they'd been unable to defeat the boss before the titanic pixie awakened, once the prince's panic had fed the shield and triggered that catastrophic energy release that had nearly killed them all, Margot, the adventurers, professors, Leon—accompanied by Melt—had been forced to step in and salvage the situation.

Fortunately, they were able to defeat the pixie as the prince, his entourage, Marie, and his powerful guardian spirit sent forth several deadly strikes in a coordinated assault, whilst everyone else barraged the titan with everything they had, stun-locking it from even mounting a proper counterattack.

After everything had settled, Margot, not caring about status or propriety, berated everyone for their recklessness in a tongue-lashing that left even the professors wincing, especially targeting the prince for his panic and the cascade of mistakes that had nearly doomed them all.

In the end, she had been forced to request additional adventurers, sending her attendant—the fox demi-human—back to the surface with a signed written request for emergency reinforcement, also compelling the professors to summon their attendants and contract guardian spirits to descend into the dungeon's depths and bolster their numbers.

During the wait for reinforcements—minutes that felt like hours of tense preparation whilst Margot coordinated with guild members through communication crystals and the professors made their summons, drawing spirits through contracts that flared with magical light—they'd begun their descent again, implementing the new strategy that Margot had devised to account for the changed circumstances and the increased danger that the second-floor disaster had revealed.

She'd caught fragments of Margot's briefing whilst Olivia healed Leon with surprising skill—the ability to heal had surprised Angelica considerably, as it was quite a rare trait, with experts in the field always recruited into the church or noble households willing to pay premium salaries for such invaluable capability, making it strange that a commoner-turned-knight possessed such power.

Olivia had berated him for his recklessness even as her hands glowed with restorative magic that knit flesh and mended bone, an incongruous combination of scolding and care that spoke to their peculiar relationship, something that went beyond mere lord and vassal.

From what she'd heard during that briefing—Margot's voice carrying across the platform as she reorganised their forces with military efficiency, assigning roles and responsibilities with the authority of someone who'd commanded countless expeditions—the plan had fundamentally altered to account for student limitations and the increased danger that the pixie's awakening had demonstrated.

Her team with Leon and Olivia would still clear the spawned creatures on each floor, moving ahead of the main force to eliminate the chaff and create safe pathways, leaving only one creature alive to prevent the boss from

manifesting prematurely—killing all spawned monsters apparently triggered the boss's appearance, a dungeon mechanic they needed to manage carefully.

The junior and senior adventurers would assume primary responsibility for the boss confrontations, bringing their experience and power to bear against the major threats whilst the students learned by observation, with Margot transitioning into an advisory role, providing running commentary for the students in real-time, explaining tactics and positioning and the thousand small decisions that separated survival from disaster, turning each encounter into an impromptu lesson.

The students would occupy support positions, contributing where they could without being exposed to excessive danger that might get them killed, with professors serving as backup ready to intervene if situations deteriorated beyond the adventurers' ability to control. The actual heavy lifting would fall to the adventurers, distributed between primary and secondary combat roles as needed based on their specialisations, with guardian spirits and attendants filling gaps in formations where additional firepower or defence was required.

That arrangement had held through floors three, four, and finally five—each floor's creatures cleared with increasing efficiency as their small group found its rhythm, as Leon, Olivia, and Angelica learned to read each other's movements without conscious thought, to anticipate and coordinate without needing words or hand signals, developing the kind of intuitive teamwork that usually took months to build.

The monsters had varied across the floors—crystalline constructs that shattered under focused fire but reformed if not completely destroyed, swarms of smaller creatures that required area suppression and careful ammunition

management, larger singular threats that demanded concentrated assault and precise timing—but the pattern remained consistent: clear the floor methodically, descend through the portal, repeat the process.

Now they stood separated by design: the main force remained on the fifth floor, preparing to engage that boss with the full weight of their numbers and the professors' backup. Meanwhile, she, Leon, and Olivia—along with their guardian spirits forming their combat team of eight—had descended to this sixth and final floor, their true challenge awaiting them somewhere in this vast chamber.

Above them, separated by vast vertical distance and the portal they'd used to descend—a shimmering gateway of magical energy that connected the floors—the larger contingent of adventurers, students, professors, guardian spirits and attendants would soon begin their assault on the fifth-floor boss in a coordinated attack.

Down here, Angelica couldn't help but feel her palms sweat at the anticipation, moisture gathering despite her attempts to remain calm. The fact that they'd be fighting the dungeon's lowest boss—presumably its strongest, most dangerous creature—with eight combatants compared to the large force of dozens above them made her feel some semblance of fear and trepidation that she struggled to suppress behind her noble training.

A hand on her shoulder interrupted her spiralling thoughts for the second time this descent, warm and reassuring, and she turned to find Olivia's concerned gaze searching her face, those warm eyes reading the tension Angelica hadn't quite managed to conceal behind her noble composure, seeing through the mask she'd been taught to maintain since childhood.

"If you want, it's not too late to join the contingent above," Leon's baritone voice added as he approached them both, his bow temporarily lowered, his expression open and understanding rather than dismissive or condescending, his tone carrying genuine worry rather than any hint of mockery or judgement.

The offer was sincere—he meant it, she realised with some surprise. He would let her retreat without judgement, without comment, would send her back through the portal to safety without questioning her courage or capability. "No shame in choosing the larger engagement. This is your first dungeon—nobody expects you to face the final boss."

But something in that kindness—that easy acceptance of what might be seen as weakness by her peers and family—sparked resistance in Angelica's chest, ignited something proud and stubborn that refused to back down. She was a Redgrave. She straightened her spine almost unconsciously, drawing upon generations of family history for strength, of ancestors who were among this kingdom's founders, who had carved this nation from chaos and held it against all threats through courage and determination.

Her bloodline had never retreated from duty, had never chosen the easier path when the harder one needed walking, had never faltered when given the choice between comfort and purpose. She would not be the first to break that tradition, would not be the Redgrave who faltered when given the choice between safety and purpose, who chose the easy path over the right one.

With steel replacing the uncertainty in her eyes, determination overriding fear, she met Leon's gaze directly, held it without flinching, and saw the exact moment he registered her decision in the set of her jaw, the firmness of her stance, the way her hand tightened on her rifle.

He shrugged slightly, something that might have been approval or perhaps respect flickering across his features before his expression returned to its usual calm. "Looks like you've decided," Leon declared, his voice remaining neutral but not unkind. "We'll be starting in a few minutes once the signal comes from above. Best prepare yourself mentally."

"Don't worry, Angelica!" Olivia's voice emerged bright and cheerful, that irrepressible optimism that somehow never seemed forced or false despite everything they'd faced. The smaller girl stepped closer, one arm flexing in an exaggerated show of strength, patting her modest biceps with complete seriousness as though demonstrating incredible power. "We'll easily defeat this boss! The three of us together—we're unstoppable! We've cleared five floors already!"

Angelica felt some of her tension ease at that confidence, at Olivia's unshakeable faith in their combined abilities despite the odds, despite their limited numbers.

Then Olivia continued, her enthusiasm building dangerously: "After all, what could possibly go wrong?"

The temperature in the chamber seemed to drop several degrees, the ambient warmth fleeing.

Leon's face went through several expressions in rapid succession—disbelief, resignation, long-suffering exhaustion that suggested he'd heard this exact phrase before with terrible results—before he simply called out with the weariness of someone who'd learned this lesson repeatedly, "Sella!"

The resulting impact of the maid-spirit's discipline echoed through the chamber, the sound of palm meeting skull carrying clearly in the vast space.

"Owie! What is it this time?" Olivia complained loudly, her greaved feet stomping against the floor in protest like a child denied dessert, one hand rubbing the fresh bump forming on her head with exaggerated pain. "I was just being encouraging! Trying to boost morale!"

"Please, for everyone's sake—for the sake of our continued survival and my sanity—do not tempt fate. Ever," came Leon's utterly exhausted reply as he turned away, heading towards the centre of the chamber where a large crystalline construct was floating idle, waiting for them to trigger whatever mechanism would begin this final confrontation. Durga followed in his wake, the guardian spirit's multiple arms already moving through preparatory combat forms, weapons manifesting in each hand.

Angelica watched them go, and despite everything—the fear, the anticipation, the weight of what they were about to face against impossible odds—she felt the corner of her mouth twitch upward at the familiar dynamic, at the strange comfort of their banter even here at the edge of battle.

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"Here's a commlink so everyone can communicate no matter how far everyone is from each other," Luxion announced, materialising beside Leon with characteristic efficiency that suggested he'd been preparing this particular piece of equipment for some time. Both he and Durga stood before the massive crystalline construct at the chamber's centre, its faceted surface catching and refracting the dungeon's ambient light in hypnotic patterns that created dancing reflections across the transparent floor beneath their feet.

Leon studied it with detachment, already knowing from his meta-knowledge of the game—from those late nights playing beside Illya in what felt like another

lifetime—that shattering this particular crystal would trigger the boss encounter, would summon whatever nightmare the dungeon had been saving for last.

Leon's attention shifted to Luxion, noting how the AI's top section had smoothly receded to reveal a small internal chamber that hadn't been visible moments before. Within the pristine compartment lay two pairs of earbuds. The artificial intelligence had clearly been busy preparing for this expedition with typical thoroughness, thinking ahead to the communication challenges of fighting across this vast chamber—something Leon was quite thankful for despite Luxion's vocal disdain for new humans.

"Have the others received theirs as well?" Leon asked, reaching forward to pluck one pair from the chamber with careful fingers. His fingers closed around the devices as he fitted them into his ears with practised ease. Durga observed his movements carefully before copying them with her upper pair of hands, her lower arms remaining ready on her weapons.

Luxion emanated what Leon had come to recognise as satisfaction—despite lacking a face, despite being essentially a floating sphere with a single red eye, the AI somehow projected emotional states through minute adjustments in its hovering posture and vocal inflection, subtle shifts in tone that Leon had learned to interpret over their months together.

Leon suppressed a sigh at what he knew was coming. He'd observed this pattern enough times now to understand what was happening, to recognise Luxion's testing methodology. The AI perpetually tested both him and Olivia on obscure cultural knowledge that only Japanese or German individuals would possess—verification checks disguised as casual conversation, constant probing to confirm their claimed origins weren't elaborate lies.

The katana incident sprang to mind immediately: Luxion had suddenly produced what appeared to be a futuristic interpretation of a traditional katana clearly expecting a specific reaction that would confirm or deny Leon's supposed Japanese heritage.

Leon, drawing on his expanded repository of bladed weapons courtesy of inherited knowledge from Archer, had responded by projecting Monohoshi Zao—Sasaki Kojirou's absurdly elongated katana, whose name literally translates to 'The Laundry-Drying Pole,' a blade so long it was more pike than sword.

He'd never encountered the false Assassin personally during his own truncated Holy Grail War—that conflict had ended far too quickly, far too brutally—but Archer EMIYA's memories contained numerous encounters with various instances of that particular Servant across multiple summonings, across different timelines where the war had played out differently.

That demonstration of his ability to wear what looked like some music earbuds without being prompted or told how to use them had apparently satisfied Luxion's curiosity and checked whatever box the AI maintained in its internal verification system.

The AI had been considerably less successful with Illya, however—hardly surprising given that she'd spent her formative years isolated in a hidden German castle, deliberately cut off from mainstream society and popular culture by the Einzbern family's isolated castle. She could speak flawless German but had no context for contemporary references, no framework for understanding the casual cultural touchstones that Luxion used as verification tests.

Though she'd then barraged the AI with stories about her yuri eroges, which seemed to put the AI in a state of ennui about what he had opened up, the fact that Leon gave Olivia secondary ownership to Luxion meant he couldn't just leave. Recently, Luxion had been able to quickly pivot conversations with Olivia to discussing Leon's potential marriage partners—a topic the AI found infinitely preferable to yuri eroges—as Olivia had tasked him with gathering intel on the girls in their year and above. At least marriage politics made *sense*.

"Yes, I've already distributed these communication devices to everyone," Luxion confirmed, his tone shifting into instructional mode with that particular inflexion he used when explaining technology to the primitives. "All you need to do is tap your left earbud to activate transmission. If you wish to prevent your words from being broadcast to the group, simply tap it again to mute yourself."

Leon allowed himself a small smile as he tapped his left earbud experimentally, feeling the subtle click beneath his fingertip, the minute vibration that confirmed activation. Durga watched intently before eagerly mimicking the gesture. The commlink activated with a barely perceptible hum—more felt than heard, a slight pressure change in the ear canal.

"Could everyone hear me?" Leon broadcast, his voice carrying through the network—probably facilitated by Luxion's floating body—to wherever the others were positioned. "And is everybody done with preparations?"

The responses came flooding through the channel almost immediately, a chorus of varied voices confirming their readiness with different levels of enthusiasm. 'Yes,' came one crisp reply—Angelica's controlled tone, professional and ready. 'Ready to start,' the lunar trio chorused with

eagerness. *'Let's start this already,'* Olivia said with barely contained impatience. *'I'll do my best, Master,'* added a familiar earnest tone that made Leon's lips quirk slightly—Meltryllis, always so eager, always so earnest, then receiving a nod from Durga.

Right then. Time to trigger the encounter. Leon took a steadying breath, feeling that old combat mindset settling over him like a familiar coat—the mental shift from civilian to combatant, from person to weapon, something he had adapted from Archer's memories.

"Okay," he announced through the commlink, projecting calm confidence despite his internal reservations about fighting something this large with only eight combatants. "The boss will appear after I break this crystalline construct. Durga and I shall be the front line—we'll draw the monster's attention and maintain its focus throughout the battle, though please be careful if it suddenly shifts targets. These fights can be unpredictable."

Whilst he and Durga would form the front line—the anchors that everything else pivoted around, the targets that absorbed aggression—Angelica and Olivia, together with Melt, would constitute a mobile harassment group operating at mid-range, using their superior mobility—courtesy of Melt—to strike from angles the boss couldn't easily defend.

Simultaneously, both Sella and Leysritt would flank the formation on opposite sides, creating a three-directional threat pattern that would force the boss to split its attention.

Illya herself would remain in the back line, far enough to avoid immediate danger but close enough to coordinate her guardian spirits and provide support. This positioning would prepare them for whenever this particular

monster started flying—and it *would* fly, he remembered that much from the game—or teleporting around the chamber with its spatial manipulation.

"I am the bone of my sword, steel is my body, fire is my blood," Leon intoned, the familiar words of his aria rolling off his tongue with practised ease as he traced both Kanshou and Bakuya simultaneously, the married blades manifesting in his hands with comfortable weight.

He immediately began enlarging them, channelling more prana through the projections to scale them up, deploying three lines of his aria all at once—immediately loosening the boundaries between her inner world and reality.

His body heated as his circuits flared to life, magical pathways burning with controlled intensity, and his mana core—something everyone who can wield magic has in this reality—thrummed with power like a second heartbeat thundering in his chest.

He could already hear the noise from the floor above—the distinctive sounds of magical bombardment, the crash of weapons against crystalline hide, the shouted commands that meant they too had started their battle against the fifth-floor boss. Good.

"Okay, let's start this," Leon declared as he raised both Kanshou and Bakuya high overhead, channelling even more prana into the projection and enlarging it further until the Noble Phantasm was almost as large as Herakles's sword-axe—massive, oversized, completely impractical for normal combat but perfect for what he needed.

He swung down with both hands, putting his entire body behind the strike, and the impact was catastrophic. Both enlarged swords shattered on contact but

the crystalline construct shattered with it in a cascade of breaking geometry, fragments exploding outward in all directions from the point of impact.

Leon and Durga immediately turned and ran, moving with practised efficiency, dodging the projectiles. Like the previous bosses they'd encountered on floors two through five, he knew this would be titanic in size—the final boss was always the largest, always the most dangerous. They retreated a few hundred metres from the centre, covering the distance in seconds, moving with supernatural speed that left afterimages in their wake.

"Master," Durga asked, her voice both heard directly beside him and echoing through the comlink as she glided effortlessly at his side.

"Yes, Durga?" Leon asked, as he sprinted quickly.

"Why didn't you just shoot the crystal from a distance?" Durga asked, her voice innocent and curious.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Leon then heard snickering on the comms as he felt his face heat up. '*She has a point,*' he admitted internally, refusing to acknowledge it aloud.

"Let's concentrate on the fight for now."

"Yes, master!" But snickering could still be heard from Olivia.

Despite his red face, Leon ignored Olivia, as he continued with his sprint.

For a moment—for a handful of heartbeats—they could only hear the sound of battle from above filtering down through the ceiling. Leon's boots hit the transparent, crystalline floor as he ran, the rhythmic impact of his footfalls seeming impossibly loud in the sudden silence, whilst Durga glided beside him with supernatural grace, her multiple arms ready, weapons manifesting in each hand.

As Leon turned to face the centre, skidding a significant distance from it, he could see fragments falling from where the construct had been. They tumbled through empty air, each shard catching the chamber's ambient light as they dropped, glinting like dying stars against the backdrop visible through the transparent floor beneath them—an endless expanse of star-dotted void, dark space stretching infinitely below, making it seem as though they stood on nothing, as though one wrong step would send them falling forever into that cosmic abyss.

The lull was oppressive—the extended pause seemed to tease them that it was all for nought, that nothing bad would happen, that perhaps the trigger had failed.

But then reality screamed.

The sound wasn't heard so much as felt—a vibration that travelled through bone and stone alike, that resonated in frequencies that human ears were never meant to perceive, frequencies that bypassed hearing entirely and went straight to your psyche, to the part of consciousness that recognised predators and existential danger, that understood on an instinctive level that something wrong was happening.

The very air distorted, rippling outward from a single point at the chamber's centre where the construct had been, space itself bending and twisting under

impossible pressure, warping like heated glass, as though something massive—something that operated on a scale that shouldn't exist—was forcing its way through a gap far too small to accommodate its bulk, tearing through dimensional barriers that were never meant to be breached.

The monster appeared, ascending from the floor itself—not emerging from a portal but rising through the transparent surface as though it were water, as though solid matter was merely a suggestion it chose to ignore. The game hadn't done it justice when compared to the real thing. Sprites and polygons couldn't capture this.

It was titanic. The word felt inadequate, a child's vocabulary insufficient to capture the sheer scale of what emerged from the tearing void, what unfolded into existence like some terrible origami of flesh and terror.

The creature's body was nightmare given form, manifested and perfected in its horror—a massive, elongated form of dark crystalline segments that caught and refracted light in ways that hurt to perceive, that made the eye water and the mind rebel against processing the visual information, refusing to accept what the optic nerve was transmitting.

Deep blues and purples flowed across its surface like liquid nebula, like the stuff of stars made flesh, cosmic energy pulsing beneath translucent carapace in rhythmic waves that suggested a heartbeat operating on a scale that measured time differently than human perception, that experienced seconds as centuries. The carapace was translucent enough to reveal what lay within: starfields trapped under the surface, entire galaxies compressed and imprisoned in living flesh like insects in amber, constellations that shifted and reformed with each movement of the creature's body, stars being born and dying with every breath it took.

The creature had ten grotesque, spindly arms serving as its primary limbs, all shifting and moving in complex patterns to support its weight and adjust positions—each one grotesquely elongated, stretching hundreds of metres from shoulder joint to fingertip, thin enough that they should have snapped under their own weight but clearly operating under different structural rules.

They ended not in claws or talons, not in the expected weapons of a predator designed for rending and tearing, but in *hands*. Proper hands with too many joints visible through translucent crystalline flesh, too many fingers—seven? eight? the number seemed to shift when he tried to count—each digit articulated with disturbing human-like precision but scaled to monstrous proportions that made the similarity somehow *worse* than if they'd been completely alien, worse because the recognition triggered uncanny valley responses that made his skin crawl.

The hands flexed and grasped at air as the creature settled its weight, testing grip, finding purchase on the transparent floor, crushing the crystalline surface beneath their hold with casual monstrous strength. Cracks radiated outward from each point of contact, spreading like frozen lightning. But as it shifted, the cracks healed themselves.

Where its head should have been—where any recognisable anatomy would place sensory organs and a brain—was instead a thick tentacle-like appendage with two protruding long pincers emerging from its sides, curved forward like a bull's horn, forming an almost circle with a gap in between.

The beast's body then arched upward at the front, the spine curving in an elegant, terrible arc that lifted the forward section high above the ground, easily two hundred metres into the air, possibly more. The appendage writhed with its own life, independent movement that suggested separate

consciousness, as a vertical slit formed along its length, slowly opening like an eyelid to reveal an anthropomorphic body emerging from within.

She was massive—about half a kilometre tall when measured from the creature's base to the crown of her head, yet somehow proportioned as though human-sized, as though she should be standing at normal height rather than towering over everyone.

Her body was complete: head, torso, arms, legs, feet—a full humanoid form that stood upright on the creature's arched back as though it were solid ground, though her feet never actually touched its surface, hovering mere centimetres above the crystalline carapace as though she weighed nothing at all, as though gravity was merely a suggestion she chose to partially acknowledge when convenient.

Her back was connected to the appendage through some seamless merger of flesh, as multiple tentacles—smaller versions of the appendage she emerged from—writhed around her torso and limbs like living clothing, never quite touching her skin, creating a corona of movement. The two massive pincers flanked her at waist height, their curved points aimed forward like the arms of a throne.

Her skin shared the creature's palette—that same dark, cosmic colouration, deep purples and blues that seemed to shift and flow across her surface like living nebula, like the night sky given flesh and animated with purpose. But where the beast was rough and segmented, covered in sharp edges and biomechanical looking joints that ground against each other, her form was smooth, perfect, unnaturally so in a way that created visceral unease in anyone who looked at her.

Each curve, each line of her body was both sensuality and nightmarish at the same time, too exact to be natural, too perfect to be real, as though someone had taken the concept of humanoid beauty and optimised it past the point where it remained relatable, past the uncanny valley into something beautiful and horrifying simultaneously, that triggered attraction and revulsion in equal measure.

Her form possessed an ethereal, feminine quality that was somehow more disturbing than if she'd been completely monstrous—slender limbs with joints that bent at impossible angles, articulating in directions that human anatomy couldn't accommodate.

Her waist was impossibly narrow, creating proportions that would kill a human through organ failure, yet she moved as though this was natural. Her shoulders seemed too delicate to support the weight of those eight wings that emerged from her back, yet they held steady without tremor or strain.

Her face was what truly disturbed, what made something primal in Leon's hindbrain scream danger. Where a human would have features—nose, mouth, cheekbones, the countless small details that made a face *human*, that made it readable and relatable, that allowed social recognition—she possessed only eyes.

Two enormous orbs that dominated her features, almond-shaped and tilted upward at the outer corners in a vaguely feline configuration, irises that seemed to contain entire nebulas swirling within their depths, spiral galaxies compressed into spaces no larger than a fist.

The pupils dilated and contracted independently of each other in patterns that suggested they perceived more than three-dimensional space. They glowed with inner light that cycled through colours. Colours that made his brain stutter

trying to process them, colours that his optic nerve reported but his visual cortex couldn't parse. No nose. No mouth. No hint of breath or expression beyond what those dreadful eyes conveyed.

From her back unfurled wings—not two but eight, translucent membranes of crystalline energy that caught and split light into impossible spectrums, creating rainbow refractions that hurt to look at directly, that left afterimages burned into the retina. They moved independently of each other, each one adjusting with minute precision like the sails of some cosmic ship catching solar winds, responding to forces Leon couldn't perceive.

The wings weren't solid in any conventional sense—they were more like concentrated starlight, cosmic energy compressed into gossamer sheets so thin they seemed ready to tear at the slightest touch.

Despite its mouthless face, Leon could see the pixie's expression shift into what might have been a smirk—an emotion conveyed entirely through the shifting patterns in those alien eyes and the subtle tilt of its head, the way the nebulas in its irises seemed to swirl with something that might have been amusement.

The expression was mockingly human, deliberately provocative, a predator playing with prey that had wandered into its territory. Its hand—slender, perfect, utterly wrong—beckoned him closer with a gesture that was unmistakably human in origin, the universal 'come here' motion that transcended culture and species.

Without warning, without any visible gathering of power or telegraphing of intent, the space between the two massive pincers flanking the pixie suddenly sparked with building energy. Reality warped around the focal point, space

compressing and twisting as power accumulated, creating visible distortions in the air like heat shimmer.

Then a beam burst forth—not the slow charging attack from the second floor pixie, but instant release, zero-to-light-speed in a fraction of a second. The beam was massive, easily a hundred metres in diameter, composed of pure white energy that left afterimages that seemed to carry the concentrated light of a star compressed into a coherent stream.

"Master!" Durga called out, her voice carrying urgency as one of her upper arms raised a large dhal—a large circular shield but this one could easily cover them both—whilst her talwar appeared in another hand. Her remaining arms went immediately on the offensive, manifesting weapons and shooting various projectiles towards the distant enemy—arrows of solidified earth, spears of compressed stone, anything and everything to create a suppressing barrage, to force the boss to acknowledge their presence, to draw its attention before that beam could adjust its trajectory.

Leon, meanwhile, didn't try to block or dodge perpendicular to the beam's path—at this scale, at this speed, lateral movement was pointless. Instead, he ran alongside the beam's trajectory, moving parallel to its path, staying just ahead of its leading edge as he traced his bow and a large drill-like sword simultaneously. The bow manifested in his left hand, already drawn, whilst Caladbolg materialised in his right.

He reshaped the blade mid-projection, compressing the spiral structure, making it more aerodynamic, optimising it for flight, the modifications happening faster than thought as Unlimited Blade Works provided the template and his mana gave it form.

"My core is twisted in madness," Leon chanted, nocking the modified Caladbolg to his bow, drawing back with strength that reinforced muscles screamed to provide, "Caladbolg II!"

The Noble Phantasm launched with a sound like tearing reality, the sound of the sound barrier being shattered echoed across the vast chamber, the twisted spiral blade achieving velocity that made conventional projectiles look stationary, covering less than a kilometre in less than a second, carrying enough kinetic energy to punch through mountains, heading straight for the pixie's mouthless face with unerring accuracy.

The battle had begun.

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The twisted spiral blade screamed across the chamber in less than a second, a drill of concentrated destruction that tore through the air itself with a sound like reality being rent asunder. Caladbolg II struck the pixie's chest dead centre with pinpoint precision, just below her clavicle, between her breasts.

The impact was catastrophic.

The drill punched through flawless skin like it was paper—no, easier than paper, like the concept of resistance simply didn't apply—the spiral rotation creating a vortex that drew matter inward even as it destroyed, the rotation pulling and tearing simultaneously. The upper torso and head exploded backwards in a spray of dark matter—not blood, not any biological fluid Leon recognised, but something else entirely, liquid starlight mixed with void-black essence that scattered like ink dropped in water, painting the chamber walls with viscera and gore.

The blast carved through her ethereal form with brutal efficiency, removing everything from mid-chest upward in a single devastating strike that should have been instantly fatal. Her perfect shoulders, that impossibly narrow waist's upper portion, the delicate arms that had moments ago been beckoning them closer with mocking confidence—all gone, replaced by a gaping wound that revealed the tentacle appendage she was connected to at the back, now exposed and twitching like a severed nerve ending, like a puppet's strings cut mid-performance.

The creature shrieked—the sound bypassing Leon's ears entirely to vibrate directly in his bones, resonating in his skeleton like he was a tuning fork—and thrashed with inhuman fury that sent shockwaves rippling through the chamber.

Two of its spindly hand-limbs reached over and around to the remaining lower half of the pixie with disturbing purpose, nails—or whatever those crystalline protrusions were—digging into the exposed innards with sickening wet sounds, the grotesquely oversized fingers digging into flesh that was simultaneously solid and ethereal, into stomach, legs, crotch, as it pulled with deliberate violence that suggested intention rather than mindless thrashing.

The combatants were frozen in mortification at this gruesome sight that defied comprehension. They all felt their stomachs turn—this self-mutilation defied description as none could look away despite the opportune moment to attack.

Finally, with a sound that would haunt their dreams, it tore. The remaining lower half of the pixie—legs, hips, lower torso—split vertically down the middle with a wet, obscene sound that echoed across the vast chamber, the tearing accompanied by sounds like snapping tendons and popping joints.

Blackened arterial blood—or what passed for it in this cosmic nightmare—sprayed everywhere in long arcs that defied gravity, painting abstract patterns across the transparent floor. In that same horrifying moment, another pixie emerged from within the torn cavity as its replacement, birthed from impossibility. She was covered in viscous liquid that dripped and shimmered with otherworldly light, already perfect, already complete, as though the previous one had never existed.

"Great high-speed regeneration," Olivia sarcastically called out through the comms, her voice cutting through the horror with dark humour. "Fast. Too fast. We probably need to overwhelm it completely or target the connection point to see if there's a limit to this regeneration."

As the torn pelvis and legs fell onto the floor, the flesh jiggling grotesquely as it bounced twice before lying motionless, this snapped them all into action, breaking the spell of horrified fascination.

Meltryllis picked up both Olivia and Angelica with waves of water that solidified beneath their feet, creating stable platforms that moved with her control. The water spirit maintained perfect balance despite the chaos, carrying them across the chamber at speed.

Angelica aimed for the joints of the creature's forearms. Severing them might limit its reach by several hundred metres, might give them the breathing room they needed. Her rifle cracked out measured shots, the recoil absorbed by her reinforced stance. Each one found its mark. The joints burst apart under concentrated fire—flames from her enchanted ammunition and explosive rounds tearing through cosmic flesh that bled starlight and shadow, spraying patterns across the transparent floor.

Olivia, positioned beside Angelica on the same water platform, chanted her aria. "Engel lied, Storch Ritter! Dägen!" Several of her stork knights manifested from shimmering light—constructs of woven hair and magical energy taking the form of large birds flanked by floating swords. They rushed towards the creature, diving at its eyes and exposed wounds.

Simultaneously, another strand of Olivia's hair was plucked and reshaped mid-air into a gigantic dagger easily twenty metres long. The transformation took seconds—hair weaving itself into a blade of condensed magical energy.

The massive blade rushed towards the base of the thickened tentacle holding the titanic pixie, aimed at the connection point where flesh met flesh. The dagger struck true, punching into cosmic flesh, but she was only able to create a small gash, perhaps five metres deep that immediately began weeping dark matter. The tentacle was simply too thick, the layers of tissue too densely packed to sever in a single strike.

Meltryllis twirled with a dancer's grace, her body moving through forms that were equal parts ballet and violence. The wave of water that rose at her command was like a choreographed tsunami, rising fifty metres tall as she spun. It crystallised with a sound like a thousand bells singing in harmony, the temperature plummeting so rapidly that frost patterns bloomed across the surface—fractal structures of impossible beauty spreading like frozen flowers. The ice shards that broke free numbered in the tens of thousands, each one needle-sharp and precisely aimed, embedding into the opposite limb to the one Angelica had been bombarding, creating a coordinated assault from multiple angles that forced the creature to acknowledge threats from multiple vectors.

The creature continued screaming as it took damage from multiple angles, the sound reverberating through everyone's bones with unnatural resonance that made their teeth ache and their vision blur at the edges. But then, adapting with horrifying speed, several of the other hand-limbs raised their palms with deliberate menace, each hand orienting with disturbing synchronisation, directed at each combatant as though the creature could track them all simultaneously.

Everyone looked in horror as the palms opened wider. Each fingertip had an eye—small but perfect, each one independently moving, watching.

Several hundred-metre black orbs of fiery plasma manifested in mid-air before each raised palm, reality warping and buckling around their formation as though space itself recoiled from their existence. The cores burned purple—not the purple of earthly flame, but something deeper, something *wrong*, like the colour of dying stars compressed into spheres of annihilation. When they launched, they didn't simply fly—they *tore* through the intervening space, leaving trails of distorted air that shimmered with heat-haze and dimensional stress, the sound a howling chorus of bass notes that shook ribs and wind chimes that pierced skulls.

Everyone tried to dodge immediately, breaking formation and scattering across the vast chamber to make themselves harder targets. But the orbs loosely followed them in wide arcs, course-correcting mid-flight, tracking like heat-seeking missiles with malevolent intelligence that suggested they weren't simple projectiles but semi-autonomous attacks.

They had to time their evasion perfectly, had to dodge at the opportune moment so that the orbs would crash into the chamber floors or walls instead of their bodies, creating craters of purple fire and twisted space where they

impacted, reality itself warping and buckling under the energy release. The dungeon repaired the damage almost immediately, reality stitching itself back together like living tissue healing.

Then, with another shriek that made everyone's ears ring despite the commlinks, three tails burst forth from its posterior with the crack of cosmic thunder, each one a living whip of imprisoned cosmos. They were made of segmented orbs that contained *actual stars*—miniature suns burning in cages of crystalline flesh, entire solar systems compressed into structures no larger than buildings, galaxies swirling in impossible confinement. Each segment pulsed with the cold fire of stellar fusion, casting light that had travelled unimaginable distances only to be trapped here, in this nightmare's body. The tentacles at each tip writhed like a nest of serpents made from the stuff between stars—void-matter given terrible purpose.

At the tip of each tail were clusters of tiny tentacles—dozens per tail, possibly hundreds. At the blink of an eye, they writhed wildly like angry serpents. Then in the next instant, they straightened into barbs designed for penetration, the transformation so complete it seemed like different weapons entirely.

Two of the tails sprang forth with whip-crack speed, creating sonic booms that echoed across the chamber. They attacked both Leon and Durga as they weaved and dodged, continuing their assault without pause.

Leon held enlarged Kanshou and Bakuya—the familiar weight comforting even in this madness—throwing them at every moment with perfect timing, releasing them in paired trajectories. Each throw restarted the cycle as the blades returned to his hands, allowing him to trace more copies that joined the storm. Soon dozens of Kanshou and Bakuya pairs filled the air around the creature, a whirlwind of married blades attacking from every angle.

Durga kept her bombardment steady, her multiple arms working in perfect coordination as she deflected another strike from the barbed tail. The tip of the tail was easily twenty metres across, dwarfing her entirely—she stood no taller than Leon himself, making the size difference almost absurd. Yet she met the attack without flinching.

The Terran Spirit let out a war cry that shook the chamber—the sound of earth itself rejecting this cosmic intrusion—as one of her arms slammed down a large farasa. The battle axe gleamed with divine light, pinning down the offensive limb with crushing force that cracked the tail's crystalline segments, driving it into the transparent floor hard enough to leave spreading fractures.

The barbs at the tail's tip reverted to tentacles instantly, wrapping around her weapons and limbs with surprising strength, trying to pull her off balance and drag her toward the main body.

She swept her other arms—now holding various swords and axes that Leon had forged when their contract was made, weapons that gleamed with the same divine quality as her axe—whilst releasing beams of black and crimson energy from just above the crown of her head. The beam blasted upwards before sharply arcing down onto the length of the tail like divine artillery. The bombardment helped pin the limb to the floor, creating smoking craters along its length that wept dark ichor.

"Master!" Durga called out, her voice cutting through the chaos.

Leon had just started running up the body of the pixie at full speed, his legs burning as his circuits screamed, channelling prana, his altered, sharpened boots finding purchase on the smooth crystalline surface. He was embedding countless blades as he went—Kanshou and Bakuya stabbed deep into the inner thigh, Hrunting's black blade piercing flesh, nameless weapons from

Unlimited Blade Works planted like seeds. Each one was overcharged with more prana than it could structurally contain, brittle and deadly, waiting to explode on his command.

He called out between heavy breaths, lungs burning from the exertion, "Coming!"

The pixie swiped with her newly regenerated hand in a wide arc, fingers spread. A trail of purple dust followed in its wake like poison pollen scattered by wind. The dust fell in a slow trickle, hanging in the air with malevolent intent. Each mote glowed with faint light that pulsed in hypnotic rhythm.

Leon didn't hesitate. He traced the same dhal shield Durga used, the circular shield manifesting above him to intercept the falling dust. He applied a vector to the projection, using reinforcement to make it follow his descent. His other hand traced Berserker Heracles's stone axe-sword—the massive, brutal weapon enlarged to match the scale of his target.

Even with the reduced gravity at this height—he was easily a quarter of a kilometre up, perhaps more—he had achieved close to terminal velocity through reinforced descent. The jagged weapon, enlarged further to match his velocity, became a meteor of stone and prana.

The tail swept up to intercept him, barbed tip spreading wide to impale.

Leon swung.

The stone axe-sword sliced through the barbed-tentacled tip in a single devastating cut, the sheer mass and velocity making resistance meaningless. Dark and purple matter sprayed through the air in a fountain, leaving trails of impossible colour hanging in space like frozen fireworks, like wounds in reality itself that bled light.

The remaining orb segments of the severed tail lashed out in retaliation, the stump bleeding purple-dark ooze as it tried to bash Leon mid-air, to crush him through sheer mass.

A tidal wave of water surrounded both Leon and Durga with perfect timing, Meltryllis's awareness encompassing the entire battlefield. The water swept them away from the retaliatory strike, carrying them hundreds of metres in seconds with the gentleness of a mother pulling a child from danger.

"Thanks, Melt! Send us to its back," Leon praised his guardian spirit. As he spoke, he triggered the detonation sequence. The swords he'd embedded along the pixie's inner thighs exploded in cascading sequence, each detonation triggering the next. The pixie's legs split open from the inside, cosmic flesh tearing, spilling more of its impossible biology into the void.

"Yes, Master!" came Meltryllis's quick, happy reply. The water carried them in a controlled arc, and the duo crashed onto the back of the inhuman body with bone-jarring force that would have shattered unenhanced bones.

Leon was already moving before he'd fully landed, already projecting and embedding more swords—Kanshou and Bakuya, a dozen nameless blades, each one overcharged to the breaking point. He fed more prana into them than they could withstand, felt them crack and fracture even as they left his hands. They detonated around him in cascading explosions of magical energy, tearing chunks from the creature's crystalline carapace.

Both Leon and Durga fought on the creature's back, dodging and weaving amongst the dozens of flying buzz saws—the Kanshou and Bakuya pairs that continued their deadly orbits, carving through nightmarish flesh with each pass. The severed tail swept again in blind fury but missed them entirely, its momentum uncontrolled. The massive appendage punched into the thick

tentacle holding the pixie instead, the impact creating visible cracks in the crystalline flesh.

From their elevated position, they could see the trio—Sella, Leysritt, and Illya—positioned at mid-range, sending out gravitic blasts and superheated balls of light which pulsed like captured pulsars. The attacks severed several of the creature's limbs in explosive bursts, and one of the three tails was completely torn away, tumbling through the air before crashing to the chamber floor.

But the nightmare just kept regenerating. As it lost each limb, new ones began growing from the stumps, flesh knitting itself back together with disturbing speed. Several severed limbs already lay scattered on the chamber floor, twitching with residual life.

Then Leon heard it—a sound beneath them that made his skin crawl. The sound of gnawing, of flesh and bone being ripped and consumed. Wet, organic sounds of feeding, punctuated by something that might have been satisfied grunts or the working of a throat swallowing massive chunks of meat.

From Angelica and Olivia's perspective on Meltryllis's water platform, they had a clearer view of the chamber floor beneath the monster.

Angelica's eyes widened in horror as she saw movement in the shadows under the creature's bulk. Tentacles—dozens of them, possibly hundreds, thinner than the ones on the tails but no less disturbing—were emerging from *beneath* the transparent floor, reaching up through some hidden opening or portal. They wrapped around the severed limbs, dragging them down into the darkness below with purposeful efficiency.

And there was something else down there. Something massive and writhing that the tentacles were feeding. She caught glimpses of it through the transparent floor—a mouth, if it could be called that. A massive, circular maw lined with spiraling rows of teeth that ground and crushed, that pulled the severed limbs into its gullet like a cosmic garbage disposal. The thing *underneath* was eating the pieces, consuming them, and she could see—gods, she could see—the consumed mass flowing back up through fleshy tubes, feeding into the main creature's body, fueling its regeneration.

It wasn't just regenerating. It was *recycling itself*.

"There's something beneath it," Angelica called out through the comms, her voice tight with barely controlled horror. "It's feeding—it's feeding the severed parts back into itself!"

Olivia's response was immediate, cutting through the horror with tactical assessment. "That's why it regenerates so fast. It's a closed system. We need to stop the feeding or overwhelm the regeneration completely."

Angelica reached behind her without looking, her hands finding the potions she needed through muscle memory and training. "Melt, mana and stamina."

"Yes, Ms Redgrave, the corks have already been removed," came Meltryllis's earnest reply, the guardian spirit somehow managing their mobility, her own attacks, *and* their supply management simultaneously.

Angelica downed both bottles in quick succession, the liquid burning as it went down—too hot, too cold, too *much*—but the effect was immediate. Mana flooded her core, stamina pushed back the exhaustion that had been creeping into her limbs. She wiped the excess from her lips with her forearm, sweat

beading down her temples despite the constant movement keeping the air flowing past her face.

She switched tactics immediately, abandoning the concentrated explosive fire magic she'd been using. Instead, she channelled enchanted flames—fire that would latch onto whatever it touched and burn until there was no more material to consume, flames that couldn't be extinguished by regeneration because they'd simply continue burning the new flesh as it grew.

The flames caught and spread across the creature's limbs like living things, hungry and relentless.

Olivia, meanwhile, upped the production of her stork knights, hair pulling free from her scalp in steady streams to weave more constructs. The current group was trying to divert the attention of the remaining two tails, sacrificing themselves in suicidal dives to prevent the appendages from harassing Leon and Durga on the creature's back. "Zähre!" she declared, and another flock manifested, rushing forward, shooting magical bullets from their beaks as they swarmed.

Leon and Durga continued their assault from their position on the creature's back—a surface area that could probably dwarf their academy's entire school grounds. They riddled the crystalline carapace with projectiles, carving trenches and craters, exposing the flesh beneath.

Then, without warning, the tentacle holding the pixie suddenly *moved*. It flipped over with disturbing speed and flexibility, inverting completely. The pixie's feet were now spread upwards toward the distant ceiling, whilst her head hung upside down, hair defying gravity to float around her face in an unsettling halo.

But her eyes—those terrible, nebula-filled eyes—were locked directly on Leon and Durga. Facing the annoyances on her back.

The mouthless face somehow conveyed satisfaction, amusement, the promise of violence.

Leon didn't give it another chance. He traced Herakles's sword-axe, the weapon manifesting in his hands with familiar, brutal weight. Simultaneously, he reinforced his body to the absolute maximum his circuits could handle without burning out, felt his muscles swell with power, felt his bones become steel, felt his blood turn to fire. The weapon began enlarging in his grip, growing from oversized to monstrous, from monstrous to apocalyptic.

"Trigger off," Leon said calmly through the comms, the words carrying absolute finality.

Olivia's response was immediate, her mind already three steps ahead. "Illya, make sure the three tails are preoccupied. Meltryllis, harass its limbs—do not let it interrupt anyone. Everyone else concentrate fire on the pixie and the appendage it's attached to. Give it everything!"

"Set!" Leon declared, taking his stance, the enlarged Herakles sword-axe resting on his shoulder.

After everyone's acknowledgement came through—a chorus of affirmations from all eight combatants—Olivia followed through immediately. More Stork Knights manifested in waves, the golem constructs made from her hair rushing towards the monster in suicidal flocks. "Zähre!" Another flock materialised at her call, rushing forward in perfect formation, shooting concentrated magical bullets as they circled the pixie, bombarding it from every conceivable angle, creating a storm of light and destruction.

Illya suddenly teleported—space folding around her like paper—appearing just above where the three tails thrashed and writhed. With a sweeping gesture that left trails of shadow in the air, she brought forth her own constructs. Shadowed forms of bipedal wolves and hares, each one wielding weapons that gleamed with unnatural light. Several owls with bladed, jagged claws flew in complex patterns around the tail appendages, diving and slashing with mechanical precision.

She added her own bombardment to the chaos—gravitic blasts that compressed space itself, and beams of blackened light that seemed to drink in the chamber's illumination. The tail appendages were torn apart under the assault, tentacles severed, and barbs shattered. But they grew back almost instantly, new flesh replacing old.

Yet Illya's sharp eyes caught the crucial detail that everyone else had missed. "The regeneration is slowing!" she called out through the comms. "Each regrowth is smaller! Keep it up!"

That single piece of tactical information changed everything. They could *win* this through attrition.

Meltryllis, still managing both Olivia and Angelica's mobility with perfect control, twirled through a complex series of movements. Where her feet touched the air, water coalesced, and where water formed, ice followed. A massive tidal pool manifested beneath the monster—not above, but *below*, rising from the transparent floor like a frozen tsunami. This particular tidal pool was made of hundreds of thousands of ice crystalline shards, each one sharp enough to cut steel, all of them churning in a vortex of destruction that shredded the creature's limbs bit by bit, preventing the tentacles beneath from collecting the severed pieces.

The feeding was interrupted. The thing beneath the floor *shrieked*—a sound of pure hunger denied, of frustration and rage—as its tentacles grasped at nothing, as the ice shredded what they tried to collect.

Sella and Leysritt joined the concentrated assault, abandoning their previous targets to focus entirely on the pixie and its tentacle appendage. Their solar-like energy orbs manifested in rapid succession—miniature suns compressed into spheres no larger than fists, each one containing enough energy to level buildings. They fired in perfect synchronisation, the spheres of concentrated light striking the pixie's torso and the tentacle appendage with explosive force that sent shockwaves rippling through the chamber.

Sella's attacks were surgical, targeting the connection point where the pixie merged with the tentacle, each impact creating spreading cracks in the crystalline flesh that glowed with inner light. Leysritt focused on the pixie's limbs, severing arms and legs with each strike, forcing the regeneration to split its resources, to choose what to repair first.

Durga added her own bombardment to the apocalyptic barrage, multiple arms wielding different weapons simultaneously in a display of divine combat prowess. Her farasa cleaved through regenerating flesh with each swing, her swords carved deep gashes that wept starlight, her spears punched through the tentacle's thick hide. The beams from above her head intensified to blinding brightness, creating a constant barrage that hammered the same spots repeatedly, preventing the creature from repositioning, from defending, from doing anything but endure.

The combined assault from all eight combatants created a storm of destruction so overwhelming, so absolutely devastating, that even the creature's impossible regeneration began to fail. Flesh couldn't knit back

together fast enough. Wounds stayed open. The pixie's beautiful features began to crack and fracture.

"Omni-process Projection complete," Leon's voice came through the comms, calm despite the apocalypse around him. "Now, I shoot a Hundred Heads. NINE LIVES BLADE WORKS!"

Leon *moved*.

The world seemed to hold its breath. Time didn't slow—Leon simply moved faster than time had any right to allow, faster than physics permitted, faster than reality could properly process. The enlarged Herakles sword-axe became a blur, became a concept, became inevitability itself.

*Thighs.* Both legs severed at the femur in simultaneous strikes that came from impossible angles, the blade existing in multiple positions at once.

*Groin.* The pelvic structure shattered, crystalline bone exploding into fragments.

*Ribs.* The entire rib cage carved away, exposing the cavity within.

*Upper arm.* Both shoulders separated from the torso, arms spinning away still trying to reach for him.

*Collarbone.* The clavicles shattered, the fragments glittering like stars.

*Windpipe.* The throat opened, revealing the hollow inside—no organs, just void and starlight.

*Temple.* The skull split, that perfect, terrible face cracking down the middle.

Everything was simultaneously slashed with godlike swiftness, the technique that had once slain a hydra applied to the context of melee. Seven strikes that

landed in the same instant, that occupied the same moment in time, that created a sound like a hundred sonic booms overlapping with each other until it became a single continuous roar of destroyed air.

The pixie didn't have time to scream. She simply came apart, her perfect form reduced to chunks of cosmic flesh that scattered across the chamber like a obscene explosion. The tentacle appendage that had held her spasmed once, twice, then went still, leaking dark matter from the cuts that Leon's strikes had carved through it on the way to his primary targets.

For one perfect moment, there was silence.

Then the creature—the thing that remained—*shrieked* with a sound that was nothing like before. This wasn't pain or fury. This was *loss*. This was something fundamental being torn away. The sound bypassed ears entirely, struck directly at souls, made everyone's vision go white with the intensity.

The massive body thrashed, hand-limbs flailing wildly, tails whipping with uncontrolled fury. The remaining two tails began to dissolve, melting like wax, the cosmic orbs along their length going dark one by one.

"It's dying!" Olivia called out. "Keep the pressure—don't let it recover!"

But then the body dissolved, not collapsing but *liquefying*, the crystalline structure turning to shadow and flowing upward. Both Durga and Leon dropped from quite the height as the surface they'd been standing on ceased to exist.

Meltryllis's waves caught them instantly, the water forming gentle cushions that settled them down on the chamber's transparent floor.

"Stay ale—!" Leon's warning was cut off when an inhuman screech wailed from above. The monster manifested high above them, perhaps a kilometre up, its fragile-looking wings beating as it revealed what lay beneath.

Everyone's eyes tracked upward, their minds struggling to process the altered form hovering in the vast space.

The central mass pulsed and shifted between two impossible states—an enormous eyelid, its surface slick with membranous fluids that caught the light like oil on water, and simultaneously a gaping maw lined with jagged, serrated teeth that gleamed like obsidian daggers. The two concepts occupied the same space, fighting for dominance, creating visual discord that made the eye slide away from focusing too long.

At the centre blazed a massive orange eyeball, easily fifty metres across. The iris swirled with patterns that suggested malice given form, whilst the pupil—a vertical slit like a predator's—dilated and contracted as it fixed its gaze upon them. The sclera was sickly yellow-grey, pulsing with visible veins thick as cables that throbbed with each beat of whatever passed for this thing's heart.

Where three tails had once lashed with deadly precision, now nine writhing limbs—possibly more, the count kept shifting—twisted and coiled through the air like serpentine whips. Each appendage glistened with viscous coating that dripped steadily onto the chamber floor below, the droplets sizzling and eating into the crystalline surface where they landed, leaving smoking pits.

But it was the pixie-like form that made stomachs clench with revulsion.

Gone was the deceptive crystalline beauty that had masked its true nature. Now everyone could see it in its horrific glory—exposed muscle fibres that twitched and contracted visibly, stark white bone jutting through tears in the

flesh, and sinew stretched taut like violin strings ready to snap. The anatomical display was grotesquely fascinating and utterly repulsive. Muscles rippled without skin to contain them, each fiber visible as it worked. Bones gleamed pristine against the raw red meat, creating stark contrast that burned itself into memory.

Most disturbing of all was what remained of the head.

Only a cracked skull persisted, the fracture from Leon's earlier strike running from crown to jaw like frozen lightning. The jaw hung impossibly wide in a perpetual silent scream—despite the pixie having had no mouth before, now it possessed one stretched beyond any human limit. Through the gaping aperture, two eyeballs rolled and undulated frantically, pressing against the inner surface of bone, fighting each other for position, each one struggling to catch a glimpse of the world beyond their bony prison. They weren't resting naturally but floating, animated by something that had nothing to do with optic nerves or conventional biology.

*'Well,'* Leon thought grimly, already tracing his bow, *'that's going to feature in my nightmares for the foreseeable future.'*

"Don't let up, continue attacking!" Angelica's voice cut through the comms, cutting through the moment of horrified paralysis.

"I have created over a thousand blades," Leon's voice rang out as everyone restarted their assault. The words of his aria carried across the chamber as reality bent to his will. He traced arrow after arrow, each one a sword converted to aerodynamic form, and loosed them in a storm. Caladbolg II after Caladbolg II materialized and launched, twisted drills of destruction that screamed through the air. Rain upon rain of steel fell upon the enemy, each blade finding purchase in cosmic flesh.

Durga restarted her bombardment, beams of crimson and black energy spawning from above her crown, blasting upward before arcing down like divine artillery. She charged toward the creature, weapons manifesting in each of her multiple hands.

Leon followed her lead. As he ran he traced hundreds upon hundreds of swords at fixed XYZ coordinates in the air, creating makeshift platforms and stair steps of projected blades—each one stable enough to push off from, each one placed with Structural Analysis precision. He ascended through empty space on stairs made of steel, never ceasing his bowed assault, never stopping the rain of steel, never stopping his tracing Noble Phantasm after Noble Phantasm as he notched them on his bow.

Olivia and Illya redirected their constructs toward the nightmare hovering above. Stork knights and shadowed wolves rushed upward in suicidal flocks. Owls with bladed claws circled and dove. Gravitic blasts and beams of blackened light joined the storm.

Meltryllis—still maintaining platforms for both Angelica and Olivia—summoned a massive water spout that crystallized mid-formation into a tornado of jagged ice shards. The frozen vortex reached upward like a pillar, shredding limbs as fast as they regenerated. Her two passengers added to the assault—Angelica's enchanted flames that latched and burned without ceasing, Olivia's hair-daggers that she called 'Degen' launching one after another.

Both Sella and Leysritt followed Leon and Durga's lead, their solar-like energy orbs manifesting as they flew toward the monster on wings of light.

But the creature roared in defiance.

Every remaining limb raised simultaneously, and gigantic plasma orbs began forming in each clawed hand—not the hundred-metre spheres from before but massive concentrations easily two hundred metres across. They launched in waves, dozens at once, tracking each combatant with malevolent intelligence.

"Melt, defence!" Leon ordered, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Don't wait for it to descend—block with ice walls!"

"Sella, Leysritt, redirect with gravitic magic," Olivia followed up immediately.

Walls of ice manifested in patterns across the chamber, intercepting the plasma orbs, detonating them prematurely. The guardian spirits added their power, bending space itself to curve the trajectories away from their allies.

Then it *vanished*.

Reality folded, and the creature simply ceased to exist in its position. It reappeared instantly behind Leon and Durga, the distance crossed in zero time. The skeletal pixie swiped with one muscled arm, the movement impossibly fast.

The impact sent both Leon and Durga flying. They tumbled through the air, unable to arrest their momentum, and crashed against the chamber's far wall with bone-shattering force. Leon felt ribs crack, felt his back crunch against the invisible barrier that marked the dungeon's edge. Durga hit beside him, the impact driving the air from both their lungs.

"Leon! Durga!" Olivia's worried voice came through the comms, answered only by pained grunts.

"Sella, Leysritt, Illya, cover us!" Olivia ordered, her tactical mind already adapting. "Angelica, continue your attack. Melt, bring us to Leon and Durga."

"Yes, Ms Olivia," came Meltryllis's reply, her usual cheerfulness replaced by worry.

The monster, now relieved of the burden of thousands of projectiles pin-cushioning its body, began teleporting around the chamber. It appeared and disappeared in rapid sequence, harassing the trio of guardian spirits. Plasma orbs launched from every position, creating a web of destruction that filled the space.

The trio of guardian spirits struggled, caught between offence and defence. They couldn't maintain both simultaneously—every moment spent blocking was a moment they couldn't attack, and every moment attacking left them vulnerable. Meltryllis attempted to detonate the orbs prematurely with ice walls placed in their paths, but there were too many, coming too fast.

Olivia leapt from the water platform carrying her and Angelica, leaving the wave behind as she rushed toward the pair collapsed against the wall. She dropped to her knees beside Leon, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear with hands that only trembled slightly.

Durga was already shakily trying to stand, waving Olivia off. "Tend to Master first," she said through gritted teeth, one arm cradling her ribs.

Olivia hovered her hands over Leon's back, her palms glowing with restorative magic. She could feel the damage through the connection—cracked vertebrae, ruptured organs, internal bleeding. Her magic went to work immediately, knitting bone and sealing vessels.

Then came three heavy *thuds* against the same wall, followed by three more impacts as bodies slid down to collapse near them. Sella, Leysritt, and Illya—all three thrown like rag dolls, all three struggling to rise.

"Sorry, Master," Sella said shakily, one hand pressed against her side where a plasma orb had scored a direct hit.

Then everyone's hair began to rise. The air itself became saturated with magic—so thick it was almost visible, so concentrated it made breathing difficult. Static electricity crackled across skin and armour.

Durga was the first to move, followed immediately by Meltryllis. Both took defensive positions, Melt raising ice walls in layered patterns, Durga manifesting her dhal shield and expanding it to cover the group.

With everyone's backs literally against the wall, thirteen copies of the abomination suddenly appeared in a wide semicircle that was almost practically straight before them, surrounding their position. Each one identical, each one real, each one charging power. The space between the pincers flanking each pixie's skeletal head sparked with building energy, reality warping around the focal points.

Thirteen beams of pure destructive energy burst forth simultaneously, all concentrated toward the same point—toward the huddled group with nowhere to run.

"Unknown to death, nor known to life," Leon's voice rang out clearly despite the pain, despite the building roar of incoming annihilation. "Rho Aias!"

The seven-layered shield bloomed before them—seven petals of translucent pink energy, each one massive, each one overlapping the others in a flower of absolute defence.

It was quite the boon, because as soon as the thirteen beams of pure destructive force converged—as concentrated destruction met absolute defence—both Meltryllis's ice walls and Durga's dhal shattered instantly. The

ice exploded into steam, the divine shield cracked and burst into motes of light.

Not that Rho Aias fared much better.

In two seconds, four layers had already broken.

Each shattered petal reflected damage back onto its caster. Leon's body jerked as though struck by invisible hammers. Blood burst from his skin in random patterns—not from wounds but from the sheer internal damage, from blood vessels rupturing under impossible pressure. His bones cracked audibly, the sound carrying even over the roar of the beams, his skeleton fracturing under forces it was never meant to withstand.

But beneath the pain, Leon felt something else—relief, a cycle of healing and damage running simultaneously. Olivia's hands never left his back, her magic working overtime, reknitting flesh as fast as it tore, setting bones as fast as they broke.

Leon dismissed and resummoned Rho Aias, the fifth layer shattering and reforming, the sixth layer holding for precious seconds. Behind them, everyone huddled in his shadow. From their perspective, Leon's back looked impossibly large—their last hope before oblivion takes them for everything. The layered shield bloomed and reformed before him like a flower eternally opening, each petal translucent pink shot through with gold script, each one catching the light of the destroying beams and refracting it into rainbow patterns that would have been beautiful if they weren't instruments of survival.

The petals shattered and reformed in sequence, a rhythm of destruction and recreation, buying them seconds, buying them time, buying them *life*.

Leon looked inward whilst his body screamed, searching through Unlimited Blade Works for something that could change the tide. He found three possibilities. One was a bright symbol, a sword of victory, signifying the triumphant before it was broken. The other two were looming constructs within his Reality Marble, massive beyond measure, and Leon wondered when Archer had been able to see the originals.

*'I'll prime these two for now,'* Leon thought as he traced another Rho Aias, the seventh layer shattering, the first reforming.

*'Judging the concept of creation.'*

Leon winced as pain beyond the physical lanced through him. These were divine constructs—weapons wielded and created by gods, the materials unknown to mortals. Even the most basic imitation would take a toll. What he didn't know was that blood was now streaming from every orifice of his face—nose, eyes, ears, mouth—painting his features red. His body was experiencing backlash on a cellular level, his brain suffering from countless micro-aneurysms as neurons fired and died.

But Olivia was there, reknitting him over and over, her face contorted in concentration and desperation, her magic working beyond what should be possible, drawing on reserves she didn't know she had.

*'Hypothesizing the basic structure.'*

*'Duplicating the composition material.'*

Leon's body buckled as his Reality Marble compensated, unable to replicate divine materials, substituting with alternatives that were close but not perfect. His circuits burned, overloading, threatening to fail entirely.

*'Imitating the skill of its making.'*

*'Sympathising with the experience of the blade.'*

*'Reproducing the accumulated years.'*

His body was overheating now, temperature rising beyond what flesh could sustain. His mind, his instincts, his every cell was rejecting what he was doing—this wasn't meant for humans, this was hubris, this was reaching beyond mortal limits. But he pushed through it all, forced his will onto reality, demanded that the world bend.

*'Excelling every manufacturing process.'*

With a desperate roar of defiance that tore his throat raw, Leon shouted the names that would doom or save them:

"IG-ALIMA! SUL-SAGANA!"

Everyone's eyes widened, their minds unable to process the sheer *scale* of what appeared above them.

Two swords materialised in the air, but calling them swords was like calling mountains pebbles. They were impossibly vast—each blade easily a kilometre long, three to four hundred metres wide at the base, tapering to points that could pierce reality itself. They appeared like guillotines dropping from heaven, their whole massive lengths falling with the inevitability of divine judgement.

Ig-Alima and Sul-Sagana—the swords wielded by Zababa, the war god of Kish, weapons that had split mountains and carved valleys, blades that had been present at the dawn of civilisation when gods walked among men.

Ig-Alima, 'the most exalted one,' whose edge had never dulled. Sul-Sagana, 'the greatest of heroes,' whose weight was said to equal the world's sorrows.

But Leon's versions were hollow—not solid divine metal but shells, frameworks, imitations that captured the form and function but not the true essence. They were to the originals what shadows were to solid objects. Yet even shadows of divine weapons wielded power beyond mortal comprehension.

The swords fell.

The kinetic force alone was apocalyptic. Two mountain-sized blades dropping with terminal velocity, with gravity itself weaponised, with mass multiplied by acceleration creating forces measured in megatons. The air screamed as it was displaced. Sonic booms overlapped into a single continuous roar that deafened.

The blades fell onto the thirteen copies of the horror given form, and the chamber *shook*.

The impact created a shockwave that radiated outward in all directions. Everyone was blown backward against the wall by the sheer force—not from the swords themselves but from the air displaced by their passage, from the pressure wave that preceded them, from the reality-shaking violence of their descent.

The thirteen copies were cleaved and crushed simultaneously. Those caught under Ig-Alima's edge were bisected, split from crown to base, their cosmic flesh parting like water. Those beneath Sul-Sagana's flat were simply *flattened*, compressed, reduced to spreading stains beneath impossible weight.

The swords embedded themselves in the chamber floor, driving deep, creating cracks that spread in spiderwebs across the chamber floor.

But still the creatures' cries echoed across the chamber. The chorused symphony of horrific shrieking was amplified tenfold as thirteen throats screamed in unison—not death screams but rage, pain, *denial*. The sound bypassed ears entirely, resonated in souls, made reality itself vibrate in sympathy.

"This is our last stand," Leon rallied them, his voice hoarse but carrying through the comms to all eight combatants. They were all shakily trying to stand from the backlash, all bearing injuries, all exhausted. "Buy me thirty seconds."

He could see the twelve copies vanishing now, dismissed or destroyed, fading like nightmares at dawn. But the thirteenth—the original, the *real* one—was starting to recover, was pulling itself together even whilst pinned beneath Sul-Sagana's immense weight.

"Make sure it doesn't leave that position," Leon commanded, already beginning the projection, already reaching for the sword that mattered. "Pin it down. Overwhelm it."

Everyone charged.

Durga was first, roaring defiance, all her arms wielding different weapons as she leapt onto Sul-Sagana's flat and ran up its length toward the trapped creature.

Meltryllis followed, carrying Olivia and Angelica on waves that solidified into platforms, bringing them into range. Angelica's rifle cracked out measured

shots whilst Olivia's hair-constructs multiplied, a storm of Degen rushing forward.

Sella and Leysritt took to the air, their wings of light carrying them upward as they bombarded the pinned creature with solar orbs, each impact creating spreading cracks in its crystalline flesh.

Illya teleported directly above the trapped nightmare, her shadow constructs manifesting in waves—wolves and hares and owls, all wielding bladed weapons, all diving with suicidal determination.

The creature thrashed, tried to teleport, tried to escape. But the pressure didn't let it. It couldn't move. Couldn't flee. Could only endure.

Leon stood alone, thirty metres back, both hands raised. His circuits were burning, his body was failing, blood covered his face and soaked his clothes. Olivia's healing had kept him alive, but couldn't keep him whole—he was breaking apart from the inside, held together by will alone.

But he had thirty seconds.

He reached into Unlimited Blade Works one final time, reached for the sword he'd seen only in fragments, the sword that was broken but whose concept remained. The blade of the king who'd pulled it from stone, the sword that had chosen the worthy, the weapon that represented victory itself.

*'I don't need the perfect copy,'* Leon thought as his body strained to its absolute limits. *'I just need it to remember what it was. What it meant. What it represented.'*

Golden light began to gather between his hands, coalescing from nothing, from memory, from the weight of legend itself. Not the Holy Sword

Excalibur—that was beyond him, was something that could only be held by the true king. But the sword that came before. The sword of selection.

The golden light intensified, taking shape, forming a blade that gleamed like captured sunlight.

The sword solidified, three feet of golden steel, with a crossguard and a pommel bearing a dragon wound around a crown.

His hands closed around the grip. The sword recognised him—not as its king, never that, but as someone who understood what it meant to carry weight, to bear responsibility, to sacrifice.

Everyone was giving their all, pouring everything they had into keeping the creature pinned, keeping it from escaping, holding it in place for what had to come next.

Leon raised the sword high, and golden light blazed along its length, running from hilt to tip, building in intensity until it was painful to look at directly, until shadows were banished entirely from the chamber.

The golden light became blinding, became absolute, became a pillar that reached from floor to distant ceiling.

"Everyone back off," Olivia yelled through the comms.

"SWORD OF SELECTION!" Leon roared, bringing the sword down in a vertical slash that was less a strike and more a declaration, a statement that this ended *here*, that this ended *now*. "CALIBURN"

The blade fell.

The golden light became a wave, a tsunami, an absolute wall of destruction that swept forward with the inevitability of dawn, the certainty of the sun rising, the promise that darkness would always yield to light.

The wave struck the pinned creature.

And the creature *screamed*—one final time, a sound of such absolute despair and denial that it threatened to shatter minds, to break spirits, to unmake souls. But the sound was cut off mid-note, severed, *ended*.

The golden light consumed everything—flesh, bone, cosmic matter, the very concept of the creature itself. It burned away the corruption, cauterised the wound in reality that this thing had represented, and cleansed with fire that was simultaneously gentle and absolute.

When the light faded, when everyone could see again through vision spotted with afterimages, the creature was *gone*. Not dead—*gone*. Removed from existence as thoroughly as if it had never been. Even the pieces that had been scattered across the chamber, even the ichor that had stained the floor, even the *memory* of its presence seemed diminished, harder to recall clearly.

Sul-Sagana and Ig-Alima faded, their purpose fulfilled.

And in the centre of where the creature had been pinned, scattered across the crystalline floor, lay the spoils of their victory: multiple orbs that still pulsed with faint inner light, jagged shards of crystalline carapace, the two massive curved horns—each one easily ten metres long—and the upper half of the pixie's skull, the fracture still visible, the empty eye sockets somehow still watching.

Then, suddenly, the three academy students felt pressure. Not physical—something deeper, something that bypassed flesh and struck directly at their cores. Each one felt it individually: the sensation of being *seen*,

of having someone—or *something*—look into them, into their souls, into the very essence of their character. Judging. Weighing. Determining if they were worthy.

His legs simply gave out, his body having nothing left to give. He fell backwards, and Olivia was there instantly, catching him, lowering him gently, her hands already glowing with healing magic even though she was swaying with exhaustion herself.

"We did it," someone said—Leon couldn't tell who through the ringing in his ears. "We actually did it."

At the centre of the chamber, an altar appeared.

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*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Despite her tiredness—that bone-deep exhaustion that seemed to settle into every fibre of her being—despite the soreness that radiated through her muscles with each breath, despite the fact that she still hadn't resolved matters with her fiancé, despite all of it, Angelica felt absolutely excellent. Magnificent, even.

She had finally achieved one of her most cherished dreams. Not merely to go on an adventure, though that alone would have been extraordinary, but to actually conquer a dungeon, to prove herself capable of such a feat, and most importantly, to contract with her very own guardian spirit. The weight of that accomplishment settled over her like a warm blanket, chasing away the lingering doubts that had plagued her before they'd descended into this place.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Angelica remained seated on the cool transparent floor of the chamber where they had just slain the dungeon's final boss. Her legs felt rather like jelly, if she was being honest with herself, and she rather suspected she'd be aching dreadfully come morning. But that was tomorrow's concern. Tonight—or was it still afternoon? Time lost all meaning in this place—she simply wanted to savour this moment, to let the reality of what she'd accomplished sink in properly.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Looking to her left, Angelica couldn't help but smile as the guardian spirit she had contracted with tilted her head, her luminous cyan eyes bright with what Angelica could only interpret as genuine affection. The spirit smiled at her in return, and something warm blossomed in Angelica's chest—a connection, a bond forming between them that went deeper than mere words.

She had relinquished control over her guardian's appearance entirely, allowing the spirit to choose for herself, and what a remarkable choice it had been. The spirit had introduced herself as Britomart, a cosmic fairy-type guardian spirit whose very presence seemed to make the air shimmer with possibility.

Britomart wore a flowing white dress with a high collar and a daringly plunging neckline that descended to her midriff, held together by delicate golden chains in an intricate lattice pattern. The fabric fell to mid-thigh with layers of white and deep purple trimmed in golden knotwork, moving with fluid grace. From her back emerged translucent fairy wings that refracted light like stained glass, though they vanished and reappeared at will, as though she dismissed them whenever they might prove inconvenient.

She stood perhaps half a head shorter than Angelica, petite but carrying herself with natural confidence that made her seem taller. Long hair flowed

past her shoulders in gentle waves—a delicate lavender-silver that graduated into soft pink at the tips, styled with two elaborate buns positioned high on either side of her head, each wrapped in ornamental golden rings. Delicate pointed ears peeked through the elaborate hairstyle, marking her fairy heritage clearly.

But it was her eyes that truly captivated—large and expressive, the irises a brilliant cyan that seemed to hold actual light within their depths. Not nebulas or cosmic horror, but something cleaner, something that spoke of clear skies and distant stars viewed on peaceful nights. Her skin possessed a soft luminescence, pale as fresh cream with the faintest hint of rose, giving her an ethereal quality. When she smiled, those eyes crinkled with warmth that seemed entirely genuine, entirely *hers*.

She was beautiful in a way that managed to be both ethereal and approachable, powerful without being intimidating—a fairy who'd chosen her own appearance and wore it with absolute confidence.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Olivia was sitting beside her, resting whilst her new guardian spirit—a blonde, petite fairy named Pollux—lay with her head on the academy scholar's lap. The other guardian spirits were scattered behind them, all taking the opportunity to recover from the brutal battle they'd just survived.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Angelica could hear that the battle above them was winding down, the sounds of combat growing more sporadic, more distant. Quite serendipitously, she could also feel the magic emanating from the altar reaching its zenith, building toward some critical threshold that made the air itself vibrate with anticipation.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Leon stood before the altar, working with focused intensity. After everything had calmed down—after both Angelica and Olivia had contracted with their new guardian spirits—they'd been able to notice the changes in the sole male member of their group.

He looked... different enough that one would notice immediately upon looking at him properly.

Where before Leon had possessed black hair, now it turned white, as though what colour had remained had been bleached away entirely by some tremendous force. His eyes had changed as well—one remained the silver-grey she remembered, but the other had shifted to gold, creating a striking heterochromatic effect that was both beautiful and unsettling. His skin, previously pale, now bore a very light tan, as though he'd spent weeks under a gentle sun. His features seemed sharper somehow, more refined, his face having lost some indefinable softness and gained an edge that made him look older, more weathered.

Olivia had theorised that, because of the tremendous backlash he'd endured from the nightmarish creature's final attack—in which his body had been simultaneously destroyed and reknit over and over in that impossible cycle of damage and healing—some fundamental things about his physical form had begun to drift, where some of his parts were eventually replaced totally.

Leon had just shrugged when she'd explained this, as if changing something so integral to one's identity was a minor inconvenience rather than anything worth concern. He'd simply taken one of the prominent horns from the celestial nightmare they'd just slain—claiming it as part of his share of the loot—and set to work.

The moment his hand had touched the altar's surface, an anvil and a forge had manifested before it, appearing from nowhere as though they'd always been there. However, Angelica wasn't sure if it was another facet of Leon's magic or the altar's magic.

Olivia had explained this was Leon's unique method of contracting with guardian spirits. Rather than the traditional communion most used—offering prayers, pledges, or requests—Leon created offerings tailored to each spirit's interests and desires. Gifts forged with his own hands, imbued with his magic, designed to appeal to the very essence of what that spirit represented.

She'd pointed out examples. The long metal greaves—elegant pieces of leg armour with flowing designs—had been Leon's offering and gift to Meltryllis, crafted to suit her graceful, dance-like combat style. The various weapons Durga had wielded throughout the battle—the farasa, the additional blades, the implements of war—had all been his offerings to her, each one perfectly balanced for her divine strength.

These offerings became part of the contract formation itself, Olivia had explained. They became essential to the contracted guardian spirit, bound to them in ways that transcended normal equipment. The spirits could summon and dismiss the items at will, calling them forth from nothing whenever needed. If the items broke in battle, they would eventually reknit themselves given time, regenerating as long as the contract existed, as long as the bond remained intact.

It was a fascinating approach, Angelica thought. Personal. Intimate in a way that standard contracts weren't, which made her a little guilty by comparison, but it lessened as she felt the bond between her and Britomart—the warmth of

being connected to someone—wishing she could connect like this with her betrothed.

A twinge of anger filled Angelica as she again reminded herself of her current personal problems, but she waved those feelings away for now.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

A bright, blinding light suddenly encompassed the altar, so intense that Angelica had to shield her eyes. One last *clang* echoed throughout the chamber—louder than all the others, final and absolute—and then the light burst outward in a wave of pure magical energy that washed over everyone present.

When Angelica could see again, two figures stood before Leon where none had been moments before.

They tackled him enthusiastically, appearing so suddenly that he had no chance to brace himself. He staggered backwards, caught off-balance, as both spirits latched onto him with obvious affection. The offerings he'd been working on—whatever final touches he'd been applying—were no longer visible, presumably absorbed into the contract formation.

Angelica studied the new guardian spirits with interest.

Both appeared humanoid and feminine, far shorter than Leon—perhaps reaching only to his chest. Both possessed the delicate, pointed ears and translucent wings that marked them as fairy-type spirits, though their wings seemed more substantial than Britomart's, less prone to fading in and out of visibility. Both wore flowing white robes that seemed simpler than Britomart's elaborate dress, yet no less elegant.

They looked like sisters, perhaps—or twins, given their similar features. Yet specific key differences made them distinct, as though they represented two aspects of the same concept made manifest in contrasting forms.

"The guardian spirits could be innocent and cruel at the same time," Olivia said suddenly, her voice solemn with a hint of sadness that made Angelica glance over at her. Olivia was looking at Leon with his new guardian spirits, her expression complicated—fondness mixed with something that might have been grief or regret. Her hand continued to run gently through Pollux's hair, the small fairy making contented sounds in her sleep.

Angelica wasn't entirely sure what Olivia meant by that cryptic statement, but something in her tone suggested it wasn't meant for her to understand. Something private between Leon and Olivia, some shared context from whatever history they had together before the academy.

She didn't pry. Everyone was entitled to their secrets, their private griefs.

After managing to stand up from the tangled limbs of his newly contracted guardian spirits, Leon approached them, the two new guardian spirits at his side still clinging to both arms as though afraid he might vanish if they let go. He looked exhausted—more than exhausted, really, but there was satisfaction in his eyes, a quiet pleasure at having completed something important.

Angelica turned her head towards the right as movement caught her attention.

The main group of adventurers, professors, and students appeared at the chamber's far entrance, finally finished with their own battle. They'd clearly had a harder time of it than Leon's smaller group—many looked utterly spent, some limping, others supporting injured companions. But they were here now,

drawn by the altar's call, ready to attempt their own communion and establish guardian spirit contracts of their own.

This was highly encouraged, after all. Every guardian spirit gained by a member of the kingdom contributed to the kingdom's overall might, strengthening Holfort's position in a world where power determined survival. The academy actively promoted dungeon expeditions for precisely this reason—not just for the treasure or the prestige, but for the strategic value of binding powerful spirits to the nation's service.

Margot Fou Bellefleur was at the front of the group, still looking as fresh as she had at the expedition's start. Her face was bright and proud, one hand placed firmly on her hip as she marched forward toward their smaller group with the confident stride of someone who'd never doubted her victory.

But as she approached, her expression shifted. Her confident smile faltered, replaced by a confused frown that deepened with each step.

She stopped a few metres away, eyes scanning their group with clear bewilderment.

"Hey," she said, her tone blunt and direct as always. "Where's Leon? And who the fuck are *you*?"

She was staring directly at Leon as she said it.

Leon, still flanked by his two new guardian spirits, simply gave her a tired, exhausted look.

As everyone stepped out of the dungeon, they were greeted by the late-afternoon sky, the sun hanging low on the horizon, painting everything in shades of orange and gold.

In their ascent through the dungeon's levels, Leon had been approached by two of their upperclassmen—the two ladies he'd saved from the boss on the second floor. Both had offered their sincere thanks, their gratitude genuine and somewhat embarrassed at having needed rescue.

The upperclassman who introduced herself as Clarice hovered around the group after voicing her gratitude, seeming reluctant to leave despite having nothing particular to say. The other, who introduced herself as Deirdre, had been far more forward—she'd begun chatting Leon up almost immediately, even asking if he would invite her to tea. Leon, caught somewhat off-guard by the directness, had acquiesced to setting up a date before the end of the first term.

Both ladies had managed to contract with their own guardian spirits during the altar ceremony. In fact, plenty—if not all—of the expedition members had been able to establish contracts with new guardian spirits. The dungeon had been generous in that regard, at least.

Olivia, who had observed this exchange with keen interest—noting that this was the first girl who'd shown genuine romantic interest in Leon—immediately began calculating. This could be the opening salvo of her long-planned 'Operation Yuri-Yuri Harem as Leon's Mistress.' She'd need to cultivate this Deirdre, assess her compatibility, determine if she'd be receptive to... unconventional relationship dynamics.

For now, though, she simply accompanied Angelica as they both fell into discussion about magical theory, their conversation flowing naturally from combat applications they'd used in the dungeon to theoretical improvements.

Olivia began offering Angelica ideas for more devastating fire-based spells—modifications to increase temperature, ways to make flames stick to targets, methods of creating backdrafts and firestorms. She spoke with innocent enthusiasm, completely unaware of the increasingly horrified expressions forming on nearby academy students' faces as she cheerfully described magics that could ruthlessly maim or kill someone with the proper application of control and the chaotic nature inherent to the fire element.

"—and if you superheat the air in their lungs whilst simultaneously creating a vacuum around their head, the pressure differential causes—"

"Hey, Olivia," Angelica interrupted, her attention suddenly drawn upward. "Did Leon's land suddenly expand?"

Olivia, following Angelica's gaze, frowned as two new floating islands hovered just beside the island they were currently standing on. They hadn't been there when they'd entered the dungeon—she was certain of that.

Everyone could hear the telltale sound of an airbike engine revving, its pitch rising sharply. Judging from the rapidly increasing volume, it was approaching fast—very fast.

All eyes turned skyward, tracking the rapidly enlarging silhouette. The rider performed a full flip mid-flight, the bike rotating end-over-end with practised ease before descending in a sharp dive that made several students gasp. The bike stopped mere metres from the ground, the floating stone within it groaning as they arrested the descent at the last possible second.

A tall young lady stood up from the bike, swinging her long leg over the seat with athletic grace as she stepped onto solid ground.

She was striking—beautiful in a way that commanded attention rather than simply attracting it. Long black hair fell past her shoulders in glossy waves that caught the afternoon light, framing a face with delicate features and piercing blue eyes that seemed to assess everything they looked at. Her figure was exceptional, curves that would make most women envious displayed by form-fitting adventurer's attire that somehow managed to be both practical and eye-catching.

She wore a distinctive ensemble of black and blue—a fitted breastplate in black with golden accents that protected her torso whilst leaving her arms bare except for black gauntlets with golden trim. A short black battle skirt hung from her waist, split on both sides to allow freedom of movement, revealing long legs protected by knee-high black boots with golden reinforcements. A long black cape flowed from her shoulders, lined with brilliant blue fabric that billowed dramatically in the wind created by her landing.

The armour was clearly high-quality, each piece custom-fitted, bearing the unmistakable signs of someone who took their equipment seriously.

She surveyed the assembled group with those sharp blue eyes, her expression settling into a frown. "Where is Leon Fou Bartfort?" Her voice carried clearly, confident and direct.

Both Angelica and Olivia heard Margot mutter from nearby, her tone mixing exasperation with resignation: "What is my crazy daughter up to this time?"

All eyes turned toward Leon, who was still preoccupied with talking to Deirdre. His two new fairy guardian spirits hovered beside him, listening to the

conversation with apparent interest, whilst Durga and Meltryllis stood behind them like silent sentinels.

Leon looked up, sensing the sudden attention, tilting his head in confusion as he wondered why everyone was staring at him.

The black-haired lady approached with confidence oozing from every step, though her expression shifted to a frown as she drew closer, studying him intently. "You seem different from the photographs," she said, her tone carrying a note of suspicion. "You *are* Baron Leon Fou Bartfort, correct?"

Leon ruffled his hair awkwardly, the gesture drawing attention to how his white hair caught the orange light of the sinking sun, making it almost seem to glow. "A recent magical side effect," he explained simply. "Yes, I'm Leon Fou Bartfort."

He frowned slightly as he glanced at Margot, then turned back to the girl, raising an eyebrow. "What does the eldest Bellefleur daughter need with me?"

"Good—you have a sharp mind as well." With a theatrical flick of her hair, she placed one hand over her considerable chest and executed a light curtsy that somehow managed to be both respectful and confident. "My name is Mégane Fou Bellefleur. As you can see behind me—" she gestured toward the two floating islands "—I've conquered three dungeons total. I'm here to offer two of my recently conquered lands as tribute to the new Barony of Leon Bartfort."

She paused for dramatic effect, her blue eyes locked on Leon's mismatched gaze.

"Along with these lands, I offer my blade, my magic, my loyalty, my service, and my body as your primary vassal and mistress."

The silence that followed was profound.

Then everyone's hair seemed to rise as the temperature dropped noticeably. A rock near Olivia's foot was suddenly crushed to powder as everyone heard a sharp *stomp* that cracked the ground beneath it.

Olivia approached both Leon and Mégane with measured steps, her face forming a smile that didn't seem quite right to Leon—and to anyone who could visibly see the Bartfort vassal's expression, it was clear this smile belonged on a predator rather than a petite blonde academy student.

"Greetings, Ms Bellefleur," Olivia said, her voice sweet as honey and twice as dangerous. "My name is Olivia, and I'm the Bartfort Baron's *primary* vassal and mistress." She extended her hand with exaggerated politeness. "I'm sure a lady of your standing and accomplishment would rather aspire to be my liege's *wife* rather than settling for the position of a lowly vassal and mistress, wouldn't you agree?"

It seemed as if a bear and a tiger were about to clash, metaphorical sparks flying between them as Mégane clasped Olivia's offered hand. Both immediately began trying to crush each other's fingers whilst maintaining their amicable masks, their smiles never wavering even as the pressure increased.

"Oh, posh," Mégane said airily, though her grip tightened noticeably. "I'm simply being practical. The responsibilities of managing an up-and-coming barony would not suit me—I'm an adventurer first and foremost, you understand. However, since I'm contributing *two* island dungeons compared to your contribution of one..." She paused meaningfully, her smile sharpening. "The position of primary vassal and mistress should rightfully be mine, don't you think, *secondary* vassal and mistress Olivia?"

Both women exchanged increasingly strained smiles as they continued attempting to pulverise each other's hands, neither willing to show weakness by releasing first.

The assembled crowd watched with horrified fascination, several students taking cautious steps backward.

Meanwhile, Leon was sporting his typical exasperated, tired expression—the one that suggested he'd seen this coming somehow and had already resigned himself to the chaos. He looked toward Margot with a silent plea for assistance, for intervention, for *something*.

The guild leader only had her face buried in her hands, her shoulders shaking as she grumbled audibly about her crazy daughter who'd skipped the entire first term to go dungeon-diving, who never listened to reason, who'd apparently decided that offering herself as a vassal and mistress to a newly elevated baron was a perfectly sensible career move, not seeing the irony where she subjected her parents to the same stress back when she was young.

Leon sighed.

It was going to be a long journey back to the academy.

Behind him, his two new fairy guardian spirits giggled at the spectacle, whilst Durga and Meltryllis exchanged knowing glances that suggested they found this entire situation deeply amusing. Deirdre had her foldable fan extended as she covered her mouth, her face clearly amused at the events.

The sun continued its descent toward the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant oranges and reds, whilst two determined women continued their grip-strength

competition, and Leon contemplated whether it was too late to descend into one of his other unexplored dungeons.

At least dungeons are straightforward about wanting to kill him.

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**==&<o>&=-**

**End**

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