

## **Demonic 2321**

### Chapter 2321. Teamwork

Heaven and Earth had mostly ignored June. They were aware of her peculiar power, but she was simply too weak to participate in that final battle.

The attack launched toward the landmass had also been too powerful for a single rank 9 existence. Heaven and Earth didn't expect June to be able to affect it, but that outcome didn't worry them too much either.

The battle stopped while June absorbed all the lightning bolts in Heaven and Earth's offensive. Holes opened on her body, and flares came out of them due to the overwhelming amount of energy she was stuffing into her Perfect Circuit.

Everyone could see that June couldn't handle so much power. Her flesh and world had innate resistance toward Heaven and Earth's lightning bolts, but she had clear limits, and the process had already pushed her past them.

The move was nothing but suicidal. June couldn't hope to survive the process, but even Heaven and Earth couldn't predict the limits of her maniacal behavior.

June ignored the many injuries and forced Heaven and Earth's energy to improve her body. Most of her flesh didn't survive the process, but a few chunks reached new levels of power and strived toward a complete evolution.

The evolution was far from painless, and June turned into a gory figure with only a few patches of skin left on her. Even most of her muscles had shattered during her attempt to use that superior energy to improve, but she appeared fine with the damage.

June diverted part of her attention toward her flesh while the absorption continued. The few patches of skin that had survived the process had turned into materials that could endure higher levels of power, and she didn't hesitate to rely on them.

The Perfect Circuit generated energy that went far beyond June's normal limits, but her new flesh endured it perfectly. Other parts of her body weren't so lucky, but she didn't care about them.

The new energy shattered and added power to her influence, allowing her to stretch it until the closest area of the sky. June had already affected the dense sphere, so forcing the storms to fly toward her turned out to be pretty easy.

Lightning bolts left the storms and shot toward June. The attacks crashed on her body and joined the torrent of energy that she had previously absorbed.

The process resumed at that point. June forced the absorbed energy to improve her body before using the few remaining patches of flesh to expand her influence even further.

June's plan became clear to everyone. She wanted to affect the entirety of the storms with her influence. Removing the lightning bolts before the sky wouldn't provide any tactical advantage, but it might provide her with what she needed to advance.

Understanding the plan didn't change the nature of June's actions. Heaven and Earth still believed that she was killing herself. Seizing a small chunk of the storms had already almost destroyed her body. It sounded impossible to absorb all of them.

However, Heaven and Earth had already confirmed that the entirety of Noah's group was surpassing their expectations. It didn't matter how unlikely an event might be. June had a chance to succeed, and the rulers couldn't let her do as she wished.

"Enough with ants hindering our plans," Heaven and Earth announced before pointing two fingers at June.

June's situation was so frail that a single unexpected wave of energy could destabilize the balance she was struggling to preserve. Her body even contained too much power, so a negative influence would surely lead to an explosion.

Still, as energy gathered on Heaven and Earth's fingertips, a torrent of black energy teleported above them and slammed on their head.

The contact with the lightning bolts destroyed most of the torrent, revealing Noah donned in his fiendish armor. The tips of his blades tried to pierce Heaven and Earth's head, but they failed to go past the superficial lightning bolts.

However, the Demonic Sword and the Cursed Sword had slightly pierced Heaven and Earth, so potential filled Noah's world. The power-up gave new strength to his thrusting motion and pushed the crackling figure slightly downward.

The crackling noises released by Heaven and Earth grew louder, but Noah didn't let go even as sparks left his opponent and pierced his body. Yet, that slight push didn't distract the rulers from their main target.

Heaven and Earth's fingertips brightened, but an unstoppable force suddenly landed on their hand and pushed it slightly away. The rulers had to realign their arm with June, but the figure that materialized at their side stopped them.

"I can't hold them for too long," Wilfred announced as he grabbed Heaven and Earth's arm and pulled it while giving fuel to everything he had.

The muscles on Wilfred's arms bulged until they reached an unreasonable size. Still, his hands and forearms suffered by being so close to Heaven and Earth. The sparks that left their body pierced Wilfred's skin easily and left severe injuries.

Heaven and Earth initially tried to point their arm back at June, but they soon discovered that Wilfred wouldn't move. The sheer physical strength expressed by his pull was almost too much, even for the rulers.

"You'll burn if you keep at it," Heaven and Earth said before pointing their free hand at Wilfred.

"Why don't you burn first?" Alexander's voice resounded in the area before he teleported to Heaven and Earth's left side.

Alexander unleashed an oppressing aura before condensing it in his right palm. The expert pressed his hand on Heaven and Earth's shoulder, and liquid flames seeped into their body.

The scarlet liquid flames worked like an infection that tried to hinder Heaven and Earth's control over their free arm. Of course, that condition was less than temporary. The rulers only had to intensify the power of their lightning bolts to free themselves.

"I feel your resolve," Supreme Thief exclaimed as he materialized before Heaven and Earth. "Why don't you give it to me?"

Supreme Thief's figure transformed into an azure vortex that destabilized Heaven and Earth's lightning bolts. Energy left their body without affecting their overall form, but something quickly became evident. The rulers were losing power.

Heaven and Earth seemed about to speak, but a torrent of silver energy suddenly fell on their face. Sword Saint stood on the other side of the attack and thrust it forward, but his efforts only managed to destabilize the rulers' fabric a bit more.

"A demon is no ant," Divine Demon declared while materializing above Noah and pointing a finger downward.

A waterfall of blood-red energy dived toward Noah and the others without affecting them in the slightest. Yet, when the attack reached Heaven and Earth, it fused with their lightning bolts and slowed down their motion.

Heaven and Earth felt to have lost control of their body in that situation, and the matter only worsened. Noah, Sword Saint, Supreme Thief, Divine Demon, Alexander, and Wilfred's teamwork appeared perfect. Their struggles perfectly fused and increased the amount of damage they could inflict.

That was even more evident with Noah. His swords became able to dive deeper into Heaven and Earth's head, which filled him with new power and allowed him to add more strength to the attack.

The cycle of exhaustion and extreme power resumed before reaching an insane speed. Noah lost track of how many times he was on the verge of fainting. His whole focus was on matching the refilling of his world with new thrusts, and that process slowly led to the desired effects.

A crack opened on Heaven and Earth's head. The fissure expanded from Noah's swords and stretched toward the center of the other attacks. The group seemed about to break that avatar, but the rulers were ready to retaliate.

"Don't back down!" Noah roared as Heaven and Earth brightened.

Danger filled Noah's senses, but something strange joined that feeling as white light filled his vision. His companions shared those sensations, and they all decided to perform evasive maneuvers to leave the area.

"You won't get away!" Heaven and Earth shouted, but a deep growl reached them before they could focus on their escaping opponents. Then, an immense slash engulfed their figure.

Chapter 2322. Kneel

Shafu roared, and the landmass growled as the massive slash engulfed Heaven and Earth. The attack pushed the crackling figure away as it flew toward the sky.

The slash crashed on the storms and pierced them without meeting any resistance. That massive amount of energy crashed on the sky afterward, and it remained there until it depleted the entirety of its fuel.

Once the slash dispersed, the spectators in the higher plane could see that the sky didn't suffer any damage. Yet, the crackling figure had also disappeared.

Noah didn't believe for even a second that the battle was over. The sky still shone, and the storms continued to rage. Heaven and Earth's energy reserves were probably too big to calculate, so that simple attack couldn't have defeated them.

Nevertheless, nothing happened after the slash dispersed. The higher plane tried to fall silent, but Shafu and the landmass prevented that. The dragon thrust the massive blade, and a piercing attack flew toward the exposed spot of the sky.

Noah ignored the matter for the time being. He couldn't do much for the landmass, and he felt actually pleased that the sky was keeping it busy.

June remained immersed in her suicidal procedure, and her influence grew with every completed cycle. More chunks of the storms were falling prey to her power, but her condition kept worsening.

Noah teleported next to June but decided to remain silent. A second layer of dark matter flew over his reptilian eyes to prevent his innate pressure from affecting the procedure while he inspected his lover.

June was a gory mess. Only minute chunks of skin had survived, and her muscles weren't any better. Her skeleton was in the open, and the same went for her organs.

Noah could see how the damage had spread throughout June's figure. She was sacrificing her flesh to give birth to a small amount of superior fabric, and Noah didn't know if there would be enough of her left once the procedure was over.

Calculations happened in Noah's mind as he studied June. He hoped that his violent thoughts could come up with ideas to help his lover, but nothing could work in that situation.

June was too distant from Noah's knowledge. He knew her world better than anyone else, but that didn't make him able to patch it up. He lacked understanding in those unique fields.

"Stop staring at me," June snorted, but her voice carried tremors that Noah inevitably noticed.

"Are you going to die?" Noah asked.

"Not before reaching the peak," June declared.

"Make sure not to die even at that point," Noah ordered. "The universe is too big to limit ourselves to the ninth rank."

"I'll focus on surpassing you for now," June smirked before expanding her influence once again.

Lightning bolts left the storms and flew toward June. Multiple rivers of energy had already formed around her, but she wasn't even halfway through the process.

Noah shot another glance at June before teleporting away. The situation didn't allow him to be concerned. All his thoughts had to focus on winning the battle.

Divine Demon, Sword Saint, Supreme Thief, Alexander, and Wilfred had gathered in a random spot of the void during that break, and Noah reached them. The experts didn't say anything about his short trip toward June, and he pretended not to notice the many injuries on their bodies.

Everyone had suffered during the previous exchanges. Noah, Alexander, and Wilfred had large holes on their bodies, and some even pierced them from side to side. Divine Demon, Sword Saint, and Supreme Thief were worse off due to their weaker bodies, but their healing techniques were already at work.

"What do you think?" Alexander broke the silence. Everyone was staring at the exposed area of the sky, but no one could predict what would happen.

"The sky is too tough," Noah responded while the landmass launched another attack that failed to scratch the white layer. "Heaven and Earth can probably hide inside it and create a worldwide tribulation to finish us off."

"Only cowards would do that," Divine Demon pointed out.

"I can come up with something to lure them out," Supreme Thief announced.

"We should find a sword that can pierce the sky," Sword Saint exclaimed.

"We are ignoring the sword maniac, right?" Wilfred asked.

"I have some interesting sword paths," Supreme Thief revealed.

"I can make sharp stuff," Alexander added.

"Heaven and Earth are the sky," Noah grunted. "We kill them, and the sky falls."

"Killing is definitely better," Divine Demon declared.

"What if they hide?" Alexander wondered.

"They won't," Noah stated as his eyes fell on the smiling Caesar in the distance. "They have to use us as stepping stones. That means defeating us thoroughly."

"So, since their previous effort failed," Supreme Thief guessed.

"Yes," Noah continued. "They will probably come up with an avatar that can deal with us."

"Let's kill the next one quickly," Divine Demon uttered. "I don't want to waste time dealing with weak versions."

"Isn't it better to go step by step and improve along the way?" Wilfred wondered.

"I think we are better off going all-out once and for all," Noah replied.

"Nice thinking, my heir!" Divine Demon laughed.

Noah didn't answer. He honestly didn't know which plan would favor his organization. He could only trust his instincts, and they were telling him to go wild.

"I can force Heaven and Earth to bring forth their best avatar," Supreme Thief claimed.

"You just want to steal their weaker creations," Alexander pointed out.

Supreme Thief wanted to contradict Alexander, but the sky suddenly lit up and forced the experts to disregard their squabble. Noah and the others kept their consciousness unfolded to be ready for any attack, but Heaven and Earth didn't bother hiding.

A tall, humanoid figure became visible behind the exposed area of the sky. Details grew clearer as the creature approached the white surface and crossed it to enter the higher plane.

Bright white crystals shone throughout the humanoid figure. The avatar seemed made of those blinding minerals, but Noah and the others could sense that there was much more hidden under and inside them.

Dense lightning bolts ran inside the crystals, and a rhythmic crackling noise resounded under them. The avatar seemed to have a loud core. It had a heart that Noah and the others couldn't study.

The avatar's power wasn't too different from before. It was a slightly superior quasi-rank 10 item, but there was something far deeper in the current version.

'They brought their meanings with them,' Noah thought.

The avatar hovered in front of the sky for a few seconds before pointing its face toward Noah's group. Its mouth opened, and sparks accompanied the words that came out of it.

"Do not worry," Heaven and Earth said in a buzzing tone that resounded throughout the higher plane. "We are done playing around. This form embodies our true power."

"Were you tired of losing?" Noah mocked.

"There is no need to fake confidence," Heaven and Earth announced. "It's perfectly normal to be in awe of our might."

A suffocating pressure came out of the avatar and filled the higher plane. Noah and the others felt an unstoppable force landing on their bodies and pushing them down. Heaven and Earth wanted them to kneel.

#### Chapter 2323. Pride

The pressure wasn't only heavy. Its seemingly unstoppable power came from the deep meanings flowing inside it.

Noah and Alexander had an easier time understanding those meanings. They were extremely powerful specimens that stood at the peak of their respective fields, so they could recognize the similarities in that influence.

Heaven and Earth weren't trying to suppress Noah's group. They were merely expressing the entirety of their power, which carried the sea of worlds accumulated during their long lives.

That stable mass of meanings naturally gave birth to a superior existence, something that went beyond the limits of the species. Heaven and Earth were far past magical beasts, humans, and hybrids. They were a being that had long since abandoned those weak labels.

Noah didn't forget about his time as a human. He recalled his envy and interest in the magical beasts and the process that had eventually brought him to his current state.

Still, a long time had passed since Noah stood before a creature able to surpass his innate advantages. That period had even led him to believe that he was one of the most powerful types of beings in the world, but Heaven and Earth proved him wrong.

Noah struggled to view the crystal figure as a proper living being, but he couldn't ignore its power. Heaven and Earth didn't care about that detail when they built the avatar. They had only wanted something that could contain their immense accumulation of meanings, and the result was incredible.

The crystal figure stood at the peak of numerous fields, and Noah had to admit that he didn't know many of them. Heaven and Earth had built something extremely close to perfection, and its mere presence seemed too heavy for the inferior beings in the higher plane.

Of course, that superiority alone couldn't make Noah surrender. It only pushed him to show what he had learnt during his time at the peak of the food chain.

'I've played this game far more than you,' Noah thought before sending potential to his body and pride.

Veins bulged throughout Noah's body as he forced his figure to remain straight. His neck seemed on the verge of exploding when he lifted his head and opened his mouth.

A roar that spread into every corner of the higher plane came out of Noah's mouth and enveloped his underlings into an ethereal protective membrane. His pride filled the world, and his organization drew power from that intense meaning.

The pressure on Alexander and the others suddenly lost power. The team could move freely again, and they soon noticed that the rest of their companions were experiencing the same reassuring outcome.

Many underlings didn't understand what had happened, but Noah's core team was different. Alexander and the others only needed to glance at their surroundings to see that Heaven and Earth's pressure was still there. Their minds had simply become immune to it.

"You have always disdained the magical beasts," Noah roared while his companions straightened their position. "You can't even begin to fight me in this field!"

"We weren't trying to fight anyone," Heaven and Earth explained. "Don't pretend to know the intentions of a superior being."

"You never learnt how to deal with defeat," Noah laughed, and his companions couldn't help but reveal smirks.

"Defeat," Heaven and Earth repeated. "You think that your current power is a victory over us. You don't even understand the meaning of that word."

Heaven and Earth lifted an arm to point it at the enemy group. Noah and the others prepared themselves for the imminent attack, but their surroundings turned white before they could summon their energy.

A pillar that connected two opposite spots of the sky shot out of Heaven and Earth and engulfed Noah's group. Innate defenses activated as the white energy ravaged everything it could, but they failed to protect the experts.

Divine Demon was the first to come out of the pillar. His fuming figure hid the charred holes on his body and other severe injuries. He had lost his left arm and part of his lower body, and his world had also suffered some damage.

Noah left right after Divine Demon. He didn't lose any limbs, but his body was a charred mess. Moreover, his world shook to no end and destabilized his centers of power. He had an easier time protecting the ethereal blackness, but he couldn't control himself properly now.

The others soon followed, and they all showed a wide array of severe injuries. Still, none of them cared about their physical wounds. Heaven and Earth's sudden attack had touched their worlds, and they had to focus on patching them up or stabilizing them.

Only Sword Saint retained some degree of control over his power. His world was atypical, so it could endure the abrupt offensive, allowing him to realize that Heaven and Earth didn't stay still.

Heaven and Earth could use that chance to inflict a major loss on Noah's group. They probably had the power to kill a few experts in a single blow, but they disregarded the team to fly toward the landmass.

Shafu and the landmass had also benefitted from Noah's pride. The temporary suppression had made both of them livid, so they didn't hesitate to launch a massive slash toward Heaven and Earth when they saw their sprint.

The landmass was still getting used to its power, and the same went with Shafu. They shared an instinctive understanding that improved their teamwork, but they had yet to learn how to cooperate.

Each subsequent attack was stronger than the previous due to that learning curve. The slash that flew toward the crystal figure wasn't only immense. The amount of power it contained seemed capable of filling the entirety of the higher plane, and the meanings flowing inside it were also far deeper.

The crystal figure didn't stop advancing while the slash flew in its direction. Heaven and Earth faced the attack head-on, and the clash disintegrated that giant mass of black energy.

The scene was almost unreal. The landmass had launched one of the best attacks the higher plane had ever witnessed, but Heaven and Earth had destroyed it without effort. A mere clash with their crystal figure had turned the slash into dust. The rulers didn't even slow down during the process.

Shafu swung the landmass again, but Heaven and Earth landed on that immense black surface before the dragon could complete the attack. Their sheer presence in the area interrupted the offensive and prevented Shafu from moving its weapon.

The landmass' infinite hunger activated as soon as the crystal figure touched its surface. The immense creature tried to devour Heaven and Earth, but its corrosive abilities failed to affect their body.



Heaven and Earth didn't waste time. They raised one leg before stomping it on the landmass. The impact generated a shockwave that spread through the entire world and filled the void with storms, but that was only the aftermath of the attack.

The stomp released countless white rivers that dived into the landmass and made their way through its structure. Giant web-like cracks expanded through the massive creature and drew images that seemed to depict lightning bolts.

The landmass growled in pain as that destructive energy expanded inside its body. Its innate defenses couldn't do anything to stop it, and Heaven and Earth had released enough power to kill its opponent in a single blow.

However, the white energy suddenly stopped expanding in random directions and came out of the landmass to converge toward its tip. June stood there, kneeling on the black surface with a hand pressed on the creature, and the crackling rivers quickly crashed on her.

#### Chapter 2324. River

Strangely enough, the rivers of white energy didn't cause any explosions. They landed on June before seeping through her maimed figure and disappearing.

No one could sense that powerful attack anymore, and Heaven and Earth also appeared lost. Their might had significantly increased after entering their new body, but June had managed to affect their technique anyway.

Still, everyone expected a single outcome from that surprising event. Heaven and Earth had hurt the entirety of Noah's team with a casual attack, so their second technique wasn't something a single rank 9 expert could endure, especially one in the liquid stage.

However, a chaotic and violent aura came out of June and explained part of the situation. Solid stage power filled the tip of the landmass and spread in every direction before transforming into flares that shot toward the sky.

The flares landed on the storms before exploding into ethereal clouds. That influence enveloped the many lightning bolts, forcing them to leave the sky and fly toward June.

Torrents of lightning bolts fell from every corner of the higher plane and flew toward June. She stood up as those attacks fused with her body and disappeared.

The event was beyond strange. June didn't experience any power-up, but the energy of the lightning bolts disappeared anyway. She was clearly absorbing that power, but no one could understand what she was doing with it.

Eventually, dense sparks came out of June's injuries and entered the few remaining chunks of flesh to activate their healing properties. New skin, muscles, bones, and tissues grew from those maimed edges to rebuild her body.

The rebuilding process didn't only give June a body worthy of her new level. The quality of her flesh reached a far superior quality in fields that the spectators couldn't identify. Noah could see that her skin didn't aim to match his sturdiness, but it still strived to grow stronger than him in some aspects.

Heaven and Earth had the chance to launch more attacks, but they waited to study the event. June attracted all the storms and lightning bolts in the higher plane to absorb them into her body, and the process ended once no injury remained on her figure.

June's aura waned at that point. She remained in the solid stage, but her influence returned inside her body. She wasn't affecting the world anymore, and the contact with the landmass was even hurting her.

"What did you achieve?" Heaven and Earth asked. "You can't hope to deflect all our attacks."

"I can always try," June teased.

Heaven and Earth glanced at the landmass. Their previous attack had left deep injuries in that immense creature, but the latter shared the hybrids' insane resilience. Healing abilities had even activated to close some of the most severe wounds.

The damage involved the center of the landmass. It didn't affect its sharp edges, so it was safe to assume that Shafu could still use it to attack. Heaven and Earth would have to prioritize those areas to eliminate that annoying creature, but they decided to test June first.

Heaven and Earth waved their hand, and a pillar came out of them. The attack resembled what they had launched toward Noah's team, but it was far denser at that time.

The white light condensed into a mere bright line during its fast flight. June couldn't hope to dodge the attack, which landed at the center of her chest less than a second after Heaven and Earth's gesture.

The attack could probably pierce anything in the world. Heaven and Earth didn't add any unique nature to their offensive, but the sheer amount of energy inside it made its might clear.

In theory, June couldn't hope to block the attack. She could survive, but her world was bound to suffer damage. Yet, nothing remotely similar happened.

June didn't have the time to summon any technique, but she had no intention to act anyway. The bright line landed on her chest and pushed her away, but the corrosive properties of the landmass helped her disperse that momentum sooner than expected.

When June stopped, she straightened her figure again to show the outcome of the attack. Everyone had seen the bright line hitting her, but no one could find traces of that event on her body. She was perfectly fine.

The event was shocking, but Heaven and Earth didn't show any emotion. They inspected June for a few seconds until a word eventually left their mouth. "Immunity."

"That has always been the final goal of my evolution," June declared. "I finally perfected this body. I don't have to hold back anymore."

June lifted a hand above her head, and sparks came out of her palm. That energy transformed into lightning bolts that expanded and condensed until they took the shape of a long orange spear.

A loud came out of June's body and echoed through most of the higher plane. The noise carried pulling properties that forced energy, experts, and much more to take a step toward her.

The pulling force didn't affect Heaven and Earth, but they didn't miss how the entirety of the landmass shook due to that influence. Still, their attention remained on June since she didn't hesitate to throw her spear.

The orange weapon seemed to explode as soon as it left June's hand. The spear transformed into a bullet that left a bright trail through its trajectory.

The attack was fast, but it remained too slow for Heaven and Earth. The rulers raised their hand to stop the bullet, but the latter revealed its true form when June's heartbeat resounded again.

The bullet experienced a surge of energy that turned it into an orange torrent far bigger than the crystal figure. The attack engulfed Heaven and Earth and dug away part of the landmass' surface during its flight toward the other side of the higher plane.

The similarities with Heaven and Earth's first attack were impossible to miss. June had basically replicated their technique, but she had added the deep meanings of her world to it. The torrent didn't deplete energy during the flight. It actually grew stronger.

A proper river appeared in the almost empty higher plane. The world had the landmass, Shafu, and the vast array of golden inscriptions, but an orange torrent had joined them now.

The river didn't disperse even after landing on the sky. Instead, it generated more energy during its flow, giving birth to a proper sea above the white layer.

The orange sea revealed the nature of June's attacks. Sparks flowed over its surface and multiplied as more power appeared inside them. A stranger would find the scene impossible to explain, but everyone knew June's world. She had learnt to expand the properties of her Perfect Circuit to her very energy.

The incredible scene filled the weaker experts in Noah's organization with hope, but it didn't affect the core team. Noah and the others were pleased that June could finally fight, but they knew that the attack couldn't defeat Heaven and Earth.

As predicted, two white slashes cut through the sea and the entirety of the river while releasing whooshing noises. June had to turn herself into a lightning bolt to escape those attacks, but her landing at Noah's side revealed how her evasive maneuver didn't save her completely.

June carried a cross-shaped injury on her right shoulder when she materialized next to Noah. Sparks came out of the wound, but they failed to fix it. June had to settle with covering it with her power.

Meanwhile, the entire river crumbled into dust and revealed the intact crystal figure. Heaven and Earth didn't suffer any injury, and the white light in their palms now carried a far more dangerous power.

"You became immune to a single one of our worlds," Heaven and Earth stated, "And we have always known how to counter it."

Chapter 2325. Offensive

"Well," Wilfred exclaimed, "We weren't expecting this to be easy."

"Do you have a plan?" Alexander asked.

"Thinking isn't my job," Wilfred responded. "I just attack."

"Same here," June announced.

"I like that part too," Divine Demon added.

"A sword follows its own path," Sword Saint stated.

"You could have simply agreed with them," Supreme Thief snorted. "No need to sound wise."

"You don't have a plan either," Alexander pointed out.

"I don't need a plan," Supreme Thief declared. "I only need to show them who's best."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Alexander admitted before glancing at Noah.

"Yeah," Noah sighed. "Let's do that."

Noah released his dark matter and created the dark world under him. Multiple workshops activated and built an army of six-armed dragons with blades instead of claws.

"We should coordinate," Alexander suggested.

"I was feeling mud," Supreme Thief responded.

"You really want to rob them even now," Alexander cursed before heaving a helpless sigh. "I can work with that."

"I'll handle some of their attacks," June uttered. "Don't bother dodging if they use neutral energy."

"I'll cut them," Sword Saint declared.

"I'll teach them how to be a demon," Divine Demon added.

"We have a plan," Noah concluded. "I'll go first."

Noah's statement surprised his companions, but he knew that they wouldn't remain too far behind. Potential flowed into his understanding of space and time as he filled a good chunk of the higher plane with dark matter and disappeared inside it.

The dark matter was too violent to be a sea. Noah had created multiple wave-like structures that shot toward Heaven and Earth while hiding his presence and the army of dragons.

The diversion didn't faze Heaven and Earth. The crystal figure raised a hand, and a soundwave came out. The attack had a circular shape that expanded toward the waves of dark matter and created instabilities in their structure.

The dark matter couldn't hope to survive the attack. The waves turned into dust, but nothing came out of them. Noah and the army had completely disappeared.

Heaven and Earth didn't say anything while they lifted their arm. A series of rumbling gales came out of their hand and ravaged their surroundings without focusing on any specific area.

The gales eventually hit something, and Heaven and Earth didn't hesitate to look in that direction. Beams shot out of their eyes and pierced their target, generating explosions in the process.

White energy expanded from the areas traveled by the beams. Spherical structures grew and pushed the gales away, but the latter didn't disappear. Heaven and Earth forced them to condense in their palm, where they created a tiny hurricane.

Nothing came out of the spherical structures, but Heaven and Earth weren't done. A sharp, high-pitched noise resounded from their body and created a pale domain around them that covered half of the higher plane.

The domain appeared stable until a small area above Heaven and Earth trembled. The rulers threw their tiny hurricane there at that point, and the attack expanded to envelop everything in its violent winds.

A painful cry left the hurricane but failed to distract Heaven and Earth. Still, the rulers couldn't help but focus on the winds afterward. Some gales were turning black for no apparent reason.

The hurricane wasn't the only target of that strange technique. Multiple black spots appeared in random places of the pale domain and started to expand. Noah's influence began to take over the area, but Heaven and Earth didn't let that continue for too long.

Heaven and Earth opened their mouth to release a humming noise. The attack forced the pale domain and the hurricane to freeze, which halted the expansion of the black areas.

Everything crumbled right afterward. A rain of shards containing enough power to fill most of the higher plane fell into the void, and hundreds of black figures materialized among them.

Six-armed dragons and fiendish avatars appeared around Heaven and Earth and voiced roars before shooting toward them. The rulers were at the center of a tight encirclement, but that offensive didn't worry them at all.

Thousands of tiny spikes seeped out of the crystal figure and shot forward. Every weapon carried an insane amount of power, and the army couldn't do anything against it.

The spikes easily pierced the dragons and the fiendish avatars, forcing them to self-destruct to unleash their energy. Complete blackness filled Heaven and Earth's surroundings, but their face remained calm as they inspected the darkness.

Heaven and Earth eventually sprinted ahead and pierced the blackness to reach the single survivor of their previous offensive. A maimed six-armed dragon had tried to hide among the energy released by its companions, and the rulers didn't miss that.

"You reached the final battle only to play tricks on us," Heaven and Earth mocked before tapping their fingers on the dragon's head.

That mere touch turned the dragon into dust. Heaven and Earth also launched a beam to pierce the humanoid figure that had come out of it. Yet, their expression flickered at that point.

The beams dug a hole into the fiendish figure, but no blood came out. Noah wasn't there. Instead, the avatar exploded to fill the area with fuming blades that shot in every direction.

Heaven and Earth didn't bother protecting themselves from the attack. The swords generated clanging noises when they landed on the crystals, but they failed to inflict any damage.

Nevertheless, one of the swords that flew above Heaven and Earth's head suddenly released dark matter and created a portal-like structure. Snore's massive head came out of it and spat a waterfall of destructive energy.

Heaven and Earth endured the waterfall, but the sheer power of their body soon took care of it. Sparks came out of their crystals whenever the destructive energy touched them, and those innate defenses eventually spread through the entirety of the technique.

The torrent shattered, but a series of black lines materialized in its place and converged toward Heaven and Earth. The crystals didn't suffer any damage during the offensive, allowing the rulers to lift their arm to deal with the new threat.

A figure materialized and swung its blades, only for them to end up on Heaven and Earth's palm. Noah put as much strength as possible into the attack, but he couldn't do anything. The crystal figure was simply too strong.

"You have improved," Heaven and Earth commented. "Your understanding can almost affect the void, but we were there long before you."

A loud shockwave expanded from Heaven and Earth's back at that point, and a second soon followed. Wilfred eventually teleported behind the rulers and thrust his palms forward to slam them on the crystals.

The impact with Heaven and Earth's body almost made Noah feel dizzy. The sheer strength unleashed by Wilfred was incredible, but the rulers didn't move.

"There's more," Heaven and Earth announced before two figures materialized at their sides.

Alexander voiced a low cry as a mud-like liquid came out of his mouth and filled the area. The attack didn't affect Noah and Wilfred, but Heaven and Earth could feel its hindering properties trying to influence their body.

Supreme Thief also used mud, but his attack gave birth to a giant humanoid figure that fell on Heaven and Earth and fused with Alexander's attack.

The creature used the mud in the area to restrain Heaven and Earth and search for weak spots in their body, but the process instantly failed. The crystal figure didn't have weaknesses.

Still, Supreme Thief stepped through the mud anyway to touch Heaven and Earth with his bare hands. His whole figure shone with azure light as he immersed himself in the meaning running through the crystals, and his curiosity soon skyrocketed.

"You have so much worth stealing!" Supreme Thief laughed.

"Make way!" June shouted before unleashing an orange torrent on the area.

Divine Demon and Sword Saint didn't hold back either. They launched massive attacks on the sea of mud. Three pillars carrying different shades converged on the same area, generating a deafening explosion during their clash.

Chapter 2328. Snake

The Eternal Snake expressed the results of its hibernation through its hiss. Marcella could partially evaluate the nature of its new power, but what she failed to understand left her confused.

The creature was still a rank 9 magical beast in the upper tier. Its species had undergone some changes, but there were limits to how much it could improve.

Marcella had seen magical beasts overcoming their innate limits through transformations and modifications, which often involved a radical evolution of their species. For example, the Foolery had to become a hybrid, and the dragons had to turn themselves into mindless weapons.

Even Noah had to go through a similar process multiple times during his life. He had started as a human and had walked the hybrid path for many years until he had eventually surpassed that entire field.

However, the Eternal Snake didn't do any of that. It had remained a magical beast, and most of its core still shared many similarities with its original species.

Of course, Marcella didn't underestimate the hibernation. The current version of the Eternal Snake was the result of numerous empowerments, but she didn't know where that power had gone.

"Defying Demon!" The snake continued to call. "I can smell you! Come out and fight me!"

The snake didn't receive any answer, and even Marcella hesitated to interact with it. She was conflicted about the current situation, and fear had nothing to do with that.

The previous battles had forced Marcella to reevaluate her power, but she remained utterly confident before a magical beast. Yet, she knew that the Eternal Snake was an annoying opponent. Its resilience would only lead to a prolonged battle.

Marcella wanted to help Heaven and Earth, so fighting a magical beast sounded like a waste of time in her mind. Still, she couldn't move freely due to the ice, which forced her attention to remain on the Eternal Snake.

Fighting would generally be the only option, but Marcella saw a different path in the Eternal Snake's anger. Heaven and Earth would never accept a magical beast as an ally, but Marcella only needed it to remove the ice. If she could trick the creature, she wouldn't need to waste any time.

"Defying Demon!" The Eternal Snake hissed again, but the appearance of green light in its surroundings temporarily halted its rage.

"Defying Demon is on the other side of your ice," Marcella revealed while materializing near the snake. "You only need to withdraw your technique to reach him."

"And who would you be?" The Eternal Snake asked.

"I'm an enemy of Defying Demon," Marcella explained while forcing herself to perform a half-bow. "Why don't we make a deal? I won't interfere with your battle if you open a path."

"An enemy," The Eternal Snake hissed before moving its reptilian eyes over its surroundings.

A strange aura came out of the giant chunk of ice during the inspection. The Eternal Snake used its innate ability to enhance its senses, and a vague understanding of the situation quickly filled its mind.

The Eternal Snake had left Noah and the others before the final battle, but the scene that unfolded in its senses made everything clear. The creature didn't only skip the start of that struggle. It had awakened right at its end.

The faint hesitation on the Eternal Snake's face stirred Marcella's worries. She couldn't let the creature change its mind. She had to fuel its anger to achieve her goals.

"Defying Demon decided to free you only at the last second," Marcella announced. "He probably had no intention to use you at all. It must not feel great to be a decoy."

The Eternal Snake pretended that Marcella didn't say anything while its inspection continued. The empty higher plane filled with nothing but a few battles saddened the creature. That wasn't a world worth inhabiting anymore.

"Where are the other magical beasts?" The Eternal Snake asked. "Why is none of them fighting?"

"Defying Demon used them as cannon fodder to fend off our initial assault," Marcella explained. "The few surviving creatures should be hidden inside ethereal inscriptions. I can bring you there if you wish."

"No magical beast is fighting Heaven and Earth," The Eternal Snake sighed before voicing a low hiss. "Unforgivable."

"What?" Marcella gasped before the snake's massive tail cracked at her.

The attack was fast enough to take Marcella by surprise, but she still managed to summon a few plants to protect herself. However, the sheer physical prowess expressed by the Eternal Snake pierced her vegetation and flung her away.

"Plants?!" The Eternal Snake hissed in anger. "How did plants remain in this battle when the magical beasts left it?"

Marcella dispersed her momentum only to find the Eternal Snake staring at her from a distance. She instinctively summoned her vegetation to reveal her power and prove herself worthy of that battlefield, but the scene only made the creature angrier.

"Cultivators," The Eternal Snake scoffed. "Even someone using plants underestimates me. This ends today."

"Wait!" Marcella hurriedly exclaimed in front of the Eternal Snake's sudden calm. "I'll let you fight me once everything is over. Let's take care of Defying Demon first."

"You'll let me?" The Eternal Snake repeated as its calm shattered and anger came out of its figure again. "Do you think you can stop me?"



Marcella could only heave a sigh at those words. Her plan had failed, but she promptly moved to the next one. Energy flowed into her vegetation to generate new magical plants meant to counter what she knew about the Eternal Snake.

The Eternal Snake was too angry to waste time in words. It stretched its body to slam its tail on the thick ice and use the impact to push itself forward.

The sprint was quite exceptional for a magical beast, but Marcella was one of the best privileged cultivators in the entire sky. She could follow the charge, and her plants even happened to be faster than the Eternal Snake.

Sharp flowers and branches that carried bright tips shot toward the charging creature, but clanging noises resounded when they landed on it. Nothing pierced the green scales, and a considerable chunk of the vegetation shattered when the Eternal Snake fell on it.

The Eternal Snake spat a silver torrent that froze anything it touched. The broken vegetation transformed into an icy landmass, but Marcella severed herself from it before the ability could reach her.

Marcella teleported above the snake and recreated the array of magical plants while adjusting them to her opponent's new sturdiness. Flowers with burning petals grew all around them and closed to create fuming spears that shot forward and fused into a single structure.

The attack was too fast for the Eternal Snake. The fuming structure pierced its body before generating branches that expanded through its insides.

A proper array of magical plants grew and pierced the snake from the inside. Roots and branches came out of the scales before diving back into its body to add vegetation to that technique.

Marcella believed that killing the Eternal Snake quickly was impossible, but she could still immobilize it. Dealing with the creature couldn't be easier than piercing the ice separating her from the battle, so she opted for the second approach.

Nevertheless, the Eternal Snake pulled itself away from the technique, uncaring of the scales, muscles, and organs that the plants inside it destroyed. More than half of its body turned into a gory ruin during its reckless gesture, but the magical beast didn't care at all.

The Eternal Snake launched its open mouth toward Marcella, but she teleported away and replicated her previous attack. The creature had started to use the ice in the area to heal itself, but vast arrays of magical plants soon filled its body again.

Marcella didn't think much of the Eternal Snake after witnessing those exchanges. The creature's resilience was immense, but it had to freeze something to activate the healing process. She could prevent that by simply retracting her plants after inflicting wounds.

After a few exchanges, the Eternal Snake turned into nothing more than a gory mess of broken skin and falling internal organs. More than ninety percent of its body had fallen into the void, and Marcella sighed at that sight. However, the injuries suddenly vanished, and the missing flesh reappeared on the snake.

## Chapter 2329. Eternal

The Eternal Snake headbutted Marcella as soon as its figure regained its original form. The attack carried insane violence, and Marcella faced it head-on.

The impact flung Marcella toward the distant frozen layer. Everything inside her shook after crashing on the ice, but her world remained intact, and roots immediately pierced her skin to recreate her vegetation.

The attack had separated Marcella from her previous technique, and the Eternal Snake quickly added it to its collection of frozen areas. Still, none of that ice separated from those structures to fuse with the creature. After all, it didn't have injuries anymore.

Marcella didn't understand what had happened. She knew that her previous attacks had deeply hurt the Eternal Snake, but that damage had abruptly vanished without any apparent reason.

However, Marcella knew enough about the Eternal Snake's hibernation to link a few dots. The creature had probably gained some form of immortality, which partially explained the previous event.

"Do you think you can replicate a cultivator's world without abandoning your species?" Marcella asked. "Magical beasts are so naïve."

The Eternal Snake hissed in anger as it slammed its tail on the frozen landmass to sprint forward. Its massive body fused with its incredible speed gave birth to gales that shot in every direction, but Marcella barely cared about them.

The creature slammed head-on on the ice only to notice that Marcella had already left. She reappeared above the Eternal Snake with her vegetation, and another piercing attack shot out of it.

Countless plants pierced the green scales and invaded the snake's body. The creature couldn't stop that attack, but it didn't hesitate to rip itself away from that vegetation to assault Marcella again.

Marcella improved on her previous offensive. She teleported away and filled the Eternal Snake with plants again while also adding a cage of firm roots to her attack.

The Eternal Snake injured itself to escape those plants, but it failed to reach Marcella. The creature slammed on the roots that were enveloping its surroundings, and the latter held strong. They could endure its physical might.

The creature obviously didn't like that. The Eternal Snake saw that hindrance as a personal insult, but even biting the roots didn't help its situation.

"Your resilience definitely increased," Marcella commented when the snakes' injuries suddenly vanished, "But your species can't reach the same depths of a cultivator."

Marcella sent more power to the roots around the Eternal Snake to make them give birth to fruits. Seeds came out of them and generated branches that expanded in every direction, transforming the cage into a spiked hell.

The Eternal Snake couldn't stop suffering injuries. Roots stabbed its body and expanded inside it if it remained still, but the same happened when it moved. Marcella had successfully isolated it in a deadly trap.

"Your healing properties probably lack limits," Marcella announced, "But you can't fix your body if my plans occupy those areas."

More energy flowed toward the cage and thickened the array of roots. The empty spots inside the areas started to disappear, but that didn't change the Eternal Snake's situation. The creature had long since become unable to move.

The process continued until the entirety of the cage became full of sharp roots. Marcella made sure to close every gap before diverting her attention from the battle. The Eternal Snake probably was still alive, but she didn't care enough to remain in the area.

Marcella turned toward the layer of ice to inspect its fabric. The Eternal Snake's innate ability was truly sturdy, but she had plants that could pierce it. The process wouldn't be fast, but she had a way to reach the main battle.

Roots came out of Marcella's body again to give birth to fuming petals. The heat generated by those flowers intensified as Marcella added more energy and transformed them into multiple spiked structures.

The pointy plants shot forward to stab the frozen layer. Silver shards immediately fell from it, but the damage remained relatively insignificant. Still, Marcella remained calm and gave more energy to her attacks to continue the excavation.

Mere magical plants couldn't do much against such a tough material, but Marcella's constant flow of energy revitalized their fabric whenever they lost momentum. The fuming spears slowly made their way through the ice. It would take a while, but Marcella knew she could reach the other side.

The cage remained stable and added confidence to Marcella's approach. However, the frozen landmasses eventually started to fly toward the spherical array of roots.

The landmasses fell on the cage and did their best to freeze the structure, but Marcella had predicted a similar outcome. Her roots were ice-resistant, and the Eternal Snake's innate ability couldn't ignore that feature.

The ice could only expand and envelop the cage at that point. It didn't grow, but it still surrounded the roots hoping to win over their innate resistance.

Marcella didn't just let the Eternal Snake do as it wished. She sent energy to the cage while remaining focused on her drill-like plants. Reaching the other side was her main goal, so she knew she had to keep the creature trapped.

The drilling process continued without meeting any hindrance. Marcella even started to relax after a while. It made sense for a magical beast to be relatively easy to deal with, so she didn't think too much about it.

A tunnel came to life as the process continued. Marcella's plan was working, but her survival instincts suddenly screamed in fear. She didn't know the reason behind that reaction, but she trusted her mind enough to listen to its warning.

Marcella shot backward and left the tunnel to inspect the frozen layer as a whole. Nothing strange was happening there, so she turned to examine the cage. Her structure was still surrounded by ice, but even that situation didn't change.

Nevertheless, great surprise filled Marcella's mind when she turned back toward the frozen layer. Her tunnel had completely disappeared. The ice had regained its original form, wasting her previous efforts.

Marcella was stunned, but she didn't lose her cool. After reviewing everything she knew about the Eternal Snake, she could explain the event. It was safe to assume that its ice shared its resilience.

'I must kill it,' Marcella concluded, but another surprising scene unfolded in her eyes when she turned.

The layer of ice that had enveloped the cage had transformed into a giant reptilian head that bit down on the array of roots. The mouth was big enough to cover the entirety of the structure, and the latter disappeared after entering that frozen attack.

Marcella's expression flickered when she lost connection with the cage. In theory, the giant head had an opening at its base, so broken roots would have come out from there, but nothing left the mouth.

"Damned cultivator!" The Eternal Snake hissed in anger as soon as the mouth opened to reveal its intact body.

"You are one annoying being," Marcella commented while recreating her vegetation to prepare for the imminent battle. She couldn't find alternatives, so she decided to put everything she had into the fight.

"Annoying?" The snake repeated in a human voice. "I'm eternal! Anything frozen by my ability will remain frozen forever. Nothing can erase the traces of my existence!"

Chapter 2330. Boulder

The battle against Heaven and Earth had continued while the Eternal Snake kept Marcella busy, but things didn't improve too much.

The arrival of the Foolery had added a new set of troublesome attacks to the team's offensive. Having a solid stage hybrid fueled with intense anger toward Heaven and Earth also deepened the group's advantage, but it failed to bring them on the winning side.

A break happened after a few exchanges went by. Noah found himself among the void, far away from his companions and with his mental waves struggling to expand. He was losing control over his centers of power, and his condition was to blame for that.

Holes that stretched deep into Noah's insides filled his body, and many cracks joined the picture, turning his figure into a gory mess. His resilience was keeping him strong and ready to fight, but his overall prowess was dwindling.

The fiendish armor hid those injuries, but Noah knew he was approaching his limits. His world had also stopped growing due to his past failures. He had unleashed stronger attacks during the previous

exchanges, but Heaven and Earth had gotten used to them and had prevented him from generating more potential.

Noah was actively running low on energy, but his condition was far from the worse among his team. His companions had suffered a lot, and Wilfred expressed that trend better than the others.

Wilfred also stood alone in the void. The right side of his torso was a bloody mess, and his arm was missing. He had lost it during one of the past exchanges, but his life wasn't in danger. Yet, his physical prowess had greatly diminished due to the injury.

Alexander was only slightly better off. His identity as the best hybrid in the world and his understanding of his responsibilities had pushed him to face more dangers than his companions.

Whenever Heaven and Earth revealed an opening, Alexander was there. Whenever Heaven and Earth launched a seemingly enduring attack, Alexander was there. Whenever June and the others decided to retreat, Alexander was there to slow down Heaven and Earth.

That reckless approach had been sustainable only because Noah had helped as much as possible. He had even taken care of replacing Alexander multiple times. It was his role as one of the sturdiest beings in the world to face the most dangerous situations.

Supreme Thief and Sword Saint had suffered similar injuries but for different reasons. Their condition was terrible, but they appeared able to endure those wounds better than some of their companions.

Sword Saint had moved to the frontlines as the exchanges continued. His maniacal need to find a blade that could cut Heaven and Earth had pushed him into dangerous positions, but his behavior carried much more than that.

Sword Saint knew that his world was unique. He could endure deeper injuries without putting his potential in danger. The sword path would refill those missing parts during the breaks, so he happily relied on harmful attacks hoping to achieve some results.

Nevertheless, Heaven and Earth's knowledge was immense. They quickly found a way to deal with Sword Saint's peculiar world. His existence was partially outside their reach, but the same didn't apply to his body.

Sword Saint had worm-like lightning bolts running under his skin. That technique hindered his ability to move freely, which affected the execution of his arts. He couldn't perform perfect slashes if his body didn't move accordingly.

Heaven and Earth had used the same method to reduce Supreme Thief's power. Supreme Thief was the expert with the highest chance of hurting the crystals since he drew energy directly from his opponents, but that process required a connection. Heaven and Earth could easily use that against him.

Divine Demon, the Foolery, and June were the very opposite of Wilfred and Alexander. The three didn't appear affected by the exchanges, even if their condition didn't always hint at that.

The Foolery was a mess of charred skin and fuming flesh, especially near its mouth. It had suffered as many injuries as Alexander and Noah, but its world was keeping it at its peak. Its idiocy was the greatest fuel in the world in that battle.

Divine Demon was perfectly fine, but Noah had been with the expert long enough to understand that he was only pretending. Divine Demon's figure didn't show any injury, but his world had greatly suffered. His energy reserves were still okay, but he couldn't come up with techniques worthy of that battle.

As for June, it seemed that the battle didn't affect her at all. Her body carried many injuries, but they were nothing more than superficial dents that couldn't reach her world.

June's condition made sense due to her innate advantage in the battle. Heaven and Earth tried to diversify their offensive, but June could always sense when their attacks carried something she could negate.

Moreover, June's body had finally become immune to her own power. That didn't make her immortal, but it significantly increased her resistance. She could let her Perfect Circuit go wild without worrying about her condition.

The situation wasn't as bad as it looked. The group's sheer prowess had multiplied with the Foolery, and they were also turning themselves into a real threat to Heaven and Earth. The problem was that they weren't the only ones doing that.

June, Noah, Divine Demon, Supreme Thief, and Alexander were starting to achieve some results, but Heaven and Earth were also coming up with better attacks and counters. Moreover, the team had yet to pierce the crystals, while the rulers were inflicting damage during every exchange.

'We will really die at this pace,' Noah thought as he glanced at the many cracks on his swords. 'Oh, well.'

Noah shot forward, and his action started another joint assault. Divine Demon and the others didn't hesitate to fly toward Heaven and Earth, but a barrage of piercing beams welcomed them.

The group flew through the barrage, uncaring of the beams that pierced their bodies. Some teleported, other activated techniques, and the outcome ended up resembling the previous exchanges. All the experts landed on Heaven and Earth to unleash their best attacks.

"You stole the wrong one this time," Heaven and Earth mocked when Supreme Thief pulled his hand away from their head.

Unstable energy raged in Supreme Thief's palm. He tried to launch it downward, but an explosion happened and filled the whole area with toxic gas.

The explosion carried enough power to push the other experts away, but Heaven and Earth didn't let them go so easily. The crystal figure trembled before teleporting next to Wilfred. The hybrid punched Heaven and Earth to push himself away, but his left arm exploded as soon as his knuckles touched his opponent.

Heaven and Earth stretched an arm through the gory mess generated by the explosion, but a threat suddenly appeared above them. The crystal figure raised its free hand, and the immense landmass fell on its palm.

Shafu and the landmass cried in unison while putting everything they had in the thrust. The attack carried enough power to push Heaven and Earth away from the battlefield and slam them on the sky, but the slash stopped at that point.

The landmass and Shafu had every intention to squash Heaven and Earth on the sky, but the presence of a foothold allowed the latter to stop the offensive. The rulers could match the thrust's strength with their sheer physical might, and rumbling noises resounded as soon as they closed the hand pressed on the black surface.

The gesture launched five piercing rivers that dug through the landmass and reached its damaged spots. Giant cracks opened on the creature, and chunks fell out of it.

The overall stability of the landmass' structure eventually gave in. The previous damage caused by Heaven and Earth's stop expanded until it reached the other side of the creature, splitting it in half and sending that immense boulder into the void.