



Outer Ragna

Kasugamaru





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01 Prologue

Life is shit, so I throw myself into super-difficult games. That's my life.

Perhaps that's a bit of an overreaction?

"Oh, girlie, brooding again are yeh?"

I had a dream where I was a battle-scarred young girl who was being hugged by a wrinkled old lady. What do you make of that? Freud would have a field day, I'll bet.

"It's okay. Everyone fails. Everyone feels shame. There are as many regrets in this world as stars in the sky. That's just how it is."

It was actually a rather soothing dream. Maybe I'm just dealing with a lot of pent-up stress. I haven't had a real break in forever. The train to work is always as packed as a mass grave, its riders like stumbling zombies. A modern slave ship.

"It's okay to cry. Everyone has their detractors. No one can be beloved by all. Not even God."

That's true, yeah.

"Don't worry. I've been where you are. It's what makes us human. We're lonely, sad creatures. Alone, we're miserable."

Hmm, that hits a little too close to home. I mean, I like to think I do my job well, but... my personal life is more isolated than private. For as long as I can remember, I've been watching others be happy. I'm not particularly blessed nor cursed. I've just... watched a lot of things pass me by. My life is a haze. So it should come as no surprise that I did it again.

Old lady, how did your face look?

All I can remember are the whites of her eyes, wreathed by wrinkles. In the darkness, they floated like two winter moons. Her trembling lips were probably

trying to scream, “Get down!” or “Run away!”

And then, the sudden blinding flash and ear-splitting roar; the shockwave; darkness. The rest is chaos. My memories are jumbled.

I can’t breathe.

It hurts. I’m dreaming, but it hurts. What is up and what is down? My body is heavy. My body is in pain. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

Desperately, I reach out a hand and touch something. It’s hard, firm, and large. I grab onto it. Fighting back against the flow, I cling to it. Wait, the flow? Right, the flow. I’m in water. I’ll drown if I let myself get swept away. I’ll *die*. So I frantically try to climb the tree. In the water. Crazy, right?

The trunk of the tree I’m holding onto for dear life is thick. I can tell it’s a ginkgo tree. For some reason, I just can. It’s the big tree that stands on the outskirts of the village. The one with the leaves that glitter golden.

I break through the water’s surface. As I do, I void my lungs of water. It’s the only way to breathe. And breathing is the only way to stay alive. Living is the only thing on my mind right now. My numb body resists suffering and death.

Another loud sound. What is it? It’s thunder. Far off in the distance, thunder rumbles.

I see it. I see the world.

What... is this?

I gaze upon a ruddy brown sunset on the distant horizon. Above me are dark grey rain clouds. Below me is pitch-black water. The darkness is broken up by lightning and violent, frothing waves, as if each is trying to outdo the other.

This is a nightmare. But even for a nightmare, this is sick. What is going on here? It’s just too absurd.

My breathing still ragged, I look around. Between the waves, I can see something. There are small islands scattered about. Someone’s there. Figures, dressed in black. Brandishing heavy weapons and armor, they bellow a war cry.

Those are... vampires. A vampire army. Yellow eyes adorn their tan faces.

Wiping away my wet hair, I look up. There's something amid the clouds, too. Figures, dressed in white. Their light clothes flutter in the wind as they gracefully float in midair.

Those are elves. An elven army. Long ears extend from their pure white faces.

"You think this a draw, then, just because you destroyed the battlefield?" A voice echoes loudly across the land. I search for the source. On a small island stands a lone vampire. A flaxen-haired girl—wait. That design...

"Withered branches should return to the earth, like nature intended!" The girl swings a metal rod and the sound of something ripping is accompanied by a blinding light. My eyes are dazzled by the electrical discharge. Slashes appear across my vision.

But no one is hit. The attack creates a great wave and disappears. The lingering reverberations disperse.

Behind the wave stands an elf on the water's surface. An effeminate man with purple hair—wait, that character!

"A bloodsucker dares talk of the laws of nature? Don't make me laugh. Your very existence throws this world into chaos." His voice rumbles low. Oh, no. He's planning something new. Flooding the village wasn't enough, it seems.

With rushing sounds, the water begins to whirl. Not naturally; he bends the water to his will with his power.

"Drown!" The water rises, and then shoots forward in the shape of a snake. It's large enough to swallow a whole human.

"Mere child's play. You're the real joke!" The girl strikes the great snake with her rod and a bright flash of light—lightning—tears it apart. It seems familiar. Was that what had blown the old lady away? "Deep Sea? Maybe if the sea were a kiddy pool!"

"I think I hear the squawking of a fledgling warrior who presumes to call herself 'Golden,'" the elf snorts. The other vampires and elves also begin to stir, incited by the girl and effeminate man—Golden and Deep Sea. The sound of drums erupts from the ground, wild, savage, and deafening. From the sky, flutes flutter, annoyingly haughty and obstinate. A merry undertone runs through

both sides. It is as if they think they're at a festival.

"Ah ha ha ha! Die! Come, I'll smash you to pieces!"

"No, thank you. Why don't you hurry up and drown?"

Lightning flashes. Currents surge. The aftershocks of this great clash of magic shake the giant tree repeatedly. Leaves and branches fall. With every pulse the tree creaks dangerously.

It's a crazy dream. An impossible nightmare. Gritting my teeth, I cling for dear life to the tree's trunk. My nails dig into the bark. *Huh? I'm shaking... but I'm not cold or scared. What is this hot thing boiling up from the pit of my stomach?*

"I don't... accept it." The words slip from my mouth, in a voice far younger than my own.

"I don't accept it," I continue. No, is it the girl herself who's talking? I can feel my strength waning. My body isn't responding to me. It's getting harder to control... Wait, control? Am I controlling this girl? What kind of dream is this?

I stretch out my hand. It's small and delicate. Young. My hand points straight towards the rioting armies and the flickering world. My body is dripping wet. I fill my lungs, step onto a branch with my bare feet, and open my mouth wide.

"I! Don't! Accept! This! World!" Tears overflow. They flow hot and endless down the girl's cheeks, for no one can hear her. No one can hear the words she shouts at the world. There is no one to listen.

No... That's not true. There is someone. Someone right here. I can hear you. Don't worry. If you need to cry so badly it hurts, then go ahead and cry yourself dry. Cry all of your tears for the rest of your life, right here. Offer everything you have here, where the old lady and all the villagers sleep under the water.

"Yeah... Yeah, I will." *Oh! Our minds connected.*

The girl's body is shaking with fury.

"I offer my name. I offer my memories. I offer my love, my hatred, and everything else... I offer my all."

Our eyes meet. Deep within her dark, dark pupils burn bright red flames. But in a world as cold as this one, that's just fine. In fact, it's perfect.

“So, God, I ask you to give me power.” This is a dream. It has to be a dream. It’s just not right for such a young girl to be asking God for the power to fight. A tragedy, is what it is. No one wants this. This isn’t some super-difficult game, for crying out loud!

Ah... I get it now. Everything just clicked. A world where humans are on the brink of despair. The set-up. The designs. The characters. The magic. Without a doubt, this *is* a super-difficult game. One that I’ve played for hours and hours: Dragon Demon RPG a.k.a. DDR.

I’m getting the urge to play again. I remember buying the download-exclusive deluxe version but never installing it. The fact that I never looked up the extra contents might make a replay fresher. Yeah, let’s do that. Some holidays are coming up, after all. I might as well stream my gameplay, too.

After waking up from my nightmare, you might expect me to be a wreck. But instead, I was quivering slightly from the fire burning in my chest.

02 Choosing A Character In DDR / The Knight Reflects On His Chance Meeting With The Girl

I am not lost, for God saves me, loves me, and shepherds me.

-DDR Stream Part 1-

The time spent in front of the vending machine deciding on what coffee to buy is so relaxing. There's bliss in being lost, isn't there?

Anyway! Moving on! Hello newcomers and welcome back, veterans! I'm PotatoStarch! For today's stream, I thought we'd do a little Dragon Demon RPG DX. I'm sure all of you know this one. It's a completely untraditional Japanese game. An open world RPG where the narrative depends on your actions, the level of freedom, number of playthrough options, and required hard drive space are off the charts. Plus the difficulty is so high you have to question the devs' common sense.

In the trailer they state, "Go on a grand adventure in a world of swords and magic." But the game is so brutal it flies in the face of that tagline. First, the title itself is a trap. There are dragons and demons in the game, but if you ever meet them as enemies, they'll kill you. Just absolutely murder you. They're basically forced-death events. And even if you get them as allies, they'll still kill y—Oh, it's starting!

Ah, the opening cutscene is so great. That's the deluxe version for you. It's just so beautiful and fills you with happiness. Handsome guys are shouting in victory while pretty women are smiling coyly.

But it's all a lie. An illusion. There are no hopes or dreams in this game's world. It's a world of heartbreak. Well, that's why I like it, though.

Now, who should I play as? I might die right away, but you gotta pick a pretty girl, right? Let's do that, leave the face up to the character generator, and... Huh? Th-This girl... A-Anyway, she looks pretty good, right? Let's go with her. As for a name, how about "Kuroi"? She has black hair, after all.

I choose you, Kuroi! By the way, have any of you noticed that you can only select your race, gender, and appearance in this game? Everything else is left up to luck. It's such a gamble. Really makes their catchphrase, "Infinite fates await you," ring hollow for me.

As you can see, I picked a human. They're the most unpopular race by a huge

margin. But I think this way I can show off the game's best features to you all. You could say it's like drowning in a sea of despair, but enjoying it. Just gotta click confirm and that's that.

It's rolling for my start location! The results of this will determine my stat levels and skills, so it's super important. Seriously, basically everything is decided based on where you were born? Where's the romance, huh? It's just pointlessly realistic. Keep your B.S. to yourself, devs.

What's it gonna be? A noble or a top brass military background would make my beginning stats super great and lower the strategic difficulty a bit... Oh God. *Oh God*. A slave. Of all things, a slave? A human slave is, without a doubt, the worst start you can get. That's double bad. I mean, humans are basically slaves anyway. They're the weakest race in the game, making them the perfect choice for masochists.

The world setting for DDR is incredibly unfair to humans. Vampires control 40% of the continent and are aggressively expanding their territory, while elves control another 40% and staunchly defend their borders. The remaining 20% is controlled by humans—or rather, it's more like a buffer zone that they're permitted to occupy. They're treated like a lower race that's a target for discrimination. Just talking about how cruel the situation is makes me sad.

In fact, as living things, their strength in battle is on a different scale. In terms of physical strength it goes: vampires, humans, elves. In terms of magical ability it goes: elves, humans, vampires. When I explain it like this, humans don't seem that bad. But each of the other races' specialties breaks the balance and leaves humans overwhelmingly in the dust.

Now, I know you're thinking I'm being all doom and gloom—Geez! Loading is taking forever. How much longer? By the way, my start as a slave is locked in, but there's still a random roll for what kind of slave I'll be. There are a lot of spots in this game where the player might think there's freedom, but there isn't. A gladiator slave would mean my fighting skills increase easily. That'd be nice. Even a miner slave would mean my physical strength would be... No, I won't be that lucky. Since I'm a female character, I'll probably end up a chained slave. The best I can hope for would be another race's treasured pet. That way I could bide my time and aim for the perfect chance to free myself. With some

bad luck I might just end up instantly game-overing, but... Oh, it's loaded.

A serf, huh? Yick. They have some physical strength. But their skills, though! This'll make acquiring magic difficult. Oh, but my starting location is pretty interesting. It's on the outskirts of human territory, so I might be able to show you all the true charm of DDR faster than expected. There's monster attacks to deal with, abuse from elves—a vampire might even murder us. Yup, so many things to look forward to.

Anyway! In order to avoid all that, I'll have to steadily increase my stats. In other words, endless mini-games! Heh heh heh! Behold my crafting skills. Click-click-click! By the way, are you guys the type to look up strategy information ahead of time? Or do you only use it when you're in trouble? Personally, I... Oh! The sun's setting. It's vampire time, which means we gotta get inside the hut. The mini-game I recommend here is...

-Knight Agias I-

This girl was a strange one. Black hair. Black eyes. Wiry. Silent. Curt. And a hard worker. The cultivation of the Frontier was seen as no less than punishment. And in truth, only serfs and convicts were sent to work there. Any worries or complaints she might have had were overwritten by clear-headed resignation, and despite the fact that she was the only one there who swung her hoe with any sense of conviction, she never gave up. Diligently she plowed, working quietly. No one could match her results. Day in and day out, she never tired.

She did have some curious habits, though. It was something I witnessed during the tiny breaks from our heavy labor. Sometimes she repeatedly jumped over firewood. Other times, she threw pebbles at boulders. I even saw her stare unblinkingly into a bucket of water drawn from the well and endlessly count grains of wheat. If you count even the tiniest things, then she had dozens of these activities that she for some reason whole-heartedly repeated in a certain order. She even sacrificed sleep to keep this up.

One moonlit night, I confronted her. I just had to know. I had no interest in others, much less commoners who could not even swing a sword, but I was

compelled. Or perhaps I was drawn to her by fate.

“Where are you from?”

“There.” She pointed at the ground. I wondered if her parents might have sold or abandoned her. Either one was common enough.

“How is your family?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Were you raised in an orphanage?”

“No.” Whatever she had gone through, I could not get it out of her. Her face, pointed up at the stars, sought no consolation, gave off no sadness. I could not even glean a hint of loneliness from her. An unwavering determination, I suppose you might call it, smoldered in the depths of her eyes.

“What are those things you do? I see you have many strange habits.”

“Preparation.”

“For what?”

“For survival.”

“They just look tiring and like a waste of energy.”

“Not really.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. Really, now?” The girl rebuffed all attempts at conversation. She seemed to curtly reject all around her, and yet in truth she was an eager servant. She worked harder than anyone, with an unwavering disposition. Her beautiful face was only rivaled by her pure behavior, and she brought a refreshing feeling in everyone around her.

She was herself, always. Despite the public attention, she never asked for anything, she never changed. Perhaps the world from her eyes was just different from the one the rest of us saw. Ultimately, she lived strongly and carefully in this cruel world of ours. It was as it should be—or should I say, Deus Ex.

One day, a group of monsters appeared from the forest. The air was filled with screams and roars as the ground was covered with human blood, flesh, and innards. But she alone fought back. She thrived in the adverse circumstances. She was greater than all of us.

This girl, beloved by God, was named Kuroi. She would go on to earn such heroic titles as Dragon Slayer and Demon Slayer, but this was her first battle. And I, Agias Willow, bore witness to her incredible might. If not for her, a weak knight like me would have perished in that battle.

03 Battles In DDR / The Sorcerer Is Shocked By The Girl's Strike

I wait, mind empty and ears open,
Such that I can hear His voice,
And offer my body unto Him.

-DDR Stream Part 2-

I want to be a ninja. Give me the ninja technique to vanish during meetings.

Anyway! PotatoStarch here! I'm excited for today's stream of DDR DX. Last time we were going at the serf life wholeheartedly, but this time we'll finally be getting to the battles. Gather up, everyone! Allow me to share with you every detail of this game's unfairness. Be sure to tell everyone how epic this was. Oh, and if you can't handle gore, I suggest you leave now. This is going to turn into a horrorshow.

Whoo, I'm excited! My stats are as prepared as humanly possible after that series of perfectly-executed mini-games. It's all down to player skill now. Come on, my dear slave Kuroi, it's life or death! And for this occasion, I've got my specially prepared VR headset... Which I'll just toss to the side! Not using that. Veteran DDR players only use keyboard and mouse.

Snacks, drinks, manga, and light novels cover my desk, obviously. My monitor's chroma and brightness levels are by default set to low so they're gentler on the eyes. I'm totally ready for a marathon play session. Also, every in-game sound is muted, except for environment noises, which I have set to very loud. Considering what we're going up against, this is all very important.

You see, this game's pursuit of realism is inherently flawed. A war event takes upwards of half a day. Depending on the war situation, taking whole days can be an incredibly common occurrence. I've even heard tales of some events taking up to a week, half of which was just spent marching through mountains. That, like, belongs in a different game—or a different form of entertainment entirely. It's basically just a travel simulator at that point. And of course, saving after logging out during the event is disabled. There was never a pause button, but now even force-closing the game causes your save data to be automatically wiped as the game plays that infamous chime.

But it's DDR. That's just how it is. The devs are clearly out for blood... the blood of our social lives, that is. In the commercials a famous voice actress idol proclaims with her perfect smile, "On this super realistic battlefield, even a moment's hesitation can be your downfall!" But the tryhard levels since the

beta make me think there was some darkness behind that smile. Some serious anger there.

But I'm a grizzled veteran. I have no openings! After all, tomorrow's the start of a three-day weekend. Everything's loaded, so it's time for battle! Oh, shoot. Where's my hand sweat towel? And, uh, my plastic bottle?

-Sorcerer Odysson I-

The attack was sudden. I ran and hid, but there's nothing I can do now. What a pathetic end. Fitting for an excommunicated sorcerer, one might say.

The army of monsters that appeared—creatures that normally live deep in the forest like goblins, sherboa, mad apes, militant rabbits, poisonous rats—came bursting forth from the trees. Damn it all! The garrison is pathetic, too. In the end, they are simply cast-offs from the capital. Those bastards rush us. It is a bloodbath.

These beasts aren't here to feed. It must be the work of magic. Maybe the yellow-eyes cast Fear, or the long-ears cast Madness. Either way, this is bad news. They kill everyone in their path. They even kill their fellow monsters. No mercy for their fellow species. Frightening stuff.

Death. Death. Death is everywhere. Everyone is dying. No buildings will be left after this. Even this grain storehouse, which was made specifically to house our tariffs, will be rubble by tomorrow.

"Hic... Hic..."

"Why is this happening?"

"Mommy, Daddy..."

"Don't—Don't cry! You have to be quiet..." There are a lot of women among the people in here. Oh God. This is going to be a tragic end. Might as well get closer to the armored door. That way, I'll die faster. I won't have to hear the children scream. And perhaps my body will stall the attackers long enough to save a life. Or, at least, extend their lives by a little.

Some footsteps bring me out of my thoughts. The footsteps of death.

“Yeek!”

“Mmph!” Come on. They’re still so young. See how they pitifully try to hold their breath, bravely stifle their screams, and cling to themselves and those around them desperately. Some try to keep their eyes open, while others shut them tightly, tears streaming down their cheeks. Their faces are stiff, their teeth grit.

From the other side of the wall comes low breathing. And then, oh dear, the sound of something slicing into the armored door.

“Ahhh! They’re eating away at the door!”

“Ahhhhhhh! Noooooooooo!”

“G-Get something to make a barrier—Guh?!” The door bursts open and a middle-aged man crumples to the ground. At the entrance, rays of afternoon sun haloing its back, stands a sherboa, a boar monster. Its pig snout snorts rapidly. It must have trampled on a poisonous rat, for under its hooves is a giant purple creature, bubbles of blood spewing from its corpse. A miasma of entrails and shit fills the air and makes my eyes burn.

Everyone is paralyzed as the cursed monster eyes us—*appraises* us. Drool drips from its lips. Damn it. I can sense its maddening bloodlust zeroing in on the women. You dare to gorge yourself on women in front of me, Odysson?

“Not on my watch, you piece of shit.” I bring forth flames—magical flames. Without any tools it is just a spark, really, but as long as it scares the creature off, what does it matter?

“Even death has an order to it. Use your damn brains.” I stand and block the way. Though imperfect, I’m a thirty-year-old adult man. I have to do at least this much. You might mock me and say it’s nothing, but still, I hold my ground. I want to run and cry so badly, but still, I stand my ground. God has long abandoned us, but the least I can do is give the kids some faith in an old man, God damn it!

“Bring it, you beast freak... Yeep!” Blood spatters—the sherboa’s blood. Squeals of anger and pain—these, too, are the sherboa’s.

What? What’s going on?

Before my eyes stands a raven-haired girl. In her hands there is a giant, three-pronged hoe. Burlap sacks are bound to her stomach and back, and the sherboa is under her feet. To be precise, she is stabbing it with her hoe. The sharp bits are biting into the ground.

Did she drop from a ceiling beam or something? Perhaps she had been lying in wait here, long before we barricaded ourselves inside the storehouse. And then, spotting the perfect chance, she dropped in for the kill. The heavy bags strapped to her must have been to increase her damage upon impact. A very prepared strike.

A loud cracking sound resonates. Using her entire body, the girl pulls the hoe down and breaks the sherboa's neck. The handle breaks from the momentum and the girl pitches forward onto the ground, staining her clothes and face a muddy red. She quickly jumps up and looks at the beast. Her gaze is cool. I can sense no excitement in her.

The stillness is filled with death. The girl is the only one who can move. She looks around and picks up a big rock. Then she approaches the sherboa's corpse, adjusts the angle of its jaw, and pounds the rock against it. Over and over, she hammers at it. She throws a few kicks, as well. Finally, she grabs it and twists, ripping the great tusk free.

-DDR Stream Part 3-

Sherboa's giant tusk acquired! Whew, that worked out pretty well. It was worth staking out that door and waiting for it to open. My eyes were busy reading manga. This is a good sign, though. Usually when you lock yourself in the storehouse, it's a poisonous rat or goblin that comes knocking. It's really rare for a sherboa to show up instead. Although it's more like a sherboa to come bursting through the wall.

And my reward for this battle is its giant tusk. As a first-strike bonus, it comes with a special effect! Yay! I can carry it with me and it'll increase my strength with its strange power. Depending on the route, there are even some really useful applications for it later on. Honestly, it might even give me magic. That was a really rare random event! Nice! Now, time to get to work.

This is the part where I remember that DDR is an action RPG and there's a time limit. I'm pretty sure I'm right about this. How do I know, you ask? Well, this hypocritical battle is a famous part of the Frontier.

So, which "hero" will show up first this time?

04 The Priest Delights In The Girl's Dance / Magic Blessings In DDR

God descends,
Behind me,
Surveys the battlefield and my enemies,
and gives the perfect orders.

-Father Felipo I-

God is dead. Or gone. Or perhaps never existed in the first place.

Even if one accepts that there are vestiges of human history that can be mistaken as miracles, they are the results of our ancestors' hard work and labor—certainly not holy works of God. Human reality is a path of suffering with no savior in sight. Yet with this in mind, I still continue to practice as a priest.

But what is this I see before me? This raven-haired girl fighting. Such strength. Such speed. In the blink of an eye she takes down three goblins. With the piece of ripped cloth in her left hand she distracts them, dances around her victim, and then smashes down with the ax in her right hand. Poisonous rat and sword rabbit alike are lost in her wiles before she lops off their heads.

Such brilliance. Such awe-inspiring skill. This girl exceeds the bounds of humanity. In terms of mere physical strength and mastery of the human body, perhaps some knights might be her equal. But they wouldn't fight like her. No, they would not.

Look! The way she dodged that claw swipe. It's as if she has eyes on the back of her head. Goodness, can she see the future? She just jumped back as if predicting that surprise attack!

And then there's her offense. With the least amount of effort she inflicts the greatest damage. Every swing of her ax finds a neck. Heads upon heads roll,

with nary a war cry.

It's as if she's possessed by God. A human, victorious in battle? Such a tale is heard only in dreams.

"What is it, priest? Did you spot the banner of the reinforcements?"

"Why, Lord Willow!" I forgot all about the excuse I made to climb the bell tower. I cannot bear to witness the bleak, pathetic scene my church, now turned into an evacuation center, has become. Then again, considering the distance between us and the fort, there is no possibility of reinforcements arriving in time to matter.

"Unfortunately, I cannot see any dust clouds that might signal the approach of horses."

"I see... Then what about survivors?"

"Judging from how the monsters have turned to infighting, I believe the fields and groves are a lost cause. If anyone is out there, I'd guess they are in the administrative ward or the storage facility."

"The administrative ward was attacked by a troll. There's no saving them." In other words, they became bait to draw away the monsters so that we might survive. My lord's chiseled features cloud over at the thought. It must have been quite a decision to make. What a terrible position to be in. He's only here to escape the battle for succession among his famous military family, after all. That's an abandonment of his legal rights—a desertion of his orthodox life. And yet expectations of his family name and abilities haunt him like a duty. How paltry and noble a man with more obligations than rights.

The opposite is just a bag of rottenness. Many, many of this type have adorned the royal palace, both in the past and the present. All of them are, and will continue to be, submerged in presumptuous sentiment.

"Priest, how long will the warding circle you constructed last?"

"Until tomorrow morning at best. The stench is just too strong."

"I see... Then we must flee before the night ends. I shall create an escape route for us. You lead the commoners and injured out."

“My Lord, I cannot.”

“I apologize, but I must insist.”

“No, you see, it would appear that we are saved.” He gives me a puzzled look, and I do not blame him. His mouth and eyes widen in a slightly foolish fashion. How would he react to something even more unexpected?

“Please, see it for yourself. It is a miracle.” Oh, the hand I’m using to point is trembling. How hilariously shameful. A failure of a priest like myself, who never offered a prayer in his life, is now struck by faith. I’m even crying! I’m like a little boy. Me, Felipo Valkie Millennium!

But even so... My word, how beautiful it is, this girl’s game of death—her dance of evil’s destruction. She slays the monsters with grace, banishing the nightmares with every flip of her raven hair. Flashes of her white blade strike down the demons, brilliantly smashing the despair of humanity.

“Ah, that girl? The one with the black hair?”

“You know her? Where is she from?”

“I don’t know the details. I only spoke to her once.”

“Did you at least get her name?”

“Kuroi.” Wonderful. Even the sound of it brimmed with exaltation.

“Oh, no! She’s lost her weapon! We must help—”

“I think you need not worry, my Lord.”

“G-Goodness!” She glances at her ax, stuck in the corpse of a sherboa, with no sign of panic or remorse. There is a flutter of the cloth in her left hand and a hatchet appears in her right. She cleaves through the swarm of poisonous rats and readies herself for the next kill. A mad ape snatches her cloth away, but this doesn’t faze her. She turns around, a small spear in her left hand. When she picked it up I have no idea, but she instantly drives it into her opponent. Then hurls it, ending the life of another monster that was crawling up on the rubble. Next, a dagger held in reverse, she rushes a sword rabbit.

This must be magic—magic that produces weapons from empty space. This magic has no relation to the classic elements of fire, water, wind, earth, and

thunder. It's proof that this girl is special. Clear, undeniable evidence that she is a chosen being.

Ha!

Which means that there exists a being who loves her above others and has granted her their favor.

Heh heh... What fortune. Yes, what fortune! The existence of God has been proven, before my very eyes! With dazzling persuasiveness!

-DDR Stream Part 4-

Hmm... Mmm? Can humans use the spell Accept Blade? I'd understand if I was an elf or a vampire, but... it's such a rare job skill. Is this a hidden event? Whoa, I forgot about the chat while streaming! Bad streamer, bad streamer! Strike a gallant pose (never show the face, though)!

Anyway.

So, Kuroi can use magic huh? This is quite the bizarre turn of events. Learning magic in DDR is no easy feat, and its uses are heavily limited. For humans, especially, it's a masochistic endeavor.

First, there's the fact that what elements you can use is restricted depending on your race. Elves use water and wind, while vampires use earth and thunder. For some reason, humans are limited to only using fire magic. Not only that, but the balance is completely off. If you focus on offensive magic, humans are trapped between two insurmountable walls known as elves and vampires. Humans are supposed to be second when it comes to magic, too.

The reason for this is the existence of "Guardian Gods." All magic is a gift bestowed by Guardian Gods in the world of DDR. For elves it's the Dragon God, and for vampires it's the Demon God. Each race is blessed with divine, godly powers. But humans don't have a Guardian God. What the hell is that?

It's for this reason that their magic is weak, they receive no help from familiars, fall sick easily, and are generally short-lived. In this world humans are reduced to a depressingly weak race. Yup, that's DDR for you.

That's not to say that playing as elves or vampires is a cakewalk, either. They have their own difficulties. For example, it's really tough to appease a Guardian God. Seriously tough. Not only are they unreasonable, but they often make their followers run endless errands for no reward, send them on quests with no preparation, demand mysterious tributes—the list goes on. And despite all of this, the power of their blessings aren't stable, so it's a generally stressful affair. Plus, if you manage to piss one off, they'll curse you into oblivion. Sometimes they even step onto the mortal plane to kill their transgressors personally.

Remember the sherboa's giant tusk that dropped for me? I was actually planning to offer it to the Demon God. The plan was to ally myself with the vampires and snag a tiny bit of their blessings for myself. I really wanted thunder magic. I never imagined the blessing would materialize as Accept magic, though. Summoning magic is really rare.

Which god even accepts this tusk as a tribute, then? Skipping the ritual and randomly materializing its power on its own just screams Demon God to me. It's the peak of wildness. The Dragon God is really particular about order and rituals... Huh? What do you mean, Devil God? Man, I've never seen anything like this on the wiki. Wow! Should I start a thread and investigate this? Oh, but, it's my policy to not look up outside info while streaming...!

05 The Little Girl Greet The Heroine's Swinging Sword / Religion In DDR

I have no past.

My body, my name, it was all determined by a consciousness greater than mine before placing me on this mortal plane.

-Sira I-

My dad is an adventurer. I love him lots and lots.

But one day, he went out as a bodyguard for a caravan of merchants and never came back. One of his fellow adventurers told me they were attacked by a giant swarm of monsters. He told me it was because of the war. They wouldn't have gotten involved if not for the war.

The war. The endless war between the yellow-eyed vampires and the white-eared elves. Apparently both races are strong, so they incite monsters to attack their enemies. To them, it's just a minor irritation because they're so strong, that they don't think much of it.

That's why I'm all alone now.

That's why I had to come to the Frontier to work. Today, a lot of monsters attacked. A nice old man helped me escape. I don't think I'll ever see him again. I ran into a church, which ended up surrounded by monsters. I thought I was done for.

"There's no need to worry anymore, everyone!" the slightly overweight priest smiles. But the look in his eyes isn't the usual glazed-over and distant one. Real, tingling joy flows from them. I've never seen him like this before.

"Anyone who can still move, take the hand of your fainthearted brothers and sisters. It's okay. It's okay. We are pious lost sheep, gathered in the house of God. Believe in Him without doubt, for He is before us all." God. A human god?

Is this the same God I prayed and prayed to, but never returned Dad to me? I don't want to hold anyone's hand, so I walk over to the window instead. What a stupid thing to do. What am I expecting to see outside? Dad and the nice man are not coming back.

God doesn't exist.

Wait. Why are so many monsters dying? They look so weak. But that can't be true. These things ate Dad. Is that raven-haired girl super strong? I don't get it. She's so strong, and she can kill so many monsters. So why does she not look happy? Why doesn't she smile? She doesn't even raise her voice. She's not scared or angry. She's just very serious. Serious and focused, with a somewhat empty gaze. It's almost like she's praying.

Is God there? Is that why the knights are sortieing too? Are they going to fight with all they have? They look so energetic. They seem stronger than usual, like they can actually defeat monsters.

Is that also because God has arrived? I think I understand that. I'd always try a little harder when cooking or cleaning if I knew Dad was watching. Huh? That raven-haired girl... the one who's stronger than everyone... When did she pick up a sword?

That sword. It's wrapped with black leather on the grip so it doesn't slip when your hand gets sweaty. And that red tassel—it's the one I tied onto it because he said it looked too plain. That's Dad's sword. What is it doing here? Why is it being used in battle?

Wow. Wow! Dad's sword is killing monsters. One by one, they fall to its edge. With every swing the tassel flutters, the girl's raven hair dances, and the monsters die, die, die.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Someone grabs my shoulder. Their fingers are like the branches of a withered tree. Who is this man with a scary face? Oh, right. He showed me a magic trick once. He lit a fire with his fingertips, and I thought he was going to burn himself to a crisp.

"Stay here. There's no telling where monsters might be hiding." He's shaking. He's afraid. But not for himself. For whom, then? I know those eyes. When I was running here, someone was carrying an injured person on their back, face paler

than the one who was on death's doorstep. They were pulling a small girl by the hand, too. This man reminds me of Dad. So I won't go outside. I'll wait here. I'll wait for that raven-haired girl to come. I won't move a muscle until Dad's sword returns to me. Then I'll finally say it.

“Welcome back, dad.”

-DDR Stream Part 5-

We won. My dear Kuroi was totally victorious! Wow. With Accept Blade, I could mow down an infinite number of monsters. This is closer to work than actual play, though. And wow, I've never actually successfully defended this place before. Whew. Honestly, this battle in the Frontier is basically a lost cause. That's why I was planning on defecting to the vampires.

As an aside, one of the basic tenets of DDR is that elves and vampires normally don't attack humans. Their battle strength is such that annexation, even genocide, would be a simple affair. But they don't attack. Why? The answer is simple: their Guardian Gods don't condone it. When I attempted to kill humans during a vampire playthrough, the Demon God sent down an oracle who chewed me out for it. Some ethical reasoning about "bullying isn't cool" or whatever. Also, when I tried to disobey I was viciously killed. Same ethics.

On the other hand, the elves put me on trial and turned my character into a dark elf. I was basically excommunicated, which eventually screwed me over hard. They also cursed me. Scary stuff.

Which is why human territory is considered a buffer zone. But there is a loophole: they can get monsters to do their dirty work. They use magic and their underlings to rile up the monsters and set them rampaging amongst the humans. Then, once everything's in chaos, they can join in without repercussions. They drive away the monsters and station their troops in the area in the name of "security." With self-assured good intentions, they instantly grab land for themselves. Brilliant plan, right?

It's clearly all a ruse, though. Yes, thank you sooo much. The Frontier is their goal. It's the most defenseless place, after all. And this battle is, without a doubt, that sort of event. So, who's the mastermind this time? The cavalry should be introducing themselves any time now.

But I digress. My dear Kuroi, what has happened to you? Looking at her stats, her job has changed to Apostle. That's a very rare job. That basically means you're a super elite that serves a Guardian God. What in the world? No wonder she can use Accept Blade. With enough faith points, she can even use Call and

Summon magic. It's the most uncommon job. If she were an elf or a vampire, she'd be given a court rank or castle. How did this happen?

Devil God... Devil God, huh? Is that the Guardian God for the humans? Was this a feature added in the deluxe edition? Well, it wasn't advertised, and I haven't experienced this before so I'm not sure what to do. If this is new content, there's no way something this cool wouldn't be making waves on the internet.

Still, it's exciting to be playing with the unknown! Kuroi, the raven-haired Apostle of the Devil God... My heart's racing just thinking about it! I'm gonna try and survive as long as I can now, and that means I have to take care of a few things before the enemy forces arrive.

First, I have to set my companion. An apostle can have a servant, and I can choose from the NPCs with the highest faith. So, whom should I choose? Oh, I can't pick the hot knight? He doesn't believe in the Devil God at all. His stats and skills are so good, though. Darn.

Oh! I see two people with high faith. Very nice. One is a short and fat priest. Hmm, his smile is super fishy, though. He's hiding something. But his stats aren't bad. And this skill, Speech, would be good for administration and strategy... Oh! What the heck? He's a Valkie? He's royalty! What is he doing on the front lines?

The other one is... Oh, yep. This is it. I pick this one. A silver-haired little girl? I can't possibly pick anyone else. Sira, huh? All right, it's settled!

06 The Knight Makes A Decision Regarding The Great Undertaking About To Begin

This world is wonderful,
For God gazes upon it through me.

-Knight Agias II-

“There you are, Lord Willow.” Father Felipe wipes his brow as I enter the camp. Is that basket on his back full of documents? Someone’s full of energy now. I could swear he was full of doom and gloom last I saw him.

“Sorry, were you looking for me?”

“No, don’t let it bother you. The reorganizing of the garrison takes priority, of course.” Reorganizing, huh? I guess that’s the right term.

The cost for subduing the troll was far too high. Our soldiers, which once numbered a thousand, are down to a mere three hundred now. The most we can manage is re-establishing the chain of command. There’s no hope for reinforcements.

“Just because we beat back the monsters doesn’t mean things are settled. We must set up patrols, kill any enemy stragglers, tend to the wounded, clear the rubble, restore public order, send out messengers... The military has the greatest executive ability during an emergency. In short, they are humanity’s elite. We cannot begin to express our gratitude.” His silver tongue is working overtime, as usual. And his gesticulations...

“We are simply doing what we must, just like how the church’s work is essential to restoring normalcy.”

“No, no. We are merely the wooden spoon that brings the feast to the lips. The light that brings the masterpiece to your eyes. You honor me too much.” Someone’s in a very good mood. That’s rather abnormal.

“A miracle has shone upon us, allowing us to survive. That is what a priest might say. That it was not the strength of our soldiers, but some supernatural power that saved us.” This man’s loquaciousness perplexes and tests you. That’s very normal.

“I’m aware. Oh, I’m very aware. I may be captain here, but I have no intention of imposing martial law. Nor do I intend to take the credit for our victory. The military and the church should be working together now, as equals.”

“I expected nothing less of you, Lord Willow. Such calm vision. Such a clever mind. Heh. Yes, that is how it should be.” Hmph. He’s so blatantly self-important. Is he drunk, or simply thrilled to be alive? No, that’s not it. No. This is...

“It is rare to see someone as fit to be a military man as you, my lord. As rare as it is to see a revolutionary will.” I knew it. Father Felipo is letting his inner ambitions run free. This is a temptation. He’s trying to make me, a member of the honorable Willow family, his accomplice. And with such conviction, too. His eyes are blazing; vigor rises from his very soul. It drives him to speak his mind.

If I were to nod, it would expose my sincerity. We would become staunch allies. But if I were to shake my head... He’d try to kill me with the holy lance he grips in his hands. Should I shut him down early and refuse him? That would be my professional duty.

But I close my eyes. I desire darkness in order to find the twinkling hunch inside of me—in order to stake my life on one decision.

“Hmm. You would discuss such trends in such a cruel world?”

“I would, for we have been given the rare, perfect chance.”

“You intend to champion Kuroi?”

“Hee hee. Not exactly. You are very, very close, but not totally right.” I watch him carefully, prepared for the moment of confirmation.

“I would present to the world a god—the human God, through His chosen one.” God. An all too understandable word. It settles in your belly, burns with intensity, and sets the body to shivering. It’s the same way I feel when thinking of the glorious exploits of my ancestors. I even recall the warmth of my late

mother, and it penetrates my chest.

“That’s... what that was?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I felt it, too. I even wished for it to be so.”

“Those are your true feelings. No trickery, only sincerity.”

“If only we were allowed to believe in something purely, without deception.”

“Of course. It should be considered a pious attitude to worship a higher presence.”

“I see...” I allow the warmth rising in me to flow through my cheeks. What is there to be ashamed of? Because of the man before me, my eyes are now open!

“We! Belong! In this world!” we chant, fighting back tears. It is a declaration. I feel like a weight has been lifted from my chest. Fighting and death. Fighting and death. And even more death. That has been human history. Our prayers were never answered, no matter how pious we were. There was nothing there to hear them. That was the human world. But we won. Our prayers were answered. On this day, humanity is no longer a race devoid of hope.

“Let me get straight to the point.” His voice is gentle. So he can talk like this as well, eh?

“It is too early to bring Lady Kuroi to the palace. The current pillar of the royal family is not so innocent as to easily embrace hope, nor are they brave enough to make a resolute decision to enact reform.”

“So she’ll be crushed?”

“Yes. Hardship makes people not only stubborn, but thick-headed and cruel as well.”

“Indeed. You’re right.” I can’t help but agree. The unspoken evidence is in reality itself. The horrible truth that most hesitate to voice. The cursed present that we must face now that we have survived—the Frontier.

The Frontier is a place on the edge of monster-infested lands, where people

are sent seeking fertile ground. It's an important thing. A necessary thing. A national project with the dignity of our race on the line, pushing the boundaries of human territory. An offensive stance for the future of our race, with military, church, and commoners alike working together.

At least, that's how it was supposed to be. The truth is that anyone out here is left to fend for themselves, like the most recent battle. It's basically become a method of population control via monster fangs and claws. And if that wasn't enough, the people on the Frontier are treated as human shields. Our sacrifices keep their lands safe.

Is this really necessary? Is this the only way to maintain order? It's infuriating and saddening. It's enough to make a man numb.

"God, upon granting us this miracle, graciously chose this land as its stage—the Frontier, the site of human tragedy." Father Felipe fixes his gaze upon me. I cannot even look away as I wait for him to speak again.

"So isn't it fitting that this becomes our birthplace? The birthplace of our resistance. Our fight. Our challenge. Our action. Our salvation! In other words, the most magnificent of things... Revolution!" His tongue waggles happily. Even I crinkle my eyelids. Exhilaration pulses through me.

"It's like a bath."

"My, that came out of nowhere. Care to explain?"

"The world is terribly cold. But there's no need to dive head-first into His grace. One first dips their toes into a warm bath before sliding in. Slowly, you let the heat spread through your body to your cheeks. It gives you the strength to carry on to the next day." Pretty clever, if I do say so myself. What does he think?

"That is, erm, how should I say this... A very simplistic viewpoint that betrays your age. Ahem! In any case, thank you, Lord Willow, for your continued patronage of our church's purification bath."

"Hm? No, thank you. It is a marvelous thing you have."

"If you would attend my sermons, it would make the water worth warming."

“Oh, please. You would call your criticism of the holy book a ‘sermon?’”

“That was in the past. I’m talking about the future here.”

“You have a point. If the day comes when I can have a bath again, I will come to listen.” We both laugh. No matter how many problems pile up, as long as this spark of hope resides in my chest, I can laugh. A pleasant silence passes, and then I ask the question I have been harboring.

“By the way, what are the things in that basket you’re carrying? They appear to be official documents.”

“They’re various request forms. I wanted to get the Frontier army captain’s sign and seal on them.”

“Hmm. If you deem them necessary, Father, then I shan’t question you...” I inspect the documents. Addressed to the Frontier headquarters, they are things like requests for supplies, requests for more troops, requests for reinforcements from all frontier lands, warnings to our neighbors, solicitations of support from many influential merchants, requests to the adventurer’s guild and mercenary’s guild for more staff, research reports for the sorcerer’s guild, and interview proposals to the newspaper guild.

Every last document lists, in full, the number and variety of monsters fought off in our recent battle. Only two letters are addressed to specific places. One is to the Great Church. I suspect its contents would have changed depending on my answer. And yet he still sought my sign and seal first. In other words, he’s insisting on *carte blanche* for anything concerning the church.

The other is to the Willow household. He wants to see my conviction.

“Let us ring the bell first, and listen to its reverberations.” Bastard. He acts so innocent.

“Everything begins here. Let us put our hearts in order.”

07 The Sorcerer Rises and Demonstrates the Magic Flame That Has Revived in This Land

I was born the bearer of flame,
And I will die unleashing it.

-Sorcerer Odysson II-

“What do you want from me?” The church office reeks of mold. I hate it. Plus, the noble knight and black-hearted priest are in cahoots, so it’s getting a bit *fishy* as well in here. Nothing good can come from collusion between the church and the military.

“This isn’t a requisition, but an official request. Please, don’t be so defensive.”

“Indeed. Odysson, you may have been thrown out of the guild, but you are still a sorcerer. We could use your opinions and magic.”

“Hmm. Undoubtedly.”

“We have two jobs for you. They involve alchemy and fire magic.” So they want me to serve in the military, is that it? Doing menial crap like making medicine and wielding flames for them. What a pain.

“Specifically, we’d like you to teach a certain commoner herbology, monster biology, and medicine production as well as prescription. The other, we’d like you to inspect for magic aptitude, as well as test and train them for fire magic. Your official title will be Head Frontier Sorcerer.”

“Your salary will be a hundred gold, and you will be given an aide. You will also be allowed a personal guard of ten soldiers.”

“Wait, wait, wait! I’m begging ya, hold up a second!” What the hell? This ain’t normal. Head Frontier Sorcerer? An aide? Say what? I ain’t never even seen a gold coin in my life! But most importantly, WEREN’T WE JUST ATTACKED BY MONSTERS? Just yesterday, in fact. Many of us died—hell, I was nearly killed—

and we ain't even had a chance to catch our breaths.

These people work too fast. Well, I guess their swiftness is to be commended. The rescue crews and emergency supplies were life-saving. They even handed out blankets to the women. But still, this is too fast. This stinks of scheming.

"What is the matter, sorcerer? You're shaking. Are you not the master of flame?" I hate the words he chooses, that damn black-hearted priest. So he's the mastermind, huh?

"Yes, I'm a sorcerer. I have a little bit of book smarts, and I can do some funny tricks."

"We have high hopes for you. Good. Now, summon the aide and guards—"

"W-Wait! Stop, stop! Listen to me!" These guys are so pushy, damn. "Why me? Why do you want me to do this job? I was excommunicated, you know. And not for anything like fighting with my professors, either. I broke a taboo. They call me a necromancer. That's not someone you want in an official position." That's why I was banished to the Frontier. This is the only place where I can live equally among others. In the south, the Sorcerer's Guild's tendrils are everywhere. I wouldn't have been able to beg for food, let alone work. At first I thought this was a kind of exile, but I was naive. Between the monsters and the hunger, it's been a straight-up death sentence. Which kind are these guys? Would they leave a guy out to dry, or would they be the ones left out to dry? We're all getting our just desserts out here. What a load of bull.

"Oh-hoh! A necromancer? How frightening. Is it like the holy book says? Can you control undead monsters?" He said it. He actually said it. Hurry up and kill me if you're gonna. Yeah, look at you, so high and mighty. If alchemy's taught me anything, it's that humans aren't born with any sort of 'rank.' Open 'em up and they're all bags of meat; in the end, we're all just matter. And humans are amazing resources for alchemy. Much better than monsters.

"My, my. What a blasphemous confession. Have you no fear of God?"

"Idiot. Those who seek the miracles of God just don't understand God."

"Then please, enlighten me. What have you discovered from slicing open and boiling corpses, O pathetic sorcerer of meager flames?"

“Power.” Both of their eyes go wide. Ah-hah. So they want power, too. That means whatever they’re planning, it involves violence. Fine, I’ll share. They’ll regret this soon enough. Then the Sorcerer’s Guild can kill them both.

“Not just any normal power, either. I’m guessing it’s some kind of power that God has infused only human bodies with. You can get it from other species in limited amounts and find substitutes with other methods, but... they’re no match for humans.”

“Hoh? You’re referring to them as materials, then?”

“That’s right. I call it fire salt.” Fire salt. It’s white, coarse, and a little smelly. In general, you can refine about the weight of one lung’s worth per body.

“I don’t understand. How is that power? Is it used in some strong medicine?”

“You know that catalysts strengthen magic, right?”

“Of course. We priests employ holy signs, while you sorcerers wield staves.”

“Those are magic focusers. They just make it easier to concentrate power. What I’m talking about are consumables.” I gather up some dust from the bookshelf, focus some mana into my palm, and... Bang! Did I scare them? That fireball was quick, but it was big.

“That was Ignite. It’s a spell that consumes flammable objects to increase its firepower. Some use charcoal or oil. It used to be actively researched, but it’s taboo now.”

“I’ve heard of that.” The knight speaks now. I guess an old, fancy family like his would have passed down such stories. “Back when our country lines were decided, the elves forced the Sorcerer’s Guild to abandon certain research pursuits. The military was also forbidden from using bows and moats.”

“You speak of the humiliating Baltrial Treaty, yes? I see, I see. In other words, we were forced to abandon them as part of our disarmament.”

“It’s called Combustion Magic. Remember that.” Now you’re screwed. You’re just as guilty as me now that you know!

“Can this magic help us fight back against the vampires and elves?”

“With fire salt and a bit of skill, maybe.”

“You don’t seem certain. Oh, I get it. You’re too unskilled or too weak to be sure.”

“No, idiot. Ain’t no one alive that’s practiced Combustion more than me. In theory, it’s unbeatable. In theory. But...” I look at my hands. They’re wrinkly, and the shivering won’t stop. I can’t even pat a kid on the head without being careful. They’re pieces of crap. On cold days they ache; on rainy days they itch. Even the bones have gotten brittle.

“I was just one step away.” I can barely make a fist. “Go ahead and laugh, bath man. You’re right. I dunno whether it was human limitations or my own lack of knowledge, but right now my magic isn’t equal to theirs.”

“In the past, you mean.”

“Huh? Well, I guess. But reality is insurmountable. The future ain’t changing.”

“Oh, no. Now, perhaps, everything is different!” Whoa, what the hell? He’s quick for a short fatty. Don’t grab me! Don’t pull me! Damn, he’s a fast runner, too. This is gross!

“Ow, ow, ow! That hurts, damn it!” Why are we going outside? What is this, the wood chopping area? Does he want me to burn something?

“Oh! The magic man!”

“Hey, Sira. What’re you doing here?” Sira, a servant here on the Frontier. So much tragedy inside that small body. She holds a naked blade wrapped in cloth, never letting it out of her grasp. She must think it’s her dad’s sword. But that just ain’t possible.

“Hm?”

“Oh, her?” Sira points at the raven-haired Kuroi. This one’s neither adult nor child. I ain’t got no idea what she’s thinking. But, she saved our lives.

“You’re up to some weird stuff again,” I say as I watch her swing her wood-chopping ax up and down through the air. Three pieces of firewood are laid out on the ground, which she repeatedly jumps over. I just don’t get her.

“Now, let’s get to it!”

“Y-You gotta be kidding me. You want me to do that? What is this, torture?”

“No, my fellow. What are you saying? Let us step back a little so as not to disturb Lady Kuroi. Come, come.” He calls her ‘Lady.’ What the hell? Sure, she’s a great warrior, but it doesn’t suit her. These guys are too reverent around her.

“Now get to it! Unleash your special magic! Make it as big as you can!”

“Uh, I can’t. Where am I gonna get fire salt?”

“Oh, for crying out loud! How unprepared can you be?”

“What, did you think I just conveniently had some on me?”

“How about this, then?” The storybook prince-like knight steps in front of the creepy priest and hands me something. It’s charcoal.

“Swords and magic are simply arts. You don’t always have to use your greatest technique. This should be good enough for you to get your bearings.”
Hmph. Well, he ain’t wrong. But what I feel is still up to me.

I grip the charcoal, black like it’s been crammed full of human sadness, and send magic into it from my palm. And then I call out to the flames—the magical fire that only humans can control. Hm? What... What is this heat? This warmth that kindles my soul? I-Is it okay... Is it really okay for me to unleash this magic? Whoa. I feel a gaze along with the strength. Who is it? Kuroi?

No, is it really Kuroi? Is it really *just* her? This presence... This overwhelming warmth and pressure!

“Rahhhhhhh!” I unleash the fire. It’s an inferno that could easily swallow a human whole. Shit. If I were to name this, I’d call it Raging Flames. Shit, shit! I’ve never seen anything like it.

“Wonderful. Simply wonderful.”

“Indeed. A leader of many men in the making.” The high and mighty are talking about sinister things. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. But my brain’s not working. Maybe I’ve exhausted my magic.

And what the hell is that, Kuroi? Why are you hopping and chopping around me? It’s beyond creepy.

08 Patches In DDR / The Girl Embraces the Warmth and Her Father's Sword

The power of miracles is the power of faith.

Ask and be given, wish and be not given; eventually, the world will change.

-DDR Stream Part 6-

I want a break from work. Oh, but please don't fire me! I'll die!

Hey guys, it's me, PotatoStarch. I've just been instinctively repeatedly doing lateral jumps in a circle. Very shocking. Hop, hop! Ring-a-round the sorcerer, a pocket full of posies. Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down.

Let me say this again, for those who missed it: the deluxe version seems to be patched with a human salvation route. Judging from the stats, this Raging Flames spell can take down vampires. An average one will go down in one hit, even. Elves have high magic resistance and affinity so they'd be more difficult, but it would certainly be damaging. It'll just take a little bit of creativity.

Hm? Oh! The sorcerer's faith stat is rising. Good, good. The Devil God's overall faith points are continuing to shoot up, too. The knight's faith just jumped up; the priest's is the same as always; and the soldiers and frontier settlers are slowly but steadily starting to come around. This is looking very good.

But what I'm focused on is Sira. This girl is crazy. She could even become an apostle herself soon enough. She seems to have already learned Accept magic, even if it is just a limited version that she gets for being a servant.

Back to our Kuroi, though... It's frustrating, or should I say a waste? Her faith stat is already at max and she's fulfilled almost all the requirements to receive the bonuses for being an apostle, but the key power—her Devil God power—is lacking. To be honest, this Devil God is weak compared to the Dragon God and Demon God. But that's DDR for you. Even in the human salvation patch, the devs never forget to dump on the humans.

If this is all the Devil God is, I think the humans are bound to be crushed. I guess the problem is the overall faith level. Low numbers mean low power. In terms of population, vampires, elves, and humans are about equal. But in human society, religion doesn't seem to be functioning properly. It's like they don't know who to pray to.

But for now, the people around Kuroi are growing well. I'll have to spread the word from here—

Hmm. Kuroi has high stats and Accept Blade, so her survival is pretty much a given. But if I'm going to protect the Frontier, I really want Call magic. Damn you, Devil God! Is there anything I can do? I wish there was... How can I keep the Frontier alive?

I mean, the recovery after the monster attack is going swimmingly. People took action quickly, and order has been restored. The people's satisfaction is rising. But the most surprising thing? That our supplies didn't take that big of a hit. The reinforcement of the garrison is going dramatically well, too. This is all quite good. Hmm... Excluding the injured soldiers, we have 328 armed men. The cavalry dwarf them at 530. Good, good. Cavalry is important. They're the key to human battles.

One of the features of DDR is that each race has a limit to the weapons they're proficient with. Basically, the Guardian God provides more than just blessings, spells, and magical alignments. Humans are skilled with blades, which means they receive a buff towards swords, spears, and axes. Vampires are skilled with blunt weapons like staves, hammers, and fist weapons, while elves are basically all about bows. When you take into account the superhuman strength of vampires and the magical superiority of elves, each race's fighting style naturally becomes limited.

But it's not like humans can't use bows. It's just that if they shoot an arrow at an elf, their opponent's wind magic will prevent it from hitting. In contrast, elven arrows are basically homing missiles. Scary stuff. Humans can also try taking on vampires with staves, but that would turn into a bloodbath in no time at all. It'd be like a pro wrestler going all-out against a kid. Tragic, tragic. And so, our only hope is to rely on cavalry. Horses hate vampires and elves alike, so they can't ride them.

I guess it all really comes down to tenacity. Humans were once always expected to lose. That's in the past tense, though. With the advent of the deluxe edition and the Devil God... Maybe... Just maybe?

-Sira II-

Feeling cold, I wake up. It is still night, and I'm alone in bed. Father's sword is

cold and hard. As I thought, I need Lady Kuroi. I go outside, and there she is.

Lady Kuroi. She's looking intently into the distance. The sky is pitch black. The direction she's looking in is where the sun is hiding. It's kind of like her—a warm fire in the silent darkness. A light that you can feel, even if you can't see it.

Oh! The wind is picking up. Lady Kuroi's hair, darker than the night, gracefully flows in the breeze. It's beautiful. I bet if her hair absorbed all of the monster blood showered onto her, each strand would become a mighty sword.

I tightly squeeze the bag-covered sword in my arms. It's Dad's sword that Lady Kuroi returned to me. God exists, and He is within arm's reach.

Yeah. That's why it's so warm. The warmth of Dad's hands has returned. It hugs me close and pats me on the head. It also pinches my cheeks a bit, which I don't really like, but Dad always did it anyway. Come on, Lady Kuroi is looking this way. Don't make a weird face. She'll laugh at you.

"Sira." See, Dad? Now she's calling me. "Lie down."

Huh? She steps on me. Wah! Lady Kuroi's on my shoulders! Hm? She's not that heavy, so she must be standing on Dad's hands. Then she jumps high into the air and cuts down a bird. What was it doing out at night? Or is it something else?

"Sira, light." Lady Kuroi is looking down at her kill. But she doesn't dismiss the rapier in her hand. Is something else coming? Is it an enemy? I run. I stumble into the kitchen and make my way to the furnace. I scoop some embers from the ashes, place them on dried leaves, and breathe over them. Shoot. I was too rough. I have to calm down. I have to light this quickly.

"Sira, what're you doing?" It's the magic man. Good timing.

"Come! Lady Kuroi wants light! Outside!"

"Oh! Sure, leave it to me!" The man grabs a torch and charcoal. Is he going to do that thing again? We leave the kitchen together and go back to Lady Kuroi.

"Kuroi!" With a loud *snap*, the torch lights up. Was that the man's magic? Lady Kuroi is still standing over the bird-thing, rapier in hand. Whose sword was that? What did they use it to fight against? Its guard and sheath are like silver

ivy.

“Wh-What the hell?” The man makes a scary face after seeing what the torch illuminates.

It was a bird after all. Its feathers are the color of ash, with black beak and legs. Its eyes are off-white.

“That’s a death heron! The long-ears use them as familiars!”

“Yes. It was doing some night scouting.”

Huh? He said long-ears. That means elves. They’re the white-skinned masters of the forest with unbelievably powerful magic. And Lady Kuroi said it was scouting. Does that mean...?

“Huh? What the hell’re they scouting the human frontier for?”

“Checking on... our progress... perhaps.” It’s the slightly overweight priest. He must have run over here in a panic. He’s breathing heavily, and his sash isn’t tied.

“The elves are scouting at night... Huff... Huff... And not against vampires, either... Huff! The meaning of this is clear as day—they’re checking to see the results of the massacre.”

“Y’mean... The monster attack? Damned long-ears!”

“If we’d only been able to repel either the troll or the monster swarm, we would likely have died after three days of struggle. If we hadn’t managed to fend off either, we would have been crushed overnight and this place would have been the site of a monster civil war for the next three days.”

“Pieces of shit... They sure are thorough.”

“Yes, they’re being oddly thorough. I heard a village to the east was saved by elves, though.”

The adults talk amongst themselves about something I don’t understand. Their faces are scary.

Huh? When did all these soldiers get here? Are they protecting us? Lady Kuroi is looking at the ground, eyes squinted and concentrating. Is she searching for

something?

“Oh!” I yelp. I couldn’t help it. Dad’s hand drove Dad’s sword into the ground at my feet.

“What is it? Whoa, nice job!”

“Heh, another elven vanguard. They really are being thorough.”

“You ain’t hurt are you, Sira? That sword must be really heavy.”

The sword chopped a lizard in two. Its scales were light blue, and it had one eye. The monster’s blood was cold.

09 The Priest Heroically Sees Through the White Army Bearing Down Upon the Land

The crimson of flames is the color of passion.

Through me, He lights the world on fire,

And His brilliance shines.

-Father Felipo II-

My, what a good decision it was to climb that watchtower.

Here they come, gushing forth from the forest like the disgusting monsters, their formations wriggling like fish in a primal, chaotic school. The morning sun at their backs, enveloping them in shadow, casts a truly sinister aura about them. It is as if they exude evil itself.

Elves. White creatures that revere a monstrous lizard as their God. Storms signal their arrival. They lurk in the great forest that covers the eastern part of the continent, raising all manner of monsters that feed upon humans. Truly, our mortal enemies. Their blue and white banners dance in the distance. About 600 leaves, by my count. On the ground, about 300 silver leopard familiars follow along. Up above, about 50 sky falcons circle. I expect there are lizards and frogs among their ranks, as well.

“There are so many.” Lord Willow’s comment is frank and precise.

“Yes, I’d say they outnumber us about five to one. One could not wish for a more solid army. I even spot two generals riding tigers. This is not a force meant for fighting monsters, let alone humans.”

“Then they’re preparing for a battle against vampires? Ain’t never seen anything like this...” Odysson’s reaction is exactly that of a commoner. He does not shiver in fear, only stands dumbstruck. But one cannot expect more.

“One ‘leaf’ of elves is equal to a human platoon, and they have 600. Some

basic calculations would estimate this is like moving the entire human army against one division.”

“What the hell? Ain’t that bad?”

“One of the generals is an Apostle. I have seen them on the diplomatic seat.”
An Apostle. It can’t be. No, Lord Willow may be young, but he comes from a storied military family. He wouldn’t mistake an enemy general so easily.

The tiger-riders are a male and a female. The male appears to be in charge, but judging from the way the familiars gather, the female must be the Apostle. Even from this distance, the splendor of their outfits is obvious. I see, I see.

“You gotta be kidding me. That runt took out a fort on her own?”

“The famed Seabed is a tall male. He’s nothing like that.”

“I don’t know their accolades, but I am certain they are one Blade of the elven Apostles, the Trileaves. My, how grand.”

The greatest fortune is always followed by the greatest misfortune. Perhaps the events of last night altered our fate heavily—or was something else at work? Either way, it’s clear that things have taken a dramatic turn. And things aren’t going to be getting better any time soon.

“I’m dispersing the soldiers. There’s no point in attempting a display of power.”

“Indeed. Let us instead show how weak we are. I shall leave negotiations to you.”

“Should we not send out an alert?”

“There are eyes in the sky. Word would not reach anyone until night, anyway.”

“No need to panic, I suppose. If it comes to it, we can always bring Lady Kuroi into the fort.”

“If worst comes to worst, you mean.”

“Worst, huh? I think we are far past that.”

“Truly, truly. The worst is a bitter drink we are used to drinking, just as we are

accustomed to sleeping on hard bedding.”

“Keh! This is ridiculous. Just you watch, you cursed long-ears. I’ll burn you all to a crisp!” Well, I must focus on descending this perilous ladder. Lord Willow is leading the troops, while Odysson evacuates the commoners. As for me, I excitedly make for the east gate where the elves are gathering. I lick my lips and smile, rocking my head comically.

Oh! No wonder it seemed so bright this way. There she is, our Lady Kuroi, standing by our crimson banner, resiliently flying atop the crumbled town hall. Black streams of her hair entwine with the sea of crimson, a symbol of our protection. Upon her back, a great presence rides. Behold, people! God is above us! We are on the verge of the first strike in the great war that will engulf this land, the human revolution. And I shall humbly sing of its gravity, its majesty!

“Why, what have we here? Rulers of this shining world and mediators of nature, lords of creation, scholar of magic’s secrets, holders of ears as beautiful as pure white orchids! It is our honor to welcome you from the verdant east as guests in our desolate lands.” Heh, that stopped them. Even the falcons have paused. Excellent.

I ripped that excessive welcome from an official document, however. It’s proof that here there are people who know of diplomacy. To put it even more simply, it’s a warning to these creatures that if they let their guard down just because this is the Frontier, there will be problems later. Can’t ignore that, can you? If things get big enough, I expect the vampires to the west... Heh heh heh... Even that fearsome, monstrous lizard of yours will hear of this. You wouldn’t want that, would you? After all, you swore not to invade human lands unprovoked.

“Your welcome is accepted.” The male tiger-rider approaches. He’s dressed in a blue and gray battle outfit and equipped with a long, white bamboo flask and a short staff of ancient wood. No quiver. I assume he is a close-quarters water mage. His appearance is that of a middle-aged human, expressionless yet powerful. The picture of a self-made man.

“State your name.”

“I am Felipo, head priest of the frontier.”

“I am Second Commander Arcsem.”

“It is my honor to make your acquaintance.” I lower my head respectfully to hide my glee. An opening already. The elves send an Apostle, yet her second-in-command is a mid-level officer. What an unfavorable comparison. Such an odd composition. And yet, 600 leaves is about right for a mid-level officer. That is, if the mid-level officer in question was in charge.

So, were they not able to amass a large enough force? If so, that would be a weakness to exploit. Or were all of their high-ranking officers busy? That is also something we can exploit. Perhaps, even, the Apostle was an unexpected addition? Urgency and forcefulness can be exploited, too. Whatever the case—it could even be multiple things—their already chaotic chain of command is on the razor’s edge. How wonderful!

“The Ewlogond Republic’s Council had decreed that our army be dispatched. Prepare a place for us.” Hah! Trying to force your way through with authority, huh? What an elven decision. The word Ewlogond is supposed to have a ring of ‘absolute justice’ or something... What a farce.

“I’m afraid I must decline.” The middle-aged second-in-command’s eyebrow twitches.

“What?”

“I said, I’m afraid I must decline.”

“Explain yourself.”

“We have just suffered an attack by monsters, my good sir. Great fortune allowed us to repel them, but as you can see, our fences are toppled, homes are destroyed, and we must live covered in dust and rubble. There are still bodies for us to find, and the footsteps of monsters lurking about for a meal still echo. There is just no way for us to accommodate your arrival...” Let’s see just how much the heron and lizard were able to scout yesterday. I mustn’t instigate anything until I know for sure.

“Prepare a place for us. And bring out the leader of this land.” He insists, huh? I see. So they know quite a bit. At least, it’s certain they know there’s no fighting left and that we are rebuilding our forces. They just need permission to

invade our walls.

“Oh, what misfortune! It truly pains me, but I cannot do what you ask of me. To insist is...” This is a good chance to confirm their numbers. 600 leaves, was it? I wretchedly wring my hands. Oh-hoh! Not everyone has the same number of arrows. They must have exhausted them somewhere. Each platoon and squad has shared amongst each other.

“Oh, the monster attack was massive, not to mention savage and brutal!” In other words, they’ve already been in a battle—a limited and low-risk battle where only some soldiers had to fire their arrows.

“Desperate battle after desperate battle have left us with many dead soldiers and civilians. Our leader, the Frontier Army Captain, was also gravely wounded in a battle with a troll—” For example, a battle where a few soldiers were instructed to smoke out some monsters. Then, once they had rounded up the incited swarm, perhaps someone had cast the spell Madness. This caused the monsters to go berserk, leaving the forest to stumble right onto human land. Let’s call it a monster tidal wave—the normal chaos of a monster attack is amplified on a massive scale. But this is all within expectations. It’s more a matter of how much proof I can get.

“After a long night of attempting to patch him up, he passed away before dawn. It is truly regrettable.”

“Lies. Is that not the captain over there?”

“Oh! That is the acting Frontier Army Captain.” Ah-hah. So their scouting started the day after the attack. It also only extends to the outside of buildings. “He is normally our Minister of War, so as you can see he takes well to directing our remaining soldiers. He would of course come to greet you, but in this state of emergency he deemed it better to prevent any monster rats from scuttling underfoot and causing you any distress.” Hmm. So he knows the effects of the monster tidal wave, but it would seem this was not a meticulously thought-out plan. It was, ultimately, only the action of a mid-ranking officer.

“Hey, Arcsem!” Oh? What have we here? A younger voice? “How much longer? I’m sleepy. Can you get this over with already?”

“Your Grace, I am a little busy.”

“Aww!” *Your Grace*. The elven system of government is not based on lineage, so this is a title that can only refer to an Apostle. Her appearance, like her voice, is that of a young girl’s. Her outfit is extravagant, with lots of flowing cloth. In her hand she holds a folding fan, but no weapons to speak of. I assume she is a wind mage. So this is one who has been given a special blessing from a Guardian God... An elven Apostle.

“The beasts hunger as well. Hurry it up.”

“...Priest, enough with the formalities. Bring us food.” Hah! So it’s a short-term plan and your supply trains are unreliable, eh? I see, I see. I swear, I will use every last ounce of silver in my tongue to wrest as much information as possible from them. Everything has been as I suspected—from the execution of the monster tidal wave that went as planned, to the unplanned situation they find themselves in now.

“Right away.” What fortune! There are so many openings for me to take advantage of. I have to work very hard to keep myself from skipping with joy.

10 About Elves in DDR / The Dragon Warrior Watches for Danger in an Unknown Land

I give my body unto Him.

I give my life for Him,

so that I may please Him.

-DDR Stream Part 7-

People who do unassisted speedruns of giant RPGs are, in my opinion, a type of philosopher. They are enlightened.

Anyway! PotatoStarch here. I've run into a bit of trouble. I'm unable to use hyper mode to speed up time. Hmm. The event is still ongoing so I guess there's no problem, but I can't even skip sleeping times. What? You want me to do a stream of watching Kuroi's sleeping face? Okay, that one was a joke.

But really, stuff like this is what makes streaming bittersweet. Like lemonade? Or maybe chocolate? While I'm still energetic, I can steadily up my stats, and when I'm feeling tired I should have been able to just let things play out in observation mode.

By the way, things have taken a pretty interesting turn. It's quite the shocking, mysterious turn, too. Maybe this thing is bugged...

Ahem. So, it turns out the monsters were sent by the elves. Their forces number 600 elven troops and 400 familiars, for a total of 1,000 fighters. This is a formation the elves could use in unconventional warfare against the vampires. They have a reasonable number of troops, and their numbers make hiding, attacking, and running easier.

Part of the use of this frontier battle is to lure out their enemy. The strategy is to come to inspect the ruins of the Frontier before sieging and annihilating us. An army of a thousand could easily suppress one or two hundred.

But what is this? Why is this? There's an Apostle among their ranks! This is no place for her. There's a big difference between one's own territory and someone else's. I mean, Apostles are the strongest job. They're the trump cards for each race. Normally, the elves have three and the vampires have three. There's a hard limit on them, so it's not possible to have any more. It's part of the reason both sides are evenly matched. But now in this deluxe playthrough, the humans have their own special girl.

So what's an Apostle doing in human lands with a small force? Not to mention this particular elven Apostle's appearance is beyond bizarre. It's Sakiel! Sakiel,

guys! She's the Vermillion Flower of the Trileaves and the only little girl character! She was second place on the official site's popularity poll! Well, statistically she's the weakest of all the Apostles and she can only use Summon and Call magic.

But she's not someone you can afford to leave out of a battle with demons. She's what you'd call defensively oriented. So to see her here... It just makes even less sense. And where's her servant? That scary-looking older girl... There she is, up in the sky camouflaged with a white cloak. That's the elves' best flying unit for you.

Her name is Fleilyu, the Falcon. As servant to Apostle Sakiel, Angel of Ten Thousand Bells, she's the character that many players speak of as "it's game over if she spots you," a.k.a. Sudden Death Girl. If she's up there watching for enemies, does that mean this mysterious event is going to turn into a limited scale war? If that's what this army is for, then I guess I can understand why Sakiel is here... Nope! It's Sakiel, after all.

Is some big player about to appear? Since there are no demons... A vampire Apostle? Nah, no way. If that actually happened, the humans would be so screwed. Wiped out, in fact. The best I can think of is a mid-scale battle. I hope it's that.

Then, are the elves laying a trap or will the vampires bring it to them? Either way, the frontier is guaranteed to be collateral damage. The humans are totally screwed. Oh! The elven army is entering the frontier. Things look fairly orderly, but there's no avoiding trouble in this power dynamic. We did kill their scout familiars last night, after all.

Time to get ahead of this!

-Dragon Warrior Fleilyu I-

I was seen.

Just now, something was looking at me. A gaze struck my body like an arrow... No, pierced it, like an invisible, silent, and fearsome spear.

I should lose altitude. Carefully. Weave through the air. Alighting on the

unmoving ground, I can finally tell for sure. My body is shaking. This has never happened before. Even in my battles with demons, I remained proud and true.

This is dangerous. Something extremely dangerous lurks here. It's not a vampire, either. Those creatures are nocturnal and essentially powerless against a sun-filled sky. I would never be afraid of them.

But this danger... It must be related to a demon. If that is the case, perhaps there is a secret hidden in the land itself. The humans have only recently started to settle here. There could be something buried underground that they are unaware of, melted into the darkness.

Say, perhaps, an ancient demon that was sealed away here in a war from the Old World. The legends often speak of an undead king's curse. If that is the case, I can understand the Council's emergency decision.

I must return to Lady Sakiel's side. I must tighten my watch. I must be as a moonless night, even during the day.

"Where are you going, Dragon Warrior? This is not your post."

"S-Second Commander Arcsem."

"Sit among the clouds in case the bloodsuckers attack. That is your duty." What a pain. Has he been watching me?

"My duty is to guard Her Grace the Dragon Commander. Let me through."

"I cannot. We have not detected any sort of threat at present. Return to your post."

"Detected? It'll be too late once you do!"

"Do not speak so unclearly. It does not suit your rank, Falcon." Damn him. I had taken his stubbornness into account, but there is a clear edge to his tone. This situation is against his will. Originally, this was to be an expedition to draw out and destroy the vampires, in which he would have been able to use his strength and talents to their full potential. As a Second Commander, such an opportunity would be almost worth killing for.

"Don't forget, I have the right to command on this mission. I will have you obey my orders, Dragon Warrior." His argument is stubborn and sound. The

Council decided to change our duty and assigned us a scouting mission. As a result, his carefully raised platoon is being used as disposable bodyguards for Lady Sakiel.

“Fly, and do your best to find the bloodsuckers before they do anything terrible.”

“Her Grace is in that building, correct?”

“You won’t obey, then? Well—”

“Know your place, or find out the hard way. Her Grace’s safety is more valuable and precious than all of your lives, honor, and anything else you can think of combined. If you continue to bar my way, you will experience the Falcon firsthand.” Back off, Second Commander Arcsem. I can sympathize with feeling regret over being swept aside, but being patient in the face of such adversity is something to be proud of. You are a water mage. If you reach for the water canister at your waist... Good. That’s a good boy.

“...At the end of the second floor.”

“You have my gratitude.” That attitude. Those footsteps. I’d thought him a calmer man, but he’s surprisingly passionate. Perhaps that is how much he is risking with this mission.

Not good. I shouldn’t have left Lady Sakiel’s side.

The security is passable. Soldiers line the street, wind falcons sit atop the roof, frogs and lizards lurk beneath the rubble, and silver leopards lie in wait inside buildings. No openings. However, it is only a human-made building. I simply cannot relax around painted wood walls.

“Oh? Fleilyu, you’re back?”

“Yes, I requested to serve at Your Grace’s side... Erm, what are you doing?” Her loveliness knows no bounds. Clinging to the window in the back of the room, she looks much like a rainfrog.

“I was looking at the humans.”

“The humans?”

“I can see a group of whelpings. Five or six, I believe.” She beckons me over

to the windowsill. Ah, so she can see the side of the well. A crowd of human children are gathered about.

“They’re drawing water with that bucket.”

“Hee hee! It’s a game, actually. A water game. I like such things, so I can tell.” That water is extracted from the ground without ever coming into contact with the wind. In other words, it is not suitable for our magic. This would not be a good location for a base.

“Hm? What are they doing with the beasts?”

“Oh, they are giving the silver leopards water.” We should be fine in terms of supplies. The horses and cattle are in enclosed spaces, so they cannot wander off.

“And feeding them.” Human children, their favorite food, are plentiful here.

11 The Sorcerer Chants and Confirms the Direction of Humanity's War

I am human.

Thus I struggle, fight, and defeat my enemies.

So that I may live as a human.

-Sorcerer Odysson III-

"You pieces of shit!" Three. They killed three of them. Three brave, excellent soldiers. Cold-heartedly.

"Ugh, another dirty one appears."

"He smells weird, too. I can only stand young humans."

"Nah, it's gotta be females. It's a different feel when their teeth sink into them."

Three long-ears and four silver leopards. This is ridiculous. You'd need a hundred to equal me. Three leaves? I'd play with them nice and slow before killing them. Leave this to me. I, Odysson, will avenge you. And I swear to save the children you protected. I will not let them die!

"Move, filth." In his hand is a short arrow. A wind mage? Then I'll set this riding upon the surging air. In my hand is charcoal. I draw magic from within, grip it, and... Take that, ya bastards!

"Ahhhhhhh!" Raging Flames reached them! They're burning!

"F-Fire?!"

"Was that magic?"

"M-M-My hand! Water! Water!" Damn, only got one arm. The wind stream was stronger than I expected. The one over there is a water mage, though. That

ain't good for spreading fire. I gotta shut him down.

“Cursed human! How dare you?”

“Burn, leaf boy!” I was saving this one! I swing a vial full of oil and ignite the discharge. Flame Scythe!

“Rahhhhh!” Is that me screaming, or is it them? Damn it all! No go, huh? The fire scattered! Still, this is good enough. I’m fighting on equal ground against wind and water, the two elven magics.

Gotta move on. Next. Another Raging Flame—Whoa! Shit, a silver leopard!

“Yeek!” Huh? A spear? A spear pierces the ground in front of me, skewering the creature. Talk about déjà vu, man. Looks like my ass was saved yet again. And she’s standing on the butt end of the lance, too. What an acrobat.

She brushes back her raven hair and from nowhere appear an ax and a longsword. It’s like sleight of hand. That shit’s too unique even for magic.

Kuroi. She has a lot of weird habits, but she’s one strong little girl. I could never tell what she was thinking, but... I think I finally understand. I can feel the magic—hot, intense, and bright. You’re angry, aren’t you? That fury is like a raging flame.

“H-How dare you?!”

“You wild boar! Dieee!” Oh, wow. Slicing through wind, brushing away water, her blades find their marks. Or is it magic? With every swing I can feel a singing heat. Compared to her, elves are nothing. But that’s to be expected. Her firepower’s just different. The speed is one thing, but ultimately the fuel is incomparable.

This presence. This pressure. There’s something incredible inside her. More than one person alone can carry. Oh... I get it! Maybe that’s where God resides.

“Both sides, cease!” Huh? Who the hell’s this? From her getup, I’m guessing some sort of long-eared officer. “I am Fleilyu, Dragon Warrior of the Ewlogond Republic Army. Brethren, silence your magics. Humans, put away your weapons. Her Grace Dragon Commander Sakiel shall take charge of this scuffle.”

A dragon warrior, huh? And a dragon commander? What the hell? This makes the swarm of monsters look cute in comparison. The real monsters are showing their faces now. It's all over. It's not about winning or losing anymore. You gotta wonder if the entire human race is about to be exterminated. What now? Huh, God?

"Dragon Warrior, good timing! Destroy that thing!"

"Did you not hear me? I said, cease fighting."

"You cannot be serious! Look at this arm! And... Hey, wake up! Open your eyes! Ahh, he's dead! He's deaaaad!"

"Two casualties, one injured, six beasts slain... Quite terrible."

"Damn you, inferior specieeeeees!" Wind's coming—crazed, maddened wind magic. A big spell, too, but... Yup, it's all fine. See?

"Fool." This Dragon Warrior is a scary chick. That was so fast I didn't even see her strike. The long-ears with the burned arm collapses, a tail feather sticking out of the back of his neck.

"Hear me. This incident was not of Her Grace's will. It was an accident, stemming from our army's attempts to replenish its supplies. Thus, any losses incurred by the army will not be reported." Accident. Reported. Stuffy-sounding words, through and through.

"A message. Her Grace grieves. She says that human children may have been injured as well. Thus, at my discretion, I brought this. Use it." A small container of woven bamboo... A medicine chest, eh? Could it really be elven elixir? Uh, Kuroi, aren't you supposed to be taking that? Fine, I'll get it. If you're giving stuff out, I'll gladly take it. Ain't no good or evil medicine.

"...Lastly, a personal observation." Ah, shit. "I am surprised to see fire magic that can burn an elf. I have much yet to learn about humans."

The damn long-eared chick is focusing high-pressure wind on her body's surface. At this distance, it's easy to tell. Ain't no half-hearted flames getting through that. Damn.

"More surprising, however..." Her eyes. Those eyes, fixed on Kuroi. They're so

sharp, like a bird of prey's. "All I can say is you are a threat."

Shit, she's ready to attack at a moment's notice. But she stopped the fight so surely she won't start another one... right? Kuroi's on guard, too. She's empty-handed and has her back turned to the elf, but she isn't budging an inch.

"Who are you, girl?" This ain't good. If they get into it, I'll just be a hindrance to Kuroi. First chance I get, I gotta evacuate the kids. Are all six here?

"That is our Lady Kuroi, Miss Dragon Warrior."

Finally decide to show up, you piece of shit black-hearted priest? Quit huffing and puffing! Catch your damn breath already. Negotiating with the long-ears is your job, isn't it?

"Took you long enough."

"Negotiations proved difficult. I left the rest in Lord Willow's hands."

"They killed three of ours."

"Raquial, Apollos, Locton. Killed in the line of duty. You shan't be forgotten." Huh. So those were their names? I won't forget, either.

"Kuroi? Is that a name? What I'm asking is—"

"She's human." Yeah! Go get her, black-hearted priest. Give her what-for! "Very human. More human than any of us could hope to be. She is also the one who stands at the forefront of our race. She is a symbol of humanity living and thriving on this land, as well as proof that we are blessed by a higher power." Ha ha! You too, huh? Your blood's boiling too? I don't doubt it. A half-baked understanding just serves to make you madder.

"She *is* what it means to be human. Each of us is born and granted many rights: the right to be loved by our parents, the right to be proud of ourselves, the right to love our children. She teaches us that it is okay to be human. That is our Lady Kuroi." Nice smile, black-hearted priest. I can practically see the fire leaping from your eyes. And as for the Dragon Warrior... Hmph, she just looks confused. Bitch. Didn't expect that description, did you? She's all like, "*What are these savages talking about?*"

"Do not worry, Dragon Warrior. We will not seek an apology or reparations.

Dying to protect children is a high honor, just as defeating your enemies and avenging one's comrades are grand desires. Both are facets of the beautiful thing known as human dignity." He's completely won this battle of words. Then again, you have to take into account the difference in their positions.

Still, at least the enemy leaves. That's a hasty retreat. The Dragon Warrior silently grabs the leaf broaches from each of the bodies and leaves. Those are special mementos, equivalent to a head for the long-ears.

Now, then. We can leave them to clean up their own mess... Kuroi? Why's she staring at our three dead soldiers? What is she thinking? What is she feeling?

This... This magic, this presence... it can't be! The three of them stood up?! No, that's not it. The bodies are still lying there. Am I seeing things? It's hazy, like fog, but I could swear the three of them are... Kneeling before Kuroi—before something great on her back. And then they fade away. What the hell? They were absorbed into Kuroi. Into whatever is inside Kuroi. Yo, what on earth? Kuroi, could it be? No, I'm certain about this. It's not just weapons...!

"Oh... Deus Ex..." The words pass over lips. Not mine, though. Was it the black-hearted priest that uttered that?

Deus Ex.

The true word that the Church first teaches you. It means "may it be so." It's a prayer from the bottom of the heart said when a member of the Church wishes to sing praises. It is an affirmation of everything in this world. An expression of hope.

Deus Ex. Yes, may it be so. In the holy book, it is written as DX.

I—we—will surely win. I may die along the way somewhere. The black-hearted priest and the noble knight might kick the bucket, too. But we won't be sad or troubled. We will fight until the moment of victory. We will continue to fight, no matter what form we take. That is what I just learned. So one day, we *will* win. Humanity will be victorious.

12 The Knight Patiently Waits for Humanity's Glory

Betwixt Heaven and Earth lies a crimson flaming horizon.

I seek.

This place.

As God wishes me to.

-Knight Agias III-

At this point, elven arrogance is not something that angers me.

“Captain, do not make me repeat myself. This is not enough. We require more beans, potatoes, flour, cattle, and horses.”

“And as I keep telling you, Second Commander, we have no obligation to provide you with any more.” Who knows how long I have been standing here at attention, away from the troops and surrounded by elves eating and drinking. How are things going with Father Felipo?

“You are as stubborn as a mule. My patience is truly being tested.” Agreed. But I will not show it.

“I sense no respect. It is unfortunate.”

“Not only must we construct your camps, but we must also feed you. We have given more than enough help.”

“I ask the tolerance of the people of Ewlogond. However human that makes me sound.”

“We are merely fulfilling our end of the Baltrial Treaty.”

“An old interpretation of an ancient law. No, let us call it a makeshift pretext. How shameless.”

Sneers erupted from all sides. The elves' laughter is like the rustling of trees, or the tuning of an orchestra. Appropriate, considering they as a race excelled

at music.

“Is that thing at your waist a sword?”

“Yes.”

“And you call that a weapon?” He was insistent on getting a rise out of me, no matter what it took.

“Indeed.”

“It would be useless before our army’s bows, and snap like a twig in battle against a vampire’s hammer. Is that all you have to rely on?”

“Correct.” He’s stubborn. Even starting to get a bit frustrated, I’d say. What is it that makes him this way? Pride? Scorn? Panic? Resentment? Either way, this is a battle. I stand alone against a sea of heavy offensive attacks. For now my stance shows no openings, but as reinforcements are uncertain it’s unlikely this will be settled in a draw. I doubt I can even hope for a narrow defeat.

“Would you like to see?” In that case, I must act. A counterattack.

“...Yes.” Go, my sword. My vanguard.

“Hm, I dropped it. It’s heavy. What a barbaric racket it makes.”

“A sword of this make must not be wielded or spoken of lightly.”

“Hmph. You pick it up, but why do you not wipe the dirt off?”

“A warrior uses the dirt of the battlefield as his pillow. That goes double for their weapons and armor.”

“A savage’s ideals, indeed. And... Mgh... I can’t draw it.”

“Perhaps that is for the best. A naked blade calls for blood.”

“You would strike an elf?”

“I simply know the meaning of a blade.”

“You were planning to strike me, weren’t you, lowly human?” I pick up the sword he tossed to the ground again. As my fingers wrap around the hilt, I can feel a stubbornness. You’re as boneheaded as I am, aren’t you?

“Let’s test whether that stick is worthy of being called a weapon.”

“Perhaps this is not the best place. Plus, our weapons are too sharp for a duel.”

“Do not quibble over trifles. Cry all you like, but it has been decided.” He shoots me a quick, almost intense, look. This officer is tough.

“I shall loose an arrow. Block it if you can.” I hear the sound of a bowstring before he even finishes speaking. It comes not from the front, but from the side and behind. A double Rending Arrow. Wind brushes my shoulder and leg, signaling their targets. Elven archery goes hand in hand with magic.

The fact that they are not fatal targets is proof that this is a trick. He wants to taunt us into action. So I draw my sword, a quick flash through the air, and with great speed cut down the arrows.

Hmm... It’s quiet. We may be different species but martial arts are martial arts, and a soldier is a soldier. An opponent’s ability is best judged in silence. Heh, is he trying to hide the sound of his swallowing? I do not know your name, archer, but there is nothing to be ashamed of. The truth is I am also quite impressed with my skill, and that’s not just conceit.

This is a blessing. God has deigned to bless us humans when we swing our swords.

“What are you doing?” a voice roars from on high. An elven flyer, eh?

“Second Commander Arcsem! Explain yourself!”

“There is no reason to get riled up. The human drew his sword. In front of me.”

“Don’t lie to me! You surrounded him with your men and shot arrows at him!”

“If you were watching then don’t trouble me for an explanation, Dragon Warrior.”

“You would ignore Her Grace’s will, you cur?”

“I was merely attempting to secure provisions. That is within my job responsibilities.” Even elves have infighting? Interesting. So he attempted to stir up trouble—to light a starting signal—despite this waiting for him? All to bring

war to this land...

Well, I won't let him. Not as long as I bear witness.

"On plains of chaos no one knows, where hills billow like a stormy sea..." Solemnly I begin to chant an old war song. Drawn blade in hand, I dance.

"Evil winds blow purple clouds from the south, far above in the peaks of Heaven..." Chanting clearly, I continue to dance. In place of the traditional clapping I swipe my sword, and in place of drums I stomp the earth. Just listen. Just watch. This is another form of battle.

"Listen to the voices of a thousand men, a thousand horses become the shadows of the Spear Forest Wilds, become a torrent of battlefields..." A few days ago, this land was akin to a graveyard. It might still be a battlefield, but there is life now. Nay, dare I say, it is even becoming a holy land.

And so I chant. And so I dance. My body is filled with the joy of offering up my martial arts to God.

"Silent moonlight shines on the graves of the strong. A lone war banner lays upon an empty land." As the song ends I sink my blade into its sheath, the clink of the guard ringing like a bell. My sword put away, I straighten up. Then I bow.

"Pardon me. Just a little performance to show my respect for the bravery of your army." Ah, it's quiet. It's so quiet, I can even hear the sound of shuffling leaves. The whispers of soldiers are representative of an army's true nature. Quiet surprise, curiosity, admiration... those are the things I hear. As expected, whether they be human or elf, the purity of a warrior changes not. Soldiers are essentially simplistic and crude. They stand brave against enemies, fear enemies, challenge enemies. Assuming we all share these qualities, then tactics can be related. Because we kill each other, we can also sometimes fight together.

"If I recall, you were the acting representative of this land, correct?" The Dragon Warrior approaches. That must mean things have settled down here, at least.

"I am Agias Willow, acting Frontier Captain."

"Indeed. An excellent performance. I wish I had my flute so I could accompany

you.”

“It would be an honor.”

“I see. I am happy to hear that. However, that aside, there is something we must discuss immediately.”

“The disturbance in the residential quarter?”

“Yes. Second Commander Arcsem, I insist you accompany us.” Beckoned into their camp, I take the seat I am offered. The plants decorating the inside remind me that I am in the heart of enemy lands.

“Let’s get to it. Your report, Dragon Warrior.”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, losses were suffered on both sides.” So we’re not waiting for Father Felipo to arrive, eh? The Dragon Warrior doesn’t seem rushed, but this Second Commander elf does. I assume he doesn’t like dealing with that silver-tongued man. I can understand that.

“Her Grace wishes to express her greatest sorrow over this incident. Even now, she is stricken with grief. It all began with...” The Dragon Warrior’s face is grave as she explains what happened. Whether it is the victims that pain her, however, I cannot tell.

“I see. So three soldiers were lost.” An elven army occupying a human living quarter... it was never going to work. And considering the chaos from the monster attack, it’s fortunate this is all that happened. Even though people died.

“I must insist that this was not Her Grace’s will. In fact, she tried to stop it. Even in her distress, she ordered me to. However it was, er, difficult for me to understand...” I can guess why, but I refrain from speaking. After all, to elves humans are not seen as equals.

“Wait. *We* lost three soldiers and six beasts?”

“The violence in the living quarter was our fault, Second Commander Arcsem.”

“We’ll come back to that. Are you telling me humans killed elves?”

“...Yes. I witnessed it myself.”

“As if I could believe that.” If anyone could do the impossible, it would be that raven-haired girl.

Kuroi.

Earlier she had been watching over me and Father Felipo from a distance when she noticed distress in the town and ran off. And then she saved some children and took revenge on elves, eh?

“We...” If I consider Kuroi’s actions—consider her actions as those of God’s...

“Our army...” As the one in charge of the soldiers here, it is my duty to deliver this verdict.

“Our army exists to protect humans. In our right hand we wield a blade, in our left we wield flames. Each of us is always ready to defend. We do not fight recklessly. However, we do not shy from battle either. Our army is a fire that, once sparked, rages fiercely until its enemies are turned to ash.” Elves and vampires. The two strong threats against humanity. Both require solid shows of force to get the message, or else a limited future awaits us. And I will devote my life to a better future for humanity. So, for now, I will press forward, hiding my true feelings. I shall endure, and I shall make progress. They will know the line they cannot cross, and the pride of humans will not falter to petty pranks.

“I pray that you fine elves do not forget this.”

I shall wait for fortune to turn my way.

13 The Girl Swears on God's Wavering Shadow / About Trouble in DDR

God gives us tactics, strategy, schemes, and plans.

The awesomeness of a veteran... The blade of God, cutting through innumerable obstacles.

-Sira III-

Elves aren't like us humans. Their skin is pure white, their hair light-colored, and they're thin, as if they'd melt in the wind or water. They wear loose clothes, and their shoes are woven. They can fly in the sky, and they walk like they're sliding. They're like fairies you'd find in a picture book... and really scary. Their eyes are cold, like ice. They watch us from afar, smiling. But we mustn't let our guard down. They like to flick their bowstrings at us and scare us with their leopards and hawks. They laugh when we panic.

One time, we found a pretty stone decoration on the ground. One of the kids tried to pick it up, but I stopped them. I'd noticed an elf with an arrow nocked. I think they really meant to shoot us.

Lady Kuroi watches the elves. She's always watching them. Her eyes are the same as when she faced the monsters. She never sleeps at all. Just watches. Watches.

Tonight, again, she stands atop a tower of rubble, black hair darker than the night flowing in the breeze.

"Lady Kuroi, do you... hate elves?" I ask. I feel I have to.

"No."

"Even though they kill humans?"

"Mm."

“...Even though you killed one?”

“Mm.” I wonder if love and hate even factor into why Lady Kuroi fights. She had a focused look on her face when fighting the monsters, but it didn’t seem like she hated them.

“Then... why?” Does she fight because she’s strong? I hope that’s not it.

“Because I’m angry.”

“Huh?”

“That’s why I fight.” It doesn’t look that way to me. Not at all. Lady Kuroi’s always so quiet.

“Who are you mad at?”

“The world.”

“The world... This world?”

“Yes. I can’t leave things as they are.” The world. The place we live in. The place we die... the place we might be killed in.

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t matter if humans live.” Oh!

“Because this world doesn’t need humans.” Right, right.

“And it makes me... furious.” I understand. I understand, Lady Kuroi. Dad said the same thing. The world is very cruel. It was why he couldn’t stop fighting, even if it was dangerous. He said if he didn’t fight, it would be beyond pathetic.

Humans don’t have a God. So no matter what they do, they’re weak. They can never measure up. None of their wishes can be granted. Which is why the other races with language don’t bother with us. They don’t love us. They don’t hate us. It’s not even like they ignore us. It’s a more pitiful, uneven treatment... Sometimes they’re rough, sometimes they’re kind. It’s like the elves and vampires don’t care about us at all.

I see... So if no one will engage with us, then we can’t hate anyone specifically. This feeling of wanting to scream out... Yeah... It’s anger. “We’re right here!” I want to scream at the top of my lungs, tears streaming down my

face.

“Let me teach you something.”

“Okay.”

“God isn’t always by your side.”

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean?”

“It’s because gods have their own fights, I think.” A fight between gods... The elven god and the vampire god have been fighting for ages, according to the priest. He described it as a very troublesome battle.

“Are you talking about the elves’ monster lizard and the vampires’ bat boss?”

“The human god is... a devil.”

“A devil?”

“A devil of battle. I fight and I fight and I fight, yet still it urges me to continue. It is a god of war and flames.” As Lady Kuroi speaks, it’s almost as if a large presence wavers in and out of existence behind her. It’s sitting... enshrined? But unlike the paintings and statues that decorate the church, it doesn’t have multiple arms, and isn’t wielding a sword and shield. It’s surrounded by lots of strange gadgets and... its eyes are closed. I can’t see its face, but I can tell that its eyes are closed.

God exists.

This thing I’m looking at is probably nothing more than a shadow of God. But He’s right there. Right next to Lady Kuroi. I can feel Him. God. When those eyes open, the fighting will start again. I’m sure of that.

“Sira.” Lady Kuroi’s voice. It’s a beautiful voice, filled with God’s power.

“If I’m ever defeated, it’ll be your turn to stand.” I stifle a scream and listen. I have to listen.

“You must prepare. You must stake everything on this.” I nod. I nod, putting my life on the line. For this is a contract. A contract with God. So listen, Dad. I’m going to fight, too. So that we can be human. Be proud.

-DDR Stream Part 8-

Oh, shoot! I fell asleep. But no battles broke out, so we're all good. At times like this, I need my blessed coffee! I'm the type of person to dump the instant coffee in a cup and splash some hot water over it. No sugar, no milk, no spoon. As long as I have that pitch-black caffeine, I'm good. Ah, so good... The drink of the gods.

Now, time to appraise the situation at the Frontier. Hmm, it's passable. Seventy points. Things are going well for now. The occupation of the elven army presents a real danger, so we can't let our guard down. Please, no events that will cause the people's satisfaction levels to plummet.

Seriously, these elves are really good at taunting others. Either that, or they're just discriminatory. The way they do things is very inconsiderate. The war crimes keep happening. It's a reality of DDR. Most of the problems occurring from the elven occupation are centered around residence.

Maybe it's because they live in the forest, but elves seem to think of homes as toys and are quick to seize them. Then, without any rhyme or reason, they trash the place, toss about keepsakes, use them for target practice, and give away pieces of art. All of this after they've already forced the humans to sleep outdoors. And don't get me started on the kids. They target kids for their "games" at an almost sadistic rate.

But, uh, if you play as an elf then you can kind of understand. To them, human kids are like rare animals. Elves don't participate in child-rearing at all. As youths, they live completely communal lives in the Mushroom Forest. Their familiars also love to eat human children. For crying out loud, they're not rum and mutton!

So, yeah, I figured something like that battle earlier would happen. I was focused on watching something else, however, so a few soldiers were sacrificed. Once we actually clashed, it was an easy victory. Two of the elves were wind mages and one was a water mage, along with six silver leopards. If you want to stop my Kuroi now, you'll have to bring ten times the army! Ha ha ha!

I mean, not only do I have Accept Blade, but I also have Fire Sword, specialized for close combat. To elves, that's as dangerous as a vampire with Thunder Strike. Oh, those are both skills for smashing through an enemy's magic. They're best for people who like to get up close and personal. But that doesn't mean I can afford to get cocky. There's still that insta-death girl, Fleilyu the Falcon. She uses a magic called Accept Falcontail that summons feathers for her. Using wind magic on top of that allows her to fly freely in the sky. The thing to watch out for is her Homing Darts. They're silent, require no movement on her part, have unlimited ammo, and can lock on to multiple targets. She can also secretly apply poison to them. That's just evil, right? What, is she a variable fighter or some specialized esper weapon? Come on! I don't want to be assassinated! Her liege, Sakiel, seems good-natured, but the other one to watch is the commander NPC. That middle-aged elf seems like a close-range water mage.

But, the elves are our allies. For now. For the moment. No matter how unhappy they are about it. The point is, the next battle will be against vampires. They will, without a doubt, attack us first. They're not the type to just watch while elves reside on the human frontier. The males and females of their race are, at their core, battle junkies. And they really do treat humans as food. I can't say we'll survive. No, be stronger. We will win! I'm not so sure if there's enough total faith for Kuroi's Call magic, though.

The bigger problem, however, is this system error that doesn't seem to want to go away. This is really bad. I can't save and quit. This is even more fatal than not being able to fast-forward. Actually, I haven't quit once this playthrough so, uh, I have a lot of *needs* that must be attended to! Like a bath and a change of clothes! And work!

But I've come this far, so I'd hate to have my data erased... Ahhh... Sorry, had to yawn. If worst comes to worst, maybe I'll take some paid leave. Mmm... I still gotta give Golden and Deep Sea a good punch... Zzz... Zzz... I can't eat anymore...

14 The Priest Admires and Desires Humanity's Beautiful Natural Horizon

I know God. God of humans.

One day, all other gods shall know Him as well, via my blade.

-Father Felipo III-

The Dragon Warrior specifically didn't bow her head, but her attitude was quite close.

"Father, I have a request. I believe Her Grace wishes to soothe the human children. In fact, she has spoken of wanting to touch and talk with them. However, considering the incident the other day, she has instructed me to at least convey her sincerity..." No matter how she phrases it, there is no way for me to refuse the request if her intentions are true. But what to do? From my perspective as a priest, elven religion is pagan and heretical. I fail to understand why they worship a monstrous lizard. It is akin to sexual perversion in my mind. Thus, the elven Apostles should be public enemy number one... or so I thought.

What a pickle. Oh dear, oh dear.

The thousands of wind chimes floating into the evening sky are so beautiful. They're almost like living things, ringing with the small Dragon Commander's will. Their rings serenade me, fulfilling me. Their clear, high-pitched tones color the world.

Oh, and what's this? Tens of large, impossible to describe objects are now rising. They swell! They are almost like church bells. Are they, in fact, living things? Whatever they are, they join in on the performance. Their low tones harmonize, supporting the high-pitched rings, enveloping them. The various tones weave together, creating a detailed and majestic scenery of sound... Oh... I can see it now! A spinning world of light; blinding, vast nature; harmony and peace between all things.

This is the elves' aesthetic sense. This is the elves' worldview.

"It is a thing to behold." Indeed, Lord Willow. I can agree with that.

"If only we could smile and say that art knows no borders such as race." Yes, so true. That is nothing to smile at there.

"The children are enjoying the show, though. And on the surface, it seems almost humorous." Yes, Odysson. You speak the truth. If I could look up at this with an innocent heart, the graveness would be obscured and it would seem peculiar and comical. Each thing in the sky has eyes and noses, after all.

"But you guys see it, right? Those are all fairies and spirits. Yeesh, what crazy magic. That shit's on the level of what Kuroi uses. It's just in a different dimension. It's enough to drive a man insane." Indeed. Indeed.

What actually surrounds the Frontier is, in essence, the elves' true power. The lizard king, projected via the Apostle... the Dragon God's power.

Oh, dear. Lord Willow and Odysson have gone silent. Ah, and my lips have been glued shut as well. What pressure. I have no other way to describe it.

I can close my eyelids, but there is nothing for me to cover my ears with. Even if I used my hands, I have no defense for the thing penetrating my very soul... Heavens, what a beautiful, violent violation.

Yes... this is violence. No matter how cultural or wonderful it might be, this is violence. Why? Because within all of this wonderfulness, there is no place for humans. And not to mention this enormous magic. We humans are only allowed to watch, entranced as bystanders. Our awe is forced.

"...It is beautiful. Truly, truly beautiful." I will admit that. Denial for the sake of denial is fool's work.

"To affirm oneself, display proudly, and exist calmly... how I envy their culture. I cannot fathom being able to say, without hubris, that our race is the main character of this world." Thus it is hard to accept for adults like us. It is unfair to remind us of such selfishness. We are so pathetically powerless, and the more we are reminded, the more our hearts wither and our tears rise, changing us humans into creatures of merely skin and bones, hope completely ripped up by the roots. We are afflicted with despair. The pain of our disease is

such that the only way to bear it is to forfeit even the ability to think.

But the children are different. Yes, the children can honestly enjoy this. For now, they can still experience the world in brilliant color. Even if one day they, too, are broken, in this small moment they can find joy. And this is all the more reason we must endeavor for revolution.

“We should be beautiful as well.” Well said, Lord Willow. Stole the words out of my mouth.

“It will not happen overnight. However, we can continue to seek it.” What a surprise. Those words. That profile. Has he already made his decision regarding his family?

“Well, it ain’t gotta be us, neither.” Hm, Odysson’s gaze is quite serene. I can guess what he’s about to say next.

“It’s the theory of exploration. Those who dig and clear the way are the ones who get dirty. It’s even okay if they fall. The ones who follow behind them can continue on. And, one day, they’ll reach something pretty. That’s when we win. To those that come after, the beauty becomes normal.” What thrilling theory. It makes me want to risk my life for progress. Odysson, you are already doing this, so it’s no wonder you can smile so widely. Oh, and Lord Willow is smiling similarly... Oh, oh! And me as well, possibly.

Very well. Let us enjoy the elves’ beauty for now. Let us indulge our hearts and bodies in the numbness. But in our hearts, we shall hold our determinations true. After all, we have... Huh?

Lady Kuroi? Everyone is frozen, and yet she’s running... to the top of the tower? To the flag? Resisting the siren’s call of the beautiful scene and sounds, her sharp gaze faces the west. Purple blends into the sky, signaling the start of night.

It can’t be.

No... perhaps it is? The sounds falter. No, they are interrupted. By physical means. Are those throwing stones speckling the western sky? Hundreds of them fly through the air, crashing into the wind chimes. What chaos.

The music is in disarray, but the stones... they don’t fall. Is it due to the wind

chimes? Are they taking the stones with them as they disappear?

“Hey! Look!”

“Yes, I see.” The falcons take flight, as well as the elven flyers. The high-pitched sounds of flutes flutter. The ominous sounds tear at my soul.

“Mobilize the army. Everyone on horseback.”

“We have no other choice. The elven army is by the destroyed north gate. The west gate is usable as well. Blockade the south gate and make a path of retreat through the east gate.” The gates, earthen walls, and wood fences. These are the things that separated the outside from the inside and protected us daily. But against elves and these new opponents, they lose their meaning even as symbols.

“Sorcerer, evacuate the citizens.”

“Leave it to me. But if it comes to it, I’m fighting back, too.”

“If you must, then do it as a combined force as much as possible.”

“Please, I burned the long ears. The yellow eyes will stand no chance.” My fellows are very reliable. When the time comes, I shall wield a spear as well. I can only do my best and then leave the rest to God. No path is more suitable for one of the Faith.

“Father, make sure you talk to the long ears. I’ve gotten used to crazy situations, but even I don’t wanna be fighting two enemies at once.”

“...How heroic.”

“Leave it to me. Even if my tongue is pulled out, I shall finish my negotiations.” We smile quickly at each other, then split off to see to our duties. There is no telling when, or if, the three of us will gather together again. Perhaps we shall all die tonight.

But we have Lady Kuroi. She blesses us with her presence. What, then, is there to be afraid of?

It is time for battle. The elves and the vampires shall fight upon this stage known as the human frontier.

15 The Dragon Warrior Passes Out and is Confused by the Vampire Raid

Waiting in vain for things to end, only to be stamped out?

I don't accept it. I don't accept a life of merely not being dead yet.

-Dragon Warrior Fleilyu II-

How? How is this happening?

"Hyawa-wa-wa-wa!" Lady Sakiel's flailing her frail arms about in such a heart-rending fashion.

"I-I will save the children!" How vexing it is to be so powerless. Only Lady Sakiel can control the divine spirits Jellyfish Bell and Sunfish Gong. And it is my duty to serve her.

"Fleilyu!"

"I am at your side, Your Grace!"

"T-Tell Arcsem to drive away the scary ones!" It pains me to leave, but if I station a familiar in my place, then maybe just for a bit...

"Right away!" We were already on a roof. I set flight. Hostilities have already begun. Elven flyers are unleashing their Wind Arrows to keep the vampires' filthy shadows at bay. There are no more than 200 of them; a small force. Where is Second Commander Arcsem? There, before the west gate, preparing a battle formation.

"A word before you depart for battle, Second Commander!"

"Dragon Warrior? Have you come to instate me as First Commander? How admirable."

"What are you talking about? I have a message from Her Grace. Drive away the vampires. She does not wish for harm to come to the humans."

“I see. Then as commander of this army, I order you to support us from the skies. That is all.” What did he say? I wish I could just let that go as an act of defiance born of the dire situation we are in. But those eyes. That expression. That manner of speaking. Is that how one acts when receiving an order from Her Grace?

“Second Commander Arcsem!”

“Disobeying orders, eh? That’s cause for a military court martial. However, there is both good and bad in the way that a subordinate destroys their master’s great deeds.”

“What are you...”

“That performance with the summoning did a good job of drawing the vampires to this particular location at this particular time. Very effective, I’d say.” What? What is he implying? Why is he snorting his nose?

“A very flashy bit of magic that was. If used well, it could summon more vampires. Yes, thinking of it that way, the good outweighs the bad. This could bring us many more battles than I first expected. Her Grace also has a policy of nonaggressive defense. The battle accolades will all belong to me.” No. No. Lady Sakiel does not wish for battle.

“No, perhaps it is still half and half. After all, I lost three men and six beasts.” Lady Sakiel had smiled so brightly when the Council had given the order for her to head to this land. She said she was excited, too. That she wished to talk with the human children. Perhaps even play with them, fate willing.

“Either way, don’t get in my way and we’re square. Just continue to be our bait.” Her Grace had poured her heart into that musical performance in order to make up for the children’s tears.

“I withdraw my orders, Falcon. Continue your Dragon Warrior duties as much as you like. We must protect this place, as Her Grace wishes. It is a wonderful hunting ground, after all,” he says, and I have no rebuttal. What would come of shouting at him? It would just serve to make my idiocy more pronounced.

It was me who recommended Her Grace to do the performance. I failed to see through this man’s plan. I let him manipulate me. I wasn’t perceptive enough.

Would a commander that fights on the front lines really go this far? Does he truly wish for battle accolades so much?

The army is leaving. Through the west gate they go to take their formation: water mages at the front, wind mages at the back. Silver leopards in the middle, on reserve. A long line that makes use of their numerical superiority. With wind arrows and bursts of water they fend off the rock projectiles, all the while moistening the ground. Preparing the battlefield.

The change is quick, his skill high. For once, I am witness to Second Commander Arcsem's true strength.

"Whassa matter? Is that all you got?" Someone yells. The enemy commander? It's an older female vampire. She's large, and wields a warhammer as a weapon.

"That was a lively bit of magic you shot up! So how about sending a thousand or two soldiers out to meet us, you pile of dead leaves!" She roars with laughter. Three arrows, riding upon a strong wind, soar toward her, only to be caught in her tight grip.

"So not only do you not name yourself, but you don't even let me state mine? A bunch of soldiers who think they're better than us. What a way to spoil the fun. All right, boys, let's head back."

"Was all that howling just an excuse to tuck tail and run?"

"Oh? Was that the rustling of leaves I just heard?"

"If you wish to run, run. We will hunt you to the ends of the Earth like the beasts you are."

"Hah! This anonymous dead leaf sure has a mouth."

"I am Second Commander Arcsem. Tell it to your filthy beast king in death."

"I'm Fang Chief Barebow. What, did you fall asleep crying in your mossy nest?" The battlelines move. From the wet mud of the elven army sprouts a horde of snakes of various sizes, all made of water. They attack. The water mages are putting their all into this spell, Water Serpent. The wind mages join them, sending Wind Arrows hurtling through the air to raze the ground. A

simultaneous volley of magic. Impressive.

But no one can match a vampiric defense. Many, many walls rise from the ground along with clouds of dust. Dirt Wall and Stone Shield. They have a lot of earth mages. The volley of rocks pauses and the silver leopards rush forward, following the loosed arrows. Very good.

But the enemy is formidable. Nothing can get through their walls. And with all eyes on their defenses, they move backwards in great numbers. Are they really retreating? We have the numbers advantage, it is true, but this is too convenient. I can almost hear Second Commander Arcsem clicking his tongue now.

“Front line, draw. Give chase. Backline, circle around the sides and cut them off.” The water mages grip their canisters. They’re preparing for the assault. And the wind mages, are they casting Slide? It’s a spell that allows them to travel across the ground at great speed, like sliding on ice. Nice work, Second Commander Arcsem, immediately giving chase as well as attempting to surround them.

“Go! Don’t let a single pebble escape.” The army drives forward. The forest to the west is full of conifer trees with a steep slope, so it’s a question of whether we can catch them before then. Or perhaps the idea is just to rush into it. The answer relies on the actions of our flyers. If there’s even one squad waiting in ambush, our army will be destroyed. But I know Second Commander Arcsem; he will have seen through this. Even so, I feel uneasy. Perhaps it is because I am away from Lady Sakiel’s side. There are so few soldiers left in reserve.

I take flight. I must return. Now that the volley of rocks has ceased, Jellyfish Bell and Sunfish Gong have disappeared and the sky is turning a disturbing color—red, like a burning forest, and black, like a night filled with bloodsuckers. I don’t sense that gaze. That extremely dangerous one. I haven’t sensed it since I arrived. Not even a hint or sign of it since that one time. It was no illusion, but if it is staying quiet, then I have no reason to be on the lookout for it.

There are, however, irregularities. Specifically the fire magic that burned us... and the girl who cut us. Both are still so hard to believe, even though I witnessed them myself. Second Commander Arcsem certainly doesn’t believe it.

In fact, he thinks I executed his soldiers. Perhaps I should ask the Council. If Lady Sakiel's safety cannot be guaranteed, then I at least need to know an estimate of how long this operation will last. She has a guard of five water mages and five wind mages, as well as ten silver leopards, but against demons they will only be able to buy some time.

Lady Sakiel is still on the roof. She's lying on her white tiger like a couch, her hand propped up on a silver leopard. She looks quite relaxed.

"Oh, Fleilyu!" I can see she is tired, yet she refuses to return to her bed. How tough and noble. I cannot fathom why Second Commander Arcsem does not wish to protect such a treasure.

"How did it go? Was Arcsem enthusiastic?"

"...Yes. He heroically charged off to drive away the enemy. They are being routed now."

"Ohh! I see. That is good... Good." Her smile blooms like a flower, but worry and anxiety cloud her expression. It pains my heart to see. Her Grace is so benevolent.

"The winds of the battlefield will sting your skin. Why don't you return downstairs for the moment?"

"Hmmm." I try to encourage her to make her own decision, but if I must then I will overstep my bounds and drag her back to the capital. This is no place for someone like Lady Sakiel. If she wishes to protect humans, she could do it from somewhere safer...

"I think I will watch over things for a bit longer."

"Your Grace, the hawks are already keeping watch. Second Commander Arcsem will also be fine, I am sure." If it's human children she desires, there are many more in existence. Even if we consider them rare.

"Mmm. I want to do what I can to help."

"Even so, Your Grace..."

"Just listen. Long, long ago, God once said to me..." Is she going to share a conversation she had with God? The words of God, so rare that even the

Apostles have hardly received them. Words so transcendent that they even became the national policy of the Ewlogond Republic! I must listen with rapt attention!

“DO YOUR BEST.” What a... mysterious phrase. It’s not a spell incantation, though. It’s as if they already have an air of power to them.

“Those are the words He said to me. As for what they mean... Yeek!” An ear-splitting explosion. I know this unpleasant sound. It’s thunder magic. Where is it coming from? There! The south, most likely near the gate. A separate vampire squad!

16 About DDR Streaming Soul / The Shadow Laments the Vampires' Lust For Battle

God's spirit is my spirit.

At times it is quiet, and at times it is fierce.

-DDR Stream Part 9-

Sakiel, what have you done?! You're gonna make me mad! At night! On the frontier! You use Accept Chime and Call Grand Bell together to put on a concert?! That's just idiotic! Sure, it was a performance of the most famous song in DDR, a gorgeous and peaceful number that I love, but still! And yes, the midair aquarium was fantastic, surreal, and healing at the same time. But still! That's just asking for the vampires to raid our town and have a party with our dead bodies! See? See?! The vampires are coming! They're totally pumped! What did I tell you?! Oh, dear. I know this is a guaranteed event, but I was hoping to buy enough time to practice my Call magic some more. If this ruins the frontier, I'm blaming Sakiel entirely.

So, a hundred and fifty from the west? That's weird. Vampire platoons are one hundred soldiers each. So why the excess? And they just retreat without fighting? That ain't right. This is clearly a trap. That must mean they're coming from the south... Move, move... Ah, yep.

"Huh? Did we get figured out already?" the vampire chief says. A total of fifty soldiers. It's quite easy to see they split up their forces to make a separate platoon that would attack from the back.

"A human female? Just the one? You must be lost." Is this chief the one with the fingerless gloves? Ugh, such bad taste. White bone decorations dangle from his neck and waist, clinking loudly.

"What a great way to liven up this party. Let's rape and eat her." By the way, vampire bones are brown, while elf bones are a light green. A mysterious detail of DDR. They haven't released an official artwork and settings book yet, but the excessive attention to detail for stuff like clothing, culture, and family structures is a hallmark of DDR's quality.

"Oh, how about we eat her alive like the last one? I'll be the rapist. Whoever's eating, keep it to the arms and legs. I wanna savor this for as long as possible, and we can use the ribs later." Hah, the chief NPC has a name.

"Humans are so lean. I know we agreed not to drive them extinct, but can't

we hunt them a little more freely?” Now, what’s this Chief Gatmunt’s stats... Hmm... A thunder mage with fist skills. What a common class.

“Wh-Whoa, what was that? I just felt a cold wind.” What an idiot. His choice of magic is terrible. He’s a melee fighter, but he has Lightning Bolt? What’s he trying to accomplish? At least pick Embody Thunder or Thunder Punch.

“What are you staring at, female? I don’t like the look on your face.” The rest of them are all trash mobs. Hmm. This platoon’s full of stinking men. Why am I reminded of a gang of delinquents in cheap, flashy jewelry?

“You’re human, ain’t ya? Shouldn’t you be crying and begging for your life? Go on!” Whoa! Aha ha ha ha! Lightning Bolt! He used Lightning Bolt! Now, of all times? Gatmunt’s such a show-off! Bwa ha ha ha ha!

“Why aren’t you pissing yourself?!” Now he’s dashing forward! What, is this some hilarious attempt at passing the ball? Well, one chop to the back of the neck and he’s out. Ah, that was funny. My stomach hurts from laughing. Mr. Gatmunt, you have my utmost respect.

Now I have to return the favor, right? I gotta show off, or there’s no point. This is no time to be complaining about being sleepy. I’ll show them the soul of a streamer. There are forty-nine enemies left, so... Okay! It’s Kuroi’s turn! Summon a sword with Accept Blade, then shoot it into the ground! Again and again, tuning the height and angle each time! Eventually, I end up with forty-nine swords around me! Then, I suddenly draw the first sword from the ground! Double the effort for no reward! Finally, with a sidelong glance to set the tone, I beckon the vampires forward with my hand. Bring it, boys. Bring it! Booyah! Kill one, toss the sword! Pick up another, kill, toss! Kill, toss! Toss! Toss! Whoo! This is exhilarating!

-Shadow Tamika I-

What kind of sick joke is this? A single human, trampling over fifty vampires? Even a drug addict wouldn’t have such a disturbing dream. As a drug dealer, I can attest to that.

“Tamika. Tamika...” If I’m not seeing things, those dozens of blades all

appeared out of thin air. If I were to describe even one moment of this scene out loud, even the fantastic ramblings of a man drunk on virgin blood would pale in comparison. As a virgin myself, perhaps I shouldn't say that. But a human? Using Apostle-tier magic? Is that even... Yeow!

"Tamika! How long are you going to keep watching?" Before me appears the rotten face of my superior. It creeps me out. Shoot, I let my consciousness sit on the other side for too long. I'm still having trouble using insects for my Shadow Vision spell. Their eyes are so different that I have to use my brain to compensate.

"Forgive me, Lord Batkiss. The bat I was sharing my vision with got trapped in a gust of wind..."

"Enough with your excuses. How is my foolish younger brother doing?"

"...He is having a bit of trouble, it would seem."

"Oh, Gatmunt, Gatmunt. He certainly does love to play around. I thought with a bit of flattery he could at least stir up some chaos... How heroic, unleashing thunder from that position." Don't sigh intoxicatedly. Don't bow your legs. And definitely do not let that thing between your legs grow. How gross can one guy be? And his little brother is just as bad.

Kind of a pickle, though. The sex fiend's brother is now missing his head. And his men are dropping like flies... but nothing good will come of me being honest. Worst case scenario, I'll be killed while he's venting his anger. Having said that, I'd like to avoid questions of who's to blame. Hm? Oh, this is perfect.

"Eek! Oh, no!"

"What now, Tamika?"

"Why, the bat... it's been killed by a hawk."

"Don't you have any other familiars you can cast Clairvoyance on?"

"No... I-I'm very sorry!"

"Useless. And you call yourself a vampire? Have a little more concentration."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Good. Now no matter what he hears later I can just humbly suggest that it was an elven trap and the usual massive elven hate chorus will

start up. My safety is secured. There is still that strange human... I don't know who that is, but she was certainly very dangerous. It would be best not to get involved. I will, of course, keep an eye on things, but I am not about to claim this discovery as my own. No thank you. Strange and startling truths are only poisons that disturb the peace. To hell with anything where the negatives outweigh the positives for me, personally.

“Very well, then. It's time to move. We know our destination: the place where the flying leaves are camping.” I should have seen that coming. It is that sort of strategy, after all. He's going to take over 50 “Hundred Fang Platoons” and plunge the border area into chaos. For a bloodthirsty chief, that's akin to giving carte blanche to raze and pillage. Killing elves for trophies, hunting humans... anything goes. Three platoons are all that came this way, of course.

But no one expected an elven Apostle. Especially not Ten Thousand Bells, the one who never comes to the front lines. Perhaps it's for this reason that it can't be helped if every chief is eager for battle. The plan was as such: Barebow was to draw away the main force, Gatmunt was to cause chaos in the city, and Batkiss was to strike at the heart. Fang Chief Batkiss thought up this plan immediately. He is a skilled man. He also has the brawn to match his brains. The flyer we saw was most likely Falcon, but in a duel I'm sure he could squeeze out a victory against her. Not many elves are left on the human frontier. Perhaps the others will succeed after all.

“Careful, everyone. The elves are cunning. There's no telling how many may be lying in ambush. We shall break through their net in one swift strike.” No, I was wrong. It's just not possible. If that mysterious human and the elves are working together, then this will never turn out well. Let's check back in on the battle... Fifty vampires annihilated without even breaking a sweat. We've got a monster on our hands. And her weapons have vanished? No, if she can conjure them, then it stands to reason she can banish them as well. Very similar to the magic Apostles wield. Judging from the scale it's only at its first stage, though.

Now she brushes back her raven hair, hugs herself, and... stands still? Hm? What purpose does that—Ow!

“Tamika! Focus!”

“Y-Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!”

“Let’s move!” Good grief. He could just leave me behind. He already has a hundred warriors. We head south, hopping over a crude fence. So this is the human frontier, eh? It’s pretty clean for having experienced a monster raid. Ironically, the only thing staining the ground is animal refuse. The elves treat everywhere like it’s their forest.

Bells ring. Mm, a good warning system. Humans are weak, so they have to be smart and careful. Hm? There’s an elven woman on the greenery of that roof. Must be Falcon.

“Eek!” She disappears headfirst into a nearby building. A very natural-looking slip. This must be the reason she’s known as a woman who’s clumsy on her feet. Shouts arise from our soldiers. As I thought, there was a trap.

“Ahh! V-Vampires!” Oh, a human? I’ve been witnessed, so there’s no helping her now. I tightly grab her by the throat.

“...Pregnant, eh?” I let go, lending support so that she doesn’t fall backward. My mother miscarried my younger brother because she fell. Humans as a species are just too physically weak.

“Listen. I swear on the baby in your belly that I will not kill you. But do not tell anyone about me. I am sure that life is hard on the frontier for a woman, but do your best to bear and raise that kid.” I hand her some silver beads. They’re worth far more than the window I broke, but just about right for the stress caused. War is so... Ugh. I set off into the night, making sure to leave a fair amount of distance between me and the sounds of battle.

17 The Knight Makes a Decision And Charges Into the Tyrannical Vampire Forces

To live is to fight.

Fight, fight, fight... Fight until you die.

-Knight Agias IV-

I am a man of the House of Willow. I have mastered the martial arts required of a top-rate knight, and studied the strategies required of a top-rate general. I have polished myself well. I do not hesitate when it comes time to set foot on the battlefield. Even if it might become my grave. So surely this stirring in my heart is excitement for battle.

Kuroi's battle earlier was an amazing dance of swords and spears. She cut and pierced, cut and pierced her way through the horde of vampires. Even when her whole body was stained red, she continued to cut, cut, and pierce. Their inhuman strength and vicious weapons didn't seem to bother her one bit.

I see now that her weapons are summoned via a special magic. But where do those sword and spear skills come from? Her clever melee combat? Her mental and physical stamina to continue fighting? Is it all thanks to God's blessing? Does she only fight with a power that is given to her? No. It is a culmination of her training. I, too, have experienced the deftness of her blade, so I can understand. God's blessing is, as they say in arithmetic, multiplicative, not additive. Those who do not do all they can before asking for help will not receive His blessing.

Yes. I have seen them myself, too. Kuroi's curious habits. Every day, between shifts of heavy labor, she would continue to train. We all looked at her strangely, but she never faltered. She called it "preparation."

Why did I not emulate her? How can I stand on this battlefield, satisfied with my training up until now? Bells ring. Someone is striking them. This sound is

nothing like the earlier serenade. It carries a sense of urgency.

From the lookout tower someone shouts, “North!” An attack from the north. There. Is that them? They’re running across the roofs; trampling over the work of humans, the creatures of the night approach.

Vampires.

Wielders of monstrous strength and agility, they are humanity’s natural enemies. About a hundred of them are here. Their strength and hunger are enough to make anyone see this as a nightmare that will wipe out the frontier.

Above the three-story building where the elves are staying, a falcon flies. A very large falcon. Silently, without flapping its wings, it soars toward the vampire horde. But it is no living creature. It’s magic, a construct of many feathers akin to a dummy with no weight.

Oh! Now it shoots out something. Dozens of feathers slice through the air like daggers. They strike about twenty or thirty vampires, who all stumble and fall. The feathers did not appear to be traveling quite so fast, and there was a delay between impact and effect. I assume they were laced with poison. Vampires might be very hardy, but as long as they are alive they will be susceptible to poison. The ones who have fallen writhe in pain. Quite impressive, rendering almost half of their force immobile with one attack. So this is the power of the Dragon Warrior?

The elves are, however, outnumbered. Only ten were left to defend the Apostle. Flight gives them an advantage, but it only serves to fend the vampires off for a moment. The beast familiars they employ are also struggling in combat. It’s a complete defensive battle.

In other words, now is the time. This is where we must act.

“All calvary, charge!” From the shadows we appear and get on horseback. All 328 of us create a line of cavalry in the street leading straight to the elven lodging. I forced our wounded soldiers to be in charge of lookout and relaying orders, so concentrated here is our entire fighting force.

“Destroy the vampires! We may be helping the elves, but we are not submitting to them! Heed my words! Tonight, with this charge, humanity begins

its fight!” Yes, this is our first step toward revolution. We cannot leave everything to Kuroi. This will be our first military action with our lives on the line. As Father Felipo would say, it is an excellent chance to make the elves indebted to us, and as Odysseus would say, it’s an opportunity to gift the vampires’ faces with our fists. It is the best possible opportunity... as well as a desperate strike that may cost us many lives.

“Ready!” I order, gripping my lance. Half of our men are wielding lances, the others spears. Everyone’s weapon glitters. Bathed in the color of the evening sky, our armor and weapons blaze red. My hands are shaking... I can feel God’s blessing. I drop my helmet’s visor.

“Charge!” I roar and rush forward. I am the vanguard. Like a living arrow, my lance shoots ahead. My target is a vampire that has fallen onto the street before me. As he writhes in pain from the poison, I take aim. I was waiting for them to show weakness. It surprises me how much I wish to kill him.

The speed of my charge transfers into the tip of my lance. I pierce him. Then I lift him into the air. I can feel the warmth of what spatters me, even through my gauntlets. Their blood is a much thicker color than that of a human’s. These are the drops of life from a superior creature that eats humans. I shake it off onto the ground.

The man that was riding next to me is gone. Did he fall off? If so, he’s lost to us. A vampire is strong enough to force a horse to tumble with its bare hands. Another rider slows. Something appears to have grabbed his leg. I see a shadowy hand. The vampire managed to drive its claws into my comrade even while being dragged along. I am impressed, despite the fact that he is my enemy.

I abandon my lance and draw my sword. I urge my horse forward and slash, severing the vampire’s arm at the elbow. Before I can regrip my sword, his head goes flying, tumbles, and is crushed under my horse’s hoof. Someone followed up on my attack. Good. We must not forget to cooperate when fighting vampires.

We reach the north gate, and I take a roll call. Even with the element of surprise, we lost six calvary. Vampires also have quick reactions when it comes

to battle. Truly natural warriors. And this is all the more reason that we, as knights, must strike down such fearsome enemies.

“Three Waves formation!” Cavalry works best when they are allowed to gallop. We are not suited to an inner-city battle. For this reason, all of our formations are based around charging.

“First wave, forward!” About a hundred cavalry wielding spears gallop forward, blocking the street. From the other end, the vampires charge. They kick off from the ground, leap over roofs, and ferociously swarm. There are about ten of them. That’s a lot. Even one of these monsters requires dozens of us humans to even match up.

“Second wave, forward!” A hundred cavalry knights with lances charge now. The first wave stirred up the battlefield, causing injuries on both sides. Another ten men have fallen. Now the second wave crashes into the same spot. They stab, then gallop off. And...

“Third wave, follow!” Go. On horseback and bending to the right, I aim my sword. The wind. The winds of battle shave at my cheeks through the grates in my helmet. The scent of blood mixes with the dust in the air.

Cursed vampires.

They rip spears and arms from their owners wholesale, filling their bellies with the gushing blood. Tyrannical creatures. I will have their heads.

I let go of the reins, grip my sword with both hands, and swing. My arms feel the rush of life as I cut the vampire’s face in half. Bloody fangs fly through the air. I can already see stars in the crimson sky. It is a murderous night. My sword glinting in the starlight, I bark my orders.

“Men! Cut them down!” The third wave is also the rear guard. We move in with less speed and fight the vampires as we see them.

“Filthy, impudent humans! I won’t let you escape!” One of them comes, metal hammer in hand. He roars as he brings it down, and I evade with my horse. Immediately, another blow follows. Unable to evade, I respond with a thrust. The hammer strikes my shoulder. I manage to parry thanks to the smoothness of my shoulderguard, but I can hear the crunching of armor and the screaming

of my bones. My posture, too, falters.

“Gah! M-My fingers!” However, my prize is two of his right fingers. He can no longer wield his hammer.

“Damn youuu!” Can vampires fly? Fangs bared and bellowing like a beast, it leaps above my horse despite being covered in scale mail. Fortunately, that weight is to my advantage. I thrust, piercing his throat.

“Gah—Ahhhhhh!” Its neck slides down my blade up to the guard. His face is one I do not know. I do not recognize the voice that curses me. Wide-open yellow eyes reflect in my helmet, splattered with dark blood. I twist my wrist, chopping through the neck. The severed head drops to the ground.

A blow rocks my side. I had paused for only a second, but that was enough for a punch to land. I grit my teeth, willing myself not to throw up. Under my armor is a shirt of padded canvas, and yet I’m still reeling. This guy’s head is half-severed, too.

A roar erupts, and the cavalry next to me explodes. The blow causes all kinds of bits and pieces to fly out from the gaps in his armor.

“Ha-hah! A fantastic smell!” a giant vampire shouts. Swinging a metal mallet, he searches for his next victim and his eyes land on me. That kind of destructive power cannot be blocked. I have to dodge. My only choice is to keep dodging.

“Your armor may be hard, but your flesh is so soft!” I dodge heavy blow after heavy blow, each one strong enough that it feels like my life is being shaved away just from being grazed. All the while, I hear the sounds of my allies dying. The cavalry, without their speed, are being felled one by one. One by one, they are killed.

“Die! C’mon!” This is a nightmare. The unending tyranny is like a natural disaster. And these fiends are simply playing with us, waiting until they can devour our flesh and blood. At my back, another enemy appears. Sinister claws adorn his fingertips. Those will pierce armor. How can I possibly avoid a fatal wound? No matter how I twist my body... Whoa! My horse rears. Why? Are you trying to defend me, partner? The claws slice into the horse’s belly, shredding skin and exposing pink muscle.

“Hey, this one’s mine.”

“What’s the matter, can’t handle a little livestock ya idiot?”

“This meat is so annoying. It’s only right that I make it suffer.” Even fallen to the ground with shadows all around me, my limbs refuse to give out. Finally I vomit, so I rip off my helmet and stand up.

“Huh? What’s with those eyes?” Blade tips pointed at me, I endeavor to smile back.

“Quiver in fear like a good human!”

“Wait! The horses are still—” Yes, come back, my wave of cavalry. Make the earth rumble.

“Captain! Your hand!”

“Forget me! Run them through!” I slice up through the clawed vampire as he’s recoiling from the oncoming horses, then bring my blade back down. Such swordwork makes me want to praise myself, but this is clearly not my work alone. It is God.

I step forward again. One of my allies spears the mallet-wielder, and I drive both of my hands towards his open neck. They pass through. Quickly, I pull back and readjust my aim. The vampire’s severed head writhes in pain.

18 The Sorcerer Fears and Worships the Flame Girl That Will Save Humanity

Before a battle, God strengthens His presence.

So when the opposite happens, I know that the battle is over.

-Sorcerer Odysson IV-

Well, well. I'm impressed, Agias Willow. I knew you were a cut above the rest, but I guess I should never have doubted the child-rearing of a famous military family. Not only did he fight on even ground with the long-ears, but he's also gone and won against the yellow-eyes now! This military post has seen some real action. It's still a seedy-looking camp, though.

"Good work out there, Captain."

"Sorcerer... how are the citizens doing?" What an intense look on his face. Blood, mud, vomit, and shit speckle his face. That shit raises his value as a man. It ain't something to scold him for.

"Relaxed as can be. It was the right choice to have them hide deep in the longhouses."

"So it would seem. The church's bell tower has been destroyed." That was some scary shit, let me tell you. Damn yellow-eyes went too far when they escaped. Half their force was wiped out, so they should have just tucked tail and run like the whipped dogs they were. But I guess as long as it was *just* scary, it's all good.

"In the end, it's just stuff. It served us well as a decoy. The priest seems to have survived, as well." The less people on our side dead, the greater the win. The death toll for the knight's cavalry is about 39. Some are also seriously injured. We could have another ten die on us tomorrow, but those are still acceptable losses. There were a lot of those yellow-eyed fuckers. The long-ears

screwed up, too. The fact that no citizens were killed or harmed is a testament to our military post's hard fighting and...

"Mm? Where's Kuroi?"

"Chasing down one that slipped away."

"...She gonna be okay? Pretty sure that was one of their leaders."

"I've sent a team of our fastest horses. If they do not return, I shall go myself."

"Shouldn't the elves be handling cleanup like that?"

"It is night. And they have an Apostle." Even so, they should be. They have long-ears that fly at night. Especially that Dragon Warrior chick. She's crazy. It was too far away for me to see the details, but I could tell she was using some incredible magic. I mean, freely controlling an infinite number of feathers? That's almost like Kuroi's magic! The Dragon Warrior is basically a semi-Apostle in her own right, yet she's just a servant to one. Compared to an Apostle, she's multiple levels lower. And yet she's that strong? Actually, judging from that supernatural-level concert, that may be a rather reserved estimate.

"There you are." The black-hearted priest makes his appearance. With a holy spear gripped in his hands and a great shield slung across his shoulders, he looks like he's in full traditional battle attire. It doesn't suit him at all. He looks more like a pompous rice cake.

"The elves' main forces are returning now. I think they ran into an ambush. They requested quite a lot of stable litter."

"Hm? How does that relate?"

"It means many silver leopards were injured. By black wolves, I'm guessing."

"Ugh, those? They're so dark and fast. Plus they resist magic."

"The very same. The elves hate them most out of all familiars. In other words, the vampires brought out their full-on fighting force. For the scale, at least."

"They were all skilled soldiers, too. Their offense and retreat were similarly practiced."

“...This is giving me a headache.” No joke, my brain is starting to hurt. First the monster attack, now this? The good and bad come in such extremes. Just what sort of place is this? Is it cursed or blessed?

“How have the elves judged the night raid?”

“They haven’t said. However, I’d say they were on guard for it considering the Dragon Warrior didn’t follow them out of the city. We must watch carefully for their decision once the main force has returned.”

“If only they’d take each other out. Damn long-ears. Just go back to the forest already.”

“...No, I’d say their bolstering of our defenses is preferable.”

“Haaah?”

“Yes, you’re right. But forget this Second Commander, bring us a First Commander.” What are these two blabbering about? The Second Commander is already unbearable. If we go up the chain of command even more, who knows what we’ll have on our hands?

“Oh, you don’t understand? I’m saying that even if the elves leave, peace will not return to the frontier.”

“...Isn’t there some kind of treaty?”

“Hostilities have already begun. Our only choice is to work with the elves to defeat the vampires.”

“Why? Just let the monsters fight each other like normal. Then we can swoop in and take the juicy parts for ourselves.”

“It’s not possible. Here, let me make it perfectly clear: it’s not because we took up arms. The situation has changed. Humans are now explicitly involved.” The situation’s changed? Well, I guess it’s been a rough couple of days. We experienced a monster attack the likes of which I’ve never even heard of, and then an unbelievable number of long-ears appeared. Among them was even an Apostle, who performed a concert for us that was beyond description. This in turn attracted a crazy amount of yellow-eyes, and... Hm? Thinking back on it, every one of those things is normally an unthinkable event. That’s why the

treaty was created, wasn't it? To prevent stuff like this from happening.

"Wait, you can't mean..."

"The elves and vampires are both changing their strategies. They're making quite aggressive moves with their armies. And they don't seem to mind getting the human territories involved... or at the very least, it is no longer an absolute taboo. If it was just one side, maybe I could reason it away. But with both the east and the west doing it, I have to consider that this may now be permitted to a certain extent."

"Permitted?"

"By God. Well, gods. The ones the elves and vampires worship, at least." Damn, a chill just went up my spine. I can't even speak. Am I gritting my teeth?

"...Which is perhaps why *she* appeared." Yeah? Yeah. Kuroi. It's no coincidence that God's blessing was granted to her. If not for her, we'd all have been massacred by the monsters. Same goes for our dealings with the long-ears. I'd be dead already, at least. She also destroyed a platoon of fifty of them coming from the south by herself, which really saved our bacon. If not for that, the longhouses would have been pillaged and it'd be a nightmare.

"Oh, speaking of the devil. Here she comes." Damn, I wanna drop to the ground and praise her. Just look at her, riding in on a warhorse, an entourage of cavalry and foot soldiers in tow. She glows brighter than anyone else, and she doesn't even have a torch. Just looking at her makes me feel warm. She is the embodiment of flame.

Well, she is an Apostle—an Apostle of the human God. But before that, she's our savior. It's almost like He knew something had to be done about the great war between the long-ears and the yellow-eyes that would have most certainly scattered us humans about... The great storm that threatened to end the world. And so He sent her—Kuroi: a girl of small frame with long raven hair and noble features.

"Lady Kuroi, might I borrow you for a moment?" Whoa, black-hearted priest. Putting down your spear and shield and kneeling under her horse's bridle? You're so reverent I could swear you're serving God himself right now.

“The elven Apostle, Dragon Commander Sakiel, wishes to speak to you.”
Whoa, what?

“I know we are in the midst of battle. I will not urge you to go right away. However, if it pleases you, I would love to give her just your reply at the least. What say you?” Up on her horse, Kuroi silently takes a few breaths, and... nods. Nods?

“Understood. As you wish.” Is Kuroi going straight to the stable? She could just leave the horse’s care to someone else. I’m sure there are lots of people who’d love to take over the reins. But it shows how serious she gets, which I guess is a good thing. Sira’s with her too, so I guess the decision is that it’s safe for tonight?

“Many people have begun to offer their prayers to Lady Kuroi instead now.”

“Mm. We will need to clearly establish her position soon.”

“As an Apostle, you mean?”

“Yes, about that... it would make things a lot more efficient if we could get official approval from the Church. I shall get right on that.”

“The army should prepare some sort of title for her as well.”

“That could be fine for the moment.”

“From the perspective of a military system, she’d be classified as a lower-rank non-commissioned officer, however.” What a pain. Even outside of the Sorcerer’s Guild, I can’t escape it. Traditions and customs are so bigoted. They want so badly to keep their pre-existing hierarchy that they declare anything new a sin.

“Just call her our savior and be done with it, damn.”

“Hoh! What a straight-forward expression! But we cannot. Let us save that for the appropriate time.”

“Thinking along those lines, then... how about Defender of Humanity?”

“Lame.”

“Doubtful.”

“What?”

“Put something about fire in there. That is the source of her power, after all.”

“Allow me to put a spin on Lord Willow’s suggestion, then. What say you to Hare of Flame? It is said that a hare was once the familiar of the human God.”

“Oh, that sounds good. That’s it, then... Oh, what’s the matter, Captain?”

“Perhaps his wounds are grieving him. I think he needs to rest.”

God of Humanity... Kuroi, Hare of Flame, huh? Not bad, black-hearted priest. I see the wordplay you’re using there. Common sense has left the building for today, but that’s fine. Live with fire, die with fire. That’s what I’ve decided.

19 About the Recording Environment For DDR / The Younger Brother Reunites in the Melting Pot

If God has abandoned me, then I shall die.

If I continue to have faith in God, then I shall live.

-DDR Stream VOD Part 1-

Food, a bath, and bed. Also video games. I thought that was all I needed in life.

Hey! It's me, PotatoStarch. Sorta. I've got a lot going on IRL... I don't wanna complain while I'm recording, but... Okay, let's do it. This could be used for evidence later on. Not sure if I can submit it, though.

So, the other day, my break came to an end. But I couldn't save and log out, so I left the game on observer mode and went to work. That's when my boss came running up to me and, for the first time, I entered the CEO's office.

I was given unlimited paid vacation. I was also told to "recharge my batteries" and given a thick envelope full of bills.

I can't believe it. I've never seen a bonus event like this even in my games. The CEO was rambling on about things I didn't understand... management stuff that has nothing to do with an underling like me. It lasted for ages and he was super happy, smiling the whole time.

I don't get it.

Halfway through I started adjusting the CEO's face in my brain. Like at the character creation screen. I made his whole body smaller, made his bone structure slimmer, and even gave him an adventurous spiky hairstyle.

Whatever the case, I understand that it's all very confidential. They made that very clear. I can record, but I can't post until they give me permission. Why? Let me streeeam! Also, they said something unbelievable.

"Continue gaming for the sake of your company!"

That's it, guys. I'm really, truly confused. I mean, the company I work for is a subcontractor of city infrastructure and has absolutely nothing to do with games. Ha ha! It's hilarious.

Sigh... All of that, and it still doesn't feel real. Even so, I'm continuing to play DDR. That reminds me, some of my system troubles were sorta solved. Well, it's more like there are flashes of the game being fixed.

It seems the high-speed progress mode is usable now. What a relief. Otherwise I'd be forced to spend my unlimited paid vacation watching the city's recovery. I'm using the high-speed mode right now, in fact. As I observe the frontier from afar, the sun spins through the sky... Oh, I wish you could see the funny accelerations and slowdowns. It's so unstable. But in exchange, the frontier seems to be safe and thriving. It's really amazing. The administrative district is still a bunch of shared tents that screams temporary official offices, but the residential district has recovered to where it was at the start of the game. It's all thanks to the frenetic work of the military and citizens to restore the city.

The fields and livestock are doing relatively okay. Judging from the wandering figures, I can see the children are working hard too. Our defenses have risen a lot as well. It's almost a different level. And the elves are helping us! Look! Irrigation ditches! It's only a small-scale system, but that's elven handiwork. You could even call it a barrier created by water magic. No monsters or even vampires are getting through without the help of magic.

I can't believe elves are fortifying the human frontier. Sakiel really is a super angel. I want to make a post about this and announce it to the world. But that would be against my rules.

Hm? The sun's movement is... Agh, no good. Back to observer mode. And as for Kuroi... Good, good! Her stats are rising wholeheartedly. Once you repeat training a certain amount of times, automatic training becomes unlocked. Nice averages.

There's just something... something nagging me. Here, look at this. Why are the soldiers joining me in my zigzag marathon running while carrying bags of sand and doing lateral jumps? It's gross. There are so many of them that they'd shock even migratory birds.

And the leader of this perverse formation is the handsome knight... Yick, that's not cool. Sira's not here, though. Good. At least there's that. Oh, but she might be watching from somewhere! Geh! She's doing repeated lateral jumps too!

-Marius I-

Lying on the hilltop, I let my mind wander with the poetic inspiration welling up inside me. The north has a stern beauty to it. The wind is tinged with the sharpness of rusted metal. Looking down upon the vast fields, the sky is so clear and bright it seems completely detached. Here, nature forsakes man, distant and cold...

"Hey, Marius. Take a look at this," a voice says crossly. Honestly. Origis has been like this all day.

"I thought it was some Transportation Corps platoon, but that's a convoy of merchants."

"You're right. A carriage drawn by four horses? How luxurious." The line traveling what could hardly be called a road was like a diligent and tenacious army of ants. With its queen in tow, as well. Ah, I see. So that's why they're accompanied by ferocious-looking soldier ants.

"Check out that banner."

"Yeah. It's the Red Lions, a mercenary band. They're a bunch of shady dudes that ally with vampires and attack humans."

"Wow... What a bold merchant."

"They're either a weirdo or an idiot. I dunno who this big shot is, but they've certainly got money to burn." True. For mercenaries, gold is all that matters. But hiring a shady mercenary band and heading straight into a land embroiled in conflict... The merchant themselves might be riding in that caravan. It would just be so boring if such eccentricity was only half-baked.

"Hey, Origis. Why don't we go with them?"

"Huh? Why? That sounds like a pain."

"Because it seems interesting. If we poke the soldiers and their employer, they might sing for us."

"Hmm... you think?" My brother Origis hates the city. He probably doesn't want to understand the people there. But that's too bad. What lies before us is a toxic substance that will plunge our world into the depravity of humans dying

pathetically. To let them pass by unperturbed would not only be boring, but would also certainly spark strife at their destination.

I must find the connection between violence and affluence.

“Marius, stop staring at me. Fine, already.”

“Thanks, Origis.”

“You’re starting to resemble our mom more and more lately. It’s scary...”

“Huh, maybe I should tell her you said that.”

“Wait! I said fine, okay?!” He nods, cursing to himself under his breath. Good.

“Then let’s go join them.”

“Right. Be friendly, now.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior.” We stand and turn around. In the shadow of the hill is a line of cavalry a thousand strong, elite soldiers garbed in a fierceness born from the toughest military training. The banner they raise is a flaming red cross on a field of black, the noble symbol of our family. House Willow, army of flame, stands here. The north is quite suited to us.

“Perhaps we should dispatch a message to our brother that we will be late.”

“We could always tell him that it was because of my selfish whims.”

“No way. Imagine being the messenger who has to memorize and deliver that...” We get on our horses and lead the line to the top of the hill. Even with their lances down, our troops can make one uneasy. No one flies banners, either. Origis’ surly attitude keeps the soldiers on edge.

“May I greet them?”

“Go ahead.” Honestly, Origis. Having 500 cavalry sitting atop a hill is just screaming that you’re ready to ride out to battle at any time. There’s no such thing as a friendly downhill rush of cavalry. But I can understand why he’s on edge. He wants to reunite with Agias as soon as possible so that he can give him a piece of his mind. It might even turn into a brawl. In that case, I’ll have to step in.

First things first, though: we have to be of some help. We have to stay calm,

as a military man should, and see through everything. A man as great as my brother Agias swore his life to a mysterious girl. His heart, which had been drowning in despair, is “now lit with the brightest flames” thanks to her. She has given us hope as well, this Lady Kuroi. Who is she? To be honest, I can hardly focus on the hundred-something soldiers marching before me. My mind has been racing this entire time. I feel like a maiden that is about to be late for a secret rendezvous.

“Greetings, my fellows. I am Marius Willow.” I flash a refreshing smile. It’s all right to let go of your swords, my good Red Lions. Your employer is in no danger.

“I have a suggestion for the master of this caravan. Might we join forces on the journey north, to the frontier?” Let us have a conversation—a bit of chatter while we travel. And if, perchance, I find out you are going to interfere with Agias’s plans... well, I’ll just have to quickly wipe you all out.

20 The Priest Proclaims the Blessings of Good Fortune of the Human God and Then Goes Silent

The rising sun is akin to God's power.

I merely bathe in the light of dawn, for I dare not keep it to myself.

-Father Felipo IV-

Morning prayers have finished. The noon smoke from the kitchen arouses my appetite. Alone, I sit in my office. In other words, I have free rein in this place.

"...And thus, we valiantly repelled the fearsome vampire raid! Oh, how vexing! I, a lowly priest, cannot do justice to that godly battle! It was a scene for the ages—nay, the very holy book itself!" Here is where I'll tightly close my eyes and shiver as I'm overcome with emotion. Heh heh heh. I don't even need to crack my eyelids; the gasps and furious scribbling of notes tell me just how effective I am being. Now I'll drop my tone and draw close, as if relaying a secret.

"And the elves, why, they were so awestruck they presented us with their secret remedies and scented woods. Amazing, no? And this is a military secret so I cannot share any details, but the elf princess... Pardon, Her Highness the Elven Princess, is staying here." The elven princess. Such a fearsome and rare phrase. It is sure to snare the hearts of the masses. Perhaps I cannot relay the truth, but that is not a problem. In fact, plausible lies suit my purposes much better. This way, my words can ride the winds of desire and become more easily exaggerated. Perfect.

"A theological perspective? That I cannot tell you. As the one in charge of this land's church, I have sent a notice to the main church, slapdash though it may seem. I imagine that the Cardinal will eventually make an official proclamation... Oh, what a glorious, dream-like proclamation it will be." That's how it is. I leave the rest to you all.

Hm. I contemplate the size of the newspaper article, then decide it is time to wrap things up. For the finale, I'll shower him with the items that must be emphasized.

"Forgive my aimless musings... After careful thought, perhaps it is humanity's bravery that ought to be commended. In other words..." I stand and lively, proudly state: "Odysson, sorcerer of the frontier who unleashed mystical fireballs to protect the commoners at his back! A gallant hero! Agias Willow, Acting Captain of the Frontier Army, who challenged our fearsome enemies with only his armed cavalry! Our venerable leader! And I, Father Felipo, who bravely took up the spear as the belfry tower fell!" In truth, I didn't actually do anything, but I would like some money to rebuild the belfry.

I've just noticed, but this reporter didn't bring an artist with him. Why is that? With nothing but the written word to detail our deeds, I am forced to continue my speech. Honestly.

"And lest we forget, the most fantastic of anyone or anything on that battlefield was the Hare of Flame, Lady Kuroi." I drop to a hushed voice, so that my words may secretly, sweetly wind their way into his mind.

"The tidal wave of monsters, the magic of elves, the monstrous strength of vampires... every disaster that threatens to annihilate us, she beats back. Indeed, it is like a miracle from God." Did I hear the reporter swallow? Good. Now his fascination will lead him to admirably pen this story. Yes, the exit's that way.

Now, what's next... Oh? If it isn't Odysson at the door. He looks as if he's eaten something quite sour. And after I just got done talking him up as our hero, as well.

"What's the matter? Why are you standing there?"

"I-I know it's all necessary, but... damn, you really wag your tongue like an idiot."

"A priest's sermons are magic, after all."

"Oh, really? No wonder!"

"I was kidding. Now, give me your report, Sir Frontier Sorcerer." Now he looks

as if he's eaten something bitter. Such a wealth of expressions.

"...First, the dissections of the monster bodies and the production of drugs from them is going really well. The people are passionate, but I think the biggest help has been the arrival of the expert."

"The one from the Sorcerer's Guild? I thought they were quite exclusive."

"They are. But the adventurers are pretty open about the dissections. As for the manufacturing, I've got a guy. Managed to pull in an apothecary."

"I see. So that's the secret of your catalyst magic."

"Basically. Whether it's fixing or breaking, it's all consumption in the end." Odysson shrugs, and I notice an unfamiliar wand at his waist. Judging from how filthy his clothes are, that must be the completed product.

"Mm? Oh, this is the finished ash wand. It's made from the branch of a witch hazel tree. It's really dense, so just one of these can unleash up to six spells."

"That's wonderful. And you can mass-produce them?"

"As long as I have total control of all the charcoal, I can produce a mountain of them."

"Let's make something more dedicated. This situation requires a more modern kiln."

"Yeah, there are more people now... despite how dangerous this area is." In spite of his tone, he's smiling. Heh heh heh. I can understand. It was a happy miscalculation on my part to see just how many people flooded to the Frontier in such a short amount of time. They were driven to gather here despite the hardships that may await... Hope is such a sweet, piercing nectar. People will risk their lives for something merely if they can see it with their own eyes.

"So, uh, about the people and training needed for the Fire Corps..." Hm. This face is quite difficult to describe. Surely he is not constipated.

"Whatever the results, it's fine. The planned reinforcements from the fort will include enough for military sorcerers and the Fire Corps. In an emergency we can even ask the adventurers. For now, if you could continue your aptitude tests..."

“A hundred, wasn’t it? The number you wanted.”

“Yes. If we can get that many, we can mobilize them as a platoon. However, the army’s main strength is ultimately its cavalry. An army of sorcerers is but a dream and an ideal.”

“366.”

“...Sorry?”

“I said, 366. Of the people I’ve tested, over half of them have shown aptitude. Normally we’d be lucky to find one among a hundred.”

“That is, err...”

“Well, once they actually start casting spells we’ll see the wheat separate from the chaff. Mana pools, control... there are a lot of variables. But they can all shoot fire from their fingertips. Depending on their training, they’ll grow.” What sort of face am I making right now? Let’s just make sure my mouth is closed for the moment. I push up on my chin.

“By the way, the military guys all passed. A one hundred percent success rate, you could say.” I’m speechless. I can hardly think. Did someone just come in? Oh, the reporter from earlier. Perhaps he forgot something. He meekly does a right-about-face. I don’t blame him. He just walked in on two grown men staring at each other, struggling to find words and expressions. I cough, and somehow manage to regain some composure. This is my stage, after all.

“Call Lord Willow. This requires an emergency council.” My word, how long has it been since the last time my voice got so husky with emotion?

“Depending on how things go, our battle tactics may have to change.” God. Oh, God. May His influence be feared.

This reminds me of how Lord Willow mentioned his sword skills had increased after receiving a blessing. His horse also became lighter of hoof. Come to think of it, I haven’t run out of breath once so far. I’d simply chalked it up to my excitement helping me surpass my exhaustion.

“Talk to the Sorcerer’s Guild, too. Remember what I went through?”

“Yes, indeed. This could be a good chance to embrace.”

“Mm. Don’t need to waste time anymore.” Time in this land of destiny has been moving incredibly quickly. First the repeated battles, now the gathering of people... various wills are flying about at high speed, creating a swell. This place is the hypocenter of the shaking of our times. And so, people we may not wish to see will be coming. Yes, indeed.

“Oh, you two are here? Good.” Well, isn’t this rare. Irritation is on his face. Normally he is so calm and composed, but I sense some internal struggle.

“I know this is sudden, but I need 200 cavalry for a training drill. We’ll be back in three days. You’re in charge while I’m gone.” His tone is quite serious. Well, well.

“W-Wait, Captain! Where’s this coming from?”

“I must crush them, or this will never end. For any of us.”

“Uh... Who?”

“My younger brothers. They’ve just arrived.”

“Y-You’re gonna use 200 cavalry for your sibling rivalry?”

“They have a thousand. We’ll be using practice spears, so no one will die.” But people will be hurt, it sounds like. And how fast he walks! I have to jog to keep up. Oh, there’s a knight in front of the church. I don’t recognize this young man.

“There you are. That’s my brother for you. If he’s going to die, it’ll be on a horse.”

“Be quiet.”

“I will not. Those who would chase a woman in a group while dancing are but perverts. I refuse to listen to such a person.”

“...Then on the battlefield we shall have our exchange.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want. In the name of House Willow, I shall punish this gang of perverts.” I see. Yes, I see. I see it all.

I watch the horses ride off nobly into the distance, a cloud of dust in their wake, then move on to a new task. There’s nothing that can be done about such an unexpected situation.

“Maybe we should stop the soldiers from joining in on Kuroi’s weird activities. All that hopping and sliding around is really gross.” You ask the impossible. Once Lord Willow has set his mind on something, he cannot be deterred.

I’ve just had a thought.

I didn’t see anything. I didn’t hear anything. That is how it is. So, I’ll go back to work. No, don’t stop me!

21 People in DDR / The Girl Feeds on the Warmth of a Family

Battle requires preparation, so I eat, drink, and sleep.

Preparation and time are necessary if one is to fight long and valiantly.

-DDR Stream VOD Part 2-

When I have something pressing to do, I get the urge to throw myself into something menial wholeheartedly.

Hi all, it's PotatoStarch. I just cleaned the crap out of my bathroom. And with everything sparkling, I returned to my monitor to find a heated cavalry battle outside the frontier. Uh, what's going on? I've never even seen this level of fierce fighting from someone else. Oh, looks like the handsome knight won. So many mysterious events are happening.

That aside, the frontier's population sure has boomed. We might have exceeded our pre-monster attack state. And people just keep pouring in. A big help is the fact that the fort is sending us food and all kinds of other supplies. Fort resupply events happen sometimes when playing on the frontier, but I don't think I've ever seen them offer so much before. I'm half overjoyed and half worried. This feeling gives me such a sense of déjà vu.

Also, the elves have gotten much more polite. I was sure they were just plotting to kill children again so I had Kuroi step up her patrols, but... nothing's happened. The peace is lovely, but I also feel a little empty that the events have been such misses. Thankfully, Sira has been by my side the whole time as a reassuring companion. If I had anything to complain about, it would be the fact that hawks and the Falcon are keeping watch 24/7.

But oh well. No accidents means no problems. The satisfaction of my people is top priority.

And the most exciting thing is the rocketing overall faith levels. As for my Devil God power levels... still iffy! Kuroi can still only use Call magic! The religion systems must not be working properly. The people around her are rising rapidly, but the others are kind of awkward or, I guess you could say, lacking in faith. It's like they can pray all they like, but the Devil God's power isn't being juiced. Do your job, Church.

I can't really blame the short, fat priest. His speech skill has been working wonders for government affairs. He might be burdened with too much, relying

just on his stats. It's also his job to negotiate with the elves. The acting leader, our handsome knight, is a muscle-head after all... we might need to start beefing up our staff.

Staff, huh? People who are needed seem like they're always busy. Now, I'm not praising terrible work environments, but this is true in organizations where some people are absolutely necessary, and some are replaceable. So what does that make of someone who was ordered to stay home and play video games? Aha ha... They haven't tried to follow up at all. Not even a phone call.

Mm... I'm hungry! That reminds me, the food in DDR is so plain. For humans it's bread, soup, and roasted meat. That's it. So gourmet. The other races have such detailed cuisines, so it really seems like the devs got lazy. Even the strategy sites say, "just eat some bread." What's the point of a hunger system, then? Huh? Uh, wait a second. What's that in the corner of the courtyard? Even from the zoomed-out view of observation mode, I can see noodles being slurped... Zoom in! Whoa, I knew it! Kuroi, is that udon? Are you eating udon?! And with mochi in it? Or is it the limit of the game's resolution? Are the noodles just too thick? Either way, what a shock... the deluxe version is astounding. I never would have expected them to enhance the food culture. I'd had no hope for such a human element of peaceful daily life.

I see... so that's how it is. Even the DDR devs have hearts!

-Sira IV-

"I see. So you two are like Apostle and servant, huh?" The old woman with a pipe exhales smoke from her mouth with a bored look on her face. I know that this smoke is poison. Even so, she chooses to smoke it. Just like Dad. He used to say that the poison helped mask his misery.

"So you're telling me the human God isn't just young and pretty, but also a freak? I don't understand. According to the holy book, as long as we work hard all our lives, we'll be welcomed with open arms once we've become decrepit and ugly with age." She also gives me all her food, just like Dad. I've never had anything like this. It's good. It makes my stomach warm. I wish we could eat together, though.

More smoke. Unlike alcohol, it doesn't make you more joyous, right?

"This is delicious."

"I see. Eat up. I've got tons of the stuff." Dad always said that he felt way happier hearing me say something was delicious than if he was eating it himself. He would insist that I eat.

"And you... how many bowls have you had?" Lady Kuroi is on her fifth bowl currently. When there's no food she goes without it forever, but when there is, she eats as much as she can.

"Your stomach must have no bottom. Is that the secret to defeating 50 vampires?"

"Mm."

"Another bowl? All right, all right. You're so skinny. Where do you put it all?" The old lady with the pipe signals, and a person from the stand quickly brings over another bowl. It's weird. We don't even have to pay with money or tickets.

"I don't care about the money for these. What a cheery sight it is, though. You, there. Write '50-Vampire Killer' on the sign. We'll name this dish after her." This stall, the shop, and even that other shop farther down all move at the old lady's command. It must be that sort of business.

Uh, what was it called again? That's right, the Crimson Flower Company.

She'd ridden in on a carriage that I'd never seen before, drawn by four horses, and had claimed she was here for "business." Ever since then, she's been feeding us delicious food. I thank her, but all she says is "it's business" and turns away coldly. The kids and I all want to eat with her, though.

"God, huh?" Oh. That tone, like she's about to cry. It's just like me before I met Lady Kuroi.

"The human God is basically the king of drinking and smoking. I'd always thought it was a way for cowards to pull the wool over their own eyes. And the fervent believers were like drug addicts. But still, I couldn't let go of the holy seal..." I see. So that's how it is. This old lady has no one. They're gone, aren't they? Her child, like I was to my dad. And so, like me when my dad never came

home, she cries without shedding tears.

It hurts. I'm sad. I'm lonely.

"I was sure this religion was akin to slavery. That's why I never put much faith in it..." She comes over to me, her face overflowing with emotion. She stares... at the sword I hold, and at the hand that isn't mine. Dad's hand, which holds the hot bowl in my place.

"...Your father?"

"You can tell?"

"I can. A parent's hand when it fusses over its child during a meal is so happy it could melt." Is that how it is? I often hear that if I become a parent, I'll understand. Dad always seemed happier when he was poking my cheeks, though.

"Miss Kuroi. If I worship you, will my prayers reach God?"

"Mm-mm."

"No? Then what should I... Huh?" Lady Kuroi reaches out her arms toward nothing and draws a big circle.

"God is here right now." Yeah, that's right. I can tell, too. Its presence is fainter than when it descended on her back the other day, but I can still feel it. God is right there.

The old lady seems shocked, but then her expression crumbles and she prays with all her might. She's shaking. Tears drip from her eyes. I can't hear what she's saying, but her whispers must be the name of her dead child.

I should pray, too. Dad, if you can use two hands you can do it as well. Let's do it. But wait... God seems down. I can tell. He's just like the old lady and Dad—hungry but doesn't eat, just watches me gently with a warm smile that feels like holding your hands over embers on a cold day. I want him to cheer up.

"This is delicious, God," I say. Oh, I think God smiled.

22 The Dragon Warrior is Angered and Relieved by Human Rage, Pride, and Business

I am an Apostle. An Apostle of the human God.

Thus, I must fight Apostles of other creeds. Those are the rules.

-Dragon Warrior Fleilyu III-

“Ready, Fleilyu? Listen closely and try to understand.” Lady Sakiel stands on the bed, small but regal. I would never miss a single word she says. On the floor I sit at the ready, fully prepared to hear every word.

“Elves, humans, and vampires are all equally precious creatures. We are the only ones on the continent with surviving magical cultures, after all.” Her voice is adorable, but her words are confusing. What is she trying to say?

“In fact, there were once many apex creatures in this great land. You’ve read the stories, haven’t you? In the forests lived the elves and insectoids; on the plains, the humans and centaurs; in the mountains, the dwarves and kobolds; in the sea, the mermen and the... I don’t understand this one, but the dorodoro.” Ah, so it was a lecture on mythology? I remember hearing about these in fairy tales as a youngling. They were illogical and put me to sleep easily.

“Unfortunately due to natural disasters and wars—there was also a time when the land was covered in ice—the races died out one after another. Like petals falling from a flower.” I remember now. Myths were eerie, as well, to scare us out of staying up all night. Stuff like a devil king reviving from the depths of the earth to wage war against God, or how all of the elves went into hibernation. But in the end, they spoke of the glory of elves. It’s only natural. Elves are a race beloved by God. We exterminated the evil pagans, annihilated our ancient enemies the dwarves, and established order and justice across the world.

“Everyone calls them apes, but one of the races that has survived this

turbulent history is the humans. They have a long history, just like us elves, and are a precious tribe.” I see. So that’s why Lady Sakiel makes sure to call them humans.

“So you wish to value their rarity and pay respect to their history and lineage... Is that it?”

“Mm... It’s hard to express, but I suppose that’s about right. In any case, I want to get along with humans.”

“Understood. They fought fiercely against the vampires. I am sure that Second Commander Arcsem understands their usefulness. The Council has also given orders to use this land as a strategic foothold.”

“Strategy... That again?” Oh, how tragic Lady Sakiel is. Forced to remain in this barbaric land without any hope of reinforcements... If they were simply normal orders, I would have fought against them. But orders given in the oracle’s name must be obeyed without question.

“I hate war...”

“I understand, but our opponents are the violent vampires. If we don’t fight, they will dominate this land. If we don’t win, true order cannot be restored.”

“Can’t we all just get along?”

“With all due respect, I suggest you stop talking. If it’s the Leaf Massacre that you doubt in regards to the republic’s broad policy, then please take caution.” As long as my wind deafens any possible wayward ears, there will be no problems. Still, Lady Sakiel is a risk magnet. Her loveliness can lead to unexpected rashness, sometimes.

“Ugh... Fleilyu!” I mustn’t look. Remain at attention but stare at the floor. Otherwise I’m liable to proclaim, “Leave everything to me!” Resist. Hold out. Imagine something you hate. Something I hate... the vampires. Dark creatures that must be exterminated.

That reminds me... in her story earlier, Lady Sakiel did not mention the vampires.

“Lady Sakiel, may I ask a question?”

“Mm? What is it?”

“How does one explain the vampires? I heard they suddenly appeared about 300 years ago, around when I was born.” They are a miserable, cursed species that preys upon the apex races that she spoke so proudly of. They are violent, pleasure-seeking, and slaves to their instincts—the embodiment of all the world’s evils, and the natural enemy of elves. I find it hard to believe they are “precious.”

“They’re... Mm? Fleilyu?” There is a disturbance in the wind. Soldiers? They’re already here, then.

“Forgive me. It seems your humans have arrived.”

“Ohh! The time has finally come! And? Is everything prepared?”

“As you have commanded.”

“Good, good! Let’s go, then!”

“Lady Sakiel! Let me receive them first. Perhaps after, you may appear...”

“No, I’m going. They’ve come to visit me, so how can I not be the one to welcome them?” She hops up and down in such a lovely manner. Oh, and how she takes quick small steps! Being able to observe such things is one of the perks of being her guard. No, I must not get distracted. Lately I’ve been getting lost in my own thoughts more easily. It’s a blessed and unexpected harmful side effect of having a monopoly over serving Lady Sakiel’s every need. It only takes a bit of mental preparation to handle the hardships, but the opposite turns my mind to mush.

“Good, good! The tea and snacks are all ready.” The tea room set up on the roof is filled with the sweet things that Lady Sakiel adores. I can only hope the humans are able to appreciate it.

“Still... aren’t there a lot of guards here?”

“Not at all.” My security is perfect. Five wind hawks circle in the sky above us. Ten wind and ten water mages are stationed on all neighboring rooftops, each accompanied by a silver leopard. And this time, I am here as well.

“I see... you don’t think they’ll take offense?”

“Considering your station, the security may even be too light.”

“But...” There is one threat. What was her name... the black-haired one who cut through elven magic. The humans gossip about her and call her unrefined things like “50-Vampire Killer,” but that’s clearly an exaggeration. After seeing the remnants of the battlefield, they must be stretching the truth. The vampires attacking from the south were probably hit by a surprise attack by the humans that threw them into chaos and caused them to slay their own allies. That would also explain the Thunderbolt cast from an inexplicable position.

“Ohh! Thank you for coming! My name is Sakiel!”

“...Kuroi.”

“Kuroi, huh? Mm, a good name.” Not only does she refuse to name herself first, but she only nods slightly? I swear, humans are so... at least she came unarmed. That is only natural, of course. Two men accompany her, what looks like a military officer and a civil official.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Ange of the Crimson Flower Company, recently appointed Master of Coin for this land. I hope we can get along.”

“Mm! You’ll have no problems from me!” The civil official is a middle-aged female. Her build is nothing special, but I can sense a slight air of magic to her.

“It is my honor to make your acquaintance as well. I am Marius, younger brother of the acting representative. I’ve come to serve as his proxy.”

“Ohh! Siblings, is it? I’ve heard that means your faces are similar!” This handsome male is a commissioned officer. I can tell from the way he holds himself.

“You are well-versed. I am told that my brothers take after our father. I, the youngest, take after our mother.”

“Hoh! Humans have such profound mysteries.”

“The resemblance can even cross generational lines. People say I am the spitting image of my great-grandmother.”

“Such is possible? Then perhaps your relatives also resembled people who

once lived thousands or tens of thousands of years ago!” The Kuroi girl is silent and expressionless, but her companions are friendly. However, I do not understand. I was expecting the representative, the priest that serves as a negotiator, and the fire mage to accompany her.

“Come, sit! I’ve got some really good snacks.”

“We appreciate your hospitality. However, the Dragon Warrior appears quite suspicious of us.”

“...I have some concerns in regards to security and etiquette.”

“F-Fleilyu!”

“I understand. Allow me to explain.” I nod, urging him on. I hate to make Lady Sakiel wait, but I need to understand the situation.

“The three you invited have, for their own reasons, decided to step back.” He smiles as he peddles his excuses. He never shows any bashfulness, does he?

“First, Father Felipe has been forbidden from getting near this place by your own Second Commander. Something about trying to prevent any unnecessary negotiations.” Damn you, Second Commander Arcsem. Talk about uncalled for.

“Next, Frontier Sorcerer Odysson is unfortunately a bit ill. He has had to adopt a rather special method of training for the Fire Corps... Heh heh... Pfft!” What? He seems quite amused by something. I’m aware that the man was sent to train those who could summon fire into mages. I take it that is going well. If it is, that is also a threat. But according to our investigative reports, they were practicing “strange, bizarre, and superstitious rituals.” As I recall, they were forced to balance vases of oil on their heads while assuming stances like twisted branches, and zigzagging through a course of roof tiles surrounded by embers...

Idiotic. Truly uncivilized practices. Apparently humans do not even know meditation techniques.

“My brother, Agias, is simply not here at the moment. Monsters have attacked several nearby villages, and he has gone to hunt the creatures down.” Monsters, eh? A favorite pawn of elves and vampires. This story is probably true. There have been so many soldiers coming and going lately that it has been difficult to tell the difference between their training exercises and battle sorties,

but I do remember one thing: a few days ago, 700 cavalry rode out and have yet to return.

“Where did the monsters appear?”

“To the southwest, as well as the northwest.” I knew it. Neither of those are strategic elven locations. Assuming these were not naturally random encounters, then it would be the work of vampires. With so many battles occurring on the front lines lately, there’s no way our army could have circled around to enemy lines and set this up.

“As well as the east.” No! It’s not possible! Even if there was an irregular operation that I was unaware of, there would have at least been some consideration for us. There’s no way they would risk the possibility of the battle reaching Lady Sakiel.

“It is possible these reports are mistaken or false. We have become a base of hope and dependability for our people.”

“Yes, indeed. I came here precisely because of the stories I’d heard of this place.”

“Hoh, hoh! Is this place so popular? I can understand that!”

“Lady Sakiel, let me serve the tea.”

“No, I’ll do it. I am the host, after all.” Her hospitality is wasted on them. No, this is just a part of Lady Sakiel’s bleeding heart. The humans ought to be crying in thanks.

“The guest of honor is you, Kuroi. Drink up.”

“No. Forgive me, but I shall partake first.” How dare you dash her hopes. Humans are such miserable creatures.

“...Such arrogance. And I don’t mean just your tea etiquette.”

“Oh, my. You wish to speak of manners? What I suggested was only natural.”

“What was ‘natural?’ You offer not even the slightest bit of thanks for Her Grace’s unprecedented hospitality. Have some shame.”

“Hoh... Hospitality? Shame? Ho-ho-ho!” She laughs. At me. At an elf?

“All this from those who, after threatening us, offer a cup of possible poison straight away to Lady Kuroi and order her to drink? And you would have us rejoice? Why, it’s outrageous. I must wonder who really lacks gratitude and grace here.” What? What did she just say? A mere human. A lowly human dares...

“Indeed. It is an unexpected peril that we have fallen into such a heavy siege.” The officer glances toward the spots where our flyers hide. No. He can’t have spotted them in such a short amount of time.

“It seems we were correct to come instead.”

“An excellent decision indeed. It would not affect the local government terribly if we were to not return.” What are they doing? Why do they kneel, pull back their collars, and expose their bare necks? What am I supposed to do with that?

“We ask that you take our two heads, and in exchange grant our people mercy from your gleaming white army. Just please, allow Lady Kuroi to leave. She is our people’s hope.” What is going on? How did this happen? Argh, Lady Sakiel is looking at me with tears in her eyes! Was it me? Me? Did I misunderstand something to bring about this situation? Lady Sakiel had been so excited for this opportunity, but just like the concert the other day, my thoughtlessness has brought everything crashing down.

Sip.

Crunch, crunch.

The Kuroi girl is drinking her tea and nibbling on a snack. Everyone—me, the humans, the soldiers—sit there, dumbstruck. We can only stare as she eats without a care.

“Well? Is it good?”

“Yes.”

“Is that presence at your back... your god?”

“Yes. He just descended.”

“Enjoying my tea, I take it?”

“Yes. Seems so.”

“I see... That’s great to hear.” Lady Sakiel and Kuroi are conversing. The scene seems so far away, as if hidden behind a veil of mist.

“You and me. One day.”

“It is the destiny of Apostles, yes. But not yet.”

“Yes. God is facing west, I believe.”

“Mm. Same here. It is a sad thing, in my opinion...” I see. So Kuroi is a human Apostle.

With a calm mind, I listened to the human soldier’s urgent report. Monsters had appeared en masse from the mountains to the northwest. The tea party was adjourned. A few minutes later, the military officer rode out with 500 cavalry. I watched them go, their horses kicking up dust.

Now I serve silently by Her Grace’s side, observing the machinations of humans.

23 The Middle Brother Annihilates and Solicits, for the Sake of the Girl who Would Lead Humanity

Destroy the monsters, as one would clear a virus or curse.

How can you claim to love God if you cannot do that?

-Origis I-

Seven hundred cavalry head toward the desert. We are clearly moving at a fast, strict pace, but there is little exhaustion. Are these the results of that foolish training? The dancing, the spinning... why did every single exercise have to be so bizarre? Wasn't there something more normal we could do? I understand it was how we gained divine blessings, but it still eats at my soul. Even our horses' coats and kicks have improved, but I refuse to accept it.

"The Hell Expanse is beyond that hill. Battle will be upon us soon after." There is a springiness to Agias' command. He's full of energy. My brother has always had an eccentric side, but it seems that's been polished to an overwhelming degree. How can I describe it? When you remove vanity from a man, this is what you're left with.

"Are you listening, Origis?"

"I am. We moved quickly, but I didn't expect us to get here in only two days."

"We lost two days, you mean. There's no telling if we'll be too late."

"Yeah, I guess..." Just the fact that we might arrive in time is amazing in my book. It was when we split up to save the lesser villages from monster attacks that I learned just how perilous the Hell Expanse was. My blood ran cold, I tell you. That place is home to the largest population of people in the northern frontier. When I'd heard that a giant horde of monsters had moved in, my mind was boggled. We had to rush out to their aid. And yet, we couldn't afford to split our men. As a compromise, our only choice was to head that way while

gradually reassembling our forces. We were fated to take a roundabout path, and in the end we couldn't avoid it.

Even so, the Hell Expanse hasn't fallen yet. We managed to arrive before it could. The fact that he doesn't find this astounding speaks to how astounding Agias himself is.

How horrible. The buildings, nestled between rivers and greenery, are in a terrible state. Even from this distance, I can tell they've been raided and ransacked. Cursed goblins, spewing miasma of stench about as if they own the place. A number of hobgoblins accompany them, too.

But, just as our scouts reported, some citizens seem to have been evacuated. From atop a cliff overlooking the town, yellow walls have been erected to create a sort of fort. Smoke rises from the center. And from the wasteland at the foot of the cliff, looking for a chance to invade, are goblins. Hobgoblins dot the massive, evil horde. A quick count shows over 2,000. This isn't normal; the numbers are unnatural. But for a battlefield, maybe not so much.

It's a vampire vanguard—not naturally occurring, but cultivated.

Goblins as a race are purely male. However, reproduction is apparently easy for them. Many species can serve as suitable hosts for their spawn, but the cursed vampires say humans are “the best.”

The path up the cliff is narrow. Defensive walls must have been constructed as well. But the enemies' numbers are too great. They'll eventually break through. No, it would seem they've already halfway broken through.

“We'll split our army into two forces.” That's my brother Agias. Such quick decision-making.

“I'll lead 200 men towards the town. From the look of things, a large amount of citizens weren't able to evacuate. They must be prioritized.” Very true. Goblins only care about eating and raping, and with such a large amount of them nearby... In other words, by searching for survivors, we can learn something of their numbers.

“Origis, you will take 500 men and destroy that.” He points at the horde of goblins on the wasteland that number over 2,000.

“You can do it, I trust.”

“Of course. Just go all out, right?”

“Indeed. Bring honor to the banner of House Willow.”

“I like those orders. I take it we have free rein to use magic as well?” I call to my soldiers and ride down the hill. Behold, all of you fighting for your lives up there. The banner we raise is a burning cross on a field of black. Let your spirits rise, people. The army of House Willow is here to save you. You are already saved. We shall destroy the goblins.

“Men, ready your fire bombs!” We ride forward as a group, and I grip a charred brown ball in my hand. I channel my mana into the insect growth, plucked from a witch hazel tree and stuffed with charcoal.

More. Fill it more. Is this all I have? No, I can do more... There!

“Form a vertical line! Surround the enemy group! Release on my orders!” I shout and rush ahead.

The wind pressure is perfect. I can already see the goblins’ ugly faces; that’s how close I am.

I’m fast. Galloping in makes you feel more confident. In every battle I’ve been in, I’ve charged just like this. Even so, I’ve won them all. That’s why our house’s name echoes with military might.

But things are about to change. I turn my horse’s head to the left; neither my sword nor my lance are drawn. Only the wind from our horses rushes toward the enemy, the thundering of their hooves freezing them in their tracks.

“Light!” Good, goblins. Crowd together more.

“Prepare to throw!” The goblins freak at the sight of the cavalry and clump together nicely.

“Release!” Eat this.

I hurl the fire bomb. Before me, 500 fire bombs arc through the air. They bounce off the goblins’ heads and shoulders, dropping at their feet. Some goblins in the middle catch them or even pick them up. The balls are combustion magic, brought to life by Inferno. They’ve been packed full with the

spell.

“Retreat!” As we move back, I hear a loud *boom*. Whoa, they keep going off. *Boom! Boom! Ba-ba-ba-boom!* The sounds rumble in my belly, and heat washes over my cheeks. It’s even more amazing than usual. The mana mixed in nicely. And the spell name Inferno is no exaggeration, either.

The wind catches the huge black plumes of smoke and carries them, revealing a huge pile of corpses. But it’s not enough. Not every goblin was caught in the blast. Some can still move. Some are still recognizable as goblins. These are all extremely bad things.

Death to all monsters. Goblins can’t even be harvested for materials, so their only purpose is to die.

“Men, draw your swords! Strike at will! Annihilate them all!” My fighters scatter, and I charge forward as well. I cut through a confused goblin; I stab at a berserking hobgoblin. I show no mercy. I will not allow a single one to live, or a single one of my men to be lost.

Surprisingly, our horses are unphased. They don’t even flinch from the light and heat of the explosions, nor do they shy away from our enemies. Agias was right. You don’t use your horse to fight—you fight with your horse. We’re so in-sync that I’ve basically left my reins tied to my saddle. This makes it extremely easy to use my longsword.

And in fact, my moves are strangely sharper. Horse and rider together dodge a hobgoblin’s club and simultaneously sever its arm at the elbow. As the horse rights itself, the return swing of my longsword sends the monster’s head flying all in one breath.

Hmm. I’ve gotten really strong since coming to the Frontier. Perhaps I could even beat Agias... On second thought, of course not. In our duel, he even used his horse to attack, attaching a horn to it like a unicorn, which made me worry for the sanity of both horse and rider... but I was defeated, so I cannot complain.

There is also one more person that I’m sure I cannot defeat: Lady Kuroi. Even without crossing swords, I can tell just from her appearance. She is not normal. It’s true she’s a master of martial arts, but it’s more of a pressure... Basically,

she's a one-woman army; the literal definition. It's no wonder Agias is so taken in by her.

But that's also why people like us are needed. Soldiers that can fight; an army that heralds her arrival. We exist to pave the way for her to reach the final battle. Agias was right. No letter would ever be enough to express what he has seen.

That's the last one; the monsters are all wiped out. Passionate cheers rain down upon us. Fly our banner in response! My brother's forces have to do a thorough, time-consuming search of the town, so we had to win big here. You are saved. Be excited... and fight more. I invite you, my fellows, to join us in our revolution with Lady Kuroi at the helm.

24 The Knight Cheers and Charges, Setting the Field Of Monsters Aflame

I am not alone.

We are here, therefore I am not alone.

-Knight Agias V-

Bomber Knights in tow, we proceed forward. The sounds of marching feet and trotting hooves intermingle as we approach the mountain. The horde of monsters rushes forth like a landslide; we must fight them back. Just as Marius's forces have already.

"It's been battle after battle for you. Aren't you tired, brother?" I snort at his joke. My original plan was to wait until he became a man before leaving the house, but for some reason, despite becoming an excellent soldier, his boyish nature hasn't changed a bit.

"A late question, but shouldn't some of the Expanse soldiers be joining us?"

"Their first priority is to protect the Expanse. Even with the monsters vanquished, the remaining stench will invite more. Plus..."

"Soldiers with differing methods of battle will only slow us down, right?"

"Indeed. It's no longer a question of skill."

"Well, I suppose that's true." Two new pieces of equipment are tied to my waist: four fire bombs, and two ignite canisters. The Inferno cast by the fire bombs is as destructive as any charging army. Control of combustion magic is difficult, but every one of our soldiers has mastered it. However, that is only natural; we would not call them Bomber Knights otherwise.

The ignite canisters, however, are still proving tricky. Filled with oil and very effective, their results greatly depend upon the user's mana and skill. Origis can only use one type of canister. As for Marius... he could very well become a

warrior of flame magic.

“The people of the Expanse were so passionate. Tons of soldiers wanted to come with us. We could have at least brought some of them on board.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say. And if we were merely marching—no, merely hunting monsters, I would have gladly taken them in.”

“But the vampires, huh?”

“They will not appear rashly. But don’t think it’s a guarantee they won’t show at all.” As we proceed, we frequently send out scouts. During the morning and midday, we hurry forward. Before the sun sets, we select a place to hide out in and rest during the night. Then, before the sun rises, we’re off again. We must be wary of vampires, but there is no time to waste. The physical and mental toll is no laughing matter.

But not one of our soldiers has fallen behind. Our new training methods are bearing fruit. Our provisions are holding strong, too. We were able to resupply in the Expanse, which made this expedition possible.

If there’s one issue, it would be the Frontier. Our main force is away from home. I understand that this situation is forcing our hand, and that Father Felipe and the others came to this decision after much careful thought... Still, it’s rough. The tea party just happened, too. Hearing about it chilled my guts, and just remembering it causes me to shiver.

Lady Kuroi never said this, but our entire enterprise started from the very bottom. Our options were limited, and everything was a balancing act with danger all around. I just hope that lowering our defenses against the elves doesn’t lead to something terrible. If it does, please, let Lady Kuroi escape at least.

This desolate wasteland of stone and sand, dry as bones... it’s just like us in the past. But now, it’s impossible to accept a life of simply becoming a cold clot of dirt.

A flash of light in my eyes appears before the sun—before daybreak. A delayed, low rumbling follows.

“Brother! Look!” It seems the battlefield has shifted more to the east than our

scouts indicated. Among the mass of bodies, Inferno is being used in focused fashion. Marius is being pressed.

“Full speed ahead, men!” Think while you gallop, Agias. Come on. Our enemy is an especially large horde of monsters. Compared to the Frontier attack, there are far more of them—and more types, as well. Some extremely dangerous monsters include trolls, ogres, and bugbears.

Marius is leading 500 knights to intercept; he said they’d slow the monsters down until we arrive. He’s not the type to make promises he can’t keep, so if he says he’ll do it then he’ll definitely do it. He should know our position, as well. We’re approaching from the south. Almost there. The scouts have already delivered their reports and are circling back.

And yet the battlefield has moved to the east, and the fire bombs are being used tactically. Why is that? It can’t be... Ah, I see. In that case, I assume that sound earlier was my signal.

“Vanguard, draw your weapons and canisters! Rearguard, make sure to use every fire bomb you have!” I’ve got it.

A massive horde of monsters, blasphemy upon the world. With over ten trolls, as well as ogres and bugbears running about, it’s enough to feel the end of our nation is at hand. The miasma of stench that belches from their mouths and vile drool that drips from their lips defiles the very earth. They are unorganized, but aren’t very spread out. Good job on keeping them contained, Marius. You may be on the run right now, but you’ve served your purpose well.

In fact, it seems he’s using his high speed to toy with them, drawing out the smaller monsters. Mad apes, that latch onto horses without fear; poisonous rats, that bite at their legs; omega pherox, that jump and swarm... all of these are annoying for cavalry, and yet I don’t see a single one. The explosions earlier must have cleaned them up. They have set the stage, and are now waiting for us to arrive.

“Long spear formation!” Then I must live up to their expectations. Let me show you the determination of the one who summoned you all this way. Two hundred cavalry form a wedge, with me front and center. Five hundred cavalry ride in four vertical lines behind us, as if protected by our wedge. At the very

end of the formation should be Origis. We're both in dangerous positions. But Willow men would have it no other way.

I grip my lance with both hands, and pray to God.

"Chaaarge!" Unleash your battlecries, my men. Drown out the beasts with your voices and charge into the field of monsters.

With speed as my weapon, I pierce through.

Dodge! Split! Rip! Cursed monsters. We are the spear that leads humanity. You cannot hope to oppose our brave spirits and sharp wits with mere instinct.

Before me is a bugbear. It's a bear-like monster with an evil mind. Its arms are raised, as if trying to intimidate me. Pointless. Compared to a vampire, it is an artless, pathetic move with only raw power behind it. I stretch out and pierce its throat. I can feel myself going through its skull. Shrugging off its writhing corpse, I look ahead. Deeper.

An ogre, huh? It's trying its best to reach me, all the while sending smaller monsters in its way flying. Not a priority. Go ahead and try to catch me. Kill your companions while you're at it, please.

Okay. It's about time.

"Rearguard, release fire bombs!" I order and explosions erupt around me, Inferno spells constantly being cast. The vanguard's wedge has pierced deep into the enemy horde; as the monsters attempt to crush us, our rearguard flings fire bombs to pulverize them. This is our long spear formation.

I feel the heat of the flames on my back and move forward. Come, troll. Challenge me. Let us test how much your flesh and bones can regenerate.

Many soldiers have risked their lives before, foolishly dying... but no longer. This is to prove that we have come so much further.

In my hand, I hold a flame canister. I pour mana into it, gripping it tight. This spell, Flame Blade, was taught to me by Sorcerer Odysson himself. With a giant blade of flame, I slice through the troll's belly. I hear a howl and smell the stench of fat and meat burning. The flames are insane.

Suffer. I cut through its thick hide, burning it from the inside and out. The troll

frantically tries to pat out the flames, rolls on the ground even, but they won't be extinguished. As long as my mana remains, it will continue to burn. Not pausing to view the results, I press forward again. I stab, slice, and fight off every monster I see, making my way toward the other end of this rotten earth.

Pierce. Retrieve.

In the midst of this, I hear a cheer. This is a battlefield, fool. I understand the elation, however.

"We did it! We did it, damn it! Take that, monsters! And screw you too, vampires!" Origis, huh? Why is a man of House Willow the first to cheer? I'm glad you survived, but the battle isn't over yet.

"Brother!" Marius. He must have circled around from the right.

"An excellent charge right through the center!"

"Mm. I commend you for delaying that horde, as well. It was quite helpful that you eliminated the smaller ones." I trot forward and survey our enemies. The troll's corpse is like a burning boulder. The Inferno spells were quite effective, too. Thousands of monsters have already been killed. Origis's men are good with those fire bombs; they really bring out their destructiveness.

"Good. Marius, join the rearguard. Take the Bomber Knights from the vanguard and split forces with Origis."

"Are we charging in again?"

"Yes. Let us carve a cross into this field of monsters. Later, I want you to kill a troll."

"Yes, sir!" These monsters have, without a doubt, been mentally influenced by vampire thunder magic. The proof is in how many individuals are now going berserk. This isn't because they fear our magic—it's because they've been freed from some mind-control spell.

But we shall show no mercy. Our species cannot coexist. Furthermore, this is human territory.

"Chaaarge!" God, bless our battle! Agias Willow, forward!

25 About DDR ROM, Bans, and DX

God is not all-knowing and all-powerful.
A heart that feels anger or sadness cannot be.

-DDR Stream VOD Part 3-

Heya, PotatoStarch here! And boy, do I need a drink. That's right, I'm starting drunk. I mean, how would you feel if your account was locked? Now I can't post videos. I thought I might be able to watch things by making a different account, but that was instantly banned. Why? It makes no sense, you stupid devs!

What the hell is going on? I didn't really read the EULA, but I was totally not breaking any rules. In fact, even made up my own rules and was careful not to break them, either. Well, I'm actually breaking one of my rules, which is no drinking.

The best thing to accompany a drink is udon. Plain udon, with nothing in it. Ahhh, that's the stuff.

Sigh... What am I doing? ...Yum.

Aw, let's just play. It's for the sake of my company. I really don't understand that, either. I got a special bonus, you know? But holding onto the envelope kinda scared me, so I transferred it all to my family.

Dragon Demon... D... X... It's just sitting there on my monitor. And I've been staring at it for so long.

Let's check the status of the Frontier base. Okay, okay. In fact, it's more than okay, it's amazing. What is this? The scale has expanded to a shocking degree; the population has exploded; there are all kinds of officials now; and we're allies with the elves for the moment, too.

Whew. Automation sure is amazing. And my little Kuroi has been hard at work on her auto-patrols, too.

I feel like I'm not needed anymore. All I can really do is play the mini-games, which ultimately are just me pressing buttons really quickly... After a certain point, I can just leave that on auto, too.

Sigh. I ate all my udon.

Anyway, I was never very good at strategy simulation. There's just too much to pay attention to. When I played as a noble before and tried to correct the

imbalance between rich and poor, I ended up going bankrupt. I fell to being an adventurer and soon hit game over.

In my priest playthrough, it was even worse. I was so excited about landing a rare job and used guides extensively... only to end up disappearing into the mist atop an executioner's stand for some reason. That was scary; traumatic, if I'm honest. They used an ax, not a guillotine, after all.

Thinking back on it, I've never accomplished my first goal. No matter what character I use, I always hit game over somewhere. But that's what makes this DDR, and I enjoyed it.

There's always been only one goal. The thing everyone aspires to at least once: the human salvation route. I tried and failed as a vampire; I tried and failed as an elf. No matter how strong I made my character, it was just freaking impossible. I could never beat *her*. I'm sure it was made so she couldn't be beaten.

The Demon God Strigoaică.

Creator of vampires. The undead queen. Bringer of destruction to the continent.

No matter what route I followed, the vampires would ultimately be victorious thanks to her unreasonable violence. That's just how it's programmed. It's the official ending, you see. The Demon God laughs as she summons a storm of unimaginable scale and destroys the world. The first time I saw it, I was honestly dumbstruck. Like, how are you supposed to beat that? But I figured it was a bad end, so I started a different character. But the world was still destroyed. Same for my next playthrough. This is where something weird clicked, and I fell in love with super difficult games.

But... there are rumors. Rumors of a true end, where destruction of the world is avoided. Somehow, the Demon God withdraws from the world on this route. At least, that's what people say.

That's not really defeating her though, is it?

Hilarious commentary, I know. One more beer, please. Ugh, bitter. It's the taste of life. It's the best.

Sigh... DDR, huh...?

I wonder if this playthrough will end in destruction, too. Even though it's the DX version. Oh well. It's just that kind of game. All worldly things are impermanent and all that's fair must fade; it's that sort of logic. The haughty vampires get to do whatever they want, though. If you can't hope for results, then you just have to enjoy the time you have left. The vampires get to have their cake and eat it too, of course.

...The humans are working so hard. The Frontier's developed so much. Ultimately, in this game the vampires are the main power and the elves are just a rival... Humans are no more than small fry or minor characters. The Guardian God that got emergency patched-in was, in the end, the weakest god of them all.

And Kuroi is an Apostle of this god. She can't even hope to ally with the winning side to survive. I could try to intervene, but I don't know much about the DX version.

Gulp, gulp... Ah...

Ugh, I'm so drunk. Maybe I should break another one of my rules. Anyone who agrees, raise your hand. Meee!

Okay, let's start up the search engine.

Dragon Demon RPG Deluxe version strategy site! I type it in, and lots of candidates pop up. Judging from the layout, the one most veterans use is this! Click!

Now, then... Mmh? The package's design seems... different. But the PC and console versions have the same art. The DDR devs are weirdly sloppy about that stuff. What is this? Even the title's different. What's a "Dragon Demon RPG Deluxe?" Mine says "Dragon Demon RPG DX." And the strategy info? Whoa, it's totally different.

What the heck is this normal-looking character creator? "Finally, job and skill choices have been released." Huh? "The Deluxe version is basically a powered-up version." What's that about? There's nothing here about a human god. The humans are treated as an inferior species, like always.

This has to be wrong.

Oh, the stream! I was streaming my playthrough, so there has to be some reaction. People must be talking! Just this once, I'll search myself. Personal rules can be broken depending on time and place!

Huh? HUH? Why are there zero hits? And what the hell is this? I'm getting messages like "This page has been deleted" and "Forbidden" and "404." Oh, even my Wikipedia page is gone.

The thread! I can still check the strategy thread... Why isn't there a current thread?! What's happening? And you call yourselves DDR players? In that case, I'll make a thread myself... There! How do you like that? Now to grandly start up a discussion... Huh? My thread was deleted. Whoa. Scary. I need another beer. Deliciously bitter.

Is the world telling me something? That I'm drunk and need to go to bed? I'm scared. This must be a dream. The harmful effects of a super informational society or game brain or whatever they call it. God, I love beer.

My recording's kinda wonky, too, now that I'm noticing. My PC's gotten really smooth. It's somehow gotten an upgrade. Nothing makes sense, honestly. It's all weird. My CEO told me to go home and play games, for crying out loud. Paid me a ton of money to do it, too.

DDR DX, huh? What is this? Why is it working here, and with this content. Why am I continuing to play? It's unstable, and I don't feel like playing.

Mmh? An emergency event? Ohhh, this is really bad. Vampires have declared war on the Frontier. An Apostle is guaranteed to join now.

An Apostle. A vampire Apostle. Will it be the master of earth magic, Ruin? The master of thunder magic, Thrall? Or maybe the earth-thunder hybrid, Golden? No matter who it is, the Frontier doesn't stand a chance. Any one of them can level the place solo.

Wait, Sakiel's still there. Sakiel, the Ten Thousand Bells. Master of defense. And there's Kuroi, the lone Apostle of the human god. Raven-haired Kuroi, Devil God Apostle.

Can I do it? No, I have to. Otherwise it makes no sense! Battles are my

specialty. Seriously. I mean, I've died so many times that I've lost count. I've raised so many characters, and each time I thought I had it. But they were all killed. I never gave up, though. In this way, I've refined my methods.

That's right! I should boldly declare my intent now! I, PotatoStarch, have had my skills optimized in the heat of DDR's battles! Hahhahaha! Haha haha... Haheehee... Phew. I don't feel very confident. Some working adult I am. Maybe that's why they told me to just play video games... I love beer.

26 The Merchant Observes and Smiles at the Men who Prepare for a Life-Or-Death Battle

I step on the death of humans.

I am supported by death; saved by death; propelled by death. Forward I go.

-Merchant Ange I-

Government and the military. Cross them together, and it's a recipe for war—when daily life is crushed underfoot by the unexpected. A calamity of violence that kills men and women alike. There's not a thing to like about it.

So you can imagine my surprise at finding myself planning a war.

As Master of Coin for the Frontier, my job essentially boils down to merciless coercion. I wring the people dry of the funds they need to live so we can supply our military. How bizarre.

"Really, there's no need for me to explain things. The vampires' claim is clear cut. They recognize this place as a land in dispute, and therefore they are attacking. That's it. No declaration of war or anything. They simply attack," Father Felipo says jokingly, but no one is laughing. His office is like being in a jail cell waiting for trial.

"Attack? Isn't there room to negotiate?" an officer whines. He's the one who brought us supplies and soldiers from the northern fort. What was his name again? Something long and hard to remember.

"Pardon me... Sir. Even if you ask..."

"No, Father, let me speak. I'm not blaming you, so settle down. We face vampires, after all. It's understandable that they will not simply sit down and chat with us." How naive. That pause of Father Felipo's was because he couldn't remember your name.

"But because we face vampires, we must do *something* or it is the end of us.

You say this is a land in dispute. In other words, they're after the elves. Maybe we negotiate and get them to fight as far away from the Frontier as possible. It will take some time to evacuate." Oh, he's warming up. And yet he doesn't understand how grave, unprecedented, and dreadful this situation is. The elves and vampires will do battle, while we humans do our best to not get involved? Such a life, akin to mere livestock, is no longer an option.

"We shall fight alongside the elves against the vampires. The matter is already decided." Acting Captain Willow seems indignant... or perhaps not. He was so sure we could not rely on the fort. And yet, in our time of need, they've dispatched this nameless commander.

"Come now, Captain, why does it have to be that way? It would be insane to fight the vampires. Besides, we have a treaty of nonaggression. If we go to battle without approval it would be very bad. And how do you propose we even defeat the vampires? It's not possible." This commander has guts. I can see it in his eyes. He's not ignorant; he's being inconsiderate because he knows all too well what awaits.

"We've already fought the vampires," he says... not angrily. What amazing poise this man has.

"We won. We killed some. Just as was in the report we sent to the Frontier Commander."

"Oh, that? Sure, they read it. But no one believes it. They think you claim the elves' efforts as your own."

"Is that what everyone at the fort thinks?"

"No, only a handful. Mostly those who know the strength of vampires."

"So you want us to showcase our power... the power of the Frontier Garrison Army?"

"Essentially. I don't wish to risk my life simply to further the fame of House Willow, nor do I wish to lead my men to certain death." Oh, I see. This is a matter of military houses. The Willows are certainly famous, but they are not perfect, nor the only ones in existence. Combine that with the mysteriousness of authority, and such discord is not uncommon.

“They already showcased their power. It was jaw-dropping.” Oh, now the old soldier from the Hell Expanse speaks up. Captain Zakkow, was it?

“I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Thousands of monsters, annihilated by a mere 500 cavalry. It’s also been reported to me that they wiped out a massive horde of over 10,000 monsters with only 1,200 cavalry.” Zakkow is here with a volunteer army, made up of men, peasant and soldier alike, from the Hell Expanse, who wished to join the fight at the Frontier. They are all passionate, with hopes of revenge burning in their bellies. And their leader appears to be quite the veteran. At least, so I judged.

“These soldiers are strong. Incredibly strong.” He’s practically feverish. Almost like a young buck.

“And the leader of this army says they killed vampires. It’s only natural to believe him. In fact, I question you for refusing to believe.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say. I saw the trophies. Never seen so many giant troll bones gathered in one place before.” Even so, he shrugs. He has guts. Makes me want to compliment him.

“This place is filled with suspicious activity.” He looks at all of us, even me I suspect. Ah, there it is.

“It is justifiable that your Minister of War becomes Acting Captain. And it is often the case that a priest helps with administrative proceedings. However, appointing a Head Sorcerer I cannot abide. You are ignoring customs and law by not seeking the endorsement of the Sorcerers Guild. In fact, they will see it as picking a fight.” First he goes for Odysson, eh? The man has been silent... but not angry. In fact, he nods repeatedly. Why is that?

“There is also the matter of you summoning a thousand cavalry from House Willow. It is difficult to determine whether you overstepped your bounds here, but it is far too suspicious. Rumor has it the cast-out second son is joining forces with his younger brothers to overthrow the family.” Gossiping about other people’s scandals is just so fascinating, after all. Especially when it involves a famous family.

I’ve heard about this family, oh yes. They say the eldest son is a man of mediocrity, who only cares for social life, and that compared to the second son

he most certainly comes up short. It was only a matter of time before he was disinherited. But with a bit of trickery, he managed to get the second son sent to the Frontier. Even if it's not true, such a tale of hate is all too plausible.

Captain Willow is, as always, expressionless. I wonder how his brothers would react if they were here. Would they be angered? Saddened? Or simply disgusted?

"And then there's your master of coin. She's the leader of the Crimson Flower Company. Of all the people to appoint... I can't believe you trust her." I have nothing to say to that. This commander has said nothing but the truth this whole time.

Yes, from an ethical and moral point of view, I am a villain. Human meat, human blood, human bones, human skin... anything other than living humans—if vampires want it, I locate it, gather it up, and sell it.

"Not to mention she brings the Red Lions as her personal guard. They say these guys lead vampires to human settlements. And you have them as part of your defenses? I have no words. It is beyond bizarre." The mercenary company the Red Lions are executors for my business. They head out to contested lands and collect the dead. They prepare them for sale. And then they bring the items to the vampires. Certainly, some have gotten greedy and followed them, which brought about disaster.

But if I didn't supply them, the damage would be even greater. Who? Tell me, who would happily deal in such dirty sales?

Huh? Applause? Who is it? Oh, you. Father Felipe. He's been listening with a smile on his face this whole time to the man whose name he can't even remember.

"Ah, how wonderful. A truly accurate judgment. I am quite aware of how people outside the Frontier see us. Surely there is more, but let us keep it to this for now."

"I see. Well, there are also complaints against you, Father." I wonder what this means. They're smiling. I was sure they'd be at each other's throats.

"Oh, that is a surprise. What sort of complaints?"

“The newspaper is in a fever pitch. Who in the world thought up that dramatic story? They’ve already announced a puppet show. I’ve seen it.”

“Ho-hoh? How is the performance?”

“It was entertaining. I nearly died of laughter when the snowman-like priest crawled out of the destroyed church.”

“Well, well... who wrote that script? How rude.”

“One of the scribes from the Church, I’ll bet. They certainly have a grudge against you, Felipo.”

“That is quite vexing, my dear Jashan son Peine.”

“Shorten that name. It’s too long.”

“It’s your own name.”

“Please. I told you, Peine is fine.” Really, what is going on here? Only Captain Zakkow and I are confused. Even Captain Willow and Odysson are smirking. How vexing.

“Oh, let me explain. He and I were classmates in seminary. We were thick as thieves, disparaging our families and the world.”

“Except thanks to the difference in power between our families, I was the only one expelled.” Old acquaintances, similarly terrible personalities, thick as thieves... Ah, I see. So that’s it. This officer is a spy, and he was trying to act out, with heavy ad-libbing, the various things he’d learned through gossip.

“I’m sorry for saying such terrible things. Especially to you, Master of Coin. Not only did I look down on your job, but also your humanity.”

“Indeed! If I hadn’t known you were joking, I would have slapped you!”

“I’m not that petty.”

“Oh? In that case, what would have been my fate?”

“Assassinated by the Red Lions. I don’t know your skills, but you’ve served your purpose now.” Ah-hah, what’s the matter? Your face has frozen.

“I’m joking. You used clever means to tell me what the world thinks of myself. I merely wished to return the favor. I’m not as good at this as you.”

“I-I see. I’m sorry. Truly, forgive me.” He reverently bows his head, spine straight as an arrow. I crack a smile. It’s all thanks to his farce. Even Captain Zakkow smiles, which is no mean feat. To be able to make others laugh in these times is a truly, truly wonderful thing.

“While I’m apologizing, let me say that I came here to die.” Yes, I sensed that you have guts.

“I was sure that my ‘friend,’ most sullen and sour, had died, until I received a flurry of letters asking for my help. I did a lot of calculating, and was considering being treated to a night out as payment when I heard you wanted to go to war with vampires. I mean, really.” So this, erm, Officer Peine-something-or-other has been on their side for longer than me. He’s much more involved with their important work than me. I see, I see.

“No matter how many thousands of monsters you wipe out, or how many dozens of vampires you kill; no matter if I believe everything you say and feel a bit of sweet hope... we’ll all still die. We just don’t stand a chance.” Indeed. As far as opponents go, this is the worst of the worst.

“Of all things, the vampire Apostle... Golden, was it? No, no, no.” That one fearsome word had been imprinted on their declaration of attack. The head vampire Apostle, she’d even managed to make Deep Sea withdraw.

“So, since we’re all going to die anyway, I selected the most reckless fellows from the fort. People who are bored with this world. You can count me as one of them. In fact, I’m their chief.” Is that why he can smile? He smiles just like a naughty child.

“Make me believe in hope. You have hope, don’t you? You have a human Apostle. Enough with the charades and let me meet her. Then, if she truly inspires hope in me...” He can’t stand it anymore. Can’t bear it.

“...Then I’ll fight braver than anyone, till my dying breath. With a beaming smile on my face. Shouting, ‘Glory to humans!’ the whole time.” Oh, so that’s it. This office is full of adults smiling like children. And this is how war begins.

27 The Shadow Sighs at the Pride Of Men / The Second Commander Hates This World of Women

God is signaling for battle.

His raging presence... The air is thick with portents of violence.

-Shadow Tamika II-

What a disaster this is.

“Hey, Tamika. Do you know the color ‘coffee?’” I had always planned to one day curry favor with Golden, but she surprised me by coming to me instead... What good fortune. I get to rise up in the world as a worthless non-commissioned officer. No, thanks. This doesn’t make me happy. I want to run away.

“You don’t, I’ll bet. It’s a word I heard directly from God. It means ‘a heavenly, melting brown.’ Just like the color of your skin.” Don’t stroke my cheek. Don’t trace your fingers down my neck. Whoa! Is she gonna slide down to my breast?! I know we’re in a cave, but there are guards around... I mean, that’s not the problem! This is just creepy! M-My pulse is clearly elevated!

“L-L-Lady Golden! Surely you jest!”

“Mmh, so big and soft... yet just a little firm. Are you nervous?”

“O-O-Of course! I mean—” I try to wave my hands wildly, but I can’t break free. This chick’s got such monstrous strength! “We’re in the middle of battle! The elves ar-WHOA?!”

“They’re just some worthless scouts. No need to pay them any mind. More importantly, I’m captivated by this little grain... what color could it be?”

“Eep!” I can’t do this. I give up. My only choice is to let her have her way with my body. Damn vampires. Every one of them. I should put up a little resistance and then pretend to faint. Then I can use my Shadow Vision so my mind can at

least escape... I doubt my virginity will be taken. Yeah. Wouldn't want it to affect the taste of my blood.

Focusing on a fly that I poured my mana into, I swap places and...

Hm. The attack is relentless. Arrows weave through the trees. One guy's armor is struck. He'll be fine. Another's skin is scratched. He's done for. Looks painful. Poison that can kill vampires. I hear it's extracted from frogs.

Water coils between the falling leaves—the Water Serpent spell. Any soldier touched by it seems to be suffering. Normally it enters through the esophagus and drowns the victim... More poison? How terrifying. What is the meaning behind choosing and executing this strategy? From what I can see, most of the dead are vampires. Judging from the numbers—3,000 vampires to their 500—it's just a forced attack.

A fierce attack with a small force during the day, when the elves have the advantage, in a forest where they likely know the lay of the land, eh?

Mmh? Is that water mage the leader? Oh, right. He's the leader of the main elven force on the Frontier. He's strong. Orthodox, too. The length and speed of his Water Whips are top-class, and his orders are precise. He's a master. A veteran like that for an enemy will be trouble. His quick instincts mean that he has few openings, whether he's attacking or retreating.

So why is such a warrior leading a pointless strike like this?

Is there an ambush nearby? Switching to locust eyes... no, don't see anything. How about a flank from the side or the rear? Switching to beetle eyes... no. Then from the sky? Bee eyes... Oh, what nice weather. There's only one hawk in the sky.

In any case, it makes no sense. Which means there could be some abnormal mentality at work here.

Mmh... Oh, I see. Discontent, maybe? The Frontier received 2,500 elven reinforcements. Naturally, as leader of only a few hundred, he would lose command of the whole army. He was also forced to retreat in a previous battle, so I'm sure he was reprimanded for that. Took a hit to his pride. And it's clear from the way he fights that he's a prideful man. He's outraged, with no place to

put his anger.

In other words, he won't be satisfied with a mere scouting mission, so he's at least trying to turn it into a warm-up battle. A sad display of pride. That's the meaning behind this attack.

The fool. Men often pull crazy stunts like this. Not satisfied with just doing crazy things, they also praise and extol others for their insanity and look up to them. They also talk about the aesthetics of ruin. It's a philosophy I just can't understand.

But if it'll defeat the Demon God, I wouldn't mind assisting.

See? Now Barebow's joined the fight thanks to this manly romance—or simplicity, more like. I bet he thinks it's a battle of destiny. But the truth is he'll just be ridiculed, in my opinion. Can he really feel proud of this, as he watches his men die one after another? This is why war is so dumb... Ow!

"Mmh, finally awake are you?" Sh-She bit me! Golden bit my neck!

"Don't worry. I didn't suck your blood... I just licked you a bit. You wouldn't wake up, so I felt the urge to push boundaries." Don't lick me, what the hell?! This is unreasonable. Ugh, my whole body is slimy!

This! This is why I hate vampires!

-Second Commander Arcsem I-

"What's the matter, Arcsem? You look quite desperate!"

"Don't hold back on my account, bloodsucker!" Dodging a swing of his battle hammer, I lash out with my Water Whip. I don't need to hit him. I just need some space. My whip writhing, I lay a trap. The forest floor is fortified with tree roots and filled with water. Performing earth magic is difficult here, but my magic fits in perfectly.

"Did you not realize how large our force was before you attacked? Is that why you've become so frantic?"

"Don't compare me to the likes of you!" I flick my whip and bring his attention upward. He doesn't jump. Now eat this: a swarm of over a hundred Water

Serpents! If even one touches you, they'll steal your very breath away.

"Petty tricks!" Impossible. He cast Stone Shield at his feet? How was he able to wield earth magic so easily? Oh, the attack earlier. When he missed with his hammer, he crushed the earth and poured his mana into it. Leapfrogging off the shield, he comes again. Damn vampires.

"Now dieeee!" The battlehammer, its hardness increased by magic, is an ugly lump of metal that represents the savage idea that "as long as it's hard, it's good." I flex my whip, returning it to my hand. I manage to do it in time, but the blow is surprisingly powerful. Over half the water that made up my whip is scattered. The mana that was in it remains, however. It's just enough for one spell.

Try this on for size... A circle of water current that will seal away a vampire... Stream Barrier!

"Tch! What a pain!" He jumps away? He should have just charged in. I would have put him to sleep for good. Fortunately, I managed to capture his foot for a second. His senses are dulling. Time to follow up.

"All you do is poke at weak points! Have you no spine?!"

"Traps are best suited for beasts."

"Hah! I don't think the guy who got caught in a beast trap should be barking!" He flings pebbles with magic; they accelerate until they're flying too fast to be seen. The earth magic spell Stone Bullet.

I dodge, diving behind a tree for cover. I can hear the rocks slamming into the tree over and over. Their destructive power is surprising as well. Hmm, his presence has disappeared. Must have used the opportunity to run. A full-speed retreat, of course. Vampires have no shame or honor. They're savages that only act based on battle instinct.

And... am I going to lose to that?

I had made up my mind to invade this place, but in the end I wasn't able to draw out Golden. Despite killing so many while greatly outnumbered, we've endured great losses as well and are currently surrounded by the enemy. There's no hope of reinforcements, either.

This isn't how it was supposed to be... I thought I'd finally found the perfect opportunity. The plan had all started by using monsters to attack the human territory. A truly unoriginal scheme, filled with annoyances and with no chance for achievements. It then got diverted into a plan to draw out the vampires which, while irregular, was supposed to allow me an opportunity to fly my banner.

And then, suddenly, everything was ruined.

The Dragon Commander and Dragon Warrior had come along, and I was ordered to assist them with living in the human territory. Basically, I was relegated to being a woman's bodyguard. But I took measures, and succeeded in luring out the vampires. Yet thanks to the machinations of women, victory escaped me.

Even now, interference has allowed my potential accolades to escape. It was, I think, a failure from the start when the woman known as Golden came into the picture. A vampire male would charge out to face me head-on, even bellowing his own name.

Women. Women are the bane of my existence. Always. Everywhere. Even on the battlefield.

That reminds me: the ape suspected of killing elves was a female. I disregarded it as impossible at the time, but a female human is still a woman; perhaps she did the impossible just to hurt me.

No, the real problem goes all the way back to the beginning... the goddesses—dragon and demon. The world fights over these two divine beings. Perhaps this is just my natural place in such a world. Is my purpose simply to die in a corner of the battlefield to suit the whims of a god?

As if I could accept that. Not that life. Not that death. I will continue to struggle, until I can finally teach them a lesson. Those damn women.

28 The Sorcerer Nervously Prays, Steps Into a Fated Battle, and Does His Utmost

Oh God, my enemies are before me.

Oh God, give me the strength to fight.

-Sorcerer Odysson V-

I ain't scared, ya hear me? It's just that the wastelands I'm used to have turned into something crazy. The sun is tilting far to the west, so maybe I ain't seeing things well but... Viewing from the east, the dudes flying a blue and white banner don't even seem to budge a muscle.

It's a massive army. Over 2,000 long-ears with an equal number of silver leopards and wind hawks circling above. The mana leaking out of them is turning into a mist. They're just like a moving forest. Damn long-ears. I know they're our allies, but they act like the whole world stinks. Damn it all.

But if they weren't here, we'd be totally screwed. After all, our common enemy is something this very world rejects, and makes monsters look cute in comparison. With the western sun at their backs, they rise from the earth, the army of massive yellow-eyes, flying their yellow and black banners. They number just over 3,000. They ain't got many familiars, but... they more than make up for it with bloodlust.

She's there. Somewhere in that army, she's there. The yellow-eyes Apostle is appraising us. I'm too scared to look away. I don't wanna search for her, but I can't help but try to find her. I should stop. Searching like this uses mana, which could lead to her spotting me. If she does, she'll instantly kill me... Golden, the Thunderstorm, will attack!

"Ohh! Ohh! Cavalry sure are cool!" Oh. That reminds me, we have our own fighter with a second name. She's the elven Apostle who for some reason is a fan of humans: the small one they call the Ten Thousand Bells.

“It’s like I’m seeing the ancient centaurs! But these horses’ eyes are round and cute, so they win! Although they are a little mean and won’t let me ride them, it’s fine because they’re so cute! Can I feed one?” Why did she come here at the last moment to feed horses? Well, I’m sure she has a lot going on. Stuff like coordination, strategy, and promises to uphold. If we’re going to fight together, it’s important to make arrangements in advance.

If we lose this battle, it’s all over for the Frontier. Which is why we’ve brought every last soldier we can. Our main force consists of 1,200 Bomber Knights. Led by the famous knight brothers, they’re without a doubt an elite force made up of the best that humanity has to offer. They’re so fast and strong; if they’re not enough, we’re done for.

But the most amazing thing is the strategy they’ve worked out to use Inferno magic in a group. Tossing a bunch of fire bombs to create a massive explosion just blows my mind. They said a focus on firepower is their family’s motto so it wasn’t much of a leap in logic, but in my humble opinion the Willows are all crazy. Just one mistake and they’ll wipe out their own allies.

Then again, maybe I’m crazy for getting ideas based on that...

“Oh, Odysson! Don’t try to spoil her, now. She may look small, but she’s still an elf. You don’t know how many centuries she’s lived for.” Damn black-hearted priest. How can you say that when you come holding carrots?

“You’re wrong. I was just thinking. Things have gotten really crazy.”

“We have survived until today, but perhaps tomorrow we shall die. That’s all it is. That’s how it always is. If you are thirsty, drink; if you are hungry, eat.” What, you’re gonna eat those yourself? You really do have a bad personality. That’s more like spiting the horses instead of teasing the shrimp Apostle. Also, being so thickly clad in armor only accentuates your obesity.

“However, I understand what you’re feeling. This is our first battle, after all.”

“A first battle with Ten Thousand Bells as an ally and Golden as an enemy? I’m gonna cry.”

“Why, you’re such an emotional fellow. Are you overwhelmed at the unveiling of the platoon you personally trained?”

“My allies don’t understand me, either. I’m seriously gonna cry.” My platoon... the first magic platoon in history, and it’s finally real. From all the commoners with abilities, I selected 200 with the greatest talent. Then there’s the 50 sent by the Sorcerers Guild. Plus the 50 adventurers we hired. In total, 300.

They really stand out, no matter how you think about it. Cloaked in bright red mantles emblazoned with the Crimson Flower Company’s logo, they’re each equipped with three of my newest inventions, the charcoal wand, two flame canisters, and one dagger. There was no time to teach them how to ride horses so I told them to just run as fast as they could. That’s why they’re wearing high-quality black leather boots.

“So, Father. Are you really planning on standing on the front lines?”

“Hee hee hee! You ask this now? I command more soldiers than you, I hope you realize.”

“Well, I guess...” The black-hearted priest’s platoon is in charge of guarding mine. Considering the rarity of a magic platoon I’ll admit it’s necessary, but... the 500 he leads are just a bunch of adventurers, mercenaries, and volunteer soldiers. I doubt they’ve done anything remotely close to military training.

“Just think of us as your great shield and leave it all to us. I will handle defense, and the offense I trust you all to do your utmost.”

“We’ll fight until we die. No need to ask.”

“Indeed. And then for the first time, we can say that humanity did everything it could!” Caught up in his passionate speech, I look over. Right. Her.

Kuroi. An Apostle, and the vessel for the human God. Everyone’s looking at you. Everyone’s mind is on you. But what do you expect? That’s the kind of presence you have. Just having you stand there makes it feel like the space is tilting. It’s impossible not to think of you.

Over there, the 100 cavalry and 300 foot soldiers that came from the Hell Expanse are praying to you. I can understand them all too well. You can tell they took the same path as us. They, too, were once plunged into the abyss of despair.

Over here, the 300 cavalry from the fort are prepared for battle. They're dead men walking. They will, without hesitation, throw away their lives so that you can take another step, Kuroi. You command everyone's attention.

It's not just the humans, either. The long-ears are watching your every move as well. Especially the Dragon Warrior who's sticking super close to the shrimp. Even now she's on guard. Scary as hell, that one.

I ain't hallucinating, either. For I, Odysson, am more sensitive to these differences than your average person thanks to magic making me aware of God's presence. God, who's on your back now. He seems... a bit savage. Not ferocious, mind you. He's got this aura of violence... an impulse for destruction?

"Oh, fire sorcerer! You're here too?" Whoa, what does the shrimp want with me?

"Don't look so sullen. I am an Apostle, but I am also a wind mage. According to legend, elves and humans worked together to defeat the Demon God with the greater magic of Fire Storm. The technique has been lost, but wind and fire are still quite compatible!" That's just a story. As for compatibility, that sounds like superstition to me. But the shrimp aside, the one behind her is freaking me out. See how sharp her gaze is!

"Why hello, Dragon Commander. First we have the honor of seeing you at the war council, and now you come to review our troops? This will surely put the men in high spirits. I am sure they will live up to your expectations in the upcoming battle."

"Be at ease. You talk and wave too much."

"Why, how can you say..."

"And your overly polite yet patronizing attitude doesn't fool me. Don't try to deny it. The old witch that was my etiquette instructor talked just like you."

"Oh... to think that I would be so misunderstood..."

"You know that elves have excellent hearing and purposefully mentioned my age, didn't you? Mmh? And you make no attempt to hide the carrots you hold."

"...Would you like to feed the horses?"

“Good, good! I forgive you! Gwa-haha!” Wow, she’s really feeding the horses. What are their nerves made of?

“Try to smile, even if you must force it, Odysson. The soldiers are watching.”

“What... Oh, I see. So that’s how it is.”

“Yes. The soldiers on both sides have put a lid on their hostilities, but distrust still boils below the surface. We must show them that we are getting along.”

“...Do all that we can, even here?”

“Indeed. You are too right, my man... I must say, you are terrible at smiling.”

“Shaddup. Not everyone’s a great actor like you and your commander friend.”

“What are you saying? Diplomacy is the basis for everything, and acting is the basis for diplomacy.” Such black-hearted, convincing words. I’m glad I’m a sorcerer. Objects don’t require smiles or acting abilities.

Hey, Kuroi. What about you? You don’t smile, don’t even show a single expression. You’re so pure, I doubt you even think about acting... you’re always so serious. Maybe that’s why you can continue to face God.

Is that why you only fight? Are you so strong because you only fight? A raging girl and a savage god... two beings burning like an inferno... I wonder how long you two can keep fighting so determinedly. Can you keep it up? Maybe it’s not my place to say, but I’m a little worried.

If I die, at least use me as a bit of kindling. I’m sure I’ll burn real well. That way, you can allow me to keep fighting. Thanks in advance.

29 The Art of War According to DDR: Accepted Wisdom, Survival Rates, Standard Tactics, and Special Effects

Omniscient eyes scan the battlefield, seeing, understanding.

God commands. Move like the wind. Strike with audacity.

-DDR Stream VOD Part 4-

Monitor brightness—as is. FOV—maxed. Contrast—minimized. Positioning adjustment—done.

Music—muted. Ambient noise—maxed. Sound quality—Live. Headset—on.

Finger warm-ups, sweat removal, placement—complete.

Heeere comes the war event! Ah! The refreshing flavor of hops and grain!

What an interesting little situation we've got here.

For TuberStarch, a battle between vampires and the elf-human alliance is a first. What a move up for humanity! 'Course, I'm used to survival type events where I'm dragged into a supernatural war.

FWIW, survival rates in such events should be treated like a baseball batting average. 30% is good. It's all about avoiding massive spells slung without regard for collateral damage and not winding up as some familiar's snack.

Thinking back, I've sure died a lot. This character, that character; the end came on them suddenly.

Humans, after all, are basically background flotsam. No matter how carefully built or specialized, the devs couldn't give two shits about the player's intentions. They're there to get squashed, vaporized, and otherwise disposed of by the battlefield's protagonists. Sometimes they're picked up, but then they pretend they never existed... Just generally mistreated.

Yep DDR's definitely a game for masochists. Escapism? Not here.

I mean, sure, PotatoStarch is a mere lackey. The company can do just fine without him. And even for livestreaming I got that bizarroBAN. My stat increases, certs, and health are nothing to write home about. In a word, I'm your average Joe, devoid of any special talents... Ah, the sweet bitterness... Bring me more of the sweet bitterness!

Ah, dammit! Drinking and whining, really? I'm cutting this out when editing! I mean hell, it's just a recording! Not like I can even be sure I can upload it! Aw,

fuck it.

Sigh... Cough cough... Ahm.

Right, PotatoStarch here with a message: Don't drink and game!

Anyway, this time we've got a war event. I'll be taking on the vampires as a member of the human army. I don't know what feat of diplomacy brought this on, but the elves are our allies, so we might be able to put up a fight today. Guess this is also thanks to the Apostle Sakiel.

As for the scheduling—it's according to DDR's accepted wisdom; starting in the evening, around sunset.

Basically, elves are strong during the day, vampires during the night. So why don't the elves just attack in the morning? Funny you should ask; the enemy hides using earth magic, but when they emerge at night to attack, the elves hole up inside the magic barriers erected during the day. Earth and water magic share a feature, you see—they're incredibly hard to breach if you put enough time into them. Once the enemy holes up behind them, there's no good way to break through them. Stalemate forever and ever. God forbid a war actually did last an age—you'd start seeing player profiles on milk cartons. Which means that if we're going to have a proper war, it needs to happen around this time of day.

In terms of stat boosts, it starts with elves in front and slowly tips to the vampires. Elves want to end it quickly. Vampires want to tough it out while making sure the elves don't run before the time is ripe.

Anyway, let loose the dogs of war!

Things are starting pretty normally. Vampires start with a proper charge. About 60-70% of their army, a grand total of about two thousand of them, dash ahead. How very vampire-like of them. They're accompanied by black wolves.

The elves, meanwhile, set up a water barrier, daring the vampires to come after them. It looks like a shallow moat of sorts. However, this is actually a defensive barrier shaped with Flowing World, a spell that's got special effects against vampires. It might be shallow, but they can't step over it, and the magic stops them in mid-air if they try to jump over.

Then the exchange of stone and arrow fire. This is pretty scary. The sound just drags you right into the chaos. The rocks fly straight as though they're spinning like rifle bullets, and the arrows seek out and home in on their targets. No end to lethality.

Each side's got their own way of defending, too. Vampires swat down projectiles with their weapons, block them with earth walls and stones shields, and there's even some that just grab them out of mid-air. Elves avoid attacks with flight or hovering magic, or swat them down with gusts of wind or water whips.

Now, of course the only reason they bother with this ranged exchange is because neither side's capable of blocking everything thrown at them. The effects of impacts are pretty gruesome. The rocks are imbued with magic so they're harder than usual. Broken bones are the least of your concerns. As for arrows, they're also imbued with magic and are poisoned to boot—one hit and the war's done for you, you're going home in a box.

It's a slow, methodical grind.

If you try to escape the rocks by getting some altitude, you end up a glorified lightning rod for lightning magic, and if you try to protect yourself from arrows with armor, well, someone's gonna fill that up with water and then you're drowning in your own personal water chamber. So instead, it's a test of wills.

I suppose if you had to pick strengths, elves have the advantage at long range, while it's more even at mid-range. Mostly because the rocks lose velocity with range.

Things look about even for now. They're stalemated at mid-range.

And then... Ah. Both sides are holding their Apostles in reserve. It's still a test of wills.

In this case, the vampires have the balanced Golden, good in both attack and defense, while the elves have the Ten Thousand Bells, Sakiel. In terms of matchups, Ten Thousand Bells has a bit of an advantage. The biggest reason is the difference of maximum MP. Sakiel has enough MP to be sitting pretty even after blocking all of Golden's attacks. Of course, Golden's got plenty of opportunities to win. In fact, the vampires have a better chance of pulling off an

upset.

The key is in the gap in their summoning spells. The Bell's only got up to rank 2 Call spells, while Golden's got up to rank 3 Summon type spells. As you know, spell power goes up dramatically with each rank. From Sakiel's point of view, no doubt she'd like to get Golden to move first and back them into a corner. Golden, on the other hand, wants to find the right moment to unleash a massive spell.

Wonder when they'll move... Hm? What's this?

Oh, vampires are coming this way.

Looks like they've lost patience and want to try to spread out the fighting. There's about a hundred of them, so it seems like a company's gone to the effort of trying to flank the elves.

Pity for them that Kuroi's here!

And then... Oh, I guess I'm supposed to explain this as though I'll be editing it later so... Oh, right, you see, the human army's taking part in this battle! Did I say that earlier? Anyway, a picture's worth a hundred words! Take a look.

There's 1,600 mounted knights, 800 infantry... and a really sketchy looking group of 300 wrapped in red cloaks.

What the hell are those?

300 dudes with red cloaks, black boots, and black staves? They just look like some suspicious cult or something. Totally can't tell what they are.

I mean, I know what they're supposed to be. Whether real or not, they're a company of fire mages. But they sure as hell weren't wearing those cloaks yesterday... Creepy... Man, that's some awful fashion sense...

Hm? They're nodding at me pretty confidently.

Oh? Ohhh! Hey, look! They've started chanting all at once... Still though... this is still really sketchy! They just look like a weird cult of some sort! They're stroking their black staves pretty weirdly, too! Hm? Just trying to get heat from friction?

Whoa! Here it comes! Three hundred red tentacles... Err... I mean, flames!

Fire magic, Fire Ray!

Three hundred rays of fire arc into the nearly dark sky and... rain onto the vampires!

Cripes! Looks hellish down there.

There's no precision here, just carpet bombing with fire. A hundred vampires are all aflame. Since it's magical fire they can't just pat it out either... But hey, wait a sec, even considering it's a DoT spell, the vampires are all turning to ash one after another...?

Wait, are you serious? Yes, that's gotta be it! Fire magic's got special effects against vampires!

This one's in the bag. Totally in the bag. Last time I was showing off, I was just dominating with my sword, so I didn't realize this, but I'm certain we're gonna win this one. Why, you ask? Kuroi's got Flame Blade, which adds fire elemental damage to weapons. And so long as she just keeps it constantly active...!

No time to waste!

Get on that black horse and charge the enemy! Woohoo!

Weapons? A pair of Accept Blades! I mean, mounted two-weapon fighting has such low DPS, it's mostly something you pick for looks, but with Flame Blade...!

Yep, guess I'm right! Even a little damage sends them up like a roman candle!

Ahahahahaha! Doesn't matter that I'm tipsy, I've got this! Take that! And that! Is there something wrong there, oh vampires? Turning to ash with a look of dumb shock on your faces!

Oh, there's one that won't go up in flames. A lightning wielder, huh? Must've used some sort of physical boost spell or something.

Good, but you're still getting smoked like a cigar! Don't overlook Kuroi's stats. Just need to focus a little bit and land one more blow... Ah-ha! And up in flames you go. As for the other lightning user, I'm just gonna chop your head off. Schwing! Ahahahahaha!

Man, this is fun. This doesn't feel like DDR, but it's still damned fun.

This must've been what I was after. To just dominate the battlefield like this.

I just wanted to fuck up the strong. The chosen of the Demon God. Cut through the vampires like they're butter.

I never found it that satisfying playing as an elf character. It just wasn't the same. I found satisfaction when we'd win big, but that was the satisfaction of playing well. There wasn't this sort of catharsis. Well, elves are favored, after all.

I guess it's because I'm playing as a human.

Humans—the oppressed, inferior race. The ones who are pathetic in life and pathetic in death... That's why it's so satisfying. I'm so happy I could scream.

Go, Kuroi! Go get them.

Attack, attack, and kill every last one of them. Give that bastard a taste of his own medicine. Let him suffer as he's made others suffer.

The pretentiously named Golden, the vengeance you're owed for all of your pain, take her out on this battlefield.

Screw the elves.

Sakiel? I've got enough healing, so forget her.

The human army... Whatever. I mean, it's rare, but it was plenty fun, so who cares?

Here we go, Kuroi! Let's go! Keep going!

30 The Middle Son Charges Through the Vampire's Ranks/The Officer Smiles and Glimpses Hope

God, give me strength. God, give me strength.

Provide through thy tumultuous spirit the strength to crush my enemies.

-Origis II-

Damn, she's strong. There aren't any words to describe her solitary charge.

The magic that burned away the vampires was strong, but Lady Kuroi's strength drives even that power from my memory. It's overwhelming. Like a spirit of war playing on a field of blades. As far as my eyes can follow, she slashes, she burns, and she destroys. She gives no sign of stopping.

But, just how far is she going? Is she going to charge through the vampire lines and charge their command?

Say that's not so. Tell me that's not so.

By shielding her horse... she takes blows from rocks and lightning. But because she keeps pushing... the horse's legs start to give way beneath her.

"Brother! I beg you, let me go join her!"

"Origis... Very well, go! Catch up to her, whatever you do! We'll press from the south!"

"We're with you. By your leave, acting Lord Lieutenant?"

"Captain... fortune favor you!"

"Leave it to us! Hah! I'm starting to enjoy this!" The captain and the 300 knights from the Cliff Fortress intend to follow me. No, they're the ones with the most right to accompany me. They're here solely to follow Lady Kuroi into battle.

“We move at a canter! Form lines!” We move forward, five hundred in a single line. I position the three hundred from the Cliff Fortress behind us.

They’re brave, but they’re no dragoons. They don’t understand the radius effect of fire and fire bombs. I have no choice but to closely direct their advance.

“Weapons free! Use fire lances at will! Each man will advance! Follow me!” We spur into a gallop. Our horses kick up the vampire ashes that had settled on the ground. The vampires and elves are slow. The incredible power of Lady Kuroi has the entire battlefield numbed in shock. She’s bought us time to win precious speed and distance.

A flick of my pole-arm. A vampire stares mutely in shock. The flick sends the vampire’s head flying. Trampling the head beneath my horse’s hooves, I move onward.

The glimmer of flame. Someone casts a burning spell. They have no other choice. The sound of a collapsing cavalry horse. The black wolves. The familiars, not the vampires themselves, are the bigger threat.

A vampire stands in front of me, steel club ready in its hands. It plans to bludgeon me, horse and all.

Damn you.

I signal to my horse with a shift of body weight. We jump, horse and rider together, above the enemy’s head. As we pass overhead, a blow from my pole-arm. I feel the impact against my arm. A muffled scream. I split its face in two.

More enemies. Black wolves pounce on horses. I thrust at those vicious jaws. Down into their heads.

The concussive sound of an explosion. Seven, eight of them from behind. Someone’s set off their explosives. They were the ones who’d been dismounted. It wasn’t against orders. They have the freedom to do as they please when surrounded, facing death by mauling. The right to take at least one of the bastards with them.

Lady Kuroi is over in that direction. Deep, behind the enemy lines. The enemy begins to gather around her. Lady Kuroi’s slowed so much that the enemy can

now swarm around her.

“Cliff Knights! This is where we split up! Go around us and head to Lady Kuroi!”

“Certainly, but what about you?”

“We’ll keep running headlong into the enemy! We’ll throw them into chaos! Use that to get through!”

“Got it! We’ll make it, I swear!” Of course. They’ll reach Lady Kuroi. Or at least they’ll force one or two to reach her. That’s why they charge.

“All units! Form wedge!” With myself as the spearpoint, we form into a pointed edge, sharpening. And then...

“Follow me!” Now’s the time. The time for death, the time for glory.

We collide at full tilt. Braced on horseback, pole-arm outstretched, scything through. Momentum is everything. Stopping means death. Even a loss of speed is a death sentence.

An enormous sense of claustrophobia. There are times where it feels the momentum is about to ebb. Each time, someone imposes himself between me and death. Each death brings a flash of magic, and we accelerate once more, regaining momentum.

We make it through. Through the throng of vampires. How many we killed, how many we lost, we don’t count any of it; we keep moving forward.

We can still see Lady Kuroi. But... the obstacle ahead was tough.

A surge of bodies in front of us. Vampires gather so thick they form a wall. Some are heavily armored. I bite my spear’s shaft with my teeth and pull out a fire lance. Gripping it with both hands, I pour in my magic, my overflowing heart into it... Good, I’ll hit them with this. They’ll taste the full wrath of my very soul.

Fire magic, Fire Storm. A flame erupts from the thrown fire lance. Tongue after tongue of flames bursts forth, swallowing everything around it as it spreads. Taste that, you bastards!

A flame large enough to swallow a house. The result of trying to use Leaping Flame, not having the fine control, and instead putting all my effort behind

intensifying my flames. It's only fire. Not enough to be lethal, is it? But I know, you bastards hate fire. I see you edge away.

We're the opposite. Fire draws us in. We give our lives over to it.

"Line formation! Make them burn!" I use another Fire Storm. Others follow with Leaping Flame. We steadily build up the flames that way. They gain in intensity. From a single house to a tenement, then even larger.

It's like with us. We started small, built it up and grew bigger, stronger.

It's beautiful. So very beautiful.

"All troopers! Fire wheel formation!" We rush forward with the flames to our right. We circle around the right flank of the vampires, attacking as the flames throw them into confusion. We continue our charge even as they hurl stones and lightning, pounce with their supernatural strength. We'll be damned before we stop. No matter how many we lose, we continue our encirclement without fail.

What's the hesitation? Come at us. Gather round. Around us, the ones who feed and shoulder the flame. That's what it means to face off against humans. It's what it means to fight us.

The three hundred from the Cliffs... they're down to about two hundred, but they're in a good spot. They'd better be paying attention.

"Ready fire bombs! Deploy at will!" Now's the time. Time to let loose with all the Exploding Flames we can manage.

We throw everything we have at them: the light, the sound, the heat, the impacts. Yelling is allowed. Hell, scream out, you lot!

Give them a taste of what humans can do.

-Captain Jashan son Peine I-

We'll show you what humans can do, damned bloodsucking beasts!

"Did you see that, you lot? Of course you saw it, yeah?" I look to the soldiers who had survived the charge through the fields of death, gazing into their faces.

“I, the awesome Peine witnessed! The third brat of Lord Willow dramatically going out in a blast! That’s how a man should go out!” I make a stupid comment and wait expectantly for a response.

“Wait, wait, his third sonship is still alive, sir! That’s not a blaze of glory!”

“Uh, who’s this awesome Peine anyway? There’s a Jaks on Peine, who is our commander...”

“Fire bomb cavalry, that’s a wonderful innovation! A type of trooper that deserves full praise!”

“Indeed, indeed. And they’re quite the gentlemen, to boot, letting us have the moment of glory.” Good, we’re having fun. That’s enough. We can charge in laughing.

“Gentlemen! We are now fighting for the right to an embrace! The winner wins the right to embrace the beautiful and invincible Lady Kuroi! The rest of you will have to make do with each other! It’s a wide world out there, with plenty of love and fetishes for everyone! I like to think of myself as an understanding fellow!” The big laugh before the charge goes well, too. Good. I’ve no regrets.

“Alright boys, charge!” We charge in as a single body.

Despite all the confidence I had in this style of charging, it feels slow compared to the movements of the Bomber Knights. But, well, it’s about making do.

Looks like the various bloodsucking beasts to the left and right have noticed us. We’ll leave them to you, oh comrades on the outside. Go with the lances. If that’s not enough, hit them with your mount. And if that’s not enough, then grapple with them. Good, buy us as much time as you can. Kill them if you can. Stop them, even if you have to tear their throats out with your teeth. Further, and further ahead. We can still do this. We’ll make it. That third son of House Willow’s done us proud. Not only did he grab the attention of the bloodsuckers, he’s got their wolves on him, too.

There. I see her. Lady Kuroi. She’s lost her horse and is fighting alone on foot. She’s a hell of a sight. A damned impressive sight.

The Waltzing Blade Maiden. The Dance of Demon Slaying.

She kills demons as though she's dancing. Her raven mane sweeps away nightmares. The platinum flash of her sword cuts through the monsters, as though elegantly blowing away humanity's despair... Yep.

Ah, now I understand Felipo's almost drunken prose of praise. She's not backing down in spite of being surrounded by the bloodsuckers. She keeps creating new weapon after new weapon and slaying the enemy. Burning the enemy. She fights as the ashes flutter around her. She shows no sign of worrying about the blood crusted on her. The divine power around her sparkles, making her almost too bright to look at. Such intensity. Lady Kuroi is roaring out as humanity's representative.

To that I feel gratitude. Nothing but gratitude.

I've felt nothing but frustration since I was a child. There's so much wrong with the world you see the moment you catch a glimpse of reality. Human life is too cheap. Human life is all too often just the plaything for others. I've been roaring out in defiance ever since.

Of course, when you actually roar out, there's plenty of problems there, too. I wound up almost getting kicked out of home, then I actually got kicked out of seminary... Inevitably, keeping quiet starts piling up the frustration, too. I'm sure that's the case with everyone. Everyone who tries to live without taking their eyes off the world; they deal with things they simply can't tolerate. If it was just about weakness, that'd be one thing. You could give up. But mockery by the strong, well that's not something that's bearable.

Don't underestimate me. Don't dismiss people precious to me.

Don't mock all the things around me, all that I consider valuable.

Don't look down upon humanity. Don't treat us like pathetic refuse.

And now, witness.

Lady Kuroi is impressive, isn't she? She's our representative. She speaks for us all.

Which is why... Lady Kuroi, you're done for this day. This isn't the only place

you need to roar. There's plenty of other bastards we need you to defeat, Lady Kuroi. There's so many other scumbags that need to learn of your presence. Because we don't want you to finish your primal scream on this battlefield in the middle of nowhere.

"Go forward, lads! Keep going! Lady Kuroi is over there!" I leave holding off the throng to the desperate, bodily charge of the remaining cavalry troopers, somehow dive under the bloodsucker's claws, force my way through, and reach out my arms.

"Yes! I win!" Hurrah! I got to embrace Lady Kuroi!

Let me through. Let me through, with the precious, slender waisted, surprisingly light cargo in my arms... the saint who will shoulder all our hopes and prayers. To some place where she can take a breath.

"...Patience, Lady Kuroi." I see it. The dust kicked up by the human army as it attacks from the south. The main body surrounding our mage company.

"You don't need to win every fight from start to finish to win the battle, Lady Kuroi. You just need to win at the right opportunity." Behind me... Mmh, not a single trooper left, huh? I guess they were all obsessed with embracing one another. Well, that's fine.

"As for finding the right opportunities, well, you can leave that to the Willow brothers or Felipo. That's why everyone is here." There's still a problem in getting to the main body... No, it'll be fine. Third Boy's unit is clinging on. Damn, they're impressive.

Aren't you jealous? I'm embracing Lady Kuroi.

"This is the end for us, ma'am... but you'll let us fight with you again, right? That's what Odysson told us. Please, give us that honor, I pray you." Hope I'm still smiling properly. It's cold, I'm starting to shiver. My cheeks are numb, so I don't feel like I'm able to smile right. I'm also thirsty. Guess this is what happens when you're bleeding out. There's a hole in my thigh and back, after all.

"Please, go on straight ahead." I set Lady Kuroi on the saddle and give my horse one last smack on the rump. I hear one final whinny before I dismount. No, I lied, I fell off. That's pretty lame, isn't it? Oh well. That's fine. Anyway.

I wanted my last opponent to be a bloodsucker, but I guess a black wolf's more my lot in life.

All right, come. I won't let a single one of you through.

"Heheh... Ahahahaha! Oh, that was so much fun! Hurrah for humanity!"

31 The Priest Praises the Brave Host/The Dragon Warrior Accepts the People of Fire

I have given everything to be here.

There shouldn't have been anything left to lose.

-Father Felipe V-

Lady Kuroi's return appears to have succeeded thanks to the support from Origis's company... A fine result. In the end, it's the only thing that matters. What else we sacrifice to obtain it is of no importance.

Jashan son Peine... well done. To drag Lady Kuroi from such a horde.

And now hundreds of bodies, hundreds of beasts, ignoring the elves in front of them, are charging toward us in pursuit of Lady Kuroi and the Origis Company. I see the vampires have recognized Lady Kuroi as a clear threat. It's to be expected given that display of power.

The challenge is accepted. All we will do is fight and protect her.

With holy spear in my right hand and shield in my left hand, I, Felipe Valkie Millennium will not back down, not so much as a step. Behind me are five hundred infantry. I stand here, in the middle point of the center company.

The enemy aggressively swarms towards us. No doubt they're headed right for us. The time for skirmishes is at an end. We can no longer leave it to the Bomber Knights.

I begin to hear the grunting and groaning from the troops... I hear even the clacking of teeth.

"Companies, halt! Reinforce by squad!" A good voice. Lord Willow's orders ring clearly even from the right wing.

"We will repulse the forces pursuing the Origis Company here! Left wing,

Marius Company, select the appropriate platoons as skirmishers! Use them to drive the enemy to the center, narrow the battlefield!”

“Understood, sir!” I wonder if he’s ordinarily taciturn to save his roar for the battlefield.

How strong. How dependable.

“Mage Company! Prepare for successive fire and get ready!”

“Yep! Lads, we’ll use the new wands! Prep them with your magic!” Odysson’s voice is quite impressive, too. Worthy of trust. Even when peppering his words with odd phrases in daily conversation, desperation brings out the steel in a man’s heart. He’s another hero worthy of praise next to Lord Willow. Bringing the once forbidden art of flame magic back into the world is an overwhelming contribution to humanity.

“Infantry companies! Prepare for full defensive combat! The enemy’s getting through to us!” A harsh voice. The voice of one shouldering scores of lives. And no doubt they’re right. There’s many enemies chasing the Origis Company. No matter how the cavalry moves, there’s no way they can intercept every last one of them.

“A’ight! Rear rank, volunteers! This is the time to spend your lives! Grit your teeth!” Captain Zakkow’s voice with the gravelly weight of one who clawed their way up the ranks. A harshness that drives them onward. No surprise. They’re about to face the supernatural without the benefit of being on horseback. They need to then hold their ground.

“What’s with the holy father? Front rank! We can’t hear you!” My voice, huh? Give me a moment, I’m preparing myself.

After all, the voice is the very first magic. Sending thoughts and emotions from person to person and directly influencing their hearts. It’s one of the most important things that a person can do to another.

Oh voice, take upon thy magic. Thy strength as magic. Become and secure thy place as human magic. And if thou art magic, then become fire. A fire that possesses the magic of the voice. Provide the spark upon my words, my truth, to become the magic of flame allowed only to humanity, and light a fire within

their hearts. Give us hearts of flame.

This, today, should be in my power. I calm my jangling soul, and squeeze out only my strength. Letting flow my magic, I speak as though I breathe fire.

“Oh, brave souls! Oh, host of brave, strong souls who show courage upon this battlefield! You courageous souls!” Ring out, my voice. Cry out, my words.

“We are a band of able warriors! Audacious souls challenging fate with sharp blades in hand! Ones who protect the righteous to our back and strike down evil! We are those possessed by the flame!” Reach them, oh strong words. The great meanings. The pleasant ring.

“Stand upon this ground! A powerful, immovable mountain! Line up upon this earth! An unshakable resolve!” Oh God. I can see the flames. The invisible flames spark in my soul, swallowing the troops around me. Lighting their hearts, flaring, and feeding a greater flame.

“Now is the time! We move forward! For the victory of mankind!” The response is a heated, almost rabid roar of truth.

Deus Ex. Deus Ex. Deus Ex.

The expression of hope that it will be so. The repetition of that wish. Spreading like a roar.

The militia formed of settlers, the hired mercenaries and adventurers, the chosen flame mages, the soldiers from the New Golden Lands, they roar in unison. The Bomber Knights are still holding onto their discipline, but I can feel their heated commitment. If this were a spell, perhaps I would call it fire magic, Burning Battle. It seems the fear and doubt have burnt to ash, morale climbing into the heavens. It's pretentious of me to try to control and wield this sort of intensity.

“All troops, attention to orders! Prepare arms! The enemy approaches!” Lord Willow calls out. There's not a hint of disruption to the commands.

“Mage Company! Three blasts in succession! Reaaaady!” It's time for us infantry to get to work. We hold up our shields. We ready our spears.

“Fire!” Now all there is to do is fight.

-Dragon Warrior Fleilyu IV-

What is that? Just what is happening?

Magical flames that arc high above the battlefield, then rain down, setting fire to the land. The fire magic of the humans... As though they are flame dragons. The evil dragons that served as the Demon King's familiar in the old legends, the ones who feared no one, not even the gods.

The bloodsuckers go up in flames, leaving ash in their wake. There is not a shadow of the resistance they put up against the magic of us elves, erupting in flames as though they are mere kindling. Flames that had burned even the elves now revert to their true role.

Shadows that lurk over the burning fields. Black wolves. The vampires who managed to avoid the flames also rush forward. That aggression is their true nature. The bestial rage that throws the continent into chaos. Something that all elves loathe and fear in equal measure.

The mounted warriors swiftly move in to intercept. This I should have known. This I should have understood. I had witnessed the urban battle in pitch darkness. But this goes so far beyond that... to use magic as well. They are the equals of elven and vampiric warriors.

And what drives them? A morale that burns so brightly it could engulf a forest.

Were infantry not mere fodder, a wasteful use of flesh and souls? How do they fight so fiercely? To resist even as they're flattened by black wolves, torn apart by the bloodsuckers... could even elven warriors perform such a feat?

A people that wield fire, ride upon horses, and fight as though they are flames.

So these are humans.

This is humanity.

A people with a history comparable to the elves. Now possessing the blessing of a god. This is what they've become.

That is what this is. There is no doubt. I know humanity's Apostle. The raven-

haired warrioress that spells inevitability. The incredible threat that cuts through elf and vampire alike without distinction.

Kuroi... Kuroi, the Apostle of Humanity.

She is powerful. Very powerful. The vampires stood no chance against her. The sight of her creating infinite weapons, slaying her enemies with blades and reducing them to ash with flames was like a firestorm of swords. She drew on her quarry and utterly destroyed them without mercy.

To use summoning magic for melee combat... From the elven way of battle, it is a concept impossible to fathom, much less execute. Indeed, it is closer to the vampiric way of battle. Like the Three Apostles of the Vampires that continually trouble the Three Apostles of the Elves... For they hold in common the summoning of magic weaponry in battle.

“Fleilyu, are you here, Fleilyu?”

“Y-Yes, I am here, Lady Sakiel.” Shameful. I lost myself in surprise. Such is the sight before me.

“A runner to the human army... Instruct them to come hither! My magic cannot protect them from this distance!”

“Respectfully, they appear to have the advantage. Perhaps you need not direct them...” To bring that army closer, that is a risk.

It appears Kuroi has returned to the host to rest, so we should hold some distance from them. The others are still confused.

“Fool! The sky, turn your gaze skyward!” The sky. It’s painted in the color of the setting sun and red... No, stained red and black. A thick, curdling black cloud engulfs the entire sky. Just when did...? No, it’s growing as we speak.

“It’s her! She’s summoned a thunder cloud!” Her. Yes, Golden. The ruler of the evil earth, the Golden, has started moving.

“Hurry! Tell the humans... Oh! It approaches.” The clouds let out a menacing growl, twisting around before the light and impacts follow. One after another. Over and over. No one can do anything but close their eyes and brace themselves against the onslaught. An overwhelmingly violent display of

lightning magic.

Yet, no harm comes to our ranks. For above us float countless Jellyfish Bells and Sunfish Gongs. Slowly, almost casually. Despite being subjected to such lightning, they absorb it without so much as letting through the faintest shock. A divine and towering art wielded by the Bell. The wondrous ability of Lady Sakiel.

The humans... they could not stand. The cavalry, the infantry, the mages. They mattered not. There is power that no equipment in creation can stop. Such is the lightning wielded through the Golden's summoning magic.

But it's an indiscriminate attack. The humans suffer enormous losses, but the vampires attacking them are a wreck as well. No matter the power, if it can only create barbarous, destructive results, it is only worthy of scorn, not admiration.

Here the thousand pebbles, the core of their host, begin to move. They stand as always with the Golden. If we can handle them properly, we can win this battle.

"F-Fleilyu...!" Lady Sakiel. If this is her first field battle, I can fully grasp the feelings that trouble her.

"I give to you my command as Dragon Commander." Lady... Sakiel?

"Help the human army. Save their wounded. Then retreat. I shall cover the retreat. Stay silent, this is my command. I shall Do My Best and force a stalemate!"

32 The Knight Moves, Quickly, Sharply/The Youngest Son Commands, Cunningly and Wisely

God, are you there?

Oh, my God... Why can I not move?

-Knight Agias VI-

A ringing that brings a headache, a smell that offends the nose. My limbs go numb, and I feel a dull pain throughout my body. I blink away the purple after-image and witness horror unfolding before me. Hundreds of soldiers are collapsed upon the field, with destruction leaving gnarled claw marks in the ground. Everyone is in shock. Groans echo through the ground.

So this is the power of a vampire Apostle. This is the destructive force that they serve. It's got enormous power... but it's excessive and artless. I catch glimpses of arrogance within. How little care goes into it.

The great elven magic I saw in the air that day in the dying light of the settlement's sky... The musical thought process that went into a work both painstakingly precise and mesmerizingly grand in scale... it's not even worth comparing. The lightning may injure and numb, but it's nothing like the impact that hits at the very soul.

This is just brute force. To control violence that roams unchecked, that is why I have studied the art of war and trained in the martial arts. A great spell relying on mere brute force has nothing that can break the heart of Agias Willow.

"All troops! Form squares! Wounded to the center!" So far as I can see, our army is decimated. The losses among the militia and settler volunteers are particularly high. It might be that those wielding pikes were most susceptible to lightning, based on how it falls. The standard-bearers are all down, and even Father Felipe looks unsteady on his feet.

Our remaining forces are about... one thousand and a few hundred. The largest remaining force is the four hundred troopers of the Marius Company. They got lucky due to the fact that they were spread out to support the Origis Company.

Next are the Origis Company and Mage Company with two hundred some-odd each, but it's probably better to have them fall back. There's too many that can't even stand. Might be from their use of magic. It's possible. This wasn't natural lightning, but a magical spell.

My company... Mmh, no need for roll call, they're all here. Whatever the attack, they're meaningless if they can't hit. The fruits of Lady Kuroi's instruction.

Said Lady Kuroi... is mounted but unmoving. The mud and blood plastered on her raven hair keep it from so much as swaying. I can't see any movement from her spirit. A glance at the damage to her military cloak shows just how intense her charge was.

There's something off with her. As though she's unaware of her surroundings. The swords drop from her drooping hands, vanishing before they hit the ground.

This is... the turning point.

"All troops, prepare to retreat! Origis, command the retreat! Marius Company will cover the retreat as skirmishers against the enemy! Begin retreat!" My brothers. My comrades. I leave Lady Kuroi in your care.

The girl is hope itself. She's a distant hope, one that's still far from fruition. We seek, we pray, and we sacrifice for that hope. But because we cannot help but do so, we are also desperate for results. Otherwise we die.

But the battle doesn't end today. No doubt the future holds both victories and defeats. Over and over. That's to be expected. We are planning to overturn the natural order in this world of despair. We can't always win, and we can't change things with a single victory. The world isn't that simple. We can only overturn the natural order by continuously, tenaciously fighting against it. Which is why with that understanding... we harden our hearts.

“All troops! Draw blades!” The wastelands purified by fire fill with new threats. Vampires and black wolves. Both are enemies of humanity itself that feed upon us. They open their maws, as though to consume our hope as they consumed many of our comrades.

And so we ride out to meet them. We charge forth. There’s no need for formations or tactics. These two hundred are the chosen few. All of them have seen battlefields without number. We’ve all endured the rigors of additional training; all of us, together.

We handle our mounts as though they’re part of us, forming a single, powerful warrior. Black wolf packs, mere beasts seeking blood, are nothing to us. We cut them aside without so much as a ripple through our formation. Hands other than mine are responsible for actually cutting aside the wolves. But I can feel the slash against my palm. As though we’re a single entity. As though we share a single soul.

Rocks are thrown from all sides. No need for defense. We can avoid them simply with our speed. We avoid the stones from ahead with the smallest necessary motion. It’s just a direct attack. Not a single trooper falls victim. Then we cut into our enemies, giving them no time to pick up their blunt weapons. Several troopers slash a single target in quick succession.

Ah, a hundred vampires before us. They have an air of strength to them. Seems they plan to slow us down, huddled together into packs. No need to hit them straight on. We split into two groups. I lead the left-hand group, and I think, without so much as reaching for my lance. One or two fire bombs will suffice. As for the timing... Not yet... Not yet... Now!

Explosions. Two in total, one each for the ones thrown from left and right. And I’m already directing my mount to the next target. The right-hand group does likewise.

We pin the enemy thrown into confusion by our Exploding Flame, and charge in as though passing one another. We easily break through, and split the two groups of a hundred into four groups of fifty. Each group begins enveloping and destroying their quarry. We quickly hack through the enemy.

A few steps in front of me. What seems like a commander, shouting orders. It

begins gathering magic on its palm.

Burning Sweep. I take him down and the one next to him, killing two at once.

The field, the domain of the mounted warrior. Vampires are nothing to fear for us.

The two hundred reconverge, becoming one body again. There. The next target. An enemy unit. We leave the scattered enemies to Marius. We, instead, seek gathered groups of enemies. Taking down threats one by one.

While we're still armed. While our mounts can run.

We're coming for you. Taste our vengeance.

-Marius II-

Agias is like a meteor. His precisely refined motions are like paths of light.

"Individual platoons may attack at their discretion! Take care to stop each and every enemy that steps toward you." I can't yet move like he does. Nor can Origis.

Since the core of our army are the cavalry, that's the cutting edge. They're the company that is deployed at the crucial turning point, where they must win, and return without a scratch. The company's not allowed to even have wounds.

"Move the wounded into the protection of the host! Don't overextend yourselves!" On the other end, the troops who have experienced battle against the vampires have formed squares and are retreating. They, too, are precious. They hold the key to future battles.

"Weapons free! Use as much ammunition and lances as you need! Resupply at the host!" My role is to manage the battlefield so both groups can properly retreat. Keep the possibility of sacrificing some of my own to get them away... Ah, need to take care of that one.

"Ten of you, with me! We'll take the one trying to flank!" A quick glance to Lady Kuroi.

It's almost heartrending. The flames that burned red deep in her eyes are all

askew, as though disconnected from any movement... but that's just sentimentality.

"We'll cut through the left! Concentrate!" People have spirits. Each spirit has a color, and there's endless shades of them. The brighter, the richer, the more they move people. To greater heights of joy. To lower depths of pain.

"Go!" Lady Kuroi's spirit is the deep color of rage. At least, that's how she probably thinks of herself... but I think that's not true. Her current state is proof of that.

Because people become sentimental when their spirits are moved.

"Good! Next! Those three!" Sentimentality, in terms of color, is transparent. A silent void. Because the spirit doesn't tend to any color, they become unable to act.

"That's... We're going to reinforce that platoon! Ready fire lances!" Lady Kuroi isn't a goddess. She's human. The Apostle of Humanity. It's fine for her heart to move, to break. Otherwise, she couldn't really feel rage. Only people can feel the depths of that rage.

Or... perhaps even the gods are the same.

Why else would one come down to rage for humanity? Without a spirit, there's no truth there.

"Damned humans! This is for my beloved brother! Die!" Well, that one's a problem. It's not just strong, it has a thirst for vengeance mixed into its hostility. A raging vampire. Amplifying their strength. I've already lost four troopers to it. I suppose I could attack it, claiming it as vengeance for my fallen troopers.

But, I won't. Because the magic I feed into my fire lance is tinged with sadness.

Flame magic, Blue Scales.

"Wha?! Blue flames?! Two, no, three blue fireballs are slowly... following me!" That fire is tenacious. Know that there's this kind of anger, as well. Not just the intensity of rage. But a slow, simmering hatred.

"Gyah! Poison?! This is a poisoned flame?! I-I can't move!" Perceptive.

According to Origis, I'm a bit saturnine in temperament. I don't want to just end it by burning you. No, you lot can do to suffer more.

"Damned... human!" Seems I'm also something of a trickster. As you direct your attention to me, one of my troopers lops off your head from behind. The end.

" platoons, take the wounded to the host! After which... After which, follow me!" Lady Kuroi. Oh dear, Lady Kuroi. No doubt you will dash out again. So I offer a single prayer for you.

As your heart desires.

As the heart, with divinity within, wills. That you remain that way.

"All platoons! Continue at your discretion! We'll move to stop that!" The core of the vampire horde. The thousand that accompany the Golden. They're heading not for the elves, but for us. Part of it is probably the fact they don't want to deal with the Bell's defenses. Even Agias doesn't stand a chance against them.

So someone else needs to draw their attention.

"Hold! Hold a moment, oh human!" A voice from the sky. To fly through these clouds, a rather unique elf, I see.

"Our army will handle them! Focus your efforts on protecting your retreating forces! I have sent healers to them as well!" A dragon knight commander. With scores of leaves alongside. Better late than never, I suppose.

"Understood! We leave the field to you!"

"Yes, it's ours!" It's a small price to pay, if a smile and a nod reduce our losses.

Resentment is best left bubbling in the pit of the stomach.

No need to forget it, but it's best left until you gain catharsis.

33 DDR Style Dreams, Reality, Hearts, and Truths

I believe. I believe in God.

So I wait. I can wait. God will not abandon humanity. Ever.

-DDR Stream VOD Part 5-

Well damn. The human army's a wreck.

Well, I guess that can't be helped. They're fighting the Golden after all. The combination of Call Thundercloud and Heavenly Thunder is definitely one to keep an eye out for. Need to keep them from using it. I mean, it's got awful accuracy for all its flash, so it's partly just there for show, but still.

As for Golden, riding into the battlefield on a palanquin, huh? I get it, you're rich. How gorgeous, with a beautiful woman in one arm. I mean, vampires are non-hetero by default, so I get that, too.

Hmm? The elven army's advancing?

Wait, wait, why? I mean, elves, your whole thing in set-piece battles is ranged combat. That's the trope and what makes you unique. That and guerrilla fighting in forests. I mean, "Staaaand-byyyyy, Fiiiiiire," is all bootiful, you know.

Ohhh? Hey, the handsome knight's giving it his all. What you'd call highly mobile defense?

This is all pretty chaotic and random. It's tossing all the theory out the window, but I suppose it's ridiculous for a human army to be going toe to toe with vampires to begin with. Looks like there's some sort of support buff in effect. There's just so much to pick apart if you started nitpicking.

Well, whatever, I don't care. Not anymore. I've got a bad motivator. Motivation's shot. I'm in the middle of a wonderfully fun charge... and my horse gives out from under me. But I was still dominating... until the redshirts came in and dragged me off. And of course they are getting hounded by black wolves and things are looking pretty grim.

I mean, sure, if things had stayed the way they were, Kuroi would've died. I was running out of MP after all. Combining a stream of Accept Blades with Flame Blade was burning through it a tad too fast. Then, needless to mention, they were hitting her with magic, so had to use Metabolize to get rid of stuns and rots and whatnot, which burned it even faster. I was keeping up her health with Metabolize, too.

Still, though, what's wrong with that? It was fun. I wanted a challenge on the knife's edge of failure, where I could lose myself in each attack and each parry... I wanted to stop thinking, and just let myself go. If I had to think about the future, I wouldn't be playing a game.

Gaming's here to make me forget about things.

Gaming should just be fun.

Sigh... Why am I crying?

Is it because of what's happening to the settlement? I mean it's super-duper rare. And it was starting to develop. There were a lot of weird NPCs, too. They were trying their best. And watching them... was fun.

But I guess that's all down the drain. I'm going to lose here, after all. The vampires are totally taking the fight to the elves.

Well duh, what else did they expect? Elves engaging in melee is like an outrange boxer exchanging blows at close range. Or a sniper trying to take down a sumo wrestler on the mound. Or maybe a game streamer trying to sing. Oof... I felt an old wound opening with that one.

The human army's using that opportunity to retreat, but they won't make it. The Golden won't give up once she's found something she likes. Yep, here comes the Heavenly Thunder again. Yep, game over man, game over... Huh?

Ohhh! Sakiel! Nice block! Beautiful deflection!

But wait, what the heck are you doing out here anyway? You even have the name "Lady of the Wyrms Fortress" yet not only are you out on the battlefield, but you're standing there on the frontlines! You're totally out for blood, aren't you?

Huh, wait, can we make it through this somehow? Is there some way to get through?

Oh, crap, a vampire assault company... Whoa, damn.

The tag team of Ser Handsome and Falcon Wing is really strong. Like sick-OP. The combination of air and land makes them feel damn near invincible. Oh-oh, here comes fire magic. From inside of Sakiel's shields, too, damn that's sick.

O-Ohhh... The flames are spreading out and it's giving room for the elves to fall back. The vampires trying to force their way through are going up in flames. It's totally an offensive barrier. Looks like retreat's an option... Maybe we're gonna make it.

I mean, sure, the human and elven armies are both a mess. Ordinarily, it just looks like it's curtains down for them. Even without that, this much damage... it's the sort of thing that makes you want to wipe the slate and just start over.

So why can't I look away?

Why do I want to cheer them on so badly?

Wow... they did it. The human army made it into the settlement. They made it.

The vampire attacks are intense, but the elven army's trying their damndest to hold them off. Sakiel's gotta be running short on MP, but she's totally playing up the part of an Apostle, multi-casting her summoning spells.

They just took out the bridges over the moat. Perfect tactic. This moat's a reinforced Flowing World made specifically for protecting territory. Not only is it futile to try jumping over it, it'll even reflect low-level stone magic.

And this makes it a stalemate. It's almost night, but the vampires can't force through an offensive. The Golden's gotta be depleted, and they've got maybe a thousand troops left. The moat will boost water magic, so there shouldn't be any gaps in the elven defenses at mid... range?

Huh? Wait, what the...?

Why haven't they taken down the bridge at the north gate?

Huh? Why the hell are the garrison troops there getting massacred by elves?

The hell are you guys doing? Just what the hell are you doing?

The vampires have noticed! They're heading to the north! They're going to get in! Look, they're coming in!

You... you, dammit! You redshirt commander!

Arcsem!

What the hell?! Just what the hell are you doing?!

The vampires are going ape! The people! The settlers! Nooo! They're getting massacred... They're getting devoured! The army's noticed, but they're slow. Well, of course, they've finally just figured they'd survived!

Eh? W-What... Shit, seriously?

You... You're going to take down the bridge *now*?! You took down the bridge the moment the entire vampire army was on it? Sure, that's fine if you're an elf. They're perfectly capable of crossing the moat. They've got those sorts of protections. In fact, they're escaping. They're confused, but they're getting out of there.

But, humans? No escape for them. There's no penalties like for vampires, but they can't fly. It's damn near impossible to cross the moat by swimming across. And it's already dark. The vampires are attacking. There's only a handful of them who have the presence of mind to swim and escape, the rest aren't getting away.

And you're going to attack there?! Arrows, wind magic, water magic... indiscriminately at that. So it's going to be like that, huh? Taking out the Golden, humans and all.

Ahahahahahaha... Ahahaha... Damn. Damn you're cold, Arcsem. As though you're an avatar of the DDR development team itself. Just how much... Just how much do you hate humanity?

Ah well, screw it.

Screw it. All of it.

The company, game streaming, Deluxe and DX, the immediate deleting of my posts... Well, okay, that's really damned creepy, so that's not fine, but still!

Fine, screw it, I'll do it.

I'll show you the skill of PotatoStarch, the player.

The Frontier, the settlers... they're not yours to screw around with like that. I'll teach you not to screw with them. You're dead. You're starched dead.

Kuroi. I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I'm really sorry. You know, lately, when

you're idle, you start looking toward the screen, so there were times I'd just leave you because I wanted to see that... I'm sorry, that's a lie. I keep trying to change the subject. That's how I've always tried to avoid following through.

I dreamt of you, Kuroi. Kuroi, in my dream you were still so much younger, and you had a different name. But I know it was you. There's no question of that.

No one understood you, no one accepted you, but still, you kept struggling in spite of your clumsiness... And then you lost things precious to you, and yet you kept on struggling. It was like I was seeing myself.

It's a cold world, isn't it? It's so cold you want to scream out, but the scream is empty and just leaves you so frustrated it hurts.

Humans who get tossed aside into the corner, well, to them, the world's a frozen desert.

But I heard you. I heard your voice. Your desperate prayer. A plea for strength from God. Truth is, even afterwards, when I was dozing, I felt like I could hear your voice. I'm sure it's just my imagination. It might just be that... I'm a failure as an adult, unable to differentiate between dreams and reality, but screw it.

That's fine. No, that's what I want. I've only got one heart, and it's the only one I get.

I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm frustrated, and I want to do something.

So Kuroi. Let's fight. Together. Let's resist this world's cruelty. We have that power. My skills from countless hours of play and your special powers. It's time to let loose. No more holding back. There's a lot of enemies, but we're going to take them out.

C'mon, Kuroi! Call on the hallowed spirits of the bravely departed!

Call... Einherjar!

34 The Mage Bears Witness and Understands the Power of the Young Girl's Anger and Sorrow

Oh God, give me a blade to sweep aside the enemy.

And the strength. The strength to crush the gathering horde of enemies. I beseech you.

-Sorcerer Odysson VI-

I've got fumes for magic; my charcoal wands and fire lances are out.

"We're good! Relax! The moat water around this southern bit is pretty tame! We've gotten this far, all we gotta do is put up with a bit of cold and we're home free!" Not giving up. No way in hell I'm giving up.

"The lances! Take the empty lances and jump in! Ah! Ale barrels are fine, too! Toss out what's inside and cling to em! No need to panic! Just stare at the sky and float! It'll be fine! Humans are made to float!" We've all got heads. If you don't stop thinking, there'll be new options.

"Say! Look at this. Ain't this cool? The Mage Company, the Red Cloaks, are damned strong! We'll hold those monsters at bay, so go enjoy a midnight swim!" Monsters, eh?

I thought I knew the yellow eyes were damned dangerous, but that Golden. She's a cut above the rest. The hell? A storm of lightning bolts? The power's on another level entirely! Feeling enlightened about now. The Golden exists to end the world itself. The black clouds that still cover the sky, looking arrogantly down at the world, grunting like a rock slide as it figures out how best to destroy the world. The color of death in a stewpot.

Dammit, I ain't afraid to die. We all die someday. We live knowing that.

"Don't worry! The elven princess is on our side! We'll make it through! We'll make it... We'll make it if we can stay alive... So stay alive, dammit!" But there's

these louts I don't want dying on me. There's so many of them here that I can't stand letting someone kill them. I'm not giving in. Not now, dammit.

"Hey, Odysson."

"Eh? What is it, bandage man? Shut up and sleep. We're short on litters and people. Wait your damned turn."

"No, no, I'm trying to tell you, I don't need my turn." Just what the hell is he saying? This... Peine in the Ass, the commander of the Cliff garrison. When the Bomber Knights brought him in, he was pretty much a corpse, but this sort's the most likely to cling to life. He can't move his body, but he can still move his mouth.

"Fire bombs, was it? Can ya just leave me one?"

"We're out. Also, don't underestimate how hard flame magic is to use."

"Aw, dammit. That sucks... was hoping to take those bloodsuckers with me for sure this time."

"Well, that time's gonna have to wait, buddy. You wounded need to act like wounded and just get someone to haul you off."

"Booo." Went to all the trouble to save his life, no way I'm gonna just let him run off and suicide bomb 'em... Not that I can tell him that.

The warzone's fighting is coming this way. Bloody hell, too late to drag back the orderlies.

"It ain't much of a replacement for ammo, but here, take the dagger. Use it well."

"Keep it. I mean, do I look like I can use it? Look at me."

"A-Ah? Well, suppose you're right." You telling me I have to finish this bugger off? Oh well, better that than getting eaten alive, right?

"Huh. So Odysson, your ace in the hole's not the dagger?"

"...The hell are you on about?"

"Well, you're clearly planning to try something. Like if you're out of ammo, you'll burn your blood instead."

“Oh? They feed you some books or something? S’t true, blood’s got magic in it. But it’s too raw to use without refining it. It’s not stable enough to be a medium.”

“So refined blood’s your ace, huh?”

“...You really are sharp. Yeah, this is it.” A white, smelly substance like rock salt taking up room in my pouch. Fire salt. It’s made primarily from human spleen. One of my troops, a born and bred knightly sort, pleaded for me to make it since his wounds were fatal, and so I processed and made it by my hand.

“In all honesty, I don’t think I can control it. I’m damn near out of magic... I might be able to trigger it if I threw my life into the mix.”

“So a proper suicide bomb. How cool.”

“There’s nothing cool about that, you dolt.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I’ll watch the results for you. So try your best.” Trying my best. Yeah, suppose that’s the ultimate truth. That’s what life boils down to in the end.

Welp... here they come. Damned dirty bastards, coming specifically to go after the helpless, despite the fact the fighting’s continuing all around us. Yellow-eyed vampires. Damn. Scores of em, to boot.

“A’ight! Leave this place to me, the Sorcerer Odysson! Now, all of ya, hop into the moat! Help each other out and float! And make sure you live!”

“Oh, no need to worry about me. I’ll probably die if I get into the water, anyway... Huh?” Eh, what the hell is it? When the yammerer goes quiet it sets off all sorts of bells in my head.

Are there enemies coming from the moat, too... Huh?

Cavalry.

Based on the equipment they look like the reinforcements from the Cliffs, but... the hell’s up with the colors? Black, lit on the inside in a burning red, with little flames on the surface, almost like burning coal.

There’s another. Two more. Damn, more of them. One after another. What

the hell are these guys? Where are they coming from? There shouldn't be anyone but civilians and wounded around here... just people the army needs to spend its entire force to evacuate... Ah, got it. So that's what's going on.

Yup, there she is.

Kuroi.

Mounted on a burning horse, black hair flowing... Whoa, her eyes are something else. Burning for real now, eh? Overflowing with magic. Magic the color of molten metal. A gaze of intense anger. A hotter, deeper, intense anger.

So the silent ember cavalry are basically you, aren't they? Yeah, makes sense thinking about them as burning coal. They're like your two eyes. Holding flames in the depths of mineral blacks. Eyes that don't let the enemy go once they find them.

Which means... yeah, figured. The cavalry charge. A red, burning cavalry charge with a hundred troopers. They blast aside the yellow eyes. Well, they're getting counterattacked, a few of them are falling, but they've wiped out the enemy.

Wait, no, that's not it. That's not what's happening. The fallen knights disappear once... and then reappear. They manifest again next to Kuroi. Burning a bright shade of red, they revive each time, fighting to wipe out the enemies at the end of Kuroi's glare. So that's them. They're the ones.

The Undying Legions from the holy book.

Damn, that's ridiculous. That's the only word that works. Ridiculous. No, words don't do this justice at all.

Kuroi. Oh Kuroi.

You're going back into battle, leading three hundred undying cavalry troopers. You've gone from being a single, overwhelming warrior, to leading an entire overwhelming company. Of your own.

With the heat of humanity's anger... and the depth of humanity's sorrow in your eyes.

"Gentlemen... impressive. Such impressive fighting." The captain's smiling.

Smiling as he smiles, his lips are quivering.

“...Looks like it’s not your turn yet.”

“Looking forward to it. No way I’m not getting back into battle.”

“No doubt. To join those ranks, you’re gonna have to be able to fight.”

“What a life. To have both a great reason to live and a great reason to die.”

Yeah, no argument there, bud.

Since there’s no need to give up living, and no need to have death end your hopes. A life where you can cry and laugh. A purpose for being born.

Oh. Kuroi’s advancing.

Surrounded by the mockery of the long-ears, oppressed by them, it’s an awful place. Hemmed in by the arrogance of the yellow-eyes, abused for fun, this is a cruel place. This cruel, ruthless battlefield that is like a miniature of this awful world.

You charge straight in without hesitation. No pause, not a glance back. For the people who are still fighting. For the people who call out for help. As the leader of humanity. As the Apostle of God.

Go get ’em Kuroi.

No... I’ll pray to you, God.

The girl that serves you... she’s still young. She doesn’t get that there are alternatives to taking every damned thing seriously. She’s too dedicated. Too naïve.

Please, don’t sacrifice her.

If it’s for Kuroi, I... no, we, will die a thousand deaths. We’ll happily serve as fodder and fuel, and if you’ll make us undying, we’ll fight for eternity.

So, please... protect Kuroi.

Please. Deus Ex.

35 The Child Fights, Then Greets the Children Who Enter the World

I'm not alone.

Many thoughts, many dreams through me, take the fight to the world.

-Sira V-

I know that God's not always with me. And I also know you're the god of fighting. A warrior god. The god of war.

But that's not all I know. No, I've learned a lot. Because I've been watching Lady Kuroi all this time, because I've seen where and what Lady Kuroi looks at, and felt what she felt... so I know.

That God, you're just like Lady Kuroi.

You're strong, but weak. Skilled but clumsy. Kind and dedicated. With lots of anger, lots of sadness, so much that it's exhausting. Enough to exhaust the heart. It's hard to watch. Hard to just have you do things for us. We want to join your struggle.

It was hard for me when Dad always kept struggling, working hard by himself. But I didn't complain, so that I could welcome him home. And that's when Dad...

So, please. You can rest a little. Resting is important. It's okay. It'll be okay. The precious things won't go away. They might get beaten up or dirtied, but we'll protect them all together. So they'll stay precious.

I can fight, too.

"You damned human brat! Fighting back when you're just domesticated pets of the fallen leaves!" In a dark alley, a big vampire with a big voice. In his hand is a big metal stick with thorns on it.

“Time to make mincemeat outta you!” He swings down in a straight line, so I jump to the side. Wow, that’s loud and windy. But it doesn’t hit. I jump again. And again. Hopping to and fro. Once that’s done, next probably is...

“Damned annoying...!” Yup, he swings to the side. A giant, annoyed swing to the side. It’s tearing at the wall of a house. So I jump high. Dad pulls my hand. Dad told me that the arrogant can’t see what’s beneath them. Yup, so keep pushing me onward.

I jump over the vampire and land behind him. People who use violence as a toy can’t see anywhere but in front. I know that well.

“Goof!” Dad slashes at his back where there’s no arm. He also slashes behind the knee. Keep going!

“D-Damned rodent...!” I can move behind his butt before he can turn around to me. I’m so good at this Uncle Odysson begs me to stop!

“Guuof?!” Dad’s sword stabs underneath his arm. It’s the move he always showed me. It’s strong.

I get a little distance. Doesn’t look like I can finish him, yet. Vampires are really tough. Don’t rush. A little bit at a time. That’s all I need to do. And don’t get caught. Never get caught.

“Huh, you’re struggling, huh? Lane.”

“About time to switch, isn’t it? The one that catches her eats her, right?”

“What is it? You hungry now? Haha!” There’s plenty of vampires. Lots of them around. There’s a bunch on top of the roof, looking down. They’re making me fight, toying with me. They keep talking about how they’ll eat me, where do they want to eat; scary things like that.

But that’s okay. This is the only way I can stop them.

We’re in the tenement district. At the end of the alley are a bunch of people who didn’t get away. So I can’t let the vampires pass. I need to work hard, or the vampires will eat them all.

“C’mon, let’s give him a hand.”

“Yeah, good idea. How about we get to eat where we hit?” Rocks. The

vampires behind are throwing them.

It's dark, I can't see them well, but it's okay. Dad blocks them all. Sira's not scared. Gotta ignore the ones only toying from afar. Right, Dad?

W-Wait, what is it, Dad? Why are you pulling me... Wow.

A giant ball of water falls from the sky, hits the ground, and sprays around it. Woah. It looks like there's dozens of Dad's arms. That's what it looks like, he's moving and blocking so quickly.

The vampires... Are they hurting? Or are they suffering? That ball of water, it must be poison. It's that kind of magic. So did the elves help me? Is that how that works?

But I can't breathe. I didn't get very wet, but I'm having trouble breathing.

Oh. Maybe it's from the air. Uncle Odysseus was holding his mouth and nose in the lab. He said that's because he'd breathe in little sprays of water even when it wasn't steam...

"Gaaaah! You're all damn annoying!" It's coming. The spiky stick is coming.

But my feet won't move. Dad, I can't jump.

"Guh!" I got hit. It threw me aside.

It hurts. It hurts so much. But I'm still alive.

Dad, you saved me with your sword, didn't you? And you made sure I didn't hit the ground. Thanks for all your help. I'm so happy. I'm going to try, too. It's hard, but it's okay. I'm not alone, so it's okay.

The sword... is all the way over there. Neither my hands nor Dad's can reach it there.

"Putting me through all that trouble. I would've made it easy if you hadn't struggled." A hand. A scary hand's coming. A hand that does nothing but take, a hand that brings nothing but pain. A hand that's only extended for greed. A hand that treats humans like trash. A hand that wants to kill me.

"...Not to a hand like that." Dad, please. Help me up.

So I can fight to the end. So I won't lose.

“I won’t...” A hand, a hairy hand with yellow nails...

Oh... It falls as it’s sliced off.

It’s Dad’s sword. But Dad didn’t swing it. A black and red soldier did it. Who is it? I can’t see their face, but it’s familiar.

“Wha—the hell are you... Guh?!” Two more. Soldiers of the same color. The three defeated the vampire.

Oh, handing back the sword? Thanks. This is Dad’s sword.

They pat my head. All three have kind hands... They each pat my head differently. This feeling... Oh, so that’s it. I know now.

The one patting my head is Rakiel. The one combing my hair is Uncle Apollos. And the one grabbing my head is Locton. The three that played with me. The three that the elves and silver leopards killed.

Wow. You guys beat the vampires up on the roof, too.

The black and red... Oh, those are the mercenaries. The ones who had done their best to protect me until just a little while ago, the Red Lions. And the ones who defeated the rock-throwing vampires are... Lady Kuroi’s company. The horse is red and black, too. The mount that died is fighting with us again. The cavalry soldiers, they must have been fighting so hard until now, and they’re still fighting hard for us.

It’s so warm. Everyone’s glowing a gentle red, and despite it being night, it feels like the sunset’s back. The congestion in my chest that made it hard to breathe is melting away. It’s gone. This color. I really likes this color. It’s the color of the time when Dad comes back home. Dad, who keeps saying he’s all tired. He’s lit with this color when he says those magic words: “I’m home.” And so for everyone else, too.

“Welcome home.” Everyone in black and red just looks at me. Lady Kuroi alone gives me a little nod. And they’re waiting. All of them are waiting for my next words.

Okay. I understand even if you won’t say it. I feel your feelings. It’s not the same as coming home. It’s the opposite. It’s not to rest. Everyone’s come back.

Come back from the place where they don't have to fight anymore, so they can fight again.

That's why I need to smile and say this:

"Thanks. Good luck." Lady Kuroi nods firmly and heads off. With everyone else. Off to the battlefield.

Lady Kuroi said she won't leave the world the way it is. She was angry at the world being a place that doesn't care if there are humans in it or not. That's why she fights.

Elves and vampires are going to learn who Lady Kuroi is. They can't pretend they don't know who she is anymore.

Because between day and night there's always the color of sunsets. Same as sunrises. That's what the world is.

The sky tells us that Lady Kuroi is here. It's the same as saying that humans are still here. It'll get that message across further than yelling.

It's okay now. They'll hear our wishes.

Good luck, Lady Kuroi. Good luck, everyone. I will be waiting.

36 The Golden Massacres, Then Faces the Raven-Haired Girl, Apostle of Humanity

You and I are similar, but different.

We met because we're similar, and we fight because we're different. This is fate.

-**, the Golden I-**

The blood of the elf in my grasp is rather good. Mmh. The best of the last few years, at least. The meat's no good. Elves are all bone and muscle, no fat. Still, it's fun to toss them off this Stone Tower. Landing with a splat below and becoming fodder for the wolves.

"Damn you... such outrage!"

"'You'? It's 'M'lady' or 'Lady Golden' to you, skinny twig." No water whip would reach me. Yet they try again. So I grab it with one hand.

"G... Gaaaaah?!"

"Such a pathetic scream." My Lightning Strike is just as effective through my hand. Elven magic, well, it's not just something I can destroy, I can use it like this, too.

I am the Golden. My existence is to be on high above. To be respected, to be worshiped. That is the law of nature. My divine right. Even the elves who control the air must bow to the ground in my presence. As for the water wielding elves, well they can work on their party tricks. That one's no good.

"D-Damned bloodsucker..." Huh, he can still move. To beat back the underlings sent to finish him. Not bad.

"I will not have... some woman look down upon me!"

"Not a line to say when looking up at a woman, dear." I tap the ground with

my toes, casting the earth magic Earth Hammer.

Go fly with the help of this earthen hammer. A fitting end for someone with his nose in the clouds.

To think this mere thing, a trap based on Flowing World, a trifle like that, to use it as a trap for I, the Golden? How disrespectful. Bridges are merely a convenience for letting my underlings and wolves into their feeding grounds.

As for me, I only came here because it seemed a little amusing. I came hoping for a little entertainment.

Well, it was a bit more trouble than I was expecting. Irritating Bell. Always using her trickery to block my lightning. What difference is there between cowardice and being focused on defense?

“Guh... I... I’m...”

“How pathetic. Weak, foolish, and ugly.” Mmh, this is good. Elves should just crawl upon the ground. The pathetic display is enough to provide a little comfort.

“Well, as a reward for your docility as you lose, I’ll teach you two truths about the world.” Listen, and die not only in body, but in soul.

“To the gods, the world is but a game board. Demon and Dragon. They’re simply testing their skills against one another using strong and weak pieces. And as part of that, you will end up as mere fodder for beasts.” The first truth. This realization removes any feelings of self-worth. A ruthless reality that allows no pride. And the second truth, the one provided by the gods... the second is one that denies the existence of fate.

Go into oblivion with both your blood and your hope depleted.

“What a boring, meaningless life. As the gods say, to the faceless masses, ultimately, living merely is a losing struggle.” Mmmh, such a lovely death mask. A once per decade masterpiece.

Ah, that was fun. And that’s a very important thing. To those of us selected by the gods, that’s the only thing that matters. To sort the things that look entertaining, and then enjoy them. That’s about all this world means.

Looking around, all I see is the usual boring scenery. The pathetic squabble for fodder. Vampires and elves fight, and humans are caught and crushed in the middle. The humans were a bit more trouble than usual, but only a little bit. The difference doesn't matter. They'll all be dead before dawn. This land will be consumed. Guess that's about it. In the end, that's all there is.

I clapped my hands in glee when they used fire magic. Watching my underlings turn to ash, I was hoping for a show of a sort I hadn't seen in a hundred years. Especially that one human, the one who went on a rampage on her own. An aggression comparable to a vampire. An intensity that caught the eye. A burning gaze. I wonder what was that about... I thought maybe a vengeful spirit had popped out of the humans, but it was all over before I could catch her face.

Humans. A people my God decreed should be left alone. Weak prey. Victimized cattle. In spite of the fact they might be wiped out tomorrow, they plant seeds today.

God recently mentioned we could toy with them a little bit. I wonder what She wants us to do. I wish I could understand Her strategy. My own God, who has no interest in finding the quickest, easiest way to conquer this continent. Just what interests Her so... Hm?

My underlings are being pushed back. Seems the humans are raising a triumphant shout. I can hear the voices. Humans praising their god. Words of hope.

Among the throng emitting heat like molten lava... an Apostle. That's the human Apostle. A warrior maiden with raven-hair and red eyes.

Mmmhm. Ah... so that's it.

This was what you were waiting for, Oh God of Mine.

Humans. Those pathetic vermin we could have wiped out ages ago. The ones we've allowed to exist in the south of the continent in agreement with the elves. I couldn't understand why... and now I do.

A sacrifice. A power bred from despair, raised by tragedy, and refined by obsession... the desire for a third, powerful alignment.

Oh dear. So my God is like a human! Planting seeds and waiting for them to sprout.

And? So I'm here to harvest it? I'm to do the serf's work of plucking that fruit? How meaningless... yet interesting.

A wrong choice and I might suffer death from divine retribution. But if I do too well, vampires as a people are likely to be wiped out. Oh my. How lovely. I feel that'll happen. How very exciting. So entropic and hedonistic.

"You there. Yes, you." Then I may as well enjoy this. Play with all my might. I gather my magic to the limit.

"Identify yourself. As the leader of humanity. Do it with aplomb, with elegance, confidence, and beauty."

"...Kuroi. The Hare of Flame. Apostle of the War God."

"I see. I'm the Golden. I forgot my name ages ago. Apostle of the Demon God." Even at this distance, we hear each other's voices. Well, it's to be expected. The voices of the chosen ring through this world. The world itself seeks to hear our voices.

"And what brings you here? To me, the Golden? The greatest there has been and ever shall be."

"I think you know."

"No, I don't. If you were an Apostle of the Elves, I would laugh, and accept a battle of the fates... but you are a human. The arrogance."

"...You mock me?"

"No, you are the one mocking me. Your head is too high, even upon the ground." I gesture with my chin. My underlings attack.

Well, let's see what you're made of... Oh my. How lovely. To do nothing and let your red and black soldiers do the fighting. They look to be spirits or familiars of some sort. I feel fire magic from them. We can spend our pieces and... Oh, how odd. Their numbers aren't decreasing. My underlings and wolves are getting spent, but those red and black soldiers are as plentiful as they started. In fact, they're increasing. Summoning, I suppose? I smell the familiar

stench of divinity, too.

“Why do you resist so?” Let me ask. And I shall examine your power.

Summoning is different from other magic. There’s a fundamental difference. The nature of your summons defines the root of your existence itself.

“Why were you born as a human, yet resist rather than accept being cattle or prey? It’s humanity’s place to be trampled underfoot, it matters not when or where.”

“...To live like myself, as myself, with pride.”

“Even if the fate of humans is tragedy?”

“Humans will determine what counts as human.” Oh, I see. So that’s what it is.

She thinks it’s some sort of counter-attack. She plans to resist, in spite of all that’s arrayed against her. In spite of having been preserved solely to serve as sustenance. You will form a faction against the night, and challenge me, the Golden.

“You need a bit of discipline.” Accept... Fulgrod.

Let me crush you with a weapon permitted only to me. This rod created to command creation will teach you to act as a human ought to.

“First... cower. Before the light of the Golden!” I point Fulgrod and cast lightning magic, Lightning Bolt.

Mmh, such a lovely sound. It’s an unavoidable impact, after all. Taste it. You won’t get away with just getting stunned. Perhaps your eyes and heart exploded? Collapsing in a smoking... no, only the red-black soldiers fell. They threw themselves in the path of it.

Where did...? Oh, there. She’s coming. Mmmh, how clever. Planning to climb this Stone Tower with her horse, is she? Or perhaps to jump up? She stabbed it! Stabbed the tower with a lance she summoned from the air... and destroyed my magic?!

Oh, so that’s the sort of thing you do. A thing so similar to what I do. Seems you succeeded in bringing me down to the ground. But that doesn’t put you on

equal footing with me.

“Disrespectful whelp! Kneel in the depths of the ground!” Earth magic, Sink Hole. Fall into a giant hole. The ground around here is already under my... What?!

She’d already run through. Already jumped.

In front of my eyes are hooves and a lance blade. I can’t bring my Fulgrod up in time. I can’t meet it. The blade burns with fire magic...!

The heat I can feel simply from proximity.

“Now... you’ve done it...” My cheek is hot. The pain burns through my skin. A touch returns no moisture. No, just the dry roughness of burnt flesh.

“How dare you?! HOW DARE YOU?!” A point. I see a steel point. This is... the lance tip! Did she throw it at me?

I sweep it aside. I break it in two with Fulgrod. Now she’s lost her weap... No she hasn’t!

She’s coming. The horse comes closer. In her hand, a pole-arm. How dare she look down upon me from her mount? How dare she think she can attack me without so much as dismounting!

“You have gone, much... too... far!” I face her straight on, unleashing a blow from Fulgrod. A cavalry charge is useless against my Lightning Bolt.

The scattered debris is... just the red-black of the horse?

“Gyah!” An impact runs from my back to my bottom, a heated, yet cold, and fatal blow.

Black hair flutters in my view. Damn you. The pole-arm in her grasp is held, ready to sweep upward.

You! Not only did you slash down, you’re going to land a second blow?! Human! Your eyes, they seek my head!

“Eeeeyaaaah!” I swing my Fulgrod. I force the impact.

Maximizing the output of the lightning magic enhancement spell Lightning Body, I blast through the second blow aimed at my... throat... No, I can’t... to

compare strength with me!

“Damn, you...!” With her burning gaze turned to me, this damned human
Apostle!

37 The Shadow Demon Gazes Down, Upon the Golden Days and the War of the Gods

God is with me.

We see the same world. We seek the same horizon. I have faith.

-Shadow Tamika III-

Just what is happening? What myth am I watching unfold?

My Shadow Vision sees from many perspectives on a large scale. That is to say, I'm seeing reality as it's happening. That the Golden, the head of the vampire Apostles and the unquestioned greatest combatant on the continent, is engaged in a desperate fight to the death with a human. And that she's been on the back foot from the very beginning. This is all so far beyond what I could have imagined.

The Golden can even fight dragons. In fact, she's even driven them off. She is truly powerful. She has a remarkable number of attacks. No one is even close to being her peer. While expertly wielding lightning and earth magic on one hand, she's got extremely high physical abilities and is an able melee fighter. She can summon divine relics with magic, letting her choose the range and style of attack as suits her. Every attack has enough power and flexibility to be decisive. More than that, she's got the accumulated experience of countless battles. Her combat techniques are sublime. A stance that misses no openings but provides none in return.

But in spite of all of that... each of her expertly chosen responses keep getting crushed.

Just who the hell is this freak human? Well, I mean, other than an Apostle.

Damn, the Golden's elbow was tired from the strength struggle, so she missed. And with the opponent suddenly ducking, she's lost her balance. She

rapidly regains her footing, but looks like she still took a slash to the flank. The pole-arm's just lying there. Looks like she got hit by that new short sword.

"Graaaaaah!" What a sound. She attacks furiously but her opponent's nowhere to be found. The enemy Apostle keeps slipping behind her. In spite of the Lightning Body she must be using, she's still being outmaneuvered.

"Guh!" And the moment she tries a sweep, she takes another slash.

The enemy Apostle is impressive. To cut at the back of her head while jumping over her. This time the weapon's a single-edged sword. Such finesse, switching between weapons at will.

"Hraaaagh!" She flings out another Lightning Bolt. But the impact of the spell, amplified by the relic, only manages to scythe through huts and other buildings. Her opponent's no longer there.

The enemy Apostle is, oh wow, back on the horse that had been blasted to pieces just earlier, and opened the distance.

Yeah, that confirmed it. Almost all of her moves are being read.

I knew there was something wrong to begin with. No matter the amount of training, a human simply can't outmatch a vampire physically. Then there's the Lightning Body. In a simple test of strength the Golden should overwhelm the enemy Apostle. But the reason for her deteriorating position... the enemy's reading her movements.

Her opponent's moving faster than she can even begin her chosen action. No, the opponent might be moving even before she decides what to do. That's the only way I can explain the dodging of lightning. Timing rather than speed.

Suppose it's easy to understand once you notice it. A little philosophical, though.

"D-Damn you... Grrr... Urrgh!" Oh boy, she's getting quite tired.

That's to be expected. I mean, part of it is missing all those wild swings, but she was also firing off Heavenly Thunder in succession earlier. That was in combination with a second-rank summoning spell. A heavy load, even for her. The price of fighting without rest.

Still, she's the Golden. She won't retreat. She won't cower. She won't look down.

Look at that, the red-black cavalry are charging at her, but she's not taking so much as half a step back. She kicks off against the ground. Earth magic, Stone Shield. A collision, but she continues.

She runs and she jumps. It's not just a shield now, it's a wall. Toward that she aims a flying kick. Stringing along the kicks, she moves forward. It's a traditional combat technique for vampires. Originally created to cope with elven Flowing Worlds, it becomes a proper attack when done by the Golden.

But... the enemy saw that coming, too. The red-black soldiers prepare their pikes, as though to sandwich her as she lands. They line up their pike points and charge with such gusto they seem willing to hit allies to get her.

Still, she doesn't avoid anything.

"Raaaagh!" Her right arm sweeps outward with Fulgrod, enough force to blast away the pike points, soldiers included. From her left a Lightning Bolt. With practiced skill, she expands its radius, pushing back the enemy.

That's the Golden. Unflinching tactics. Polished mastery. All overwhelming.

But still, the opponent's read it all. A single throwing spear, blade glowing red with magic, flies in from the front.

It finds its target. It stabs deep into the Golden's chest, then pierces through it, before erupting in flame.

"Grraaaaaagh!" Whoa, fire and lightning entangling. At the magic trying to set her alight, she's fighting with magic of her own. Her monstrous strength enters the fray as well. She snaps the spear in half and tosses it aside.

She's hurt and desperate. Her golden hair is charred, sending up wisps of smoke. Yet still, her presence sweeps her surroundings. The Golden is still the Golden.

"...Kuroi, was it?" Huh, she's started talking.

I need to hear this... time to move a little closer.

"Impressive... Kuroi, Apostle of the War God. You've defeated me, the

Golden. A remarkable achievement. Today's a day that'll be talked about for ages. A day when humanity finally landed a blow. A story to inspire all, regardless of the people... though only so long as this continent's history continues." I can tell up close. This is the end for her. That fate was decided by the slash to her back.

Her will and magic are still there, but her body is failing. Something deep within her, something that shouldn't be touched is damaged. Her hair, her fingertips, the edges of her feet; they begin to dry out and flutter away. They're turning to ash.

"I do have one option left... Mmh... Seems you know what it is. That's why you're hanging onto your weapon. Even though your magic's approaching the limit, you maintain your forces and seek an opening... Such an intense, heated gaze." The magic swirls. Even now, will she deal her last ace? She is, after all, the Golden.

Summoning—special magic that only Apostles can use. The third rank is its ultimate form. A spell she has only ever used once, fighting the head of the elves, the Absolute. Summon Daemon.

A daemon. An enormous manifestation of fear. A greater servant of the Demon God. Summoning such a thing, this entire region would become a wasteland.

"Not to worry, I'm choosing to do nothing. If I try that now, it'll take so much of my magic that I'd just vanish. And only it would remain. To end like some sacrifice... that would be pathetic. Unworthy of the Golden." Yes, that's a choice worthy of her.

The proud vampire, despite being the Demon God's first Apostle, had always hated and resented being ruled by the Demon God. That's who she is.

Which was why I'd wanted to get to know her. I didn't expect her to lick my entire body.

"...Summoning magic shows the wielder's philosophy." Could be something only Apostles understand, but I think I get it.

"I wanted to rule at the top of the world, and I had no doubt I deserved it. So

first I desired a symbol of my dominance of the world. Next, I desired the influence to overwhelm the heavens and control the earth. Then, finally, when I desired a throne... God sent me a single piece.” Ah, I see. There’s desires that can be guessed... and to have it torn from your grasp. I suppose that happens, too.

“Is this really all...? The world I lived in, when I was created, looked to me like a wonderful world.” Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The end of a vampire is always tragic. Unlike elves and humans, they’re a people that can never return to Nature.

“Kuroi, how will you, the human, live? In this world that ought to be wonderful... and in this world that’s fallen to a mere plaything of the gods... how will you die?” Almost childlike laughter from the nameless Golden.

“Hope it’ll be fun enough to make God throw a fit.” She dissolves into dust.

All that’s left is a single damaged, black stone.

Not to worry. In spite of it all, I’m your vassal. I won’t let the humans take your death stone. I won’t let it hear the human victory odes, and it won’t face morning in these lands.

So, well, rest peacefully.

And leave the rest to the living. Okay?

38 DDR Style Game Dreams, Nightmares, and Reality

Oh God, to whom I have given all and been given all.

Bring calm to your soul. Soothe your anger. And please, come to me...

PotatoStarch After...

Huh...? I thought I heard someone call to me... What happened?

I'm just exhausted. My limbs are heavy and my head's fuzzy. I'm not coughing, so I think I'm okay... Wait, what's okay? Well, so long as it's not the flu or norovirus.

I slowly open my eyes... and see a really old style ceiling. No lighting of any sort. Curtains fluttering in the breeze. Feels like a late morning or early noon. The bed's... well, simple to say the least, or I guess just plain hard. The pillow's pretty crappy, too. You should never cut corners with bedding or shoes... Huh? Wait, wait, wait, there's a cute little girl asleep on her arms on the side of the bed. It's such a painfully adorable nursing style.

"Mm... Lady Kuroi?" She's so pretty. Flowing silver hair. The bandages around her slender neck look painful. She needs to get some proper sleep.

"Lady... Kuroi?" Oh, she must really value that sword. Looks like it's bent... But hell, just use the kill bonuses and it'll be fine. I mean, the effects are permanent.

"Huh? Wha? D-Dad's sword... is restored? And it's warm... really warm." Huh? Smells weirdly smokey. It's coming in from outside. Wonder what it is. Hope it's not a fire or something.

Damn, it looks like there was a fire after all. Out there, outside the window.

"Lady Kuroi... or not? Are you perhaps..." That's awful.

There's destroyed buildings left and right, and some of them are still smoking.

I guess that's the North Gate. Wow, things are pretty awful there. That pile of

rocks must be the remains of the Stone Tower and Stone Shield. Looks like a pain in the ass to clean up. Hope a sinkhole doesn't open up or something.

A polite knock on the door. Feels odd when I give permission to come in. I touch at my throat. Huuuh?

"Hello hello. I'm glad to see you're awake! You had us worried when you collapsed in the midst of victory. Guess we owe it to those secret elven remedies. I mean, we sure felt that for Jashan son Peine. Well, allow me to arrange something warm for you. I'm a bit hungry myself." He sure got a lot out in a single breath. As for "a bit hungry," a bit for him probably means quite a bit, given the gut.

"Oh, right right. There was quite a bit of movement during the night, so let me report on that. Oh, don't trouble yourself, keep yourself comfortable. And please, refrain from training for a bit." Comfortable, mmh. Yeah, guess my body feels pretty heavy. Especially my arms... Huh? They're super smooth. What's going on? They're really soft to the touch.

"First, the vampire army; it appears they've fully retreated. There's not a single skull lurking around nearby woods and mountains, in fact, it seems they've retreated from all the surrounding territories. This is information the elves provided, so a bit of skepticism is in order, however, I believe it's trustworthy, for the most part." Hrm. What's with these hands? The fingers are long and thin, slender and pretty, but the palms are calloused and rough. The fingernails are also a bit of a mess.

"As for the elven army, they're making noises about a formal military alliance. Given that the current situation is based solely on the discretion of the Dragon Commander. However things proceed from here, I believe they will end within the bounds of our estimates. Meaning, for the time being, they'll maintain their presence here." Looks like parts of this body are like that. Injuries, or more precisely, bits of accumulated damage.

But why... Oh, must be because of the endless fighting.

"The problem, I fear, may be the humans." Oh, I see, this body is Kuroi's. Reminds me of that one dream.

"Myself, Lord Willow, Ser Anze, we're all using our connections, but... well,

given what's happened, even a small misunderstanding can cause enormous confusion. At worst, we might end up in a civil war. So we must be cautious moving forward..." So, this is a scene out of the world of DDR?

The chatty tubby in front of me is that scheming priest, and the girl cradling the sword must be her squire, Sira.

Yep, that sounds right.

"Hey! Heard Kuroi woke up so, whoa, hey, don't push!" As for the group that just made their dramatic entrance...

The middle-aged dude tumbling in front is the sorcerer, the two youngsters that shoved him must be Ser Handsome's capable subordinates. As for Ser Handsome himself, well, he looks so debonair it's easy to tell he's considered handsome. So why are you cradling that man covered with so many bandages that he looks like a mummy as though he's your bride? The alluring witch is looking a bit exasperated. The crusty soldier looks crustier than usual.

"What are you all doing coming together like this? Lady Kuroi still needs her rest; the last thing she needs is this bustle."

"I made some noodle soup, so these vultures decided to beg for their share."

"Oh? Yet there's still quite some time till lunch. Tch." Several people note some variation of "look who's talking." Haha, yeah, saw that one coming.

The alluring witch's tray has three bowls. The small one's for Sira, the middle-sized one is for Kuroi, I guess? And the extremely large one with the holy symbol on it, well, who's that for? It's a hell of a bowl for a supposed mendicant to be using.

"We're not here because we're hungry."

"I'm not so sure about that. After all, Origis is always hungry."

"Ma-ri-us!"

"Save it for later, you two. Your holiness, the report to Lady Kuroi?"

"Is more or less finished."

"Mrrggmrrg."

“Oh? It appears my dear friend has even injured his mouth.”

“...Apologies, I wrapped it shut. He’s started yammering, from boredom.”

“Ah, so it was your handiwork, Ser Zakkow. I believe you made the right choice.”

“Tch, but anyway, is Kuroi alright? Given all that happened yesterday...” Oh, this is great. I can’t hold back the laughter, it keeps coming.

So this is the settlement. These are the settlers. This udon is also delicious. I actually wanted to try it. It really tastes like home.

Welp, this is a dream. Yep, a dream. It’s a beautiful, fun dream just fit for a gamer.

Worn down by the day-to-day grind, exhausted from everything they can’t change... and they just can’t help getting caught up in it, wanting to do something to change that monotony, starting up the game. Playing it for hours on end. They then start to see results and get further sucked in. Then comes satisfaction.

I’m sure there are those who would say, “Why invest so much in a game?” But it’s not escapism; not exactly. We take it seriously. That’s why the emotions are real, too. Each gamer’s heart has a life of its own. They feel joy and sadness, rage... all of them are truths of one sort or another. It’s not a mainstream philosophy, I guess, but I’m fine with that. I’m fine with being niche. I mean, gamers are always happy to cheer on the protagonist.

“My... God?” Sira’s voice. Yup, that’s right. In the ruthlessly cruel world of DDR, what they need is that. A God of War. Seems a little weak, still, but... it’s got potential.

“There’s hope.” I say with confidence. Whatever is missing in terms of God of War power, I, PotatoStarch will cover with player skill. Right, Kuroi?

“...Yea.” Wow, Kuroi responded. It feels a little bit like talking to myself, but I’m starting to drift away. So I could hear it... Damn, I’m sleepy... What’s this? I’m getting sleepy in a dream? Seriously? Just how tired am I?

But it’s a good dream. A really good dream.

Grr... It *was* a good dream.

But my head hurts so much I don't want to wake up. The nausea's pretty terrible, too. And then there's my bladder. It's damn near bursting! Gyaaah! My stomach's acting up, too!

To the bathroom! Hurry to the bathroom! Oh Lord! Gaaaah!

Made it... Somehow made it.... I guess humans can cause miracles if they're desperate enough.

Just as I'm coming to that sort of enlightenment, I'm hit by the awful reality of what had happened.

I passed out in front of the screen. This is so totally drunken passing out in front of the screen. And I recorded it to boot. Fuck. Drinking during a war event? That's shameful for a self-declared hardcore DDR player. Totally stupid. Completely guilty.

Wait... What sort of event was it anyway? The war event?

Uhhh... So I did a stupid charge. Somehow made it. Then fought back using a Call type spell... Oh crap, it's really foggy. I guess the bathroom rush was so intense I must have pissed out the details, too... Also, my head hurts like hell... Urrgh.

Oh well, what's going on in DDR? Time to check my monitor.

Huh? Kuroi, why's everyone surrounding you? Are they worshipping to you?

Wait, is this an event? No? I-It should be okay, right?

I set myself into observation mode and... Anyway, I need to check the recording. It's time to face your own crimes, PotatoStarch... Ugh.

Mmh? What's this icon? Mail notification? Did I have my mailer open? Let's take a look... Err, the heck is this? Can't read it. What foreign language is this? There's like commas and stuff on the letters.

Times like this, I guess you just cut and paste a little bit of text and search what language it is. Internet's really nice... Wait, what do you mean Romanian?

We don't have any business with that country at my job.

W-Well, okay, fine. Time for translation sites to come in! Go!

...Errr?

What on earth is this?

"Hope is a lie you tell to the future"... The hell does this mean?

What the... Why does this piss me off so much? So much it's blown away my nausea!





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Outer Ragna: Volume 1

by Kasugamaru

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