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Demon Lord, Retry!



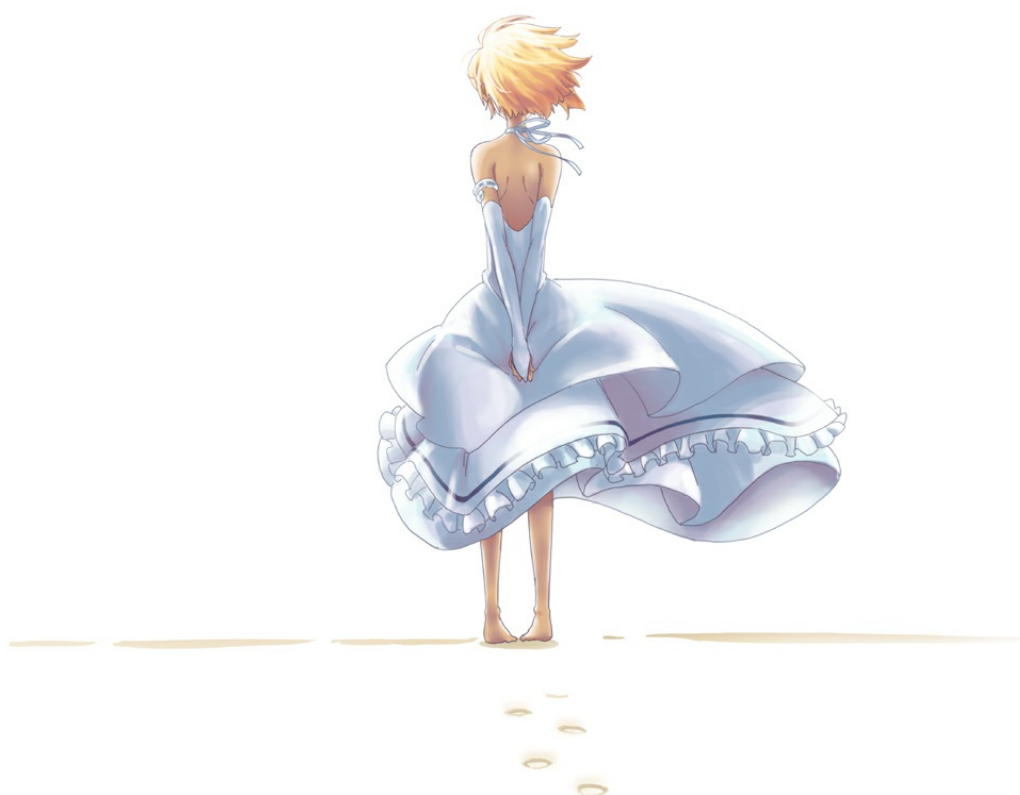


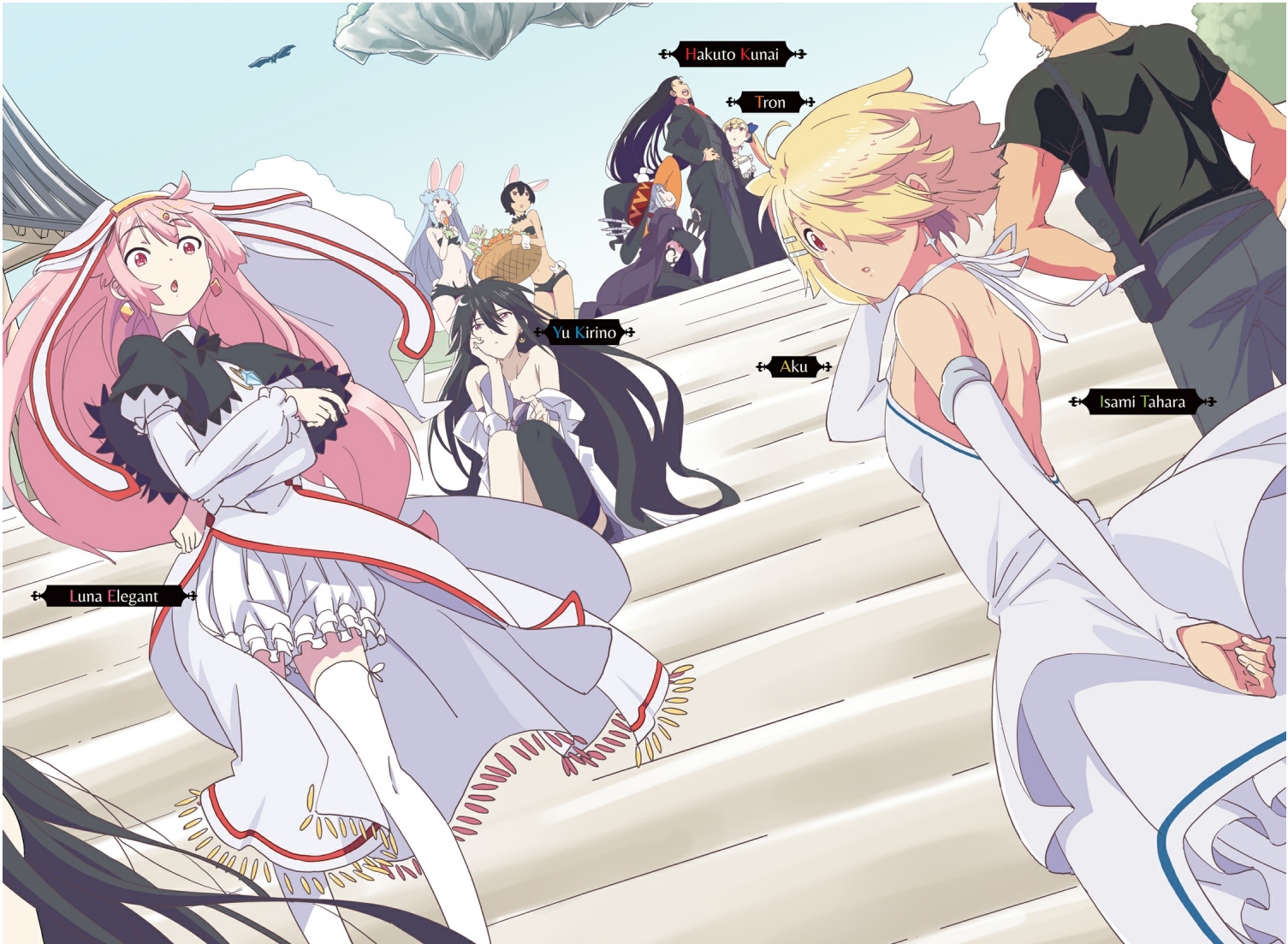
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DEMON LORD, RETRY! 2





✧ Yukikaze ✧



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—Covering an entire nation with a single banner.

A tyrant once called this a “triumph of the will.”

Then, when all nations of the world are covered with that flag...

Would that be God’s will?

...Akira Ono, *Memorial*

Neo Universe

“Are you serious, Mister Ono? You’re really going to get rid of this place?”

“Get rid of it? More like induce a rebirth.”

“So you’re getting rid of it. Don’t play semantics.”

“It’s not semantics. It’s just the next step.”

Type type type type. The chatroom symphony.

The year was 1999. The entire world was buzzing about the Great King.

“What about the people who enjoy it? Who enjoy this space?”

“Naturally, they can come on over to the next one.”

“...Think about it, Mister Ono. Sure, you made the game, but...”

“I think it’s natural to move on, taking the experience and knowledge we’ve earned with us.”

Type type type type. The chatroom symphony.

There was no Great King, after all. The year was 2000. Neo Universe. The world had turned a new page.

“You’re not thinking about the ones you leave behind in the dirt, though.”

“In the dirt... Don’t you think you’re being a little overdramatic?”

Type type type type. The chatroom symphony. A new millennium. Chaos everywhere. The world was changing, after all.

“I liked it here. To be honest, it pisses me off to see you’re ready to move on so easily.”

“I’ll make sure you’ll like the next one, too.”

“I feel like you haven’t really been listening to me...”

...XX has joined...

“Cool your jets, guys. Don’t spend a day like this fighting, LOL! It’s the year 2000! Come on! Let’s drink!”

“I’m not in the mood. I’m signing off for the day.”

...XXX has left...

“That sucks... I thought it’d be received better than that.”

“It’s just ‘cus that little one loved this place. LOL like a mother’s cooking.”

“The game’s going to be so much better. I’m sure of it.”

“You really are optimistic. Give me some of your courage so I can go find a job, LOL.”

“Then go find one instead of drinking, LOL.”

“Never! How could I work during this momentous 2000th year of our calendar!?”

Type type type type. A new millennium had begun. The year was 2000. Let us take the glorious first step.

“...People come and go, don’t they?”

“Hah? LOL, you drunk?”

“Whatever. Just watch. I’ll make the next game the most popular one yet.”

“Hell yeah. I’ll follow you to the ends of the Earth, captain. LOL like I got anything else to do, LOL.”

“Get a job.”

Type type type type. The monotonous clacking echoed.

“You know the worst part? The Great King never came, LOL. I was kind of

hoping he'd blow up the world, LOL. Nostradamus? What a dick, LOL."

"You do get into that kind of voodoo..."

"And you don't, do you, Akira?"

"Great King, my ass. I'll show the world a real Demon Lord in the next game."

Type type type type. The world disappeared.

Chapter Four: The Demon Lord on the Move

The Clown and the Bandit

“...and, voila! My arm is back on my body... good as new!”

In the city-states to the east of the nations north of Holylight, a clown was performing a breathtaking trick. The clown was Carmiya, who had miraculously escaped the grasp of the Empire’s witch. Carmiya, always an opportunist, had developed a new trick after his encounter at Artemis, and toured the performance to put food on his table. A new kind of trick... the unbelievable feat of detaching his arms and putting them back on at will. Of course, this was only made possible by Yu’s little trick of her own. But now, Carmiya was able to detach his arms by himself. With nothing to lose, he had turned this into a performance act, which drew thunderous applause wherever he went. Soon, he was constantly being booked by nobles from around the continent. Even now, his audience watched with bated breath, then exclaimed in delight at Carmiya’s every move.

(This isn’t good...)

Despite the success of his performance, Carmiya looked gloomy. There was a man in the audience who never so much as grinned, maintaining the expression of a Michael Myers mask. Frustratingly, the man was one of the most powerful figures in the city-states. He sat in an extravagant chair as if to distance himself from the crowd around him. In front of him was a table piled high with expensive fruits and wine. Anyone would have pegged him as an aristocrat. He even carried an elegance reminiscent of that status. His ice-cold expression slightly shifted, as he uttered: “Boring.”

Immediately, the applauding crowd lost all color from their faces, and the area fell silent. At the same time, some extremely well-built men stood up. The man’s comment was practically a death sentence for Carmiya.

(Crap... I really don’t like where this is going...!) Unaffected by the cowering

Carmiya and the crowd, an old woman started mumbling.

“How bizarre... An arm cut off and put back again... Maybe if I was younger, I’d understand...”

Hearing the old woman, the man crooked his neck. She had remained silent throughout the show, so he had assumed that she was uninterested.

“It’s a cheap party trick, Catherine.”

“B-But, Dear Leader! After his arms were detached so...”

Watching the old woman stammer, the man laughed. He wore a gentle smile he showed exclusively in her presence.

“Catherine. You have remained as pure as a maiden, after all these years.”

“P-Please... Dear Leader...”

“I hope you’ll always grace me with your beauty.”

Perhaps she thought that she was being mocked. The old woman tucked in her chin, embarrassed. The crowd remained silent in witnessing the peculiar atmosphere about these two.

(This is my only shot... right now!)

Seizing this opportunity, Carmiya made a move. Somehow, he produced a stunning bouquet of balloon flowers and presented it with reverence.

“Ah, balloon flowers...”

The man’s cutting gaze loosened, just a little.

“Purity. Elegance. Never-changing love and a never-shifting heart... It’s as if these flowers were created for you, Catherine.”

“D-Dear Leader... Please don’t tease this poor old hag...”

Seemingly pleased by Catherine’s reaction, the man snapped his fingers. An order for his people to accept the bouquet and reward the clown. This man usually used as few words as he could, so his subjects had to infer his intentions from subtle cues.

“An incredible honor, sir... May there be eternal happiness upon the Dear

Leader and Lady Catherine.”

“Hmph...”

Carmiya took a deep bow, hand to his chest. Further pleased by Carmiya’s show of respect for Catherine, the man snapped his fingers again. A rare sight.

Carmiya nearly jumped as a woman the size of a boulder appeared, but maintained face like any good clown should.

“A parting gift from the Dear Leader. Accept it with gratitude,” the woman said.

“S-S-S-Such an exquisite...! My tears of honor are turning to roses...”

“Beat it already, Chattermouth...!”

“Agh!”

All it took was a simple command from such an intimidating figure to send Carmiya scrambling away. In addition to his gift, he was given a travel permit. Most any country in this world taxed travelers as they came and went, and even taxed their possessions. With this permit, though, Carmiya could bypass all of that.

(Lucky... I am so lucky lately!)

Considering he had had the otherworldly experience of having both of his arms severed, Carmiya’s life was getting better and better. This clown might have been the luckiest of them all.

(Now, where to go next...)

Recalling that night at Artemis, Carmiya renewed his resolve to never go anywhere near Holylight as long as he lived.

“I cannot run into that witch again...”

Carmiya made a correct assessment. However, whether or not the witch’s boss would stay in Holylight was another question entirely.

...Meanwhile, in the village of Rabbi...

A certain bandit was peeking over the fence.

“Looks like this place has gone through some changes...”

“What’s the matter, Boss?”

“Wasn’t this the village with those... Bunnies, or something?”

Wo Wungol and his remaining men. They had been through a lot from being flicked into oblivion by the Demon Lord and taking Luna’s magic to the face.

(This used to be a rundown village with nothing even worth robbing...) As he was the leader of a gang of bandits, Wo Wungol knew about most villages and towns in Holylight, especially their financial worth. To his knowledge, the only thing this desolate village had to offer was carrots, courtesy of the Bunnies. With their population declining, he was expecting the village to be deserted in the next three years. Now, the village was strangely energized, the Bunnies toiling with vitality.

(Did someone drop some pocket change here...? Nah... This ain’t that cheap.) Wo Wungol, with his intuition as a seasoned bandit, was sniffing out something in the air. He was particularly sensitive to the smells of treasure and danger. Without them, he wouldn’t have survived this long robbing people in Queen’s territory. Mount Fuji, who had him beat in both physical strength and leadership, was now the Holy Maiden’s lackey after being beaten to a pulp by her.

(Ol’ Fuji’s gotten soft... Makes my job a hell of a lot harder.) Reminiscing about the giant whom he once stormed the continent with side-by-side, the bandit leader spat on the ground, annoyed. After Fuji had turned, Queen’s army pushed harder than ever, finally cornering Wo Wungol’s gang into the eastern corner of Holylight. East Holylight was nothing but a wasteland people couldn’t even be paid to live in. Naturally, juicy prey was hard to come by in such a landscape.

(I hadn’t touched the carrots here ‘cus I didn’t have a buyer, but...) Carrots were an extremely precious commodity on this continent. As such, legitimate status, connections, and trust were required to sell any. Of course, these bandits had none of those.

“Boss. We gonna snag some carrots from here?”

“Or Bunny-nap some cottontails?”

“You morons. We mess with one Bunny, and the Holy Maidens will hound us to the ends of the earth.”

The leader shook his head, tired of his subordinates’ incompetence. They were already being watched. Mess with a village that belonged to a Holy Maiden, and they could very well have a real army on their tail.

Once, Wo Wungol had found himself surrounded by a battalion led by Marshall Harts, only to barely escape with his life. He had lost every single one of his men that day, and was forced to spend a large amount of time rebuilding his gang.

“One of you stay as a messenger. The rest, go back to the hideout.”

“Aye-aye!”

After sending his men back to their hideout, Wo Wungol decided to see for himself what the source of the village’s vitality was. The village looked the same as before: rugged land, abandoned houses, and dried up farms that the villagers must have desperately tried to revitalize at one point. At first glance, nothing seemed different.

The pair snuck into an empty house, and quietly waited for something to happen.

“B-Boss... How long are we gonna stay here?”

“Keep your mouth shut.”

Carefully, Wo Wungol observed the village. Their stakeout had lasted into the dead of night when his subordinate finally threw in the towel.

“There ain’t nothing in this village, Boss... I’m getting hungry, anyhow...”

His boss ignored him. Finding a treasure trove required patience, concentration, and extreme attention to detail. If it came down to it, the bandit leader was willing to stake out the village for days.

“Anyway, I still wonder who that dude in black was...”

“Can it. They’re on the move.”

“Huh?”

In the complete dark of night, the Bunnies were gathering at a particular spot in the village. Without exception, all of them held a bucket in their hand, which wasn't something that was often carried around at night.

The Bunnies gathered at the well and cranked the pulley to fill one bucket after another with water. Although none of the Bunnies said a word, the bandits could almost feel their excitement in the air.

“Water, huh...?”

The bandit leader grunted, finally able to put a finger on the phenomenon that revitalized the village. They had either dug a new well or their well was no longer dry. Whatever the case, water was the source of the Bunnies' newfound excitement.

“It's not every day you find water in the ground in these parts. Dammit, Boss. We're parched over here too.”

“Once they're out of the way, we'll go for a swig.”

Eventually, the Bunnies retreated into their homes, leaving no one around the well. The two bandits crept up to it without a sound, and silently turned the pulley.

“Woah-ho! It's water, Boss! Water!”

“Hush! Keep it down.”

They tossed back the bucket to pour the water down their throats, and didn't forget to fill up their leather canteens on their waist, either.

“Boss, this water's ice cold! Like stupidly cold!”

“You're stupidly loud!”

The Boss clocked his henchman on the head, who let out a stupid yelp. After quenching their thirst to their hearts' content, the pair sighed out loud.

“I can't remember when I last had water this cold.”

“Hm...”

“What's wrong, Boss? You don't look so cheery.”

“Huh... This well’s pretty beat up.”

A foreboding thought crossed the boss’s mind, but his minion only stared in confusion. As long as there was water coming out of it, who cared how nice or rundown the well was?

“Water comes out of it. Ain’t that enough, Boss?”

“They didn’t use this well for ages. It’s barely taken care of.”

“A-Alright...?”

The leader was preparing to explain that the well would soon collapse or otherwise become unusable, but seemed to consider it not worth his while. He only shook his head, and they left the village without a sound.

“Boss, that was lucky we stumbled across that.”

“Uh huh...”

At least they could get their hands on some water here for a while.

“Those Bunnies... It’s almost like they struck a gold mine...”

The boss added, and his minion turned back toward the village with envy in his eyes. For anyone in this country, water was literally a matter of life and death. Striking a water vein out in the eastern wasteland was much more valuable than a gold mine.

“Boss, we can come back here whenever we want to get more.”

“Ain’t too bad...”

They began to share a mischievous giggle until they burst out laughing. Just by drinking some water, their mood and sense of security had drastically increased. If they had approached the well under daylight, they would have realized the secret of the well. One could imagine the look of utter bewilderment on their faces.

“Heh. We’ll take advantage of it until it dries up...”

The bandit leader grinned with content, but he hadn’t realized yet that this well, in particular, would produce an infinite supply of water.

Meeting with the Holy Maiden

In the Holy City, a large number of workers were pooled to work on restoring the city. While the worst-case scenario had been avoided, the damage to the city was significant. A good portion of the population was working out on the streets as lumber and stones were delivered to worksites. Numerous cauldrons lined the main street, and some artisans could be seen scarfing down their lunch.

“I saw it, all right! That was the silver Dragonborn everyone’s been talking about!”

“Nevermind that, I saw the Demon Lord! That dude was out of this world!”

“So who’s stronger between the two of them?”

“How the hell are we supposed to tell!?”

Naturally, the typical topics of conversation around the city were those two characters... although they were one and the same. This sort of conversation was taking place in every corner of the Holy City. Who could have blamed them? It would have been ridiculous for a Demon Lord and a Dragonborn not to start rumors. Some of the more rumor-savvy Northern Nations had already sent capable spies to Holylight in order to gather more information.

The man at the center of those rumors... was now sitting face-to-face with the final Holy Maiden in a meeting room in the depths of the Holy Castle. The oldest of the three Holy Maidens, White, had invited the man who called himself the Demon Lord for a visit, after thoroughly clearing the vicinity of the room and carefully taking measures to prevent eavesdropping.

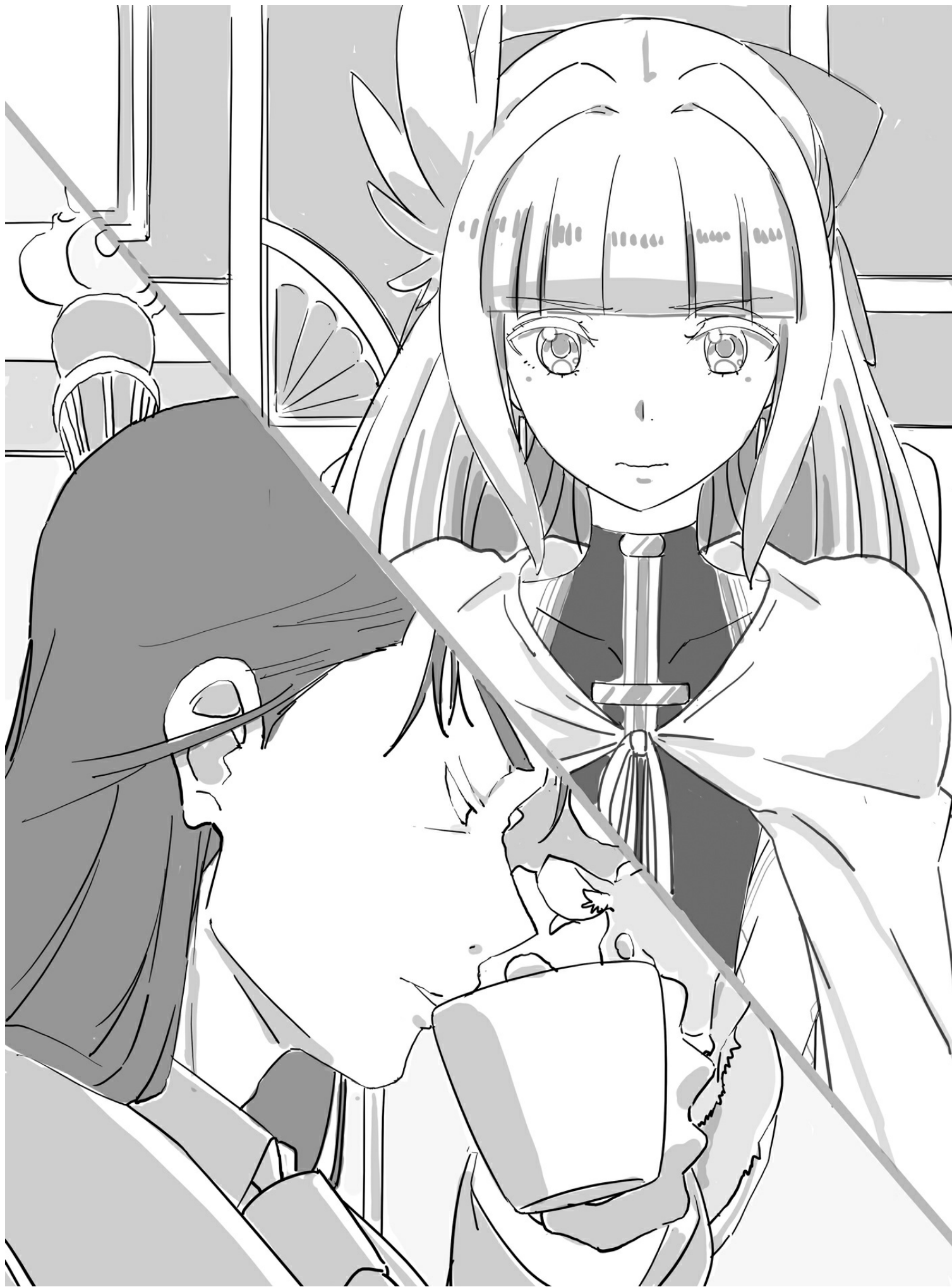
The Holy Maiden and the Demon Lord were the only ones in the room. She now faced someone who had defeated 500 Satanists in an instant, as well as casually blow a medium-rank devil to smithereens. After learning the details of the attack the other day, White had realized the hard way that she wasn’t being careful enough. She was now confident that this Demon Lord was involved in the resurrection and disappearance of the King of Devils, too. What scared her the most, though, was the fact that the Demon Lord could walk right into the Holy Castle. Even the barriers laid out by the Wise Angel could not keep him

out. White shuddered at this realization.

“...It’s a pleasure to meet you, De... How might I address you?”

“Demon Lord is fine. By now, it seems like a nickname or moniker to me.”

Calmly, the Demon Lord sipped on the coffee-like beverage offered to him and lit a cigarette he produced from his pocket. White couldn’t help but flash a frown at his attitude.



Enjoying a smoke so brazenly in the Holy Castle, and in the presence of the leading Holy Maiden nonetheless, was unheard of. For as long as this world would exist, it was doubtful that anyone else would ever do such a thing. Even Dona Dona would not have displayed such an attitude in front of a Holy Maiden. As if to point out a shortcoming on her part, the Demon Lord produced an ashtray from his coat pocket, and ceremoniously placed it on the table in full view of White. If this was a diplomatic meeting in the real world, it would have been a shortcoming. White was the one who arranged for the meeting, after all. She should have prepared for everything to make her guest comfortable.

“Are you... truly the Demon Lord, as told in legends?”

“However you want to think of me is not my concern... If that’s what you’d like to believe, then I must be.”

White clenched her fists under the table. An unbelievable lack of manners. What White took away from his declaration of indifference to anyone’s opinion... was overpowering confidence. As if he was implying that he could destroy the entire nation whenever he wanted.

“What do you want with Luna...?”

White asked with some force. She had planned to ask this later in the meeting, but she couldn’t contain it any longer. She was the one Holy Maiden who lived up to her title, and she cared about her sisters a lot.

“Our meeting had been an unfortunate one. She must have seen me as something evil. Now, however, we have a very wonderful relationship.”

White ground her teeth upon hearing this evil statement. What magic did he use...? Luna, the embodiment of self-centeredness, was strangely fond of this Demon Lord, and refused to leave his side. It didn’t seem possible by any rational means.

“Will you bring harm to this country...?”

White said, taking a leap of faith. Ordinarily, she would have never said anything so direct in a situation like this. In addition to various events in the nation, she was the one who solely dealt with representatives from neighboring countries. Her gentle but firm sense of diplomacy was respected by the other

nations, too. Such a blunt and direct question was an undeniable exception to her style.

“That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

The Demon Lord turned his cutting gaze towards White as he continued to indulge in his cigarette. That was all it took for White to shiver under the table. The look he gave and his intimidating aura... Every single thing about him seemed to exist only to instill terror in people.

“There is a saying in my country, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words.’ It means that it’s much quicker to understand something you see with your own eyes than something you only hear in rumors.”

The Demon Lord said this brimming with confidence and with somewhat of a smile. He appeared friendly on the surface, but White was far from trusting him. As far as she was concerned, one of her precious sisters had already been taken hostage. If she were to force Luna to stay in the Holy Castle, she thought, the Demon Lord could use that as an excuse for initiating an attack. In fact, she figured that the Demon Lord was waiting for that very situation. Moreover, keeping Luna confined was physically impossible. No construction in this world could withstand her Golden magic.

“I only ask you to watch what I’m about to do and judge me for yourself. I have always shown who I am better than I explain it.”

The Demon Lord’s burst of confidence only made White more nervous. She had no idea what he was about to do, except that it was going to be some sort of invasion against this country. While wearing a smile, he was surely working on something sinister in the shadows, she thought. White did see him as an actual Demon Lord.

“And there is one favor I would like to ask of you...”

He said, and White braced for impact. The Demon Lord had aided Holylight in quelling the terror attack the other day. She had expected him to request some form of compensation.

“I want to know more about the Ember Angel... If there are any libraries here, I would like to request full access to them.”

At this, White could feel her vision fading out. She was getting dizzy. Was he trying to kill the Ember Angel? Find a weakness? The fact that he so brazenly shared his intentions with her terrified White worse than she had ever been in her life.

“Help yourself... to the library. However, I will not tell you anything about the Ember Angel myself.”

“I see. That’s all right. I would be hesitant to use my words to describe someone so venerated, too.”

The Demon Lord nodded in a display of sympathy. For White, this only came across as blatant sarcasm. He must have been mocking her desperate attempt to sabotage his scheme.

“Then, if you’ll excuse me... This was a very productive meeting.”

“Yes, same for me... Very productive.”

White answered as she accepted the Demon Lord’s handshake. Letting his pitch-black coat flutter, the Demon Lord went to leave the room. Staring at his back, White asked her final question.

“You... defeated the King of Devils, didn’t you?”

The Demon Lord was silent for a moment. His answer was something White found terrifying.

“I wouldn’t call that a King. Just a poorly made fake...”

To him, even the King of Devils was a failure, something without any right to the title of King. Speaking volumes with his back, the Demon Lord left the room.

Angel White

Race: Human — Age: 18

Weapon The Holy Staff of Omega

One of the legendary weapons. On top of its powerful stats, this holy staff can store up magic and perform a particular miracle.

Armor Congregational Robe of Omega

A venerated garment blessed by the Ember Angel. Boasts extremely powerful Defense and Magic Defense.

Level: ? — HP: ? — Stamina: ? — Attack: ? — Defense: ? (+25) — Dexterity: ? — Magic: 20 (+20) — Magic Defense: 20 (+25)

The oldest and most prominent Holy Maiden. A kind woman who puts the needs of her people above all else. The only level-headed Holy Maiden, and the last hope for serving as the conscience of Holylight. She can perform some miracles, passed down to her by the Ember Angel.

Under the Table

(She was gorgeous...)

Walking down a hallway in the Holy Castle, the Demon Lord recalled the meeting that just took place. In facing such an unbelievably beautiful woman, he had to drag on some cigarettes to calm his nerves. Considering that smoking was becoming less socially acceptable nowadays, he was glad he had brought an ashtray. Considering he made such a touching effort on his part, he didn't think she could have been too angry about it. All in all, he was worried about such trivial matters at the moment.

(In any case, she seemed like a pretty sane Holy Maiden...) After their track record, the Demon Lord even felt some faint admiration for Angel White, the Holy Maiden. He had always considered names in this country to be atrocious, but he seemed to have finally found someone with a fitting name. However, the best thing to come from the meeting was that he was able to tell her to watch his actions, rather than believe the rumors. He had stopped a Satanist terror attack, and was now going to build a hospital and a hot spring resort in Luna's village. Surely, White would realize that he was as far from a Demon Lord as could be. He had explained that he had a good relationship with Luna, and she even gave him permission to browse the library. All things considered, this was a pretty good first meeting.

A few important factors were against him, though. First, his appearance was undeniably that of the dark side, and nowhere near that of a model citizen. On top of that, his overwhelming powers far surpassed that of any human. Trusting this man and turning a blind eye to him would have been a feat too difficult even for a literal angel.

"Did you see the Dragonborn yesterday!?"

"I did! He was the coolest!"

"Lady Queen was head over heels for him, too!"

The Demon Lord nearly tripped himself when he heard this conversation coming from the hallway. After the incident, people had started worshipping

that Bosozoku punk as something called a Dragonborn. Still, the Demon Lord felt like he had gained more than expected when it came to Zero.

As long as there was a man with immense powers who called himself the Demon Lord, he could expect the opposition in the country to move to get rid of him, someday. When that day comes, they would try to recruit Zero for the job... Which was, of course, impossible. He also figured that the people would be less on edge if they thought that Zero would be there in a pinch to take care of the situation. In the meantime, the Demon Lord would steadily set up his business.

(Yesterday... It didn't feel weird.)

The previous day, he recalled that he was pretty much completely in sync with Zero. When he used Do or Die, he even felt the sensation of throwing the punch himself.

He reminisced about the characters he had created.

(Early on, I was Hakuto Kunai himself.)

In fact, there was no character called Hakuto Kunai. He had simply used his real name, Akira Ono. As time passed, however, he felt that it was unsafe to use his real name online, and changed the character name about midway through the game's history. That's how Hakuto Kunai was created.

(In the later half of the game's lifespan, I was always Zero.) He had fought as Zero for more than a year or two. They were constantly together for nearly a decade. He had created Zero as a joke at first, but the fact that he never grew tired of controlling the Bosozoku must have meant that he liked Zero more than he realized.

(It's much more than that, though...)

A character he had played for almost a decade? He could call that another form of himself. Of course, it was hard to admit that the raging Bosozoku was a form of him. A Demon Lord and a Bosozoku... Sure, both of them were far from righteous heroes...

(But I'm not the kind of person to calmly carry out genocides like Hakuto Kunai. I'm not a hardcore, show-boaty Bosozoku, either, though.) Playing these

characters in the game was one thing... But he had a sense of embarrassment playing Zero in real life, which led to the Demon Lord rejecting him. He need only accept Zero, and everything — including Zero — could become Akira Ono. In a sense, that was terrifying, but somehow comical. The Demon Lord felt the strange urge to burst out laughing.

(...Ah, drop it already! I have to think of what to do for the future.) He had been granted access to the library. First thing he wanted to do was research to his heart's content. In addition, he had accumulated more than enough SP for himself. Now, after earning some more in the battle, he had 1249 SP in his pocket.

(Heh heh heh... Hah ha ha ha!)

Anyone would have wanted to laugh out loud. At this rate, he would have some SP leftover after summoning another advisor and building the Hospital and Hot Springs Resort. He was beginning to feel a sense of excitement, thinking of who to summon next.

“Speaking of, something else was unlocked...” he couldn’t help but mumble aloud.

Congratulations!

You’ve unlocked the command Quick Travel.

Defeated the Duke of Darkness — Achievement Earned Dragon’s Authority — Drastically Increased (20/100) The newly unlocked command was called Quick Travel. In the game, it was important to move back and forth through various areas in the arena. This command could transport him to an area he had been to before in an instant. It did come with the downside of spending 30 Stamina, though.

(Defeated the Duke of Darkness, huh...?)

Technically, Zero had defeated it, not the Demon Lord. He didn’t grasp how special this Duke of Darkness was supposed to be, or what the deal was here... As far as he was concerned, this had come out of left field.

(And what’s Dragon’s Authority...?)

He had never seen that command in the game. However, from the word 'Dragon', he assumed it had something to do with Zero.

(Are there things I can only unlock by fighting as Zero...?) If there were, that could become troublesome. He was unable to control Zero, after all.

(The word Achievement is interesting, though...)

There were various Achievements in the game, too. Some were easy and some were nearly impossible. A portion of the players really got into earning them all. Some were very ubiquitous, like 'killed X enemies in under an hour' and others were extremely complicated like 'filled entire inventory with Blazers.' Earning difficult achievements rewarded the player with various avatars, customizable parts like eyes and hair, or even special abilities.

(Screw this...)

He was on the side of preparing all of these Easter eggs, not discovering them. On the other hand, when it was presented like this to his face, he felt the urge of a gamer to earn them all, just to show whoever prepared them who's boss. That being said, it was more important for him to recover his admin features.

(It would be cool to unlock Shop and Token Exchange...) Shop was, as its name might indicate, a system where items can be purchased with money. The Demon Lord thought the amount of money in his possession might have to do with unlocking something like this. Once he could gather funds like he planned, he imagined that the Shop would appear as it did in the Game, where he could then purchase items. Once that happened, he wouldn't have to use his SP just to craft an item.

The Token Exchange was something similar. Players could collect the tokens strewn about in the arena and exchange them for high-power items. It was a collectible feature, implemented so players who didn't enjoy combat as much could still have fun. It was more than just plain fun, though, as players could have obtained powerful items and skills with enough tokens.

"Master Demon Lord! How did the meeting go with Miss Holy Maiden?"

Once he exited the hallway, Aku came running to him with a smile. She was so adorable that he couldn't help but smile, too. Out of habit, he scooped her up

with one arm. Aku cheerfully wrapped her arms around his neck.

“We’re getting more and more like father and daughter every day...” The Demon Lord mentally noted this as he gazed up at the glaring sun.

—Queen’s private room, in the Holy Castle

Having survived the battle, Queen was resting in her room. After lavishly using expensive potions as well as healing spells, her condition was getting close to how she was before the ordeal. Still, she was forced to take things easy for a while to make sure she suffered no long-term injuries.

“Ahh... Sir Zero...!”

While she was breathing heavy and blushing, she didn’t have a fever. In fact, she evidently had enough strength to roll around in her bed while hugging her pillow. Physically, she was all healed up, but she was ailed by something else. Anyone could see that she was lovesick. If those who knew her were to see her like this, their hearts would freeze from the shock... If Queen didn’t kill them first, of course.

“He was sooo rad...! Stupidly cool...”

Recalling Zero’s heroic display, Queen almost felt intoxicated. The majestic, raging dragon. The flash of silver that cut through the darkness. His pointed, but extremely attractive face. His body, with every muscle built to fight. Every single aspect of Zero was exactly in her ideal form.

—*Heavens, watch me roar!*

“Ooooooh...! I can’t take it...!”

The dragon’s roar played again in her ears, leaving Queen to squirm around on her bed.



Rolling around while clutching her pillow, Queen finally fell off of her bed, and kept rolling into the corner of her room, slamming into the wall with force before finally stopping. Before leaving her, Zero had said that he had a task to accomplish. Queen couldn't help but wonder what that might be. Surely, it was an important matter if a dragon like him was pursuing it.

(Tartarus, maybe...?)

That was Queen's first thought. Come to think of it, Zero had always appeared right after Tartarus. In both occasions, Tartarus had disappeared before she knew it, as if it had fled in fear of the dragon...

(Apparently, those craters were empty, too.)

The three craters that were created in the Holy City were, of course, immediately investigated by a team mostly comprised of knights from the Order. If those tunnels were dug by hand, the Satanists' determination (or, rather, obsession) was formidable. However, upon investigation, they discovered nothing left in or on the other side of the tunnels. Of course, no sign of Tartarus, either. Now, they hurried to fill up the craters. Every mage who could wield Earth magic had been summoned to the task. With care, they layered the craters with hard soil and rock.

(That fucking Tartarus... But...)

While annoyed by the thought of Tartarus, she remembered that she would not have met Zero without it. She hated Tartarus. She wanted to tear it apart, stomp it to pieces, and trample it if she could. But if Tartarus were to appear again, she had another chance of meeting the majestic silver Dragon.

"Ahhhhh...! What the hell am I supposed to do...!?"

Afflicted by these thoughts, Queen started rolling around the room again. Just like White, she seemed to be in for a long haul of anguish.

Laugh While You Can

In the secluded Hellion territory... there was an area that was especially peculiar. The forest where Allit, a high-rank devil with the fearsome moniker of

the Duke of Darkness, held his abode. The spectral forest robbed anyone of their sense of direction, and was well-known as an eerie forest where piercing screams could be heard in the dead of night.

With crumbling pain in his entire body, Allit sat up in his coffin.

(That... Dragon...)

An entity as powerful as a high-rank devil often imbued a piece of themselves into a conduit when descending to the human realm. This time, it turned out to be a brilliant decision. He had never expected to fight before the barriers laid out by the Wise Angel, much less to encounter a Dragonborn...

(Was it all planned from the start...?)

Allit shuddered to consider the possibility. Losing a shard of himself made him less powerful already, and he was further weakened by the Wise Angel's barriers before the Dragonborn had shown up. It was as if a hunter was trying to trap a boar or deer.

(Dragon... You will pay for humiliating me like that...!)

Rage overcame him as he recalled how he, the noble Duke of Darkness, was backed into a corner like a lowly beast. Raising his still aching body, Allit stood up in his coffin. At that moment, the door to the room flew open as a beautiful girl in a French maid outfit appeared.

"Master, you're all right!"

"Hmph..."

With only a glance, Allit left the room without a word. The girl followed quietly.

"I-I... was so worried. You didn't seem like yourself, Master..."

"Who gave you permission to speak?"

Allit spat out, before finally turning to face the girl. As always, she looked distorted... in a beautiful way. Parts of her limbs, and even a portion of her face, were crystallized. The girl had been cursed by the Still Angel, and was now destined to end up as a salt crystal. Finding her appearance amusing, Allit had given her his blood to make her into his familiar, almost as if to pick up a one-

of-a-kind souvenir. As a vampire, Allit drank her blood when he felt like it, and gave her some of his magic energy from time to time in order to prevent the curse from progressing. Not out of mercy, only because he wanted to toy with her distorted existence for as long as possible.

“A-Are you... hurt... My Lord...?”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself?”

Allit nearly cackled at the girl’s question. The only reason she still resembled a human being was because he had made her his familiar and had been giving her such powerful magic. Yet she was the one worried about him?

(An amusing toy, as always...)

Allit, true to his title of the Duke of Darkness, ceaselessly hungered for war and blood. While he seldom smiled, a genuine one occasionally crept up on him when in the presence of this distorted girl.

“Alli! Come out and play!”

Hearing another voice, that smile never formed. The voice of the only being who visited this forest, where even the dim-witted Hellbeasts never approached.

“Haven’t you heard of a doorbell? Click. What’s up?”

“Leave. I don’t remember inviting you.”

They both reacted with annoyance.

“You’re cold. As ice. You’re willing to sacrifice our love?”

“Begone.”

While Allit’s reaction was as cold as could be, the visitor didn’t seem bothered. Wearing a black cap and an all-black, fairytale-esque outfit, the boy held a giant scythe in his hand.

“How was the Human Realm? You hadn’t been there in a while, right? Did you kill a bunch?”

Allit walked past him without a word. Entertained, the boy that resembled Death kept bombarding the devil with questions.

“Looks like you lost. Who’s down there who could beat you, Alli?”

“Ooh, did an Angel come back to life? It wasn’t a human, was it?”

“If it was, you’re so not cool Alli, I can’t be your friend anymore. You’d be all alone, Alli.”

Allit, still without a word, walked down the flight of stairs. It seemed like he didn’t even want to acknowledge the boy’s existence, let alone the barrage of questions.

“Y-You’re disrespecting Master...!”

While Allit had committed to non-response, the girl seemed offended. Pleased by her reaction, the boy gleefully continued.

“Wow, you’re still alive? For real? Why don’t you just turn to salt, already? I could go for a glass of salty dog. Hey, you mind dying right now, actually?”

With a brimming smile, the Death-like existence raised his scythe. At this rate, he looked like he was going to decapitate her all while wearing the same innocent smile on his face.

“Are you trying to be killed, Kail...?”

“Woah, chill. Don’t take it seriously. Woosh, Alli. Woosh. That’s why you don’t have any friends other than me. Why don’t you try ruling some land?”

Kail shook his head, without any sense of remorse. This boy, too, was a high-rank devil, and was extremely powerful. There were also Grand Devils in Hellion territory, but the difference between a high-rank and a Grand didn’t come down to mere combat strength, but whether or not they ruled over land. Building a castle, gathering minions, and ruling over a territory... Those were the conditions to earn the title of Grand Devil.

They had been at war with Animania for a long time, but time and time again the dragon had intervened and left them severely damaged. Now, they spent their time fighting for power within Hellion territory.

“Land? Since when are you into stupid things like...”

“Come on. Everyone’s playing the game. I don’t get what’s so fun about it, though.”

Both Allit and Kail had enough strength to be a Grand Devil, but were thoroughly uninterested in minions or land, and lived free-spirited lives. In Hellion territory, they were both seen as ‘those weirdos.’

“I don’t want to play that game. Let’s go kill whoever beat you up, Alli.”

“As if. The dice were in his favor this time.”

“It was just a piece of you, I guess. But this is a no-excuse zone.”

Pointing his finger at Allit like a teacher to a student, Kail huffed. The strength of their shard entirely depended on the conduit, so Kail wasn’t too surprised by Allit’s defeat. Sometimes, a ridiculously strong human was born into this world. Especially those who wielded any Ooparts, fragments of ancient times, were extremely dangerous to devils. In that sense, Kail had a guess as to who defeated Allit.

“Hey, Alli. I bet I can guess who.”

Kail giggled, like a mischievous child figuring out a magic trick. There were only a handful of characters out there who could take on Allit, albeit just his shard.

“I can tell, Alli. One of the Holy Heroes right? But which one...? The one with the box? Or the one with the flames? Hm?”

“...A Dragonborn...”

Hearing this, Kail’s expression tightened for the first time. Did he hear that right? It sounded like a word that should have never come up in this conversation.

“Y-You’re kidding, Alli... H-Hey, this one was pretty funny, for once.”

“Laugh while you can...”

Leaving Kail, whose smile was gone, Allit left his manor. He wasn’t laughing, either. The man wearing the silver dragon had crushed Allit with terrifying strength. In straight combat, nonetheless.

(I will kill that Dragonborn myself... And drink every last drop of his blood!) — While Allit swore to avenge his defeat...

Some of the northern nations gained word of the incident.

“A Demon Lord and Dragonborn have appeared in Holylight...?”

Shaking her long blue hair, the woman read that strange sentence. Normally, she would have burst out laughing at such a report, but the spy she had sent to Holylight was one of the best. Not someone who would send in a fairytale-like report.

(That can't literally be true...)

Why would such things appear in Holylight in the first place? She presumed that they were things that couldn't be described otherwise.

“Once we gather some intel... I'll send the little one a report.”

Waving an eccentric fan, the woman headed to an extravagant palace. The clash in the Holy City was casting unexpected ripples...

Firebrands

——Ortemis, a high-class inn in Holylight.

A sister establishment to Artemis, the high-class bar patronized by nobles and select tycoons. This inn was also out of the commoners' league, both in atmosphere and price.

At the front counter, a pair of adventurers were checking out. They were Mynk and Olgan, the Star Players. In spite of their job titles, these two traveled light... But only because of their special carry-bag. While Mynk's weapon was a One-of-a-Kind, this bag was another rare item, found in the Bastille Dungeon up north. The more Magic the holder had, the more the bag could fit. In this world, that was pretty broken.

By the way, new items that are dug out of dungeons and the like were, naturally, unnamed. Normally, the discoverer would name them, but recently, some fame-hungry tycoons or collectors had been sponsoring adventurers to go search for never-before-seen items. Of course, the sponsor would name the item when it was found. Some gave it their own name, some came up with well-thought-out names, and others chose to name them something easy to

remember. It all depended. When someone from the Northern Nations named an item, it wasn't a problem. When someone from Holylight, notorious for their horrible sense of naming things, gave a name to an item, the result was almost always atrocious. The following is a list of some of these atrocities.

Body Feel Better (Green liquid — heals 1 HP)

Refresho (Blue liquid — occasionally heals Stamina)

Pocus Hocus (Red liquid — makes the user energetic)

The Melancholy of Kon (Yellow liquid — makes the user drowsy)

Something Brown (Nutritious dirt)

Pop-out Mushroom (Occasionally boosts male vitality)

I'll Swallow (White liquid — heals 3 Stamina — named by Yukikaze)

These names were so bad that even starving adventurers wouldn't partake in quests to discover new items if they were sponsored by anyone from Holylight.

Olgan was the one who found this particular bag, and was tasked with naming it. One second after finding it, the bag was named Mr. Packmule. Mynk had suggested My Coalescing Space of Darkness, but it was difficult to say which name was stupider. Olgan gave Mr. Packmule a light pat. Perhaps she had some attachment to the item she named.

"Let's go, Mynk. Best not to stick around in a country like this one."

"...I may not look it, but I'm severely injured here."

"It's your own fault for sticking your nose into a stupid situation."

"You've had a stick up your butt since yesterday..."

Even after receiving some healing spells, Mynk wasn't at full strength. Olgan normally wasn't this harsh, either. Something was bothering her, and Mynk had a guess as to what it was. That was precisely why she decided to bring it up.

"Wasn't it incredible? The Dragonborn yesterday?"

"Dragonborn. What a joke..."

Olgan reacted like a dog to a bell. Seeing this, Mynk internally sighed with knowing acceptance.

“Alright. That was just a human. Got it? Not a drop of dragon’s blood in him.”

As a mixed-blood herself, Olgan could very easily detect the smell of these things. Zero, according to her assessment, was just a human. No more and no less.

“Then what was that incredible power. .?”

“How should I know? Ask him yourself.”

Olgan grew more irritated by the second. The Dragonborn wasn't the sole cause of her frustrations, but only one contributing factor in how Olgan found herself in unfortunate circumstances. After watching him save that girl (who must have been a Firebrand like her), Olgan felt uncontrollable rage and disgust. Years ago, Olgan was in an even more tragic predicament than Tron was, but no one had swept in to save her. That’s why she worked relentlessly hard in order to defend herself, and had finally earned the coveted title of a Star Player. She was irritated by someone who just waited to be rescued with a slack jaw, and irritated by the idiot who saved such a fool with a brimming smile. Everything was pissing Olgan off. The next time she saw him, Olgan thought (rather seriously) that she just might impulsively kill the man.

“Not like I jived with the guy, anyway. I know it’s rude to say about someone who saved my life.”

“Hm. I’m surprised. I would have pegged you to be quite fond of him.”

“He’s just not my type. I need a man with some void, or a deep darkness about him.”

“Then marry a devil. How about Carnival?”

“Stop it! With that bouncing-off-the-walls sparkle boy!? Not even funny!”

Reveling in the peculiar topic of conversation, the pair left the inn. They were headed north. The land had been at war for a long while, which in turn provided a certain kind of vitality. There were countless dungeons and ruins, too.

—The Holy Castle library.

“Hmm... Don’t really get it. Definitely medieval, or fantasy, I guess.”

The Demon Lord still had some unanswered questions as he sat in the library, which he had entered with permission. There were countless tomes there, so he had been flipping through the books that seemed to mention the Angels, as picked out by the librarian.

“But the pictures that come up every now and again are gorgeous! ...Which would be all I’d need if I was looking for children’s books...”

As the Demon Lord sat on a chair, Aku was sitting on his lap, looking at some books herself. The scene looked just like a father reading his daughter a story.

“The thing is... Were the Angels always around? Or were they created somehow? More importantly, why did they vanish? The devils they oppose are still kicking.”

“I’ve... never thought about that.”

The books had mentioned the opposition between the Angels and demons. How the Wise Angel sealed away Greole, the King of Devils, and how the Wise Angel vanished from using up its powers right then and there. How the Still Angel aided in the sealing, and how the Still Angel had also vanished. How even deities like the Grand Angel and Average Angel vanished one after another.

“No mentions of the Ember Angel whatsoever. Maybe it went to the corner store for a pack of cigarettes and never came back. ”

“I-I don’t think so! I believe that the Ember Angel is watching over us... from somewhere...”

While the Demon Lord’s guess was outlandish, Aku didn’t seem entirely confident in her faith. Who could have blamed her? No one alive had ever seen the Ember Angel. At this point, it was just a vague existence only mentioned in some literature.

“Everyone knows its name, but no one’s ever seen it. It’s basically a cryptid.”

“Cryptid...?”

“Creatures that people think exist, but have never proven that they do. It

means they might as well have never existed at all.” The Demon Lord declared this with his usual black-and-white attitude. This man (Akira Ono, at least) had no interest in religion, and completely rejected the concept of spirits or ghosts. One of his more spiritual friends had once jokingly told him not to bother. Any ghost would stay away from him, anyway.

(And now there’s the Great Light, Lucifer the Fallen Angel, and the Goddess of Destiny...?) The Great Light had apparently led many of the angels, and Lucifer had opposed them and ended up being banished from Heaven. The Goddess of Destiny just sounded tacky. Akira Ono’s mind automatically refused to believe in any of these.

(It’s like a melting pot of a bunch of western mythology. This is ridiculous...) Defying the existence of gods, deities, angels, and ghosts straightaway was fitting for a Demon Lord. For a long time now, this man only held faith in the world he had created.

“Well, there’s no rush. Let’s come back here whenever we’ve got some more time to kill.”

“Okay! I’d love to read more books, too!”

Seeing Aku’s reaction, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but pat her on the head. Aku seemed pleased.

“Oh, Master Demon Lord... Can we read one last book?”

“Hm? The Great Adventure of Spot the Destroyer Dog...? What is this?”

While its title made no sense, it was also worn down, cover to cover. The librarian must have brought it in by mistake. It had nothing to do with their research, but the Demon Lord realized it sounded like just the story to read to a child.

The book was about a dog named Spot, who couldn’t help but chew on everything until it broke, being chased out of the village and becoming an adventurer, exploring a dungeon.

“How does a dog become an adventurer...? What kind of story is this?”

“But look how cute the doggie is.”

As they flipped the pages, they read through Spot going deeper and deeper into the dungeon, destroying every weapon and armor of the adventurers around him along the way. ‘What an annoying dog...’ the Demon Lord mumbled, but Aku seemed thoroughly entertained. Spot kept himself busy in the book, as he defeated monsters at the bottom of the dungeon, and saved a female dog from a slime.

Damn you filthy, sticky substance... Take this! Woof!

Slilililime...

The Demon Lord lost his grip on the book, and it fell to the floor.

“What is this book!? Who in the world is its target audience!?”

“B-But wasn’t that kind of cute? Slilililime...”

“Do slimes in this world talk? Do they!?”

“I-I don’t...! I’ve never seen any...”

Gathering all his mental strength, the Demon Lord continued through the book. Spot had finally made it to the deepest part of the dungeon, where he found many weapons, armor, and magical items. He took those back to the village, where he became everyone’s favorite dog... The End.

“What the... A children’s book usually has some kind of moral to the story.”

The Demon Lord mumbled, but the part where the dog found weapons and magical items in the dungeon lingered in his mind. While it was a plot point in a children’s book, he had to check.

“Excuse me, librarian. According to this book, there are various weapons and armor found in dungeons. Is that true to life?”

“Y-Yes, sir... I hear that, sometimes, items from ancient times are found in them.”

“Hm...”

The Demon Lord was thinking about armor, or some kind of item, that would protect him against magic. He had gotten off scot-free so far, but there was no guarantee that he would next time. Even with his ridiculous amount of HP, he

couldn't be too safe. Even the Sleepless Castle, the most impenetrable structure in the game, had fallen in the end.

(Something to protect me better from magic. That's a must-have...) With that in mind, the Demon Lord exited the library.

——Streets below the Holy Castle, in the Holy City.

(There's much to do...)

The Demon Lord reorganized his game plan. Fixing up the village of Rabbi, setting up his facilities, summoning advisors, looking for protection against magic: each of them were important tasks. As the Demon Lord returned to his inn, lost in thought, there was a pair of eyes watching him intently, almost as if to burn a hole into his back. The Demon Lord had noticed this immediately, but walked all the way back to the inn without reacting to it.

"Head back to the room without me, Aku. I've got a little errand."

"Okay!"

After watching Aku go in, he leisurely walked around town and found his way into an alley. Stopping there, he lit a cigarette. He had decided to just wait for whoever was watching him to show their face. Given how famous he had become, it was only natural he had people looking to find out more about him. Whether the person following him belonged to Holylight or another nation, they were undoubtedly some sort of spy.

"I'm actually a lot busier than I look. I don't have time to play cat and mouse."

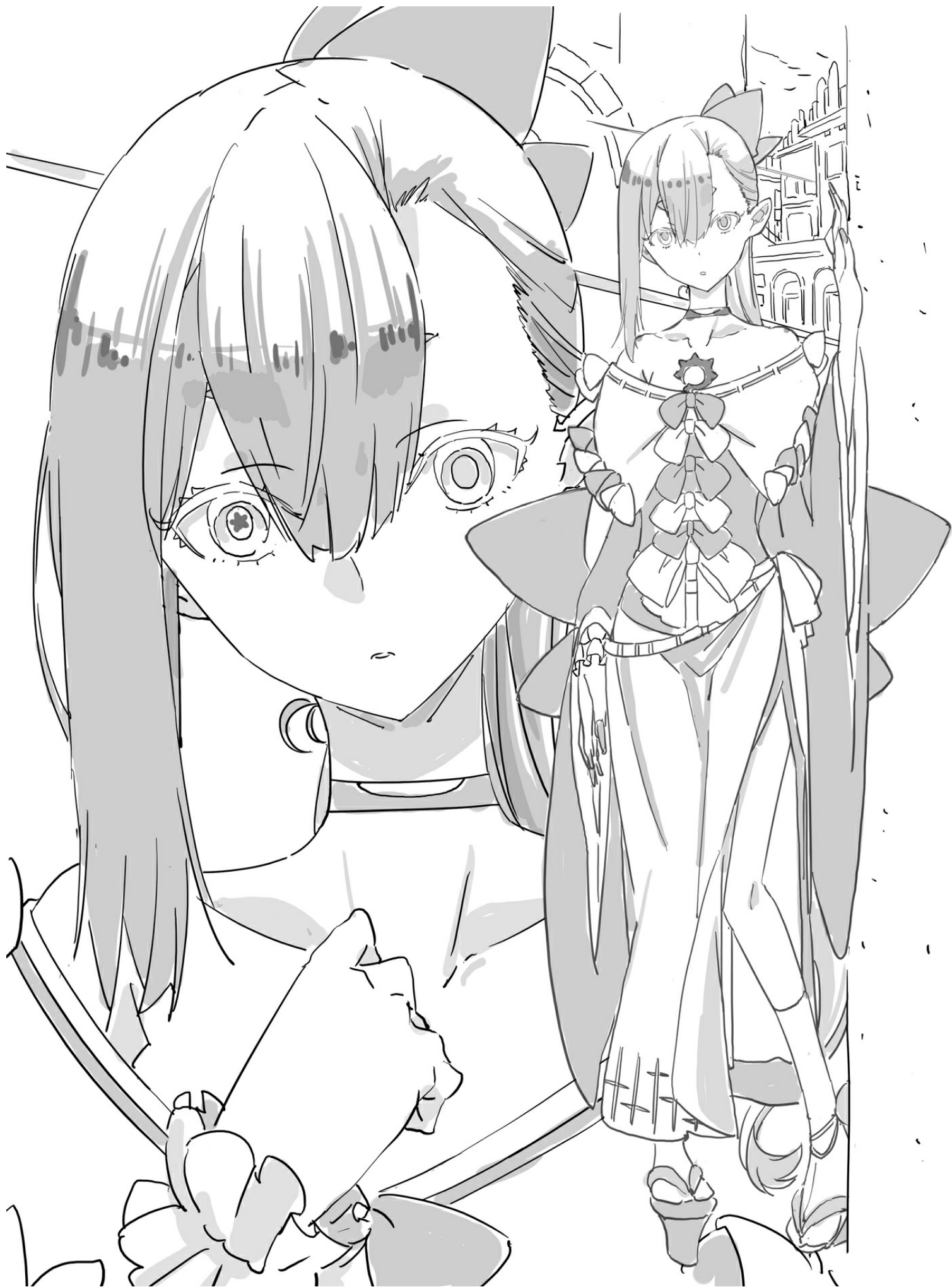
He could sense the figure, just out of sight, becoming unsure of what to do for a moment, before they finally came around the corner for the reveal. It wasn't someone the Demon Lord had expected.

"You're..."

A girl with light blonde hair and red eyes.

"...Found you."

It was the girl Zero had saved... Tron.



The First Step

(Why is this kid...)

The previous day, Zero had gotten away saying he had a mission to complete. Zero must have considered it cool to make an exit like a passing hurricane. While that was true in the Bosozoku culture of yesteryear, the Demon Lord just saw him as an idiot... Despite the fact that he had roleplayed as this character for nearly a decade.

(W-Wait, it's different! I only did that stuff because I was playing a game! How could I ever act like that in real life!? In public!?) Even as the Demon Lord was fighting this strange inner turmoil, Tron just stared at him. Her eyes had a mysterious gaze, as if she was seeing something other than the Demon Lord. Considering his ever-growing to-do list, the Demon Lord decided to try and get rid of her.

"So, what do you want, Kiddo?"

He realized after he said. It was too late. The crimson gaze intensified.

"...The same word as Zero. Same color."

"Color? What are you talking about?"

He dragged on his cigarette, and slowly exhaled the smoke. Thanks to its Stamina-healing properties, perhaps, he felt his mind clear up. He had a bad feeling... that this could turn out to be something more annoying than he had thought.

"...I see everything in colors. Emotions. Souls."

"Some kind of new-wave fortune teller? Try your luck on someone else."

He turned to leave, but something grabbed the end of coat with incredible force. Feeling her strength, the Demon Lord decided it was dangerous to judge this book by its cover. She even had something about her that wasn't entirely human, but felt a little different from that of any of the devils he had encountered.

“Give me Zero. Now.”

“What are you going on about? You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“Come out, Zero. Come right now. Come.”

“Stop saying it like that! What if a guard overhears!?”

It almost looked like the Demon Lord had pulled a little girl into the alley, having her talk dirty to him. After finally getting ready to start his business, the last thing he needed were some unsavory rumors.

(But this kid...)

She gripped the end of his coat even tighter, and she certainly wasn’t letting go. For some reason, she was convinced that the Demon Lord and Zero were the same person.

(Not that anyone would believe a kid like this.)

Even on appearance alone, the Demon Lord and Zero were completely different. Not to mention that they had different voices and were of different ages.

“What do you want, anyway? You want some money?”

“Zero... No, you... Saved me.”

‘It wasn’t me who saved you,’ the Demon Lord almost said, but kept his mouth shut. He felt like he was digging his hole deeper with every sentence he uttered. The girl in front of him seemed homeless. Rather than trying to play dumb, he thought he could turn the tables to his favor.

“This is pretty much *Nobody’s Girl*... You’ve got nowhere else to go, is that it?”

“...Mm-hm. I want to see Zero.”

A girl nodding with small teardrops in the corners of her eyes was a more powerful attack to the Demon Lord’s heart than he had expected. He was only joking, but the girl seemed dead serious.

(I don’t know how old this kid is, but there’s no sense letting her die on the streets after Zero fought to keep her alive... Made she can even be of use?) After some internal back and forth, the Demon Lord made up his mind.

“I see. I’ll let you see Zero... But I have some conditions.”

“Conditions? I’ll do anything.”

While the Demon Lord thought that wasn’t something she should go around saying lightly, he figured it came out of childish innocence. Moreover, even if he hadn’t felt pity for this girl, she still could be of use. He considered her abnormal strength and the strange power to see things in colors.

“If you obey my orders and work for me, I’ll consider letting you see him.”

“What kind of work? Do you want me to kill a bunch of humans?”

“No! What kind of monster do you think I am!? All of you!”

The Demon Lord covered his face as if to deal with a migraine.

“Pretty soon, I’ll be in a place where I’ll never have enough hands on deck...”

He stopped there. While he hadn’t counted them, the village of Rabbi probably had a population of three hundred, at most. Considering that most of them would be working on the farm, he needed extra hands. Once there were a good number of guests coming in every day, he wouldn’t be able to always keep his guard down. Even for security, this girl seemed useful.

“If you’ll use that strength and your color stuff for me, I’ll take you in, Kiddo.”

“My name’s Tron... Not Kiddo.”

“You’re still a kid. Let’s go.”

The Demon Lord quickly started walking towards the inn. He feared that if he spent any more time in a dark alley with a little girl, some weird rumors may arise.

(Yet another girl... The ratio’s getting out of hand. Maybe my next advisor should be Mr. Babysitter.) One of the male advisors came to his mind. More importantly, he really wanted another dude around who was close to his age.

“Hey, Kiddo... You can let go of my coat, now.”

“Mm...”

The kid, Tron, obediently let go. Just when the Demon Lord patted himself on the back for including the ‘obey orders’ clause, the same hand wandered over

and wrapped around the Demon Lord's right hand.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"I don't know this city. I don't want to lose you."

"Idiot! I'm too old to be walking like this."

Scooping up the girl with one arm, the Demon Lord continued toward the inn with bigger strides than before. Walking hand-in-hand with a little girl with his villainous face? Unbearable.

"You smell just like Zero..."

Ignoring the girl's ramblings, the Demon Lord sped up. He could feel some stares, but this had to have been better than holding hands. Some people in the crowd would whistle, or holler 'thanks for saving our asses!' Ignoring them all, the Demon Lord finally arrived at the inn.

(I'm so tired... I just wanted to go back to the inn...)

——An inn in Holylight.

"Everyone's ready, right? Let's go!"

Back at the inn, the Demon Lord clapped his hands loudly. He had to hurry back to the village of Rabbi and make some preparations. There were too many unexpected events and roadblocks in the Holy City.

"Mister Secretary, who is that child...?"

"Wow! Your hair is so beautiful!"

Yu didn't seem too surprised to see Hakuto Kunai bring someone home. All of the advisors had been hand-picked by Kunai, after all. Some of them were even practically kidnapped against their wills. Aku just seemed enamored by Tron's cuteness.

"H-Hey... That girl's half..."

Luna was staring at Tron with a serious expression much unlike her.

(Half...?)

The Demon Lord was curious, but guessed that she was something like a half-elf, a race found in many fantasy settings. Tron looked completely human to him, but perhaps Luna had some powers to pick up on these things as a Holy Maiden.

“I need her to develop the village of Rabbi. Give her a pass.”

“Give a pass to a Firebrand...? Are you kidding me!? I’m a Holy Maiden!”

“Help that village flourish, and you can prove your sisters wrong about you.”

“Urgh... Th-That’s...”

Just as the Demon Lord thought, Luna held a strong sense of rivalry for her sisters. Seeing an opening, this cunning man went in for the double tap.

“How can you expect to rule a nation without some open-mindedness? As long as you keep thinking about everything in monochrome, you won’t get any closer to the top.”

“What? You got preachy all of a sudden...”

“...It just means I’m counting on you that much.”

“Hrmph...! A-Alright! But I won’t tolerate any crimes on my watch!”

Luna’s finger pointed at her face, Tron nodded in compliance. The Demon Lord figured that Tron shouldn’t cause any problems as long as he explained things later, since she had nowhere else to go. The carrot of seeing Zero was still dangling, too. Whether Zero was good for the eyes was another story.

Yu, can we use Quick Travel?

Yes, sir. I feel that one of the restrictions was lifted.

Very well. Let’s head for the village of Rabbi.

Quick Travel was a command that any player could use, even Kunai and his advisors. With enough Stamina, it could be used right off the bat. This seemed to confirm that the command was unlocked for Yu as well.

(The question is, who’s the one locking and unlocking these commands...?) He seemed to have too little information to pursue that answer at the moment. These were the kinds of basic questions that should become apparent as he

researched the Ember Angel.

“Then grab onto me. We’ll jump to the village of Rabbi.”

While Aku and Luna were confused as to what he meant, they still did what he said without any objection, since the Demon Lord had displayed magic-like powers time and time again.

The Demon Lord noticed Yu reaching out, too. Strange.

Yu, you can jump there yourself.

Why should we spend 60 SP to accomplish the same result as spending 30, Mister Secretary?

Hm... You have a point.

Firmly holding his arm, Yu explained to the Demon Lord like a math teacher tutoring a student. Unlike the children in the party, Yu’s body was fully and beautifully developed. Even the Demon Lord found himself dizzied a bit.

“Th-Then, let’s go... **Quick Travel: the village of Rabbi.**”

In an instant, the world shifted around them. They landed in the strangely familiar village of Rabbi. Everyone had made it through safely. While Luna and Aku were astonished after traveling here in a flash, the Demon Lord was more interested in the Bunnies, working tirelessly. Bouncing their rabbit ears, the Bunnies were dedicated to their work on the farm. They were all sweaty and their clothes were all dirtied. Still, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but find the sight beautiful. Perhaps indicative of their far-from-wealthy economy, even the Bunny children were working on the farms. Despite some of them being at an age where their whole lives should be fun and games, the children acted as if they didn’t have enough time in the day. While they now had unlimited water, there were many more problems the village was facing: villagers moving out, the damaged soil, the lack of rain. To boot, Holylight didn’t take kindly to demi-humans, although the Bunnies were the demi-human species treated the least harshly.

“Yu. Let’s jump into setting them up.”

“Yes, Mister Secretary. You can leave the rest to me.”

Noticing their presence, the Bunnies came running up to them, waving at them. The Demon Lord seemed to have earned some trust from giving them water and fertilizer. Still, he could see in their faces that the Bunnies were exhausted, and their clothes were tattered.

(Just you wait... I'll turn everything around and rain more gold onto this village than you can wrap your head around.)

Field Hospital

“Hm. Around here would be perfect.”

Walking around the village, with the map of the entire village in mind, the Demon Lord contemplated where to set up his hospital. The village of Rabbi was guarded by tall mountains on one side, and faced a highway that led to the Holy City on the other. As far as locations went, this wasn't too bad. If he could only give the village a good draw for people to visit, things could really turn around. Since the village was halfway between the Holy City and Yahooo, a trading hub, he would have to advertise his business to both.

(I just have to take out our Base from earlier...)

The Demon Lord extracted the vanilla Base the party had been using. By combining a Base Improvement or a Base Evolution item to this, its Armor and Defensive Power would increase, morphing into a Base with various utilities. When strictly boosting a Base's Defensive Power, it would evolve as follows:

—Base (10 Defensive Power — 50 Armor)

Negates Cannon Fire. Prevents 10 Damage from all attacks. The essential Base. It has various features, and these characteristics are carried on to any Base it evolves into.

—Mid-Size Base

It was a pain to evolve a Base this far, but it prevents 20 Damage from all attacks. If the player crafted this Base in the game, their safety was practically guaranteed until the last day. The exterior and the interior were drastically

different from the vanilla version, providing players with luxurious amenities found in high-class hotels.

—Large-Scale Base

The Base with the best Defense, barring a few exceptions. As it prevents 40 Damage from all attacks, this was practically a fortress. Even in the Game, penetrating a Base like this was no easy feat. A player could evolve the Base into a different line entirely by improving its Armor instead.

—Hideout

While its basic stats were the same as a vanilla Base, it drastically reduces the player's chances of encountering enemies. +25 Armor. Considering the massive effect of the Stealth Stance the Demon Lord had used earlier, he imagined that most people would struggle to even notice a Base like this. In the Game, this was only a stepping stone for bigger Bases, but it could come in handy in this world.

—Natural Fortress

A counterpart to the Large-Scale Base, this Base boasts the best Armor out of all iterations. While it loses the effect of decreased chances of encounters from the Hideout, with an Armor of 100, this Base is practically indestructible. With 15 variations of traps laid around it, just approaching this fearsome Base could get players in a serious predicament. Damage to the head after slipping on oil, poison from venomous snakes, damage to the legs from pitfalls, attacks from the Power-up Bird, Stamina damage from fake treasure chests, etc...

(I've made some pretty heinous stuff...)

The Demon Lord couldn't help but think about what he'd created. These were all fine in the world of a video game, but setting these up in real life would seriously damage anyone who approached them. What's worse, these were only examples of Base Improvement. By Evolving his Base, the Demon Lord could make them even more despicable.

(I've got to be careful what I set up if I don't want people to label me the Demon Lord forever...) Shaking his head, he denied his imagining of that particular outcome. He would never use any of these Bases as long as he didn't need to build them. All the Demon Lord could do was hope that he would never be in a situation where any of these Bases would be needed.

"Everything all right, Mister Secretary?"

He answered Yu, standing beside him, with some nonsense.

"Just reveling in our glorious first step. Once we start treating people here, we will garner support from the masses."

"At your service, sir. I shall be your wings so you may soar to great heights..."

"R-Right..."

The Demon Lord was taken aback by Yu acting like a completely faithful advisor. This wasn't exactly true to her character in the game. Kunai and Yu's relationship had always been only that of a boss and his subordinate. Very business-like. In the game, she wouldn't have been caught dead saying something as selfless as this.

(I guess it's better than being hated or shut out, though...)

Yu was one of the cruelest advisors he had. The Demon Lord had to strive for a good relationship where he wouldn't earn her wrath or hatred.

"Oh, Master Demon Lord... Just a second! Can we grab the crackers?" Aku said, running over from the distance. The Demon Lord was about to ask why, when he realized that evolving the Base would renew its contents entirely, crackers and all.

"You don't need any crackers, do you?"

"We can't waste them!"

"I-If you say so..."

Feeling pressured now, the Demon Lord carried out the cardboard boxes filled with crackers. As they were their emergency rations, there was a considerable amount.

“Tron, let’s take this to the center of the village!”

“Mm. Let’s.”

Carrying the cardboard boxes, they disappeared towards the center of the village. Tron was carrying a stack of about a dozen boxes with ease. This reinforced the Demon Lord’s suspicions that Tron wasn’t entirely human.

“Then... Let’s get to it.”

“Yes, Mister Secretary.”

“Craft Super Rare Item... **Medical Supplies.**”

The Demon Lord produced a box with a red cross on it from the pitch-black void. All he had to do was craft this with the Base.

“Evolve Base... **Field Hospital.**”

The box was sucked into the Base. Emanating bright light, the Base’s exterior morphed as they watched. A sparkly white building appeared in the middle of many large tents in camouflage. Inside the building were examination rooms, operating rooms, and space for private rooms. There were cots set up in the tents that surrounded the building. It truly did seem like a field hospital, but this had to be more than enough equipment.

“Mister Secretary. We should check inside to make sure everything is in order.”

“I agree.”

As the Demon Lord said this, Yu wrapped her arm around his, and he started sweating bullets. Was she trying to dissect him? While she couldn’t have done that if she’d tried, thanks to Assault Queller, the ability didn’t protect the Demon Lord from psychological terror.

When they stepped into the hospital, the Demon Lord was greeted with a familiar assortment of modern-day amenities. There was concrete structure, flooring, various medical equipment, a subtly life-saving air conditioner, the smell of disinfectant, and cabinets upon cabinets of medicine.

(There aren’t any power lines out here, but that doesn’t seem to matter...) On one hand, this was only natural since the hospital was an item from the game.

On the other hand, the Demon Lord just wanted to know how this was possible. He was prepared to produce a Generator if need be, but it didn't seem like that was necessary. In the game, by the way, the Generator was not used to produce electricity, but only to revive dead vending machines in order to steal bottles of Juice from them. Since a bottle of Juice healed 20 HP, a Generator, which could net the player dozens of them, was an exciting find in the arena.

“Any problems, Yu?”

“None, sir. We can start taking patients today. But what should our prices be set at?”

This wasn't an easy question to answer for the Demon Lord. In Holylight, the size of the economy and value of their currency varied drastically from region to region. In Aku's village, people lived off of bronze coins and medallions. She had never seen even a silver coin, after all. In rural villages, bartering seemed to be common, which made it difficult to assess the worth of currency there.

“This will be tentative, but let's adhere to what we're used to. If that seems off with this world, we'll adjust the price accordingly.”

“I see... In a world with completely different values and cultures as this one, I don't think we have any option but trial and error.”

As he agreed with Yu, the Demon Lord reflected on his experiences in this world, trying to figure out a ballpark figure. A bronze coin seemed to be worth about 1USD, and a bronze medallion was 10. A silver coin seemed to be worth about 100 dollars, and the gold coin about 1000. As for the gold medallion, he couldn't form a good guess at the moment. The value of a Holy Coin of Ramd, which was even more precious than a gold medallion, seemed to be fluid, changing with time and their supply in the market. In fact, there were many that collected the Holy Coins of Ramd. Some might aggressively buy them up, while others might liquidate their large collection. Someone unfamiliar with the market could burn themselves if they tried to make a quick buck. In short, they were like stocks.

“Treat the poor for little. We won't make much trying to charge them, anyway. On the other hand, overcharge nobles as much as you can.”

“...Understood, sir.”

Yu really could heal any injury or illness. The Demon Lord felt no sympathy no matter how much he ripped off the rich. Yu could even cure diseases deemed incurable in modern-day Japan. Even if the price was set at the equivalent of a million dollars, there would be plenty of people willing to pay it. In any world, there were always the boundlessly rich growling over their bottomless hoard.

“Garner the support of the poor and rob the rich of their wealth... You have chosen a path directly opposite of the one you went in building the Empire, Mister Secretary.”

“How tedious it is to walk the same path twice. That is the definition of regression.”

The Demon Lord countered with some nonsense again. Of course, his thoughts didn’t run this deep. He only thought it best to take the money from those who actually had it. Besides, Yu was a scientist in pursuit of the potential for infinite evolution hidden within the human body. He had used the word regression precisely because it was one of the words she hated the most. His tactic seemed effective, as Yu wore a charmed smile and seemed to wholeheartedly agree.

“Yes. You and I, Mister Secretary... are always bonded so tightly by the belief we share.”

“H-Hm...”

He couldn’t help but feel a little spark at Yu’s smile.

(How is she this cute...? I don’t remember her character being like this.) Yu Kirino, as designed by the Demon Lord, was a mad scientist who dissected people to her heart’s content, cackling along the way. She felt pleasure from watching her subjects in pain.

(Does it have to do with being in a different world...? Well, we’ve got plenty of time. I’ll keep an eye on her for a while.) Leaving the hospital, the Demon Lord began preparations to build his hot springs resort.

Hot Springs Resort

(Hot springs right next to the hospital... Pretty ingenious, if I do say so myself.)

A recuperation center, he could call it.

After building a new Base and taking out all of the crackers, he used Waters of Ogaki, a Super Rare item, to complete the Hot Springs Resort. A giant, dignified three-story structure. The ground floor held the baths, a communal hall, and a dining room, while the second and third floors housed the rooms for guests to stay in. Since it also had outdoor baths attached, the entire resort was surrounded by a thick brush of bamboo trees. It was a sight reminiscent of the traditional beauties of Japan.

(Bamboo... It almost feels nostalgic.)

This epitome of a traditional Japanese inn was a calming sight for the Demon Lord, but he wondered how it would come across to the inhabitants of this world. Things of beauty and culture held something in common across the globe, but across worlds could very well be a different story. He struggled to imagine the reception.

“Th-There’s something amazing all of the sudden... Hoppity.”

“I’m so confused, hippity.”

The Bunnies started making a commotion upon seeing the resort. Seeing Kyon and Momo, the Demon Lord concealed his slimy grin. These two bunnies had attractive faces and curvy bodies. Perfect for customer service. The most impressive facility in the world was no use if its employees looked jaded.

(Now I could really use his help...)

The Demon Lord had no real knowledge of customer service or the service industry. He made up his mind to summon his jack-of-all-trades advisor and have him do all of the employee training instead. They didn’t have enough time not to delegate responsibilities... At least, that was his excuse.

“You two. Once you’re done with the day’s work, gather all of the villagers here.”

“What, for... Hoppity?”

“In order to show guests around and answer their questions, it’s critical that you all experience it for yourselves. Bath time.”

“Bath...? If we were human nobles, maybe we could afford that luxury, hippity.”

The two Bunnies remained confused by the concept. In this world, the best they could hope for was to wipe down with a wet towel once in a while. Washing up head to toe in the rain was always a commoner’s highlight of the season. If taking a cold bath was the most luxurious activity imaginable to them, taking a hot bath would blow their minds. Even in Japan, during the olden days, baths were warmed by a wood fire, kept going by somebody blowing at it. Considering the effort it took to warm a bath, most didn’t dare dream of taking a bath every day in their poor and laborious conditions. Collecting firewood took a lot of effort, and Fire Spell Stones were expensive.

(I could reserve the resort for the nobles, and make a public bath for the commoners.) While the Public Bath was a strict downgrade from the Hot Springs Resort, it could be crafted with a Kanda River, an Advanced item, rather than a Super Rare item. Since it healed far less HP than the Hot Springs Resort, players seldom created it in the game.

(Alright. I’ll open the public bath at a cheap rate for the commoners. If I only charge like three bronze coins to get in, I bet they’ll flock.) The Demon Lord decided to make an entirely new Base, not for profit, but so everyone could enjoy a nice bath. In contrast to the resort, the Public Bath only contained a changing room, large communal bath, and a water bath. He expected this to be a hit with the commoners.

“By the way, I’m going to tear down all of your houses soon, and build new ones.”

“What!? But you can’t... Hoppity!”

“Mr. Suit... You’re our savior, but that’s not fair, hippity.”

“Who’re you calling Mr. Suit!? You make me sound like I’m some Wall Street jackass!”

The Demon Lord couldn’t help but break character in response to Momo’s quip. It looked like Momo had no filter, which might be well received by customers with a niche for that sort of thing. Considering that there will be a bunch of nobles coming to the village, it would be important to set up a nice

view around the facility sometime down the road. Eventually, he planned to move the farms, too, and reshape the entire village.

(Since I'm eventually going to set up a casino, as well.)

Two of the evolved Bases were the Casino and the Underground Casino. In the game, players could enjoy games of poker and other card games, games of dice, and sit at slot and Pachinko machines. Decent entertainment for the filthy rich, and a great side income for the Demon Lord. Throughout history, in any form of gambling, the house always won. The Demon Lord's future Casino would, of course, be no exception.

"Heh heh heh... Hah ha ha ha ha! It just keeps getting better, doesn't it!?"

"Mr. Suit is scary... Hoppity."

"Mr. Suit's broken, hippity."



And so, three modern-day facilities, the Field Hospital, Hot Springs Resort, and Public Bath were set to open in the village of Rabbi. A giant leap for them, indeed.

——Later that night.

“Please, everyone, take a can each!”

“Working hard. Handing them out... Chomp chomp.”

Aku and Tron had cracked open the cardboard boxes and started handing out cans of crackers. One of them was evidently helping herself as she did so. The Bunnies had been watching curiously at first, but as soon as they had tried one of the crackers, their rabbit ears wagged. It was actually hard to tell at first glance whether they were happy or angry.

(Are they serious? Feeding our future employees some dry crackers?)

Fearing the backlash, the Demon Lord skulked away and lit a cigarette at the entrance to the village. These crackers, to him, were an emergency ration. Not something he would ever be proud to give his employees. Not only was this concern ungrounded, but completely misplaced. The best food the working class in this country could hope for was hard black loaves. Many of them often ate the nearly-inedible variety of black loaves, which were hard as rocks. On the side, they had soup with a little bit of beans or some vegetable chunks, and that was on a good day. In wealthier farming villages, they could dine on chicken eggs or meat once in a while, but that wasn't an option at the village of Rabbi, as they hardly interacted with other villages.

“So sweet and soft... Hoppity!”

“This is a dessert... Hippity.”

As it was an emergency ration, this kind of cracker was very nutritious. There was even some rock candy in the cans to help replenish glucose and encourage saliva production. In this world, where only the richest of the rich could experience sweetness, these crackers were a delicacy.

Hearing the commotion of the Bunnies from the entrance of the village, the Demon Lord shrunk his head into his shoulders. Even his cigarette hand was

shaking a little.

(I knew they'd be pissed! I've got to come up with a plan to feed them, too... My plan's down the drain if I have a worker's strike on my hands!)

While the Demon Lord was tormented by completely misplaced fears, the Bunnies at the center of the village were about to take their bath.

Yu, teach the Bunnies some bathing etiquette and give them a tour of the facility. I've got to take care of something!

Y-Yes sir... I'll be awaiting your return.

With a hurried Communication to Yu, the Demon Lord packed in a hurry. Slapping his own cheeks, he amped himself up.

"It all starts with money! I've got to make some money. An initial investment. While I'm at it, I've gotta go figure out the food issue, too. And get some uniforms for the employees."

As the time-tested paradox goes, you need to spend money to make money. As it turned out, this seemed to be an inter-dimensional truth.

Quick Travel: The Town of Yahooo.

In his hand, the Demon Lord held a Music Box, a Novice item he had instinctively created. Back in the game, it was a garbage item players could throw around. Its Attack? A respectable 1. And, of course, it could only be thrown once per item. An utterly useless weapon.

The Demon Lord's remaining SP — 1084.

The Dancing Scam Artist and the Gold Medallions

——Gonald McDonald's shop in the city of Yahooo.

"This... What sort of magical item is this!?"

McDonald's eyes were spread wide in astonishment as soon as the Demon Lord ceremoniously set the music box on the table and wound it up. By some power he couldn't comprehend, the box was playing a tune that tugged at his heartstrings. Somehow, the melody summoned to the mind a nostalgic

landscape... all the while enveloping McDonald with serenity, even nearly bringing him to tears.

“Please, hold your applause. There are two more keys for this box.”

Inserting a different colored key, the Demon Lord rhythmically wound the box up. This time, an upbeat tune rang through the room, drawing a smile across McDonald’s face.

“Is this another piece from across the sea!?”

“Indeed. In my country, we would play these during winter nights... and enjoy a glass of wine. A trend among those with distinguished taste.”

“This is an amazing piece... No instruments. No musicians. I can’t believe we can enjoy music like this so easily.”

“At balls or parties, of course, you must still want live musicians. But to entertain only yourself, or a small group of people? This is much less intimidating and far more efficient. Not to mention, you can take this anywhere. A bit tactless to walk around town with a band in tow, don’t you think?”

McDonald agreed, as if the Demon Lord had taken the words out of his mouth. Some nobles did ceremoniously carry bands in tow, and even traveled with them to vacations. As if that boosted their status as a noble... This was a ridiculous sight, even to McDonald.

“So, for this piece... how much do you ask, sir?”

“I would prefer you to assess its value, Mister McDonald.”

McDonald widened his eyes and swallowed some spit. The thing he was being asked to price was so unlike anything he had seen before. If his assessment was off the mark, the Demon Lord may cut him off as a business partner. McDonald shuddered at the thought. Everything this man brought in was full of wonders. This was a customer he wasn’t willing to part with.

“I’m sure it is a very valuable piece in your country too, Mister Kunai...”

“The value of an art piece completely varies by who sees it or holds it, don’t you think?”

McDonald tried to sneak a hint out of him, but the Demon Lord dodged the question. Not in the way that said he didn't want to be quoted, but in a way that said he was testing the shopkeeper. That's how the Demon Lord came across to McDonald, anyway. After mulling it over for a while, McDonald braced himself, and squeezed the words out:

"To be honest, I have no idea how much this piece would sell for if put on auction..."

"Hm. Do you think it will go for a considerable price?"

"Of course! There would be plenty of buyers who would pay for such a magical piece!"

"I see... Then, how would you set the starting price for this piece at an auction?"

Here we go, McDonald thought. Give the wrong answer now, the Demon Lord was sure to take the piece elsewhere. Art dealers were a dime a dozen, after all. A mistake now could very well cost him all of the possible future deals with this man. McDonald made up his mind and gave a significant price. He would actually make this the starting price, he thought.

"I would start no lower than fifteen gold medallions. Anyone who can't pay that much for a piece like this doesn't deserve a seat at the auction house."

Hearing this, the Demon Lord closed his eyes. Piercing silence continued. McDonald couldn't tell how long the silence lasted before the Demon Lord finally spoke with reverence.

"...You do have a discerning eye. I like to think I do, too, since I've found you."

The Demon Lord said as he stood, and thrust his hand out. As they shook hands, McDonald was nearly brought to tears. He had earned the trust of the strange traveler from across the sea. Considering that he had some sort of close relationship with a Holy Maiden, after all, McDonald was convinced that the man in front of him was a noble from a distant nation. Not to mention that he possessed a mountain of rare items.

In the end, the Demon Lord left the shop with fifteen gold medallions — a small fortune — and a brimming smile. Later, the music box was won at auction

by a certain madame. At the astonishing price of forty-two gold medallions, the winner was Madame Buttersauce (sister of Butterscotch). Having made a huge profit on this sale, McDonald expanded his shop and climbed farther up the societal ladder. He and the Demon Lord had now solidified their win-win relationship. Buttersauce, too, with her newly acquired music box, satisfied her ego to a great extent, garnering envious looks from the other nobles. For nobles, having something that no one had was a great status symbol... something that could be a much more effective weapon than any means of brute force.

——Fashion Police, the popular boutique in the city of Yahooo.

When this man walked through the door, Bingo the shopkeeper couldn't help but jump. It was the crazy-rich customer from the other day.

"Master Kunai, welcome back! Everyone!"

"Welcome back, Master Kunai!"

"M-Mmhm..."

Greeted with a grand welcome from the entire work staff, the Demon Lord looked to and fro, a little taken aback, but soon regained his composure and laid out two outfits onto the table. Unlike last time, he had a particular order in mind. One of the outfits was a silk tuxedo that he had crafted for himself before, and the other was a Novice item he had just crafted today: the Bunny Suit. Each of them had a Defense of 5, making them pieces of garbage in the game.

"Shopkeep. I need about twenty of each outfit. Can you make that happen?"

"A moment, please..."

Holding each outfit in his hands, Bingo examined them to their last detail, assessing them as a professional. The structure of each outfit was not very complicated... Relatively simple, in fact, compared to the ball gowns he provided for nobles. While the Bunny Suit was quite revealing, he had some experience tailoring something similar for brothels. The striking details completely foreign to him (like the fish-net stockings) captivated Bingo.

"Yes, that won't be a problem. For sizes, sir..."

“I do need someone from your shop to come take measurements. The bottom line is that I need this done as fast as possible. As soon as they are done, I need them delivered to the village of Rabbi.”

“Pardon me, sir. A project of this volume would take considerable time to...”

“The expedition will be worth your while, I assure you.”

With that, the Demon Lord yanked some coins out of his pocket, and laid them out onto the table. Five gold medallions. Shimmering light filled the shop, taking the breath away from everyone in it.

“Th-Th-This... is...”

Squeezing out unintelligible sounds, Bingo looked up at the Demon Lord. He looked to be on the verge of tears.

“This is my deposit. Finish the job quickly, and I’ll throw in two more. Can you do it? Tell me you can do it.”

“I can do it! On my life, sir, these will be delivered as fast as possible, without a second wasted!”

“Wonderful... Then, please. Don’t let me keep you.”

“Everyone! This! Is! War! ...Sprint, ladies! Sprint!”

The boutique erupted into chaos, each employee madly running around. Some went out to buy materials, some prepped the workstations, and some prepared snacks for the unavoidable all-nighter. What they all had in common were the glittering gold medallions in their eyes. A pile of money could make someone go mad, or at least make them run wild. Watching this unfold, the Demon Lord leisurely lit a cigarette. His expression was that of sublime satisfaction... and hubris.

Who else but the ruler of evil would drive everyone he met insane like this?

POKER FACE

(Alright. The food problem’s dealt with, too...)

Afterwards, the Demon Lord went to one of the biggest markets in the city of

Yahooo, presented five gold medallions to them, and set up an arrangement for a consistent supply of food. He had paid for them to deliver bread, milk, vegetables, meat, eggs, and other groceries to the village of Rabbi on a set schedule. As soon as his order left his mouth, everyone in the market went into a sprint. Their work ethic was admirable, even by the Demon Lord's standards.

(It looks like big companies in this world know how to train their employees, too.)

The Demon Lord thought, but of course, this wasn't why they were so eager to take on the job. Someone had just walked into their store and threw the modern-day equivalent of \$100,000 at them. Naturally they would start running around like mad.

(These are some back-to-back expenses, but they're small investments compared to what those facilities can get me.)

Once all gears were turning, those facilities would continue to rake in money forever. Even after these expenses, the Demon Lord was left with three gold medallions. He figured that was more than enough to get the facilities rolling.

(They're pretty much all set.)

After posting a letter to Madame Butterscotch, the Demon Lord returned to the village of Rabbi with one of the female employees from the boutique in tow. She was aghast after experiencing Quick Travel, but seemed to accept the Demon Lord's explanation that it was 'just a magic spell from across the sea,' although she was still shaking. She seemed to fear more what could happen if she dug too deep.

"Don't worry about a thing. Just focus on your task. Part of that payment was to compensate for your discretion on this matter. Understood?"

"Y-Yes, sir...!"

"Right. While you're here, why don't you take a dip in the hot springs? Two birds with one stone."

"H-Hots Prings...?"

When the Demon Lord showed the employee to the hot springs resort, her

jaw dropped to the floor, and her expression changed to something indescribable. He wondered how a Japanese inn appeared to the people of this world.

Yu, have you finished the tour?

Yes, sir. Although it took longer than expected... Oh, Luna. That's the electric bath.

“Ahhhh! It stings!”



How could this be? The Demon Lord could have sworn that he heard Luna's scream, when there was no logical way for him to. Individual Communications were one-on-one, and didn't pick up on what other people say around either participant. Still, the hilarious scream rang clear in his ears.

Saunas can be dangerous if people don't stay hydrated. Yu, don't forget to include that...

Good point, sir... Oh, little Bunny, Kyon, was it? That's a Tsuboyu, so it's deep.

"Ahhhh! It's scary! ...Hoppity."

How could this be...? Even now, the voice with the strange catchphrase could be heard in his head. If even the Demon Lord's subconscious produced that, it indicated some serious commitment on the Bunny's behalf.

And, Mister Secretary. I'm sure you must be exhausted after working tirelessly these past few days. Allow me to wash your back, sir.

N-No need for that... I have thoughts to attend to.

...About the village, sir?

Partially, yes. I am considering summoning another advisor.

The timing was perfect, as all of his talkative travel companions were indulging in the hot springs. He planned to take this opportunity to make up his mind, and execute the summoning of his next advisor. With each advisor he would summon, the strength of his party would skyrocket. Delegating work to competent advisors would free up time in his day, too.

(But it's got to be a dude, this time...)

His next choice would have been Ren, but it didn't seem like the right time, all things considered. The Demon Lord entered the resort and entered the men's half of the hot springs.

——Hot Springs Resort, Men's Quarters.

"Fweesh... This is the stuff..."

Sitting in an outdoor bath up to his shoulders, the Demon Lord cracked his neck. As he moved his shoulders, he could feel his muscles loosen. He must

have been wound up tighter than he thought over the past few days. As he scooped some of the water in his hands and splashed his face, a particular sense of relief washed over him — a moment where he could wholeheartedly appreciate life. At the edge of the outdoor bath, he could hear the bamboo scaredeer repeatedly fill up with water, and make its signature *ponk!* He could even see the moon above him, lighting up the night sky.

(Heh. An outdoor hot spring in a fantasy world...)

If he had never created the Hot Springs Resort in-game, he never would have experienced such a thing. The Demon Lord couldn't help but feel grateful for his past self. At the time, he had received comments like 'Hot springs in this murder fest!? LOL' but even those had become a fond memory.

(Now, let me remember his backstory again.)

He already had an advisor picked for his summoning this time around, and he was sure of his choice. Still, he didn't have much alone time to begin with, lately. He needed time to make some plans for the future. Reorganizing the village, training the employees, servicing the nobles and other customers while serving as a bodyguard... There was only one advisor other than Ren who could handle all of these at once.

(I have to remember that there's a chance I'll have to leave the village for a while...)

While he felt like a stern command from him would keep Yu in check, he still wanted someone to keep an eye on her. Another reason to discount Ren was that her and Yu were like oil and water. If he were to leave them alone at any point, they could very well end up killing each other.

(It's getting a little suffocating having only chicks around, too...)

What he wanted was a trustworthy babysitter. Sitting in the bath, the Demon Lord recalled the male advisors he had created.

Masaru Kato, 16. One of the younglings. A dual-wielding swordsman, with a legendary sword in each hand. While his skills were rough around the edges, he had room to grow. His character was simple: he was a total meathead. His swords always came out before his words. With utter disregard for rank or

status, he acted prideful with everyone, leading him to more than countless painful experiences, all of which he disregarded. Every spare minute of his time was spent working out and training. He wanted no money and no women, only to become stronger. A sword-fighting obsessive who lived to fight to the death with worthy opponents.

His relationship with Kunai was nothing more than a boss and his subordinate. From the eyes of the creator, though, Kato was like the troublemaking kid in the neighborhood. He had a strange fondness for this boy, perhaps because of how stupid he was.

Yuya Kondo, 16. Another one of the younglings, like Kato. He had never missed a shot with his bow, and possessed powerful eyes. With eyes that practically allowed him to see into the future, even maxed-out players could seldom dodge his arrows. In this world, the death of his targets would be guaranteed the moment the arrow was fired. He was a stereotypical shut-in, coward, and self-doubter. In fact, even in the Sleepless Castle, he never left his room. His very soul had been infected by anime, light novels, manga, and video games... He had no interest in the real world, so out of the Demon Lord's eight advisors, he was the one most leaning towards harmless. Since he wouldn't run amok if left alone, that's exactly what happened during many of the countless raids on the Sleepless Castle.

He was a pretty lucky character, considering some female characters even declared 'I would never attack little Yuya! He's so cute!' Kunai to him must have been... no more than someone intimidating. As he was extremely shy, he rarely spoke to or even had contact with anyone but the other three younger advisors. He had a sassy side, though, that he only showed Kato, who was his former classmate.

Isami Tahara, 31. One of the older advisors. A firearms specialist, beloved by everything in the world that happened to shoot something. He was stalked and harassed by 47 pairs of guns. On the battlefield, his skill set was annoying all-around. A ridiculous character whose guns each moved as if of their own volition, spraying all enemies with a storm of bullets.

He was also the only advisor with 'certified genius' written into his backstory. He could quickly learn anything and excel at it beyond what most others could

do. On the other hand, his everyday demeanor was a smirk-wearing jokester; the epitome of laziness and disinterest. Weirdly good at egging people on, too. An unaffected and poker-faced character his enemies found difficult to get a read on.

Tahara had a much younger sister called Manami. According to his backstory, he started doing the dirty work of the Ministry in order to put food on the table for her. He was seriously overprotective of her to the point of making it disturbing. To him, there were two types of women in this world: Manami, and not-Manami. No doctor had been able to cure him of this condition. While he was more on the “good” side, overall, he had no mercy for his enemies.

Takefumi Nomura, 41. Another member of the older advisors. The Empire’s proud, undefeated, and unmatched champion of mixed martial arts. While he had earned enough fame to make him a once-in-a-generation world-class star, he fell in love with a woman from an occupied nation, rather than one of God’s People, and married her despite being warned against it. No persuasion from the higher-ups could sway him. Finally, a few of them who had lost face in the matter decided to go crazy. As a result, Nomura was shunned out of the fighting world after false accusations came out regarding drug use, rigging matches, and blackmail.

He wandered from one occupied nation to another until a group of locals with a grudge against the Empire assaulted and murdered his wife. Having lost everything, he went missing. A few years later, he was found beating opponents to death in underground fighting rings as a hero-turned-heel. This is where Kunai had scouted him to join the Ministry. His strength was nowhere near that of his prime, and his former glory was already lost. He had only felt disgust for the cruel Game, too. He seemed to almost consider his placement in the Ministry a punishment for his failures in life. After losing his wife, he seldom spoke, much less held a conversation with anyone. According to his backstory, if he could regain the strength of his prime, he would be the strongest among all of the advisors. Sadly, the key to unlock that strength was already lost.

(Tahara. It’s a no brainer...)

Reminiscing on his male advisors, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but feel nostalgic realizing how weird all of their backstories were. In Nomura’s case,

especially, it was just cruel. At the time, he had written it up from a lighthearted inclination to create a male character older than him with a dark past. Now that there was the prospect of him coming to life, things weren't so lighthearted anymore.

(I don't think I could look him in the eyes...)

Stepping out of the bath, the Demon Lord chilled his body. As he was contemplating whether to go into the sauna after a break or to get into the jacuzzi and be massaged by the jets, he heard a voice there was no reason he should be hearing.

"Found you..."

"Kiddo!? What the hell are you doing here!?"

It was Tron, who was supposed to be in the women's baths. The Demon Lord hurriedly wrapped his towel around his waist. What if someone were to walk in? This wasn't funny.

"I'll wash your long hair. Thanks for the crackers."

"This is the men's side, Kiddo!"

"Not Kiddo. I'm Tron."

(This kid's buck-ass naked! Not okay, even if she's a kid!)

If Yu were to catch them like this, she would surely hit him with a glare cold enough to freeze a woolly mammoth in place. As for Luna, he could already imagine her running all around the place, screaming 'I caught you red-handed now, Demon Pervert Lord!' all triumphant.

"Get out, already! Put on a towel, too!"

"Zero can see me like this."

"I'm not Zero!"

Afterward, the Demon Lord managed to chase out the intruder, and left the hot springs after thoroughly instructing Tron to never address him as Zero in public.

(I have to summon Tahara, already... I can't stand being the only dude around

here anymore!)

As soon as he made it out of the hot springs resort, he pulled up the admin screen. 1000SP was a small price to pay to get him out of these wacky happenstances.

“Admin Feature... **Summon Advisor.**”

Even though this was his second time, he couldn't help but feel a bit nervous when summoning an advisor... And a little excited, too. After all, the ultimate dream-come-true for a creator would be to meet the characters he had created face-to-face.

Isami Tahara

“Tahara. Come hither to my presence...!”

With those words, two pillars of light, one black and one white, appeared before the Demon Lord. They came together... to form a man. While he looked like he had just woken up, he was both tall and well-built.



“Huh...? Oh it’s you, Mister Secretary. Woah, where the hell am I!?”

(Yep. That’s Tahara...)

The Demon Lord was moved in an indescribable way at watching a character of his own creation move and talk of his own volition. However, he didn’t have the luxury of letting his guard down in front of Tahara. Just like with Yu, who knew what Tahara would do if he found out that the person who summoned him wasn’t actually Hakuto Kunai.

“I’m glad you came. Follow me. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

“A-Alright...”

Looking to and fro, Tahara scratched his head. Who could have blamed him? A hot springs resort in the middle of a near-abandoned village. It was pretty confusing.

“Is this the new arena...? Money’s still not an issue, huh?”

“I’ll explain that too, in detail.”

The Demon Lord headed to the common area of the resort and sat down on one of the couches there. It came complete with ashtrays, and the two could talk in comfort. The speakers placed in the area played an upbeat Koto performance, making it a rather relaxing atmosphere.

“First things first... this is a different world from that which the Empire occupies.”

“Huh!?”

The Demon Lord repeated the same explanation he gave Yu, with a serious tone. As he explained things, including new information he had gained, Tahara’s expression changed with every sentence, and he finally sighed with exasperation. This seemed about the right reaction. It was scarier for the Demon Lord to have him accept it all from the get-go.

“So, what...? This is like some fantasy world from those kids’ cartoons?”

“In short, yes.”

After the immediate response, Tahara stayed silent for a long time. All the

while, he would look up at the ceiling with a tired expression or scratch his cheek, but the Demon Lord understood. His very creator understood. Tahara's brain was churning at full-speed, calculating all sorts of hypotheses and conclusions.

"Well, I know you wouldn't prank people like this if hell froze over..."

"Yu's here, too, by the way."

"Ugh! That wacko!? Are you kidding me!?"

"I want you to cooperate with Yu on projects here."

While casually lighting a cigarette, the Demon Lord nearly burst out laughing. Tahara's reaction toward Yu seemed exactly the same as his.

(She's pretty, but scary... Why did I have to make her like that?)

The Demon Lord would have slapped his past self if he could have. Tahara, meanwhile, seemed to have finally calmed down, and spoke with a tired expression.

"Just one thing I want to ask you, Mister Secretary."

"What is it?"

"Are you sure this is a world where the Empire doesn't exist?"

"Without a doubt. I guarantee it."

Hearing this, Tahara let out a sigh in relief, before lighting a cigarette. He smoked nearly as much as his boss.

After smoking down a portion of his cigarette, and with a more collected attitude, Tahara spoke again.

"Feels weird saying it in front of you, Mister Secretary. But if there's no Empire in this world, I couldn't be happier. Don't know... how you feel about it, though."

Starting with some timidity, Tahara finished the sentence making firm eye contact with the Demon Lord. Of course, for Akira Ono (unlike Hakuto Kunai) the Empire was just a backdrop to the Game. Just the stage he set for his fight-to-the-death survival game. While he had created detailed lore to further

engross the players into the game, it didn't really affect gameplay. In fact, he was sure that not many of the players were dedicated enough to read page after page of novels he had written in the game. For any player who hadn't delved into the lore, they must have only known the Empire as the host of the Game.

"No need to hold back for my sake. We are no longer bound by the Empire."

"Is that so? Then I've got some follow-ups... What are you trying to do in this world? Do you want to go back to the old world at some point? What do you want from us here?"

Those were difficult questions. Not because the Demon Lord was trying to gauge which answers would satisfy Tahara, but because even the Demon Lord hadn't finalized some decisions nor his final goal. To regain all of his admin features was one thing, but he didn't even know if it was possible to return to his own world at any point, with or without any secrets regarding the Ember Angel. Even if he could go back, what would he do? It would just be the same old job and the same old days on repeat. Some day he would marry someone, build a family, and end up in a grave at some point.

(Hold on... then what happens to the advisors I've summoned? Even if they get transported back to their old world... the game doesn't exist anymore.)

The Demon Lord ended up at a base-level question. Akira Ono had ended the game in modern-day Japan. A harsher way to put it would be that he killed his advisors and the rest of that world, albeit indirectly. Returning his advisors to that non-existent world would be killing them all over again. An extremely cruel and selfish act.

"There's not much I can say now. But at least..."

Tahara's eyes stared into the Demon Lord's. A very quiet and strange time passed. His eyes also seemed to part through the veils of the Demon Lord's heart, trying to read everything in his mind.

"...I plan to go in the opposite direction of the Empire."

"...Really."

The Demon Lord ended his sentence with the same thing he had told Yu

before. Indeed, he didn't dream of following in those bloody footsteps. That would only mean to rule the world with brute force. The last thing he wanted in this fantasy world was the cycle of killing and revenge.

"...Fine by me. I do owe you a big one for helping me make all that money. Manami and I would have dropped dead on the streets without you."

"...About your sister..."

The Demon Lord couldn't help but trail off. Tahara's sister meant the world to him, to the point where it was sick. There was no mistaking that since it was written right into his backstory. How would Tahara feel being in a situation where he couldn't see his sister?

"It's fine. I'm sure she doesn't want a brother around who's doing some sketchy business. She's over at old-man Sogen's. I'm not worried about her."

Sogen was a grandpa character who appeared in one of Tahara's short stories, a priest of a venerated Shinto shrine and a famous land owner who had connections all the way up the ladder of the Empire. Hearing this, the Demon Lord couldn't help but feel so relieved that he had included such a character. If he hadn't, there was even a chance that Tahara would have demanded to be sent back to his old world, holding a gun to the Demon Lord's head.

"So, what do we do for the time being...?"

"First, we run this remote village. We have a Field Hospital, Hot Springs Resort, and Public Bath."

As the Demon Lord continued with explaining the work of reorganizing the entire village, training the employees, running a successful business, dealing with complaints, rubbing elbows with nobles, and babysitting, Tahara's expression twisted and turned, in an almost amusing way.

"Who do you think I am, some blue, cat-model robot!?"

"You are a certified genius... You can do it. I have no doubt in my mind."

"Urgh! Agh... Gagh..."

Tahara jumped up, wearing a strange expression, all of a sudden. This was the same reaction Yu had once shown.

“S-Something just shocked me... What the...”

“Are you not feeling well? Have Yu take a look.”

“Don’t! Give her the chance, and she’ll slice me up into bits!”

(That’s a little harsh, Tahara.)

“Ugh! Crazy b... I-If it isn’t Yu... Ha ha ha...”

They turned around to see Yu, wearing a yukata after her bath. While her rosy cheeks added to her beauty, her eyes instilled terror in the two men. Even the Demon Lord subtly looked away.

“Who is that, Master Demon Lord?”

“You have a perverted face... You must work for the Demon Lord!”

“...Pretty color. He’s nice.”

Aku, Luna, and Tron chimed in from behind Yu, setting off a commotion in the common area. The Demon Lord was confident that Tahara the Genius would take care of everything, including the very situation they were in.

(I’m finally relieved of babysitting duty... I mean, I’m only delegating tasks. Now, I better prepare to welcome the Madame.)

And so, the Demon Lord’s ridiculously powerful task force was assembling. They were nothing but incredible threats to the rest of the world, so it was only natural that this party would become the one at the center of the chaos that would take the entire world by storm.

Isami Tahara

Race: Human — Age: 31

Weapon A Lot of Guns

Selected each time from his arsenal of 47. He wields all sorts of firearms, from historical collectibles to sniper rifles. The guns adore Tahara, and spray his enemies with all bullets and no mercy. They usually reside in another dimension, but emerge during combat and float mid-air, pointed in all directions. Infinite ammo.

Armor Kevlar Jacket

With holsters all over his body, he can quickly draw further guns. This jacket also protects him well against blades, in case Tahara finds himself in close combat. Infinite Durability.

Item Night-Vision Goggles Allows him to see, even in the dead of night. A powerful item that grants +20% to Accuracy every time it's equipped.

Item Lucky Seven

Cigarettes made by the Empire. Heals 40 Stamina. He has no preference for the brand, and carries a few packs from different brands.

Level: 1 — HP: 5000/5000 — Stamina: 600/600 — Attack: 50 (+Random) — Defense: 40 (+12) — Dexterity: 50 — Magic: 0 — Magic Defense: 0

Equipped Skills: First: **Double Tap** Second: **Bulletscreen** Third: **Spray 'N' Pray**
Combat Skills: **Grenade, Lock Down, Napalm, Forerunner, Big Boom, Lock-On, Avenger, Counter Strike, Break-Neck, Strategist** Survival Skills: **Propaganda, Disable Traps, Trap Knowledge, Artisan, Fireworks, Troll, Recover, Sticky Fingers, Phantom Thief, God's Speed, Academic, Medicine, Gambler** Special Abilities: **Certified Genius**, etc...

The Changing Village

—The Public Bath in the village of Rabbi, a few days later.

“Ahh... My heart’s hippity hippity...!”

“My skin’s hoppity hoppity...!”

The Bunnies were in the public bath after finishing their field work for the morning. This was an incredible change of scenery, considering that the entire village was struggling to find enough water for their fields just the other day. Now, the push of a button produced as much water, hot or cold, as they liked. In front of the long line of little stools, there was an unbelievably well-polished mirror for each person. From the strange faucet above the station (a shower), hot water came out with great pressure. The Bunnies couldn’t believe the sensation of wetting their heads with it. To boot, there was a mountain of soap, which the Bunnies thought was only reserved for the nobles and the richest. While they had started to warm up to soap, they didn’t yet fully understand it and stayed away from using shampoo or conditioner, but it surely wouldn’t be long before they gave them a try.

“Hoppity hop! Clean up in the cold bath!”

Several kids were playing in the cold bath, which was a common sight for public baths. The public bath was opened to the Bunnies for free, and open 24 hours a day. As a result, most of them used the facility in the morning or at night. While the floor and the chairs needed to be washed, the bath water was automatically circulated to keep it constantly clean.

While the public bath had relatively few things to clean, the hot springs resort was a different story. Even now, Tahara was training the Bunnies on how to clean the place in great detail.

“Listen up. Clean the bathing area with a deck brush or scrub brush, like this one. Don’t skimp on cleaners, either.”

Leading the pack with an example, Tahara started scrubbing the floor and walls. Some surfaces were tiles and others were stonework. Each surface had a different method of cleaning and a different brush to use. Since everyone

walked around the hot springs barefoot, grime was quick to accumulate. As Tahara instructed them on how to clean each area, the Bunnies studiously followed his instructions. After having these incredible facilities built in their village, and now that bread and vegetables were being delivered to them daily, the naturally-honest Bunnies were giving it their all to somehow repay the favors done for them.

After a series of cleaning demonstrations, Tahara headed to the common area without so much as a break. Waiting there were Kyon and Momo, wearing their Bunny Suits.

“Bunny Suits at a hot springs resort, huh? I had my doubts at first, but it’s looking pretty good. Real rabbit people, after all.”

“Th-This outfit’s... embarrassing! ...Hoppity.”

“You are all perverted, hippity.”

Covering their breasts, they gave Tahara a begrudging look, but he was unaffected. To him, the only real woman in existence was his sister.

“You just gotta get used to it already. Shake your ass, while you’re at it. Give them a show.”

“No! Way! Hoppity!”

“Hurl! ...I mean, hippity.”

“What’s important’s how you greet customers. Let’s go over it again. Take nice, deep bows, and keep your head down for at least three whole seconds. Don’t forget to smile and enunciate.”

While Tahara slaved away, the Demon Lord was somehow topless in an examination room in the hospital being examined by Yu. Awkwardly sitting on the chair, the Demon Lord had his steel-wrought back turned to Yu, onto which she placed her stethoscope and donned an elated expression.

“I think I’m as healthy as a bull...”

“No, sir. You must be examined regularly. You can’t be too careful. If something were to happen to you, Mister Secretary...”

“You have a point...”

The Demon Lord couldn't see Yu's expression behind his back. It didn't help that what she was saying sounded completely normal. Moving the stethoscope away, Yu touched his back with her alabaster fingers. Her breathing sped up and her face grew red, as opposed to the Demon Lord, who began to lose his color. A beautiful contrast.

"Th-That's enough, don't you think...? I'll come to you if I'm ever not feeling well."

"No, Mister Secretary. I haven't finished your examination yet."

Yu's hands reached around to the front of his body. While pressing her bosom against his back, she grasped his pectorals with her fingers. This was straying further and further from any form of medical examination.

"It's so thick... and hard, and manly..."

"I-I have some matters I need to attend to... I'll see you next time."

"Ooh Mister Secretary...!"

Yu wore an unsatisfied look, but the Demon Lord rushed out of the examination room, grabbing his shirt and coat. Even with the beads of cold sweat on his brow, should one be envious or sympathetic of this man?

——Dona Dona's manor in the mining region to the west.

"Buttersauce, that conniving knave! How dare she insult me in such a manner!?"

While continuing to eat his lavish breakfast, Dona Dona slammed his fist on the table, hard. At the auction the other day, Madame Buttersauce had stolen the Music Box, a mysterious magical item, from under his nose. The more he remembered about that day, the angrier he got.

"That sort of piece will only be done justice in the care of a real noble like me! Then that blob of fat... The best collector in the country, my ass!"

Dona shouted, shaking his unsightly globs of flesh. Having a rare item was a necessity for someone like Dona Dona, who ruled over a large number of nobles. At times, such items could garner adoration much more effectively than money. Therefore, any noble with an influence worth a damn would search for

art to show off. Naturally, rare weapons or armor could serve the same purpose.

“42 gold medallions... T-T-That little...!” Unable to contain his anger anymore, Dona slammed his hands down onto the table. Several plated dishes flew off onto the floor, but he didn’t give them so much as a glance.

In auctions during recent years, the format of exclaiming bids out loud in competition with one another had been done away with. This method resulted in the final bidder often paying much more than they had expected, so the rules were changed with the unwritten understanding to keep things reasonable in mind. The solution was for everyone to write their bids on a piece of paper after seeing the auction piece, and place them in a box. This way no one paid above their maximum. Previously, people had won auctions in the heat of the moment, only to realize afterward that their final bid was a terrifying amount, and canceled the transaction. That was a situation they could avoid by adopting the new system. That’s what everyone thought at first, anyway.

However, this method came with its own set of brutal mind games. Everyone had only one shot, after all. If they wanted the piece badly, they had to put the money down for it. At the same time, no one knew how much everyone else was bidding for it. There were definitely times when a single bidder went overboard and paid much more than he should have.

“I believe your bid was adequate, sir...”

From behind Dona, a man standing with great posture finally spoke up. His name was Azul, a man Dona had hired from the Northern Nations. He was famous as an assassin in those parts. His appearance was almost too perfect for a man, and his skin as white as porcelain. Dona had initially hired him for his trade, but since he turned out to have a decent brain and looks, he served as a day-to-day butler.

“To think that your bid of 40 gold medallions would be outbid, sir...”

Initially, Dona was going to bid an outlandish 38 gold medallions for the Music Box. This seemed more than enough to squash the competition. However, remembering that Buttersauce was there, Dona had added the extra two to make it a sure-fire bet of 40 gold medallions. Without taking the difference in

values and culture into effect, that was the equivalent of 80 million dollars. Still, Buttersauce was the one called up as the victor... The nobles crammed into the auction house were all astounded at the declaration of her bid: 42 gold medallions. Finally, they had erupted in applause at Buttersauce's big play.

"42 gold medallions... The Madame always keeps us on our toes, doesn't she?"

"For that lady to pay that much... That must be one lucky magical item."

"I've heard that Sir Dona placed a bid of 40 gold medallions..."

"Oh! With a difference of only two gold medallions... What a dramatic victory."

"The Madame is the noble among nobles!"

"Let us toast to the victorious Madame Buttersauce!"

The storm of applause and respect that overwhelmed the room in an instant... That was the seed of a noble's power. From Dona Dona's perspective, his pride had been shattered for all to see. Losing that mind game... was devastating for his life as a noble.

"Damn... Damn! Azul! Can't you steal it somehow!?"

"Every noble in the country knows that the piece belongs to Lady Buttersauce. Stealing it is possible, but unwise."

"Then what should I do!? You want me to lie down and die!?"

"Why don't I reach out to the person who brought in this Music Box?"

Azul had only tried to gently steer his master away from madness. While he didn't have any sense of loyalty for this master, Azul would be out of a job if Dona fell from the ranks.

"Hm. Easy for you to say... The man seems to have gained a position like the 'third' advisor, somehow."

"That's..."

Naturally, even Azul had heard rumors about this man, but didn't expect that he was the one to have brought in the music box. As far as he could tell from

rumors in the city, the man was a terrifying being known as the Demon Lord. Someone very far off from the kindness he saw in the music box.

“Frustratingly, my wife, White, has told me I am strictly forbidden from making any contact with him. Harts was just nodding along, of course. That idiot.”

“...Is that so, sir.”

Azul frowned for a moment as Dona brazenly called White his wife. While Azul wasn't from this country, he didn't even want to imagine such a pure and elegant woman married to this man.

“No matter... One day, we'll rob him of everything. I can't wait to see the look on Butterscotch's face, then.”

“Yes, sir...”

Relieved that he at least held his master from doing anything rash today, Azul raised the danger level of the Demon Lord in his mind. Perhaps his character changed entirely depending on who told the story. Some called him a tycoon, some called him the Demon Lord, and others called him a noble from across the sea.

(With my master acting this way, we are sure to become enemies at some point...) While this was happening in Dona's manor, the village of Rabbi was concerned with a much more important matter. The arrival of Madame Butterscotch was approaching.

Under the Same Moon

“We better change out the fence. And expand that area over there...”

Nighttime. Tahara was walking around the village with a notepad in his hand. While there weren't any real light sources around, he had incredible night vision as a byproduct of being a super sniper. He continued taking notes as if it was light as day.

“Should we just shave down that mountain?”

He mentioned some crazy ideas from time to time, but he could do it.

Tahara's attacks are usually directed in all directions around him, but if all of them were to point at a single target, he could surely destroy an armored tank, so why would a mountain be out of the question?

"You're hard at work..."

Tahara turned around to find Yu wearing an enchanting smile. While her beauty was accentuated by the moonlight, any player of the Game would have jumped out of their skin upon seeing her in such darkness... and begged to be killed in the light, at least.

"The Secretary's counting on us, after all..."

Tahara responded with a can't-be-bothered expression, as if he was bothered by something. He was a man who loved laziness and doing nothing, after all. He was definitely not the type to take initiative on anything.

"You're behaving well yourself. I was waiting for the population to decline around here, thanks to you."

"How mean. I have always acted how Mister Secretary wants me to."

(That's the thing.)

Tahara thought, up until this point, that Yu was the one who had the best chance of understanding what their leader wanted. Unlike Shizuka, Yu was extremely smart, albeit crazy. She didn't do short-sighted things like fight for no reason, act or lie when she could easily be found out, or kill as many people as she could indiscriminately. She was the type to infiltrate deep... by the time everyone on the surface realized it, their world would be an irreversible hellscape. The worst type of serial killer.

"So, what does the Secretary want? I bet you've got a few good guesses, at least."

They never skimped on prep work or money when it was necessary. They schemed many steps ahead until they achieved the inevitable result they wanted, no matter how much blood, lamentation, and infamy they would reap along the way. In that sense, Tahara considered Hakuto Kunai and Yu to be very similar. Still, Tahara had no malice nor distaste for them. If they didn't operate that way, they wouldn't have survived in that world. There must have been

times when trapping and even killing someone was the only option to survive. Tahara, too, had a similar life.

“To be honest, I don’t get the whole picture, yet, either...”

“Huh... Didn’t expect that.”

Lighting a cigarette, Tahara subtly gauged Yu’s expression. She wasn’t lying, he determined. He didn’t have any reason to believe so other than his own intuition, which he trusted wholeheartedly.

“He did say that he wanted to go in a different direction than the Empire...”

“He did. Also that going down the same path twice would be boring.”

“And you’re okay with that, Yu?”

Tahara suspected that a path like this would become boring for her. The Yu he knew would have much preferred to trample all over a world filled with potential lab rats, making them surrender everything along the way.

“Tahara. I... touched the end of the world.”

“Here we go again with your nonsense...”

Tahara blew out some smoke while ruffling the hair on his head. Yu would often say some cryptic things out of the blue. She spoke of philosophical concepts in a weird phrasing you might expect from scientists on the brink of insanity.

“Besides, I feel the presence of God within the Secretary...”

“D-hah ha ha ha! What the... This again? The mystery of the human body? Evolution? Something like that again?”

“No, it’s much different. I sense it stronger and stronger with time. Don’t you feel it a little, too?”

With that, Yu walked away towards the hospital without another sound. Her lab coat could be seen dancing in the tar of night that obscured one’s vision even a few steps away. Tahara watched her leave in silence before eventually putting out the cigarette he was smoking in his portable ashtray. He began walking through the village again.

I feel the presence of God within the Secretary.

All the while considering the meaning of those words that repeated in his head.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord who had just been called God...

“Well, I knew live TV was too much to ask for...”

...was settled in the most expensive room of the resort, twiddling with the TV remote while lying on the down comforter of his futon. Right now, he looked just like a Japanese working Joe on a business trip. Not a god by any stretch of the imagination.

“No sweet dumplings in the room, either... Food’s a no-go too, I guess.”

According to its original setting, there were supposed to be all sorts of Japanese desserts placed in each room and, of course, the dining hall. The Demon Lord couldn’t find them anywhere. He concluded that the crackers in the Base must have been an exception.

“But some stuff gets restocked on its own. Not too bad.”

The Demon Lord had performed various experiments to see if items like soap and shampoo were replenished and renewed, just like the water. Now, he didn’t have to worry about those resources when running the business. If he would have had to craft them one by one, he seriously could never have had enough SP.

“Master Demon Lord! These hot springs really are amazing! The water! The steam!”

“Calm down, Aku.”

The Japanese-style sliding paper door opened as Aku, wearing a yellow yukata, came sliding into the futon with force. She apparently expected to sleep in the same futon as him, as if it was natural.

“I took what’s called an herb bath, today!”

“Hm... Yeah, I can smell the herbs on you, it’s nice.”

“Really? Hee hee hee...”

“You’re sleeping next to me again...?”

Still, the Demon Lord didn’t chase her out of the room. At the end of the day, he was easy on Aku. As he went to turn off the lights with the remote to go to bed, stomping could be heard from the hallway.

“Aku! I told you to be my cuddle pillow today!”

Luna was wearing a yukata in her signature color, pink. Yu must have put it on her.

“Aku’s in my bed right now.”

“P-P-Pervert! What are you going to do to Aku!?”

“I don’t know what you’re imagining, but I wouldn’t throw that stone if I were you.”

Aku was always a fast sleeper, but perhaps aided by the hot springs, she had fallen asleep in no time. Even Luna fell quiet at seeing her asleep.

“F-Fine... Then I’ll sleep here, too.”

“No, you should go back to your room.”

“Shut up... I’m the lady of the village!”

With that, Luna curled into the futon on the other side of the Demon Lord as Aku. He was now sandwiched by a child and a flat-chested girl. The only thing the Demon Lord felt now was annoyance.

“This is seriously a pain...”

He couldn’t help but say it out loud this time. Luna cut back with her brazen attitude.

“I’m the lady of the village... I’m the top dog here...”

Luna’s eyes slowly closed at the comfort of a top-tier down comforter. Even a Holy Maiden must have never experienced such a soft bed (if one could call it that) before. Another marvel of the Empire’s technology, maximized in comfort and softness.

“Why is it... so soft... I can’t believe...”



Luna tossed and turned a few times as if to fully experience the softness, and her butt brushed the Demon Lord's left hand. Immediately, Luna screamed.

"Y-You...! You just touched my butt!"

"How many false accusations are you going to spread?"

"D-Don't you try and make excuses...! This bad hand is under arrest!"

Luna grabbed the Demon Lord's arm and made it her pillow. Was that all she wanted from the start?

"It's p-pretty hard... And the veins are t-twitching..."

"Stop saying it like that!"

While the weird argument continued in the bedroom for a while, the Demon Lord decided to leave the resort once everyone was asleep and have a smoke. It felt like there was so much to think about, but he couldn't quite wrap his head around it all.

(Tahara's here, and the Madame will arrive in a few days... This will speed up the improvements in the village, for sure.) Things were smooth sailing. Considering the fact that he was thrown into a fantasy world all alone, he was doing incredibly well. The thing was, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was forgetting something important. The Demon Lord desperately tried to remember what that was.

"Hey! What kind of pillow gets up on its own!?"

"I never resigned myself to the life of a pillow."

He turned around to see Luna, looking irritated.

"What are you doing alone this late? Y-You're not going crawl into a Bunny's bed, and..."

"Talking with you makes thinking seem stupid."

"Thinking? What about? About this village?"

"That's part of it."

Now that he had dragged so many people into this plan, he had to follow it

through. The Demon Lord had no intention of backing down against any opposition, from a position of power or otherwise. Looking up at the night sky, he exhaled a long string of smoke.

“Hey... Can I ask you something?”

“Hm?”

“Why did you choose this village? There are so many other places with better conditions.”

A poor, desolate village of demi-humans. Luna felt like no one in their right mind would have chosen this place as their headquarters. While the Demon Lord could have come up with plenty of reasons, like the village belonging to a Holy Maiden, and that he was broke, he decided to give a more vague answer that didn't seem so jaded.

“There were a few factors... But it seems like you and Aku are getting along well. It all kind of fell together.”

Perhaps there was some kind of meaning in meeting Aku early into his time in this world, and some meaning in meeting Luna, too. The Demon Lord kind of dodged the question by stating this concept that was prevalent in Japan.

“Fell together... Hey, just one more question?”

“What now?”

“Do you have any friends...?”

“Huh!?”

The Demon Lord let out a stupefied yelp at this question out of the blue. ‘Come on, loner,’ he nearly replied, but Luna's expression was dead serious, for once.

(What's going on, all of a sudden...?)

Confused by the question out of left field, the Demon Lord searched for an answer.

(Everyone makes a few friends in their life...)

He thought, but couldn't picture any friend of his. He recalled many

classmates, coworkers, bosses, and acquaintances, but the elusive important person remained hidden behind a thick layer of fog.

“Oh... So you’ve been calling me a loner all this time when you don’t have a friend yourself!”

“I’m not like you, loner!”

The Demon Lord puffed on his cigarette after Luna’s triumphant declaration. At this rate, he could earn the dishonorable moniker of the Demon Loner.

“How’d you get from talking about the village to friends, anyway?”

At this question, Luna showed some sign of hesitation, strange for her. After a while, she seemed to have made up her mind, and answered hesitantly: “If this place becomes famous... I thought, someone I know faraway might hear about it.”

Her words seemed like a devout prayer, almost making the Demon Lord stand up straight. Seeing Luna’s profile now, he could sense the aura of a Holy Maiden.

“...It’ll be famous. More than any village, town, or city in this entire world.” The Demon Lord guaranteed this with confidence. He sincerely believed that the world he had created and improved would never lose to anything else.

“H-Hmph... Keep working hard for my village!”

Shaking his head at Luna’s same-old attitude, the Demon Lord looked up at the night sky.

A few days later, Madame Buttersauce, an important figure of the nobles’ party scene, arrived at the village.

The Madame’s Visit

An extravagant carriage wearing the crest and flag of house Butterfly stopped at the entrance to the village of Rabbi. One servant after another climbed down from it, and finally they ceremoniously opened the carriage door. From within it emerged Buttersauce Butterfly herself, her massive body swaying to and fro. A celebrity of the party scene, she was the empress among the nobles’ wives,

garnering their frantic support and loyalty. When she said the sky was green, then it became so. Not even Dona Dona could find an opening in the solid army of madams. They were becoming a large force that was difficult to ignore.

The power structure of Holylight was fractured into numerous tiny pieces at the moment. As a nation, Holylight still ran with the three Holy Maidens and the Holy City at its core. While there was the Holy Church and Holy Knights' Order below them, the Church was both a bureau to select Holy Maidens and a school to train children talented in magic. As such, it was an apolitical organization.

Then there was a group of nobles led by Dona Dona. They ruled the vast mining region in West Holylight. Aided by some of their mines producing Spell Stones fit for the Water element, their financial strength was head-and-shoulders above the rest. With 'donations' to specific members of the Holy Knights' Order, Dona Dona and his men continued to grow their forces.

Then there was a group of hawks led by Marshall Harts, who led nobles near the border of Holylight to the north. While they had less money, they were united under an irreplaceable bond, forged through fighting together in war. Many of the Knights' Order followed this group, too. When it came to combat strength, no group came near Harts'.

While smaller in numbers, the patrons of the arts, led by Buttersauce and Butterscotch, could not be ignored. They held numerous rare items desired by nobles, and many of them were artists themselves. They garnered the respect and reverence of the masses. Often described as nobles among nobles, almost no one in this group would be caught fighting on the streets, as such would be to advertise their savagery. Buttersauce and Butterscotch led the wives of the southern nobles. Each and every noble's wife was proud and powerful — but if the husband had married into the wife's house? Forget about it. Such a husband was completely at the mercy of his wife. Many mines could be found in the south (mostly in Madame Butterfly's land), too, putting their financial strength comparable to Dona Dona's group.

Below all of these groups were the middle and lower classes. Further below them, underground, the Satanists curdled. At first glance, Holylight was a nation united by faith, but under the surface, it was terribly divided.

“Welcome, dear Madame...!”

The Demon Lord and Tahara, each wearing a tuxedo, performed an elegant bow with a hand to their chest. They both played their parts rather well. Seeing the pair, the Madame smiled. In contrast to her flashy appearance, she had a keen and critical eye for character and detail. These two, however, she found satisfactory.

(As good-looking as our last encounter...)

The Madame found the Demon Lord to be extremely attractive. He had a certain sense of dangerous allure only the worst criminals possessed, but for women with the nose to smell it out, this scent was irresistible. The man beside the Demon Lord, Tahara, was also an extremely dangerous man. Despite his humble attitude, his icy stare seemed to bring the Madame’s deepest desires to light, piercing through every last one of her organs. The Madame even vividly imagined him killing any opposition without hesitation and nonchalantly leaving the scene.

“What a pleasant village... It’s nothing like the rumors I’ve heard,” the Madame quietly blurted out, looking around at the village, surprised. The fence that surrounded the village had been completely redone, and the farms and houses had been relocated to preserve the scenery. The village appeared to have an open design with plenty of space, rather than just being deserted. For the Madame, who was accustomed to the bustling streets of the Holy City, the village was a welcome change in atmosphere.

“I appreciate your kind words, Madame, but we’ve only just begun. In a month or so, the village should be somewhat presentable. This place will become a heaven for all of the ladies.”

“I can see it... You’re not like the loads of other men who do nothing but talk a big game. The words you say and the things you show me all have weight.”

(The soap did the trick.)

The Demon Lord smirked internally.

In fact, the simple bar of soap did wonders to clean and refresh the Madame. In this country, where sand dust filled the air, just spending the day outdoors

got one covered in dust .

“Such an honor... But I guarantee that the facilities I’m about to show you will bring even more surprises and happiness to your life, Madame.”

“Ooh, how exciting.”

Despite the smiles on their faces, there was tension in the air. At this time, an old man wobbled out of the carriage, following the Madame.

“Hm. This is the village you’ve spoken of, Madame?”

“I told you to wait until I called you, old man!”

“Haf haf haf! Patience wears thin with age.”

He was an elderly noble, a heavy sword hanging from his waist. A blue wrap covered his eyes, and he carried a strange aura about him. Seeing the old man, the Demon Lord raised his guard a little.

“Madame, who may this gentleman be...?”

“I apologize for my last-minute guest... This geezer with one foot in his grave is Comando Sambo. As you can see, his eyes aren’t working. I thought he could use a nice little vacation before he kicks the bucket.”

“Harsh words as always, Madame... Respect your elders!”

“Can it, old man!”

The Madame introduced Sambo with a familiar sense of playful adversary. According to the Madame, he was a courageous man who used to serve as the right-hand man of Marshall Harts. A few years back, when he fought a Hellbeast that appeared in his land, he suffered an injury that cost him most of his vision. Hearing this, the Demon Lord and Tahara each wore a sympathetic expression. Making glancing eye contact, they sprung to action in order to conquer this unexpected obstacle.

“I am so sorry to hear that. However, I do have an extremely competent doctor in my employ here. She can heal your injury, sir, with no issue.”

“W-Who said that...!? Is that true!?”

Sambo walked over in the Demon Lord’s direction, his arms outstretched.

Gently holding one of his hands, Tahara spoke to him with sincerity.

“Sir... If you like, I will show you to her first thing.”

“Y-Yes... Please! Please! If there’s even the slightest chance, I will...!”

“That old man... I’m sorry to bring you more trouble.”

“No trouble at all. So, Tahara... Escort our guests, please,” the Demon Lord said with a smile, and Tahara led the Madame’s party to the field hospital. Watching them leave, the Demon Lord sent a Communication... To keep a certain someone under control, no doubt.

——The field hospital in the village of Rabbi.

“This is...”

“Please, come in.”

The Madame, whose jaw had hit the floor upon seeing the field hospital, continued inside, led by Tahara. The first thing she felt upon walking into the building was a perfectly controlled coolness. It was usually hot in Holylight, and while the Madame had the privilege of spending Ice and Wind Spell Stones to keep cool, Spell Stones could only affect a small area at a time. Cooling an entire building (like centralized AC) would cost an exorbitant amount of money in this world. The Madame, partially due to her physique, disliked the heat more than most. Oh, the countless hours she had spent devising a solution for her sweating. Now, to her amazement, she could feel her sweat subsiding as soon as she took a step into the building.

“It’s very cool in here... How many Spell Stones do you use?”

“Master Kunai... is an ingenious man.”

The Madame had asked Tahara, but the answer he gave was vaguer than she had hoped. This kind of response might have irritated others, but the Madame remained unaffected. In fact, it only added to the Demon Lord’s mysterious charm. There were only a few things in this world someone with as much power as the Madame didn’t understand, after all.

(I have never heard of or seen a building like this...)

The Madame walked, containing her excited cries from time to time. The

Madame had experienced most everything there was to experience in this world from rarities, extravagance, art, and parties... But she had never entered a modern building before.

“This is the exam room. Please...”

Tahara opened the door with a ceremonious gesture unbecoming of his appearance, showing the pair in.

“Welcome, Madame. And Mister Sambo...”

Inside, Yu greeted them with a bright smile. There was various equipment, medicine, a simple bed, blood pressure gauges, scales, and even an anatomical model.

(It's like I've wandered into another world...)

The Madame thought this sincerely. At this point, it was bordering on becoming comical. With a hearty slap on his back, the Madame sat Sambo down on the chair.

“Here, old man. Let's get it over with!”

“You are one pushy chick... No wonder men never stick around!”

“Shut your trap, old man! You've lost your mind!”

After watching their back and forth with a smile, Yu stripped the wrap off of Sambo's eyes with an ‘excuse me.’ There was a pair of clouded pupils and what resembled a red burn scar around his eyes.

“I apologize, young lady... It mustn't be nice to look at. I took the venom of a Red Keelback.”

“I see.”

“Now I can't make out much more than silhouettes... It would be wonderful if it could be improved, even a little.”

“There's nothing to worry about. In our country, we have already developed a medicine for this.”

Yu answered with comforting confidence. Sambo, still with some doubt, let out a giddy chuckle. Every doctor he had seen before had nothing they could do

about it. A powerful venom (such as that of a Red Keelback) was difficult for even magic to heal, and repairing a complex piece of anatomy like the eyes was impossible.

“Lie down here, please...”

Laying Sambo down on the cot, Yu produced a small vial from the medicine cabinet. It was only eye drops which gave a refreshing sensation. Uncapping the vial, Yu recalled her orders from earlier.

Treat him as if you’ve done so with medicine alone. I think your Hand of God might be too shocking for the Madame.

As soon as Yu administered the eye drops, Sambo let out a peculiar voice. Who could blame him? Such an effective eye drop didn’t exist in this world. Yu placed her thumb on Sambo’s eyes, and gently rubbed them as if to rub in the “medicine.” In a flash, her thumb morphed into a scalpel, and Yu shoved it deep into Sambo’s eyes. He let out a groan, but as soon as Yu’s hand left his face, Sambo’s vision drastically changed.

“Oh... Oh...!? Oh!”

Sambo looked left to right, up at the ceiling, then left and right again. His knotted, distorted vision was healed.

“I...I can see! My eyes! My eyes are back!”

“Really, old man...? You’re not playing!?”

“Oh, Madame! You’ve put on even more weight! What do you eat to keep bloating your physique!?”

“Shut your mouth, you walking corpse!”

The Madame smacked Sambo’s head with all of her might, knocking him off of the bed. Sambo kept laughing as he lay on the floor. Holding his gut, he rolled with laughter until it seemed difficult to breathe. After a while, his laughter shifted into sobs.

“I... I can see. I can see again...”

Seeing him this way, the Madame didn’t know what to say. While they had a long rollercoaster of a relationship, she had never seen him in tears before.

Eventually, Sambo wiped his tears, stood up straight, and unlatched his sword from his belt.

“Young lady, I owe you a great debt... Please accept this sword.”

The sword Sambo had offered had no frivolous decorations, and was made only to be used as a weapon. He had survived years on the battlefield with this sword at his side. A piece of his soul. Seeing this, the Madame yelled in frustration.

“Idiot! What beautiful young lady would want a hunk of metal like that!? And you call yourself a noble!?”

“Hunk of metal!? This sword is an heirloom of the Sambo family....”

“Can it! You there, please go throw this geezer back in the carriage!”

Tahara hesitated for a moment at the Madame’s command.

“...Go see Harts already. That old man will be happy to see you like this.”

“Th-That’s right! Sir Harts... Sambo will return!”

Sambo sprinted outside, and Tahara ran after him. After the two exited, the Madame let out a long sigh in the quiet exam room.

“I apologize for all of the commotion... I’ll pay you in his stead.”

“This is... Are you sure?”

What the Madame had produced from her pocket was a small box... containing a Holy Coin of Ramd. Its value depended on the market, but it was worth at least one hundred gold medallions. Even though Yu had never seen a Holy Coin before, she felt something mystical about it. This payment was ridiculously generous for a medical treatment.

“I’m sure. Thanks to you, two headstrong geezers are going to owe me, big time... And that’s worth a dozen Holy Coins of Ramd to me.”

The Madame laughed with a sense of undertone. In fact, she would not have paid it if she thought the treatment wasn’t worth the small fortune. She was bound to have some non-monetary gains to look forward to.

“Then I will accept... I feel like we’ll have a very good relationship, Madame.”

“What luck. As do I.”

Their eyes met and they exchanged smiles. Frighteningly, these women seemed to have a few things in common.

The Madame

(AKA Buttersauce Butterfly) Race: Human — Age: ??

Skills:

The Butterfly Curse A fattening curse cast upon her ancestor by a certain devil.

Natural-born Leader Talent for leading a group. Boosts Charisma.

Charismatic

Gives nation-wide fame. Largely boosts Charisma and Charm (Human).

Empress

Garners fear from men and endless support from women. Maximum modifier.

Judge of Character This skill improves with age. Evaluates an opponent's character.

Defy Destiny

?

The empress that rules the party scene in the capital. She garnered overwhelming support from the noble wives, forming a powerful association. In Holylight, she sets the trends. As her land contains numerous mines that produce Spell Stones suited for the Earth element, her wealth is bottomless.

The Madame at the Hot Springs Resort

(This is another building I've never seen before...)

After Sambo had left the village in a hurry, the Madame was led to the Hot Springs Resort by a male Bunny. It was a strange building she couldn't figure out how to describe. Thickets of an unfamiliar plant lined the edges of the building. It was a space where the Madame felt a sense of reverence she had never felt before.

(Harmony and relaxation, I suppose...)

Unlike her sister, the Madame had almost no interest in the arts. However, her eye for beauty was as keen as her sister's. With one look at the hot springs resort, she understood the essence of the place. The Madame's interest, in contrast to her sister, was in health and self-beautification.

(There's a sense of wonder just from looking at it...)

She felt time pass in a magical way in this simple village far from the hustle and bustle of the city. When she listened closely, she could even hear bells chime in the wind.

(How strange. It's like I'm a kid again...)

She wondered why. The Madame recalled her childhood for the first time in years. Back when she knew nothing, just walking a little farther down the road, through streets she didn't know, was a grand adventure. Most people would surely have a similar memory. Amidst the quiet chiming of bells, the Madame fell deeper into her distant memories. When they were kids, the Madame and her sister got along well. They explored their manor, and would even sneak out into town from time to time and be scolded together. Once, they had cracked open a watermelon in a field without anyone's permission and shared the fruit...

"What a wonderful melody..."

How did these chimes evoke in her the fragments of days long gone? The Madame couldn't help but wonder.

“...These are what we call ‘windchimes’ in our country.”

“Wind...chimes...”

The Demon Lord had appeared as if to answer the Madame’s call. With a ceremonious reach of the hand, he led the Madame into the resort.

“Allow me to formally welcome you... into my world.”

Those words were entrancing. As if they were bound by a powerful spell, they would linger in the Madame’s ears for a long time.

——The Hot Springs Resort, in the village of Rabbi.

“Welcome, Madame!”

The Madame and the Demon Lord proudly walked down an aisle of two lines of male Bunnies in tuxedos, all greeting the Madame. When they stood in front of the building, the clear glass door opened on its own, causing the Madame to jolt. She looked around to see that no one was manning the door. Inside, the building were two Bunnies dressed in scandalously revealing outfits — Kyon and Momo in their Bunny Suits. After intensive training by Tahara, he had given the green light that these two could maintain the expected level of customer service, albeit for a short amount of time. The outfit was so scandalous in fact that the Madame nearly blushed for them.

(What is with the dissonance between the quiet reverence of the building and these outfits...?)

The Madam couldn’t help but ponder. She was sure that the Demon Lord wouldn’t dress women like this without a good reason. Eventually, she reached a conclusion, recalling the themes of beauty and happiness that the Demon Lord had repeatedly mentioned to her.

“These two fruits of... no, the epitome of your quest...”

Both male and female Bunnies were genetically blessed when it came to physical attractiveness. Their allure would naturally grow with such a revealing outfit. Their entire bodies were weaponized, in a way. The Madame saw these two Bunnies as a representation that anyone who frequented the establishment could become as beautiful as them. A living advertisement, in

other words. Any woman who would visit the establishment would be greeted by the Bunnies who would remind them to keep working on their appearance. This must have been why the Demon Lord went through the trouble of dressing them in this way and standing them at the entrance.

“Hm...”

The Demon Lord remained silent for a considerable length of time before answering the Madame. Eventually, he spoke as if he had given up on something.

“Guilty as charged... I can’t keep any secrets from you, it seems?”

The Demon Lord made a goofy shrug. This wasn’t an attitude he showed often. Seeing this reaction, the Madame seemed immensely satisfied. She had finally bested him in some way.

When the Madame stepped into the building, though, she was astonished.

(No wonder he told me to take off my shoes...)

Below her feet was a wooden floor scrubbed as clean as a mirror. In fact, the Madame could see her own reflection in it. The most astonishing thing, however, were the paper doors.

“How... do you come up with such outlandish things...?”

What thought processes had led him to create such things? Some of the doors were even adorned with paintings so intricate that anyone would hesitate to touch them. The paintings ranged from cranes, turtles, or brightly colored butterflies. All of these paintings were in vibrant colors. The Madame saw it as a fine art piece more than a door. A masterwork with an exotic air and incredible charm.

“Turning such a masterpiece into a door... You really are...”

“This is called a Fusuma... They simply satisfy my taste.”

“T-Taste...”

Why in the world would he turn a priceless piece of art into a door? The Madame didn’t understand. As people would be touching it constantly, it was sure to be dirtied and eventually ruined. At this point, a lightbulb dinged above

the Madame's head.

"No matter how dirtied, beauty never fades... That's your message, isn't it?"

This was a sentiment the Madame could wholeheartedly agree with. A woman's process of self-beautification was filled with incredible efforts, and some of them were not always as clean as they seem under other circumstances. A woman's beauty was unachievable without those less-presentable efforts... The Madame could even consider this to be her personal motto.

"To prepare such a thing instead of stating it outright... Is this your idea of kindness? Or are you taunting women who haven't realized it?"

"Hm..."

The Demon Lord remained silent for a considerable time before finally speaking as if he had given up.

"For now... I'll say it's both."

"You sly dog."

The Madame couldn't help but smile. She was seeing a subtle and sensitive side of this grandiose and mystical man. The Madame saw this as the Demon Lord testing the wits of women, all the while feeling a glimpse of the man's humility.

As they walked down the hallway, the Madame spotted numerous vases, china, and framed paintings on the wall. Each one appeared to be a masterpiece in itself.

"My sister would freak... if she saw such a world filled with art..."

"Ha ha ha! That would be an honor."

When the Madame arrived at the entrance of the hot springs with bewildered eyes, Luna hurried out with a brimming smile.

"Oh, Madame! What took you so long!? Come on, hurry!"

"Wow, you're quite chipper today."

Normally, Luna didn't feel very comfortable around the Madame and her

influence... But today was another story. Luna could finally brag to her heart's content to the empress.

“Then I shall leave you now. Please enjoy your stay.”

As the Demon Lord said this, Luna gleefully tugged on the Madame's hand and pulled her into the hot springs area. A long silence remained in the hallway afterward. Eventually, the Demon Lord exhaled a long sigh, and mumbled to himself.

“I was just playing along... Hope I didn't peel the paint.”

Putting a cigarette in his mouth, the Demon Lord headed to the lobby with the satisfaction of a job well done.

——Hot Springs Resort, Women's Quarters.

“Come on, Madame. Let's go!”

“You really are in a good mood today, little Luna...”

After stripping down, they opened the door to find a sight the Madame had never even imagined before.



First of all, the area was enormous. There were bathtub-like structures in various shapes all around that filled the entire place with white steam. Tiles were neatly laid out throughout the entire floor. So meticulous, in fact, that the Madame was sure they were made and laid out by magic. In the distance, she could see a pathway laid out with flat rocks. The spaces in between the rocks were filled with small white pebbles. This was, indeed, almost a fantastical world for the Madame.

“Is all of it hot water...? I can’t believe it...”

“There’s a cold bath, too.”

That wasn’t really the point, the Madame thought, but decided to keep it to herself for now. There were so many things she didn’t understand without having Luna explain them to her. As Luna pressed some sort of button, a strand of forceful, thin streams of hot water came jetting out.

“Wh-What is this...!? What formation of Spell Stones could...!?”

“It’s called a shower. Now, let’s wash off first.”

“Allow me to wash your back, hoppity.”

With a bar of soap and towel in hand, Kyon approached and washed the Madame’s back with efficiency. With the Madame’s large body in mind, Kyon had practiced. As a result, Momo was left with a sore back, but her efforts seemed to pay off. While the Madame, since she couldn’t reach parts of her own back, was used to having someone wash it for her, the soap here felt especially refreshing. This was only natural, as the one-shot bar of soap made to be thrown in the arena and the top-shelf bar of soap kept at the Hot Springs Resort simply had different stats.

“I can feel every last speckle of dirt leave my skin...”

“Right? I can’t live without this anymore.”

Luna fervently washed herself, too. The more she scrubbed, the cleaner her skin became. In the end, Kyon rinsed the soap off of the Madame with the shower. The Madame felt like she had stripped an entire layer of skin. Now, Momo stood behind the Madame with a bottle of shampoo and conditioner,

washing her hair while massaging her scalp. Her practice against Kyon paid off, too. Through the rigorous training, every last strand of Kyon's fur, down to her ears, became silky smooth. Momo moved her fingers without saying a word (as Tahara had instructed her not to speak). Her fingers danced, as if to massage each strand of hair on the Madame's head. Feeling the dust from her hair and the dirt from her scalp wash away, she couldn't help but let out a moan.

"Ahhhh..."

The sun of Holylight shone harshly on the women here. The Madame could feel that damage heal by the second. True to an extent, the shampoo did cleanse her hair, and the conditioner did restore some damage. After another shower to rinse her scalp, the Madame mumbled in ecstasy.

"I feel so satisfied already..."

The Madame felt like this experience alone was worth paying several gold coins for. Hearing this, Luna jumped to object.

"Madame! What are you talking about!? I'm just braggi-... I mean, showing you the good stuff!"

"You're headstrong and honest as always, little Luna..."

The Madame couldn't help but chuckle, but it was refreshing in a way. Compared to her usual world of people wearing layers upon layers of masks, never speaking their mind or giving a straightforward answer — a world where hollow shells danced around each other — someone like Luna was practically an endangered species.

"Madame! Come on, let's go!"

"Yes, little Luna..."

The Madame Roars

"Go in here first, Madame. It's called a carbonic spring."

"This is a strange bath..."

Watching the tiny bubbles bunch together on the surface of the water, the

Madame showed a slight frown. Luna, on the other hand, didn't hesitate to dunk her whole body right in with a completely relaxed expression. The Madame couldn't imagine that Luna was faking this bliss. The Madame gingerly stepped into the spring before taking the plunge. The water wasn't too hot, rather it was just warm enough that she felt like she could stay in it for a long time.

With her eyes closed in satisfaction, Luna called to the Madame beside her. "Don't move, Madame... The bubbles will cling to you."

The Madame didn't understand what she meant at first until she saw it happen. Bubbles actually began to cling onto her skin.

"This is..."

The most notable benefit of a carbonic spring is improving circulation. It helps prevent high blood-pressure, diabetes, and blood clots, as well as mitigate the symptoms of these ailments. Better circulation relieved sensitivity to cold, as well as shoulder, back, and joint pains. For someone of the Madame's size, this was the perfect remedy.

"...Wonderful... I feel like my body is being set free..."

Since the Madame had spent most of her life dedicated to self-beautification, she immediately felt the effects of the hot spring. She had spent an incredible amount of money and time on her body. One could say she had a sense of super-awareness about her physicality. She had never gained this much weight by choice in the first place. A family gene was the culprit of that, and her sister (along with her departed parents) all had mountainous statures. When she was still a child, the Madame was ridiculed and insulted by other nobles, and lived through miserable experiences on the party scene. Those harsh times drove the Madame to the way of self-beautification and her sister to find beauty in art.

"Oh, Madame... This water works wonders on your skin, too."

With that, Luna gently splashed her face with water. She wasn't lying. Carbonic spring water worked as a sort of gentle cleanser and prevented damage to the skin. Hearing this, the Madame hurried to splash water onto her face, too.

“The damage on my skin...”

Of course, these effects weren't exactly immediate, save for a very subtle effect. Still, the Madame could sense the spring water improving her skin.

“Alright, Madame! Let's go to the next one!”

“Wha... H-Hold on, little Luna...”

“Come on!”

Pulling the Madame out of the tub with no mercy, Luna dragged her to the next spring. In fact, if only to the Madame, Luna served as the perfect tour guide of the facility. If left alone, the Madame would have spent hours in the carbonic spring. Luna was just about the only person in this world who could act so brazenly around her.

“The herbal bath is next. It smells so good!”

“Herbal, you say...”

She was taken to a series of five tubs, each big enough to fit the Madame easily. Some of them looked cute and cuddly while others were more seductive.

“This is my favorite!”

Luna jumped in the tub labeled ‘Pink & Gold.’ The others were labeled ‘Yellow Beam,’ ‘Night Fever,’ ‘Green Forest,’ and ‘Deep Blue.’ The Madame decided to take a bath in the emerald water, as it had a color she often liked to wear. This was the Green Forest, a bath that evoked the image of a crisp morning in the woods. There were 35 of these herbal (if you can call it that) baths in total, and the selection of five types changed every day. These baths were selected completely at random, making it impossible for even the Demon Lord to predict which baths would be implemented on a particular day.

“A forest... The scent is so refreshing.”

To boot, these tubs were designed to be enjoyed lying down. The tubs each had a metal headrest that was chilled by circulating cold water, allowing the occupant to stay in longer. It seemed quite easy to snooze away in one of these tubs.

“These scents just soak right into your skin!”

Watching Luna exclaim with joy, the Madame couldn't help but smile. The little Holy Maiden had changed a lot, recently. She was always this innocent, but also used to carry a dangerous air about her that made others keep their distance, as if she was always baring her fangs.

"Ah... You've fallen in love, little Luna."

"H-hah!? W-What do you mean!?"

"Don't try denying it. You're in love with that Demon Lord, aren't you?"

"D-D-Don't be stupid! Why would I ever...!?"

Seeing this reaction, the Madame chuckled. Even for someone who had never been in love before, Luna's reaction was just too obvious. It nearly made the Madame blush, too.

"He's a tough nut to crack, little Luna. He won't fall for any old broad. You have to really work on yourself."

As far as the Madame was considered, the Demon Lord was no ordinary existence. Building these facilities was one thing, but she had heard rumors that he defeated a gang of Satanists in an instant, and also that he blew up a medium-rank Devil as if he was playing with a toy. The Madame would not have been surprised to hear that he was something other than human. Even if he was, though, the Madame wouldn't mind it a bit.

(That Demon Lord sees significant value in me...)

If he didn't, she wouldn't have been treated so exceptionally. Then, she thought, all she had to do was further improve her value to him. For a high-power noble like her, a business-like relationship was not only commonplace, but preferred. Nothing was more comforting to her than a win-win situation.

"S-S-S-S-S-Stop talking about him already! We're going to the next one!"

"W-Wait, little Luna... Let me at least soak for a little bit."

"No! No no no!"

With a bright red face, Luna pulled the Madame up again and energetically led the way. Their next destination was a sauna. A salt sauna, at that. This particular amenity and the Madame were, apparently, destined to be.

“This is the salt sauna.”

“Salt...”

Holylight held a large mountain range to the south of it, cutting the nation off from the sea. Therefore, salt was an imported good here, and was far from cheap.

As Luna opened the door, a comfortable amount of steam flowed out. The contents of the room astonished the Madame. With a few chairs and benches here and there, there was a huge pile of salt in the middle of the room. More surprisingly, the floor was covered with enough salt to bury her ankles. The room was covered in a blanket of white.

“It’s like... snow. I’ve seen it in the city-states, a long time ago.”

While the Madame recalled a particular memory, that blanket of white literally fell from the sky at no cost. The white room in front of her now held a much different significance.

“Come, Madame. Sit down. I’ll show you the ropes.”

“A-Alright...”

Luna instructed proudly, as if she were a professor on the subject. Despite only learning all of this from Yu the other day, Luna acted as if she was a seasoned expert. Besides, using a salt sauna wasn’t particularly difficult. All she had to do was wait inside it until she started to sweat, then melt some salt on her skin before rubbing it in. After some time, she would rinse it off, and repeat the process. The effects of the sauna, however, were everything a woman could want. Performing this on the face would get rid of oils and grime, renewing her skin. While it could be dangerous to go too far, a moderate scrub was said to remove any hardened skin cells, brightening the skin overall.

“I tried this yesterday, and it worked wonders.”

“Really...?”

Luna realized that the Madame wasn’t entirely herself, but kept on with her lecture. The effect the salt had on her face was paltry compared to how it would affect her body. When rubbed into her body, the salt would have the

effect of washing out fat. This was a dream come true for the Madame. In any world, fat was difficult to get rid of. In her case, no matter how much she exercised, minded her diet, or tried any magical item she could get her hands on, the fat stubbornly remained. As she repeated the process of rubbing in salt, sweating, and rinsing, the Madame's expression changed. She could sense the effect of the routine. It drastically increased her metabolism and started burning away fat. What's more, she could target any specific portion of her body. If this room was an ordinary sauna with ordinary salt, the effects would vary by person, but would not be anywhere near immediate. Just like the wheel on the well, though, this facility was created as part of the Game. Its setting guaranteed results. Just as 2 plus 2 would equal 4, the Madame's skin would be revitalized, and her fat would melt. It was inevitable according to the facility's setting.

"See? Your skin will glow, and even your thighs will... Madame?"

"Ogh..."

"What's wrong, Madame!?"

"Ogh.... Orghhhhhhhhh!"

"Ahh!"

"Oooooohhhhhh yeahhhhhhhhh!"

The Madame roared. It was a thunderous roar, like that of a warrior on the battlefield. Who could have blamed her for it? She felt it. No, she heard it. She heard the thick layer of fat under her skin scream in agony. It screamed in terror as it faced down an inescapable enemy. Never before in her life could she hear that scream. Now it was ringing in her ears!

"W-What is it!? Are you mad!? Something you didn't like...?"

"Little Luna. I've made a decision."

"W-What...?"

"...I'm going to move to this village. Today."

"What!?"

—In the Pine room of the Hot Springs Resort, the same night.

There were two down futons in the room. Luna was already asleep in one of them. The Madame lay awake in the other, quietly looking up at the ceiling. She was met with more surprise seeing the interior of the room, the most astonishing part of which was the floor woven of strange grass. It was just a tatami floor, of course, but it was a very peculiar thing for the Madame. Once she was used to it, though, the flooring seemed strangely aesthetic. Perhaps it was the fact that it was of the Madame's favorite colors (along with its pleasant scent) that did the trick.

(At this rate, I think I'll actually fall asleep...) The Madame's large body always creaked her bed at night. No matter what bed she used, the annoying noises persisted. Frustrated by it, the Madame had become accustomed to sleepless nights. In fact, she had developed full-blown insomnia by this point. But now, the down futon made in the Empire cradled her body with ease. It even held the Madame up with its softness and overpowering resilience. It almost seemed to taunt her with a brazen smile, as if to say 'you think this is heavy?'

(Such a boisterous, handsome bed...)

Trustworthy, yet somehow annoying. With a mixed bag of emotions, the Madame could feel a good night's rest falling upon her for the first time in decades, as she was finally relieved from the maddening sound.

Move? You know someone of your status can't just up and move like that!

As slumber cradled her, the Madame recalled their earlier conversation: "Yes. A relocation by someone like me would never be accepted. Worst case scenario, they'll think I'm making allies underground to stage a coup."

"S-See...?"

"But there's one precedent... or loophole to that."

"Loophole?"

"That's right. Rehabilitation."

In fact, there were some cases where old nobles with terminal illnesses retired to the far countryside. There was also an example where a dying noble

had crashed at a war buddy's manor to spend his last days, albeit short, with his friend. In some cases, the patient had moved out of the country to rehabilitate under a renowned doctor. Since no country in this world had particularly advanced medicine, most no one bothered with such an ordeal, and even when they did, it was rarely approved. While these were extreme examples, they could pass as precedent if push came to shove. Of course, the Madame herself was completely healthy without any illness.

(Who cares what hoops I have to jump through?) The Madame thought, with unyielding determination. She remembered how much she had been put down because of her weight. Infamous on the party scene, she was always laughed at behind her back. As distant memories came flooding back, anger kindled within her. She had shut down the whispers and snickers with her power and influence, but she couldn't give up on becoming beautiful. With determination in mind, the Madame closed her eyes.

(I defy my fate...!)

Her determination and longing as a woman would fly miles above the thoughts of some Demon Lord and end up shaking up the entire nation.

The Demon Lord's Devious Scheme

(I didn't expect her to want to live here... This is more than anticipated.) The Demon Lord and the Madame were enjoying a leisurely breakfast in the lobby. A koto, a traditional Japanese harp, played on the speakers, adding to the atmosphere. While each of them had completely different intentions, they both shared a smile.

"I see. If there are no legal ramifications here, I don't mind at all."

"Thank you, Mister Demon Lord."

"I do have a few stipulations, however..."

Here it comes, the Madame thought. She was expecting him to ask for a price worthy of her unconventional request. Of course, the Madame was willing to do anything.

“After accounting for the space we need on our end, there are thirty rooms available to guests in this resort. I would like you to make a list of guests to stay here, Madame, and I want to leave the selection up to you.”

The Madame gasped. Considering her incredible experience from the day before, the Madame was sure that every woman in this world would want to frequent this facility... And they would pay any price. Now the Madame was being tasked with curating the guest list.

(There. I don't have to deal with some snotty nobles. I'll chuck that responsibility to her.) On the receiving end of the Demon Lord's intentions, the Madame was quaking. Since she was given free reign to approve or deny any particular guest, she would hold absolute power over that person, no matter who they were.

But the Demon Lord continued.

“And one more thing. No matter who it is, they can only stay a single night at a time.”

“A single night...”

(Duh. I gotta get a bunch of customers in and have them spread the word through the grapevine.) On the other hand of the Demon Lord's intentions, the Madame was quivering with elation. One night in this heavenly facility, then sent back to their land the next day. She imagined that everyone would be devastated. If she were in that predicament, she would kick and scream with all of her might.

“You really want to give me power, don't you, Mister Demon Lord...?”

Anyone who heard the rumors would have to plead with the Madame, and they wouldn't stop at once or twice. As for the people who already had the chance to experience the resort, they would be even more desperate. Naturally, these pleas would involve money and goods coming her way. No one in the Madame's circle was so destitute as to ask for a favor without providing compensation. To anyone looking in, she would seem to be standing in front of the pearly gates with absolute say over the list of those who could get in. Her popularity was only going to skyrocket.

“Power... Huh. I am just an ally to women in search of beauty.”

Hearing this, the Madame knew that there was no woman who didn't want for beauty. Regardless of age, a woman would always be a woman.

“So, you will have half the world under your thumb, Mister Demon Lord.”

Naturally, half of this world's population was men, and the other half women. To control all women meant placing half of the entire world in his grasp.

“Hm...”

The Demon Lord stayed silent for a considerable time before speaking again, softly.

“I don't wish to gain all. Half usually does the trick.”

The Demon Lord's honest response would have been ‘I'm talking about hot springs. What planet is she on?’ but he kept that to himself, and managed to whip up something mysteriously vague. He carried on his attitude that things would work out as long as he played along. From the outside, he was the embodiment of gravitas. In fact, one could say that the Madame was jumping to conclusions while the Demon Lord was too naïve. The Madame had spent most of her life in a power struggle, while the Demon Lord only wanted to earn money and clear his name.

“You are right. The women of this nation are strong... As you've observed, Mister Demon Lord.”

“Ha ha ha. How comforting.”

Despite their intentions missing each other by a mile, their strange win-win situation was secured. ‘Win-win’ was truly the best way to describe it: it involved beauty, power, popularity, money, and fame for both parties. All of these were the nitty-gritty of any world, and very valuable. For anyone looking to oppose the Demon Lord and The Madame, their tag team was nightmarish.

And this cunning Demon Lord didn't forget to say the right thing here. Oddly enough, it wasn't even empty flattery, but came from an honest observation.

“You look even more glowing than yesterday, Madame...”

“Oh, a master of flattery, as always...”

In fact, the Madame was used to being fed these lines. She had heard them all, and each time, she had been unaffected. In one ear and out the other.

...But this time, it was different. When the man in front of her — when the *Demon Lord* — said it, it carried a different weight.

“If you remember, Madame, I only speak the truth...”

The Demon Lord’s eyes pierced the Madame. His overwhelming presence froze even her.

“That’s right... and you also said...”

“That everything I say...”

“Becomes reality.”

They finished the sentence in unison. Cheerfully, the Madame laughed. The Demon Lord placed a hand on his chest, gesturing as if he had performed a magic trick. A very peaceful breakfast, indeed.

——The Holy Castle in Holylight.

“How... could this...”

Reading the delivered document, White felt a shiver go down her spine. To her surprise, Madame Buttersauce notified White that she wanted to rehabilitate in the village of Rabbi. How was this possible?

“You just hosted an extravagant party the other day...!”

White’s vision was failing. That Madame, always the center of the party and a connoisseur of everything flashy, recovering at the village of Rabbi, of all places? It wasn’t even funny. As far as White was aware, there was absolutely nothing in that village. She felt insulted, even mocked.

“Moving to such a desolate village... Oh!”

At this point, something sparked in her mind. The village of Rabbi was where Luna, the lady of the land, had recently volunteered to take full reigns. Ordinarily, White would have been happy for her sister maturing, but this time, it was different. Behind her sister, White could see the terrible shadow of the

Demon Lord looming.

“First my sister, and now the Madame of the Holy City...!”

White’s nightmare was only worsening. The empress of the party scene had incredible influence among the noble wives. What she said became the trend, which meant that she even had power over the economy. Any food she praised cleared off of shelves, and any restaurant she criticized practically went out of business. To some, the Madame was a walking time bomb, while she was the goddess of wealth to others. This is why she was one of the most difficult figures to handle in the country. For example, Marshall Harts kept himself at a great distance from her, while Dona Dona, when he wasn’t busy acting disgusted by her, occasionally took to brown-nosing the Madame. They both knew the dangers of making an enemy out of a group of powerful women.

“How did he manage to...? More importantly, what is he trying to... Oh!”

I only ask you to watch what I’m about to do and judge me for yourself. I have always shown who I am better than I explain it.

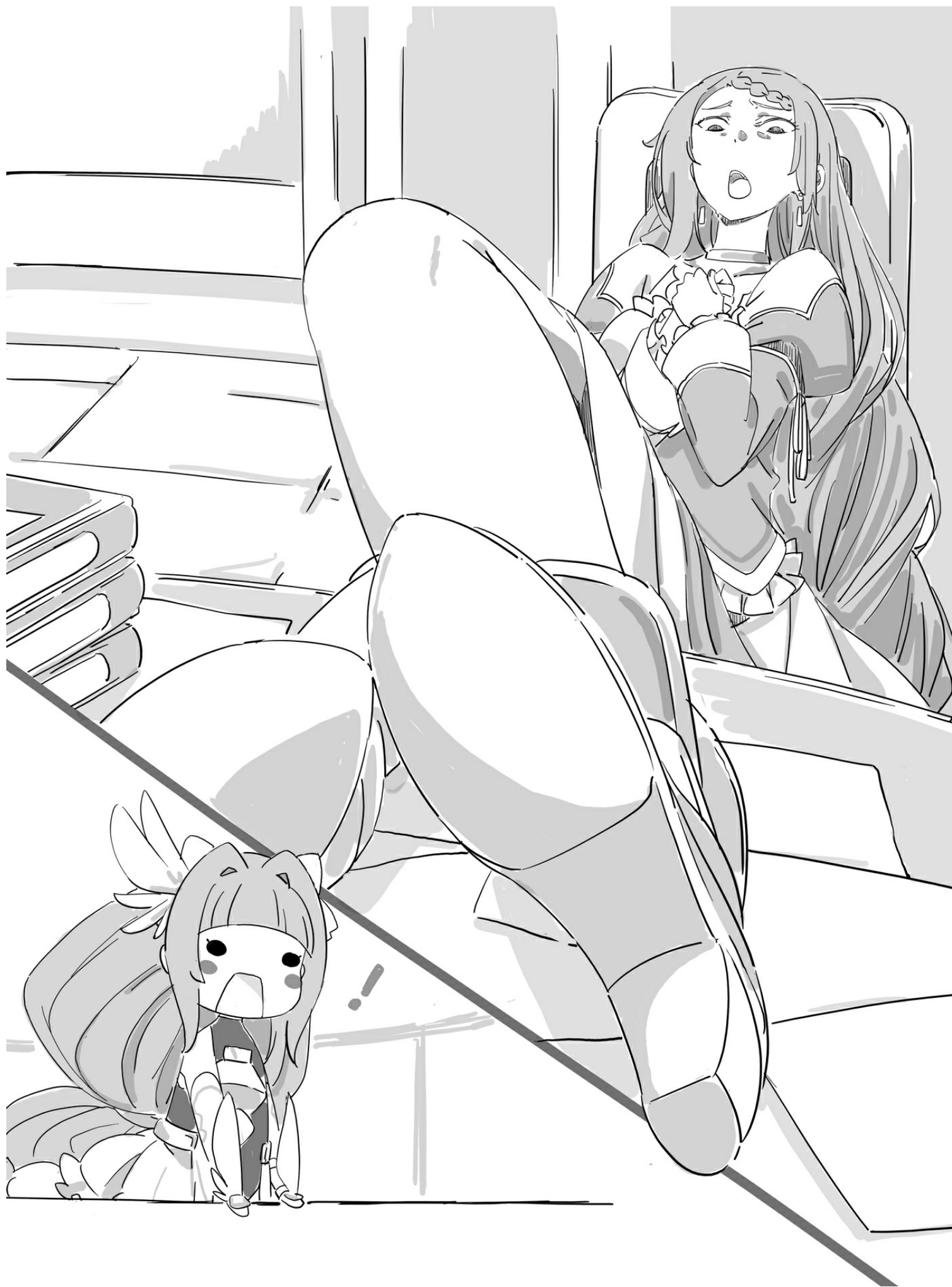
White recalled what the Demon Lord had said. Remembering it now, his declaration was astonishing. He really did show what he was capable of rather than tell it.

“I... see... That was a declaration of war...”

White couldn’t help but clench her fists. In the Holy Castle, facing her, the eldest of the Holy Maidens, the Demon Lord had made such a brazen declaration of war. White remembered how cocky and devious the Demon Lord appeared while he did so. A declaration in the dead center of the enemy’s headquarters, right to the face of the enemy’s leader? It was unheard of. With this realization, White had no other words to describe that man... but the Demon Lord.

“Queen, read this...”

Uncharacteristically, White shoved the document at Queen, who had been lounging with her feet up on the round table. She took the document and read it silently. Her leg seductively peered out of the slit in her skirt. She looked nothing like a government official reading an important document.



“Rehabilitation, huh... Why not?”

“Hey! It’s not that simple!”

“What does it matter who’s moving where?”

“Think about it, Queen. This means that the Madame has been broken in by the Demon Lord!”

Queen looked up at the ceiling, completely uninterested. Her lack of interest was so thorough that it was almost impressive to watch.

“Demon Lord, Demon Lord, Demon Lord... Luna has the hots for him. That’s it.”

“Hots for... How are you satisfied with simplifying things like that!?”

“Yeah, you haven’t seen her yet. I saw Luna’s dumbass at Yahooo... That dumb shit looked like a real woman.”

“What in the world are you talking about...!?”

While White’s anger grew hotter, Queen was still unaffected, her feet thrown up on the table, and her hands behind her head. The embodiment of a rebellious teen.

“That dumbass is in love... Just let her be.”

“In love...!? This is a national crisis!”

Seeing White scream her head off, Queen scoffed. For some reason, she looked upon White with pity. Unbelievably, Queen took her feet off of the table, and brought her hands in front of her chest.

“I guess you wouldn’t get it, sis. You’re such a square... I hope you find someone too. I’ll throw up a Holy Maiden prayer for you.”

“I don’t need your pity! I’m trying to have a serious conversation!”

Holding in a laugh, Queen gave a prayer. As soon as she closed her eyes and clasped her hands, Queen became a perfectly angelic girl. A picture-perfect Holy Maiden. Any man would have stopped and stared.

“Oh great... uh, who was it again? Up there... Make sure my sis doesn’t end

up an ol' maid, will you? ...And Sir Zero... I love you. You're the love of my life."

"You just wanted to get the last part out, didn't you!?"

"Sir Zero..."

"You're not done!?"

Another day at the Holy Castle filled with commotion.

20% Match

"...Oh, it's just you, Tahara."

"Just me, huh? I'm hard at work here."

In a room in the hot springs resort, Yu opened the door to find Tahara standing over a furlled out blueprint, writing down some notes. With a red pencil tucked behind his ear, he always looked like he was making racetrack predictions in a newspaper.

"Is that a map of the village? The placement of the facilities look different."

"Mm-hm."

"Do you... have a problem with the Secretary's placement of them?"

"The best places for things change when the situation changes. For your information, I already have the Secretary's permission."

"Oh. Then carry on."

"You..."

Yu's break-neck change in attitude left Tahara with a bitter expression. An award-worthy shift in tone.

"It's funny how you're worshipping the Secretary now... Didn't see that coming. So what, you just had a change of fetish or something?"

Yu had a type, and it was young, beautiful boys. She found pleasure in torturing and humiliating them, watching their faces distort in pain. She was a natural-born sadist. A man like Kunai didn't fit into that category by any stretch

of the imagination.

“Bunch of Bunny boys hopping around here, too...” Tahara mumbled, as he ran the pencil along the blueprint.

Most of the Bunnies were attractive, and there were, of course, children in the village, too. They were as attractive as boys could get. The Yu Tahara knew would have never managed to keep her hands off of them.

“Well... Nowadays, I’m not interested in any other man than the Secretary.”

“Alright then.”

Tahara couldn’t help but hope that Yu would stay a romantic. That would be the best for both his stomach and this world. If Yu were to bare her true nature, people would die like ants by the hundreds of thousands. All she had to do to destroy an entire nation was manufacture and spread a few highly infectious and lethal viruses.

“In any case, this is a big renovation project.”

“Yep. I’m thinking of divvying up the village into sections that would each serve a dedicated function.”

Tahara roughly stroked a few lines through the blueprint, partitioning the village into sections. Fortunately, while the village of Rabbi was short on population, it made up for it in size. Since many Bunnies had left the village altogether, there were many abandoned houses and farms, too.

“Something like this. Rehabilitation area, business area, common area, and Bunny area.”

“This will cost a lot.”

“You know... He did say he’d sell your holy coin thingy.”

“Really? My work came in handy, then.”

“Yeah. The Secretary was happy that it would be a good source of income.”

“Hh-hm... Hh-hh-hh-hm...”

Yu chuckled with glee and closed her eyes. Seeing her, Tahara couldn’t help but hope again for Yu to stay the romantic she had become. ‘For real, can you

do me this one thing?’ he wanted to ask out loud. If any more jobs were to fall in Tahara’s lap, he would start getting ulcers.

“Let’s see... If we’re making such drastic changes, why don’t we ask the Madame for her opinion on the matter?”

“...That’s a negative.”

The room seemed to chill when Tahara shot back with such a piercing tone. His blue-tinted eyes were staring at Yu. Tahara only gave this look when he was dead serious.

“In a sense, this is our castle. The Madame herself isn’t an issue, but we can’t give the likes of nobles the precedent of fucking with our territory. Did you lose your mind, Yu? Feel like dying today? *Did you forget what happened at the Sleepless Castle?*”

“...I’m sorry. I misspoke,” Yu said.

Tahara resumed his work. The sound of his pencil running along the paper echoed in the otherwise silent room. Hostility was in the air for a moment, but one of Tahara’s strong suits was not letting something like that linger.

“Alright! That’s about it.”

“Oh, we’re building more Bases, too.”

“The rehabilitation area’s going to be decked out with a reverent, relaxing air. And we’re going to push it.”

“On the other hand, the business area is pretty flashy... And you’ve written all sorts of things for my hospital.”

“Nothing but the truth.”

“I suppose you’re right... Hold on, Tahara... What’s with the standing bar!?”

“Huh? Everyone wants a cold one after taking a bath.”

“You sound like a dad... Manami’s going to start calling you an old man pretty soon.”

“Shut your damn mouth! Manami is an angel on earth! She’ll call me Big Brother until the day I die! She’s not like the rest of you!”

“...You should have yourself looked at one day.”

“You’re the doctor.”

Manami's Such an Angel – by Isami Tahara



BUNNY QUARTERS

Gather 'em up.
Major remodeling.
Bunny house.

Carrot Farms
C'est la vie!
Pump up the
fertilizer.

Another
set of wells.
The meat of the
farm (well said).

Politics? Nah,
that's too much
work. (Quotable)



PUBLIC
BATH

A commoner's escape
Price at 3 bronze coins
Garner support
Iced lattes



SIMPLE BOOTHS

Street food
Games
Shops
Every day's
a festival

Keep
everything
super
cheerful!



STANDING
BAR

The elixir of
life! A man's
best friend!

Chicken wings
Boiled tofu
Beef tongue
Seafood
(I'm getting
hungry.)



CASINO
(HOPEFULLY)

Various
gambling
Nutrition



KNICK
KNACKS
& APPAREL

People spend
money on vacation
Lots of nobles =
shops dying to
set up here.

Get that
sweet rent
money!



UNDERGROUND
CASINO

Gambling in hell
Losing it all
Loud voices...
Lots of noise...



RESTAURANTS

All of them
better taste
good

I want
ramen and
yakiniku.

Manami's a
great cook,
too. What
an angel



FIELD HOSPITAL

The witch's lair
Effing terrifying, lol
Seen it in a horror game
Slaughterhouse
Ghosts 'n' Goblins

HEALING
FOREST



(HOPEFULLY)

An evolved Base
Heals wounds



HOT SPRINGS
RESORT

A salon
for the nobles
32 rooms total.
We use 2 of them

I want to
take a bath
with Manami!

TO AKU'S VILLAGE

TO YAHOOO

TO THE HOLY CITY

—A certain inn in the Holy City.

The Demon Lord was sitting in a chair experimenting with something. He seemed to have been at this task since morning and a few beads of sweat were sitting on his forehead. The Demon Lord's body was enveloped in bright light once again. The window had been completely covered with curtains as to keep the light from escaping the room. Nothing else illuminated the room, and several locks kept the door shut. In the silent room, there was only the ball of light.

(My vision's fading...)

The Demon Lord's body had changed into a dragon's, and he looked around the room with a stare that could cut. Even in the dark, his eyes glowed an all-pervasive silver. He was Zero Kirisame... the other one.

(How to describe this feeling...)

When in the Demon Lord's body, Akira Ono felt the sort of comfort felt at a family holiday dinner. He was the root of all, and the harbinger of the beginning. When it all started, that character had worn his own name.

(On the other hand, this is like eating junk food in my apartment.) A vague image like that came to Akira's mind. He had spent a decade or so away from 'home' and in the dragon. In the sense that he had all the freedom, it seemed apt to compare that to living alone.

(What's this overflowing emotion...?)

A red-hot feeling, whirling like a mountain full of lava. It was the need for the spotlight. The need to look cool. The need to make a show. The need to make everyone cheer, to shock the audience, to make himself the center of everything. It was a primal human need.

(Nothing to be ashamed of. It's only natural.) Akira thought this with brazen confidence. He couldn't help but think it. Naturally, anyone would share this need. Most people are only held back by things like shame, shyness, and worries about society's perception. If set free from those mental restraints, anyone would strive to live a life in the spotlight.

(He might be... I might be a dragon.)

Well, anyone had the foundation to become a dragon. If they were allowed to. If they were permitted to. If they had the strength to. Everyone has the childish, secret desire to be the hero. To defeat the powerful and save the weak. To take on any enemy, no matter how powerful.

(I gotta be able to get back in command...)

From experience, Akira guessed that the Dragon would lay dormant again once he was satisfied with the show he put on. From now on, however, things would have to be different.

“I feel... an urge...” One of them said.

The Dragon punched his palm, and an aura flooded out of his body.

“I’ll beat the hell out of everything in my way...”

Rabid eyes glowed in the darkness.

“...I’m the strongest.”

The Dragon’s mouth crooked into a grin. Any evil that would stand before him was sure to taste hellfire. The Dragon’s skillset was much too focused on exterminating evil and those deemed to be the enemy. In a limited space, against a specific enemy, the Dragon was invincible. The word ‘undefeated’ on his back was no exaggeration.

“Just wait and see, you fucking Empire...!”

The Dragon stood up out of the chair, and his body was engulfed in light. When the light faded, there stood the Demon Lord, deeper and darker than a void of complete darkness. With no time to rest, the Demon Lord was taken over by the light, again. In the tireless cycle, this experimentation was bringing about a transformation, a little bit at a time. Not a transformation, in fact, but a fusion with an old companion. Akira was the Dragon himself when it all began. One day, Akira would control both the Demon Lord and the Dragon, bending them both to his will. It was only natural. He had created both of them, and lived together with each of them.

Yukikaze Storms In

——Main Street, the Holy City.

(I really have been overwhelmed lately...)

For the first time in a while, the Demon Lord was walking through the city alone. He enjoyed the carefree activity of strolling around alone, as fast or as slow as he wanted. With Aku or Luna, he couldn't help but match their pace. His strides were much wider, after all. The Demon Lord's physicality was top-notch in addition to his skills. Needless to say, his entire body was built like steel, but he also stood as tall as a model at 6'2". At the end of the day, he was an attractive man. Even when he was just walking down the street... he was noticeable.

"...I finally found you, Silver Fox."

"What!? Demon Lord!? Why!?"

He noticed the pair of adventurers he had met a few times before. One of them was a warrior with sporty, amber skin, and the other was a mage with alabaster skin. In a way, they were the two extremes of outdoor enthusiast and agoraphobe.

"Oh. It's been a while."

Even though he instinctively replied with some fake, implied undertone, he didn't even remember their names. Considering the hurricane that was his life recently, who could have blamed him? It's not like people had business cards to exchange in this world.

(Hm... Business cards, huh? That could be a hit.) After thinking so much about money lately, a business idea naturally popped up in his head. In reality, the only thing the village of Rabbi produced was carrots. It wasn't too bad of an idea to consider other products to manufacture.

"...Mister Fox. What are you doing in the Holy City?"

"A little errand at the Adventurers' Guild."

"...At the guild? What do you want to know?"

“About the dungeons up north, for example.”

In reality, he wanted to know about items that protected against magic, but that wasn't something he wanted to spread all over town. That would only advertise his weakness.

“...The workers know little about other countries. I will teach you.”

“Hold on, Yukikaze! Slow down a little!”

“...Then go home, Mikan. Go be a bag of pecans.”

“Who're you calling nuts!?”

(Alright. Yukikaze and Mikan, huh?)

As yuki meant snow and mikan meant tangerine in Japanese, their appearance seemed to reflect their names, making them easy to remember. Internally, the Demon Lord named this pair Yukimikan, or snow-tangerine.

“...There's a great place down the street, Mister Fox. As thanks for everything you've done, it's my treat.”

“I told you before, there's no need to thank me for it.”

“...Yes. You said it was something important.”

“That's right.”

As soon as the Demon Lord had said this, a pale hand gently grasped his. It felt like never-melting snow, glowing in a mystical white.

“...It's still daytime, but you can drink there, too.”

“Drink, huh...?”

The Demon Lord swallowed a ball of spit. As he recently had no time to himself, his life had been rather dry during that time.

“...This way.”

“I'll follow you. I'm not a child. You don't need to hold my hand.”

“...No. I'll get lost.”

(You'll get lost!?)

The Demon Lord nearly shouted this out of character, but somehow held it in.

(This girl looks like she should be reading books in the corner of a library... But she's acting like she's a klutz.) While the Demon Lord was taken aback by the difference between Yukikaze's appearance and her attitude, she continued.

"...Lead the way, Mikan."

"All right! Fine! I give up!"

Hearing this, the Demon Lord sensed that he wasn't exactly welcomed by the girl called Mikan. She was calling him the Demon Lord, after all. If anything, he saw that he was feared by her.

"...Love is a labyrinth."

(What is this girl saying...?)

The Demon Lord was taken to a bar, where a sign showed its name to be Kanpai. While it was still early in the day, the Demon Lord could hear a considerable number of guests, both male and female, engaging in drink and merriment from within.

"Three ales, over! I brought a new customer!"

"Hey, if it isn't Mikan. It's not every day you bring someone to...!?"

As soon as they walked in the door, the attention of the owner and every last customer was immediately focused on the Demon Lord.

(Did I do something wrong...? Wait, are these the people that were in the middle of the action during the attack?) Seeing the Demon Lord appear out of the blue, the bar erupted in commotion. After all, he was the hero who saved their lives.

"It's the famous Demon Lord! Good job, Mikan!"

"Oh, it's you!"

"Come sit with us! I'll buy you a drink!"

"Woah, who's that?"

"You dumbass! That's the gentleman who blew up Carnival!"

“Hey, go get everyone who isn’t doing anything!”

(Wait wait wait...)

With the patrons of the bar running to and fro, the bar was now housing a storm. All the Demon Lord wanted to do was ask a few questions about a dungeon or two. Now, he was in a whole ordeal.

“...Sit here, Mister Fox.”

“A-Alright.”

The Demon Lord followed the pair, and sat at a table by a wall. It didn’t look like this was the time and place for a quiet drink and conversation. The owner slammed the ale down on the table and thanked the Demon Lord.

“All the business owners around here can’t thank you enough. Drink all you want, it’s on the house!”

Slapping the Demon Lord’s shoulder, the owner gave a hearty laugh. She reminded him of the Madame in her energy that seemed to overwhelm even most men.

(In any case, I need a drink... Then we’ll talk.) He reached for the pint, but Yukikaze nabbed it from him before curling up on his lap.

“What are you doing...?”

“...I’ll help you drink it, Mister Fox.”

“Sorry. I can drink it on my own.”

(Where am I, in some sort of sleazy dive?)

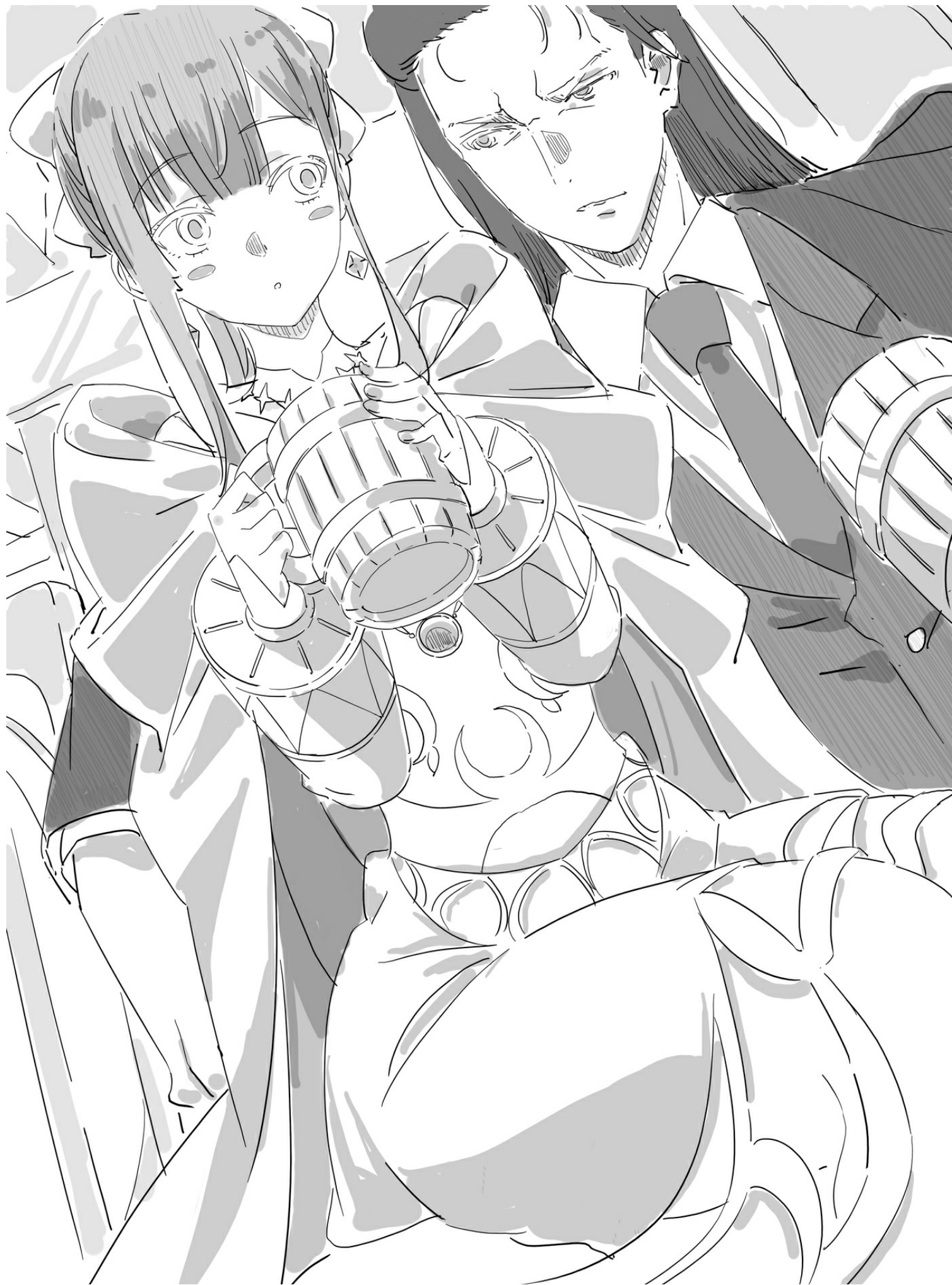
It looked ridiculous to have a girl on his lap in a bar in broad daylight. Yukikaze was a boy, anyway.

(In the first place, drinking has to be an uninterrupted, solitary act in freedom.) He conjured up some craft-beer-nerd nonsense before finally taking a sip of the ale.

“Mm. That’s good.”

So good, that the Demon Lord could feel like his troubles over the past few days were only there to let him truly enjoy this pint.

As the Demon Lord was relishing his first ale in a long time, Yukikaze suddenly robbed him of his pint, and drank the whole thing.



“It’s... Sticky in my throat... Mister Fox...”

“Don’t say it like that.”

The Demon Lord was getting worn out by everyone’s dangerous use of syntax. One of these days, he thought, he would be thrown into the slammer for some crime he didn’t commit.

“...Your lips touched it, and it touched my lips. It’s bublicious.”

“Please start speaking a real language.”

“You don’t change, do you, Yukikaze? Here, brought you some things to snack on.”

“Oh, these are...”

Boiled beans that resembled edamame, egg dishes, skewered meat wrapped in leaves, and stir-fried vegetables were placed on the table. All of them looked and smelled pretty good. However, remembering that the food in Yahooo was far from exquisite, the Demon Lord mentally braced himself before popping the end of a skewer in his mouth.

“It’s actually delicious...”

“You don’t have to act so surprised,” the owner remarked.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean anything by it... I had something similar in Yahooo, and it wasn’t nearly this good.”

“Ah, I get it. But don’t you come to my bar and expect some street-food crap from Yahooo.”

The owner laughed boisterously and returned behind the bar. Even for the man raised in the foodie nation of Japan, these dishes were completely acceptable. When the Demon Lord was enjoying the first good food he had had in a while, Yukikaze stole the skewer right out of his hand.

“Mm... It’s thick... and slimy... Mister Fox...”

“Stop! Talking like that!” The Demon Lord finished the second round of their routine.

(She’s not a klutz, she’s just a floozy!)

But of course, Yukikaze was more of a man-whore than either of those things.

“Let’s get to business, if you don’t mind. I don’t know much about the customs around here, or anything about how adventurers function. I would appreciate a detailed explanation.”

In truth, he wanted to ask about anti-magic as soon as he could, but the Demon Lord carefully cornered the conversation by starting with the occupation of the adventurer, along with their system and the purpose of their guild. What Yukikaze described was mostly the same as what the Demon Lord had imagined adventurers to be. They even fell into the clichés of defeating monsters to earn rewards and uncover treasures from dungeons and ruins. The guild accepted quests, and took a cut of the reward through introducing each quest to the right adventurer, as well as buy monster body parts and sell it to the market, for example. Furthermore, guilds with powerful adventurers seemed to do better than others. Because of this fact, headhunting was rampant in the industry, and ranking up meant better pay and benefits for the adventurer.

(They’re kind of like professional athletes.)

The Demon Lord imagined them as professional baseball or soccer players. The best players would be scouted to different teams with competitive offers, leaving them with the liberty to choose the best offer.

“...Some turn mercenary when they can’t get quests.”

“Mercenary, huh?”

Those without that kind of strength naturally had to do anything they could to put food on the table. This aspect seemed similar to the life of a professional athlete, too.

“...Sometimes you get nothing from a dungeon, and sometimes monsters are hard to come by.”

“I figured it would be the opposite of steady income.”

Unlike those with a 9-to-5 and a set salary, the adventurers were self-employed... and literally risked their lives doing their job. Upon further explanation, it became clear that a good number of them took on day-laborer

jobs, too. It was all too real and lacking in fantasy.

“...We’re at war, so a lot of people are out of work.”

“War?”

“...While we’re at war, it’s hard to take passage into the Northern Nations. They suspect spies and covert operatives.”

“So there are times when it’s peaceful.”

“...Uh-huh.”

Through the elongated battles with the Northern Nations, times of cease-fire seemed to have naturally formed. Which was only practical. There would have been no time for either side to spend on production or farming if they were at war year-round. At the end of a non-stop war like that, both sides would be left nothing more than cemeteries.

“That’s more information than I had hoped for. I appreciate it.”

“...To you, Mister Fox, I’ll tell anything.”

With that, Yukikaze glued herself to the Demon Lord. For some reason, even her hand was on his thigh. From her age and current position, she only looked like a worker and patron of some seedy nightclub.

“A-And... What kind of things do you find in the dungeons?”

“...Rub rub.”

“Stop rubbing your cheek against mine. I’m serious.”

“...I’m serious, too. I’m like Dekisugi.”

“What are you saying?”

After a considerable tooth-pulling on his part, the Demon Lord managed to ask about the type of things they find in dungeons. Generally speaking, weapons in this world are separated into five categories. The first was Common, comprised of weapons crafted by ordinary metal and animal hide. This one was pretty self-explanatory. The next was Hardcast, crafted by monster fangs, hide, scales, or the like. These, apparently, could only be made by a skilled craftsman. Then, there was Top-Tier, crafted from specific metals and materials. Humans

were unable to make any of these; Dwarves, for example, were adept at crafting these weapons. After that, there was Unique, only held by a handful of S ranking adventurers. Even Yukikaze didn't know much about these. The last category was Legendary. Luna had once bragged about it, since her staff was a Legendary.

"...We also look for undiscovered items. You can name it."

"Oh, that's interesting."

"...Let's think of a name together. Do you have any family names?"

"Like we're an expecting couple!?"

The Demon Lord snapped back at lightning speed, but he was definitely getting knocked off of his game. While it was a problem to be straight up ignored like he was by Mikan, being too touchy like Yukikaze caused a whole other problem for him. Still, he did gain a lot from his conversation with them. Finally, the Demon Lord got to what he wanted to ask all along.

"Are there any worthwhile pieces sold in the shops, for example?"

"...Anything widely available is mass-produced. Not very effective."

"What if budget wasn't an issue? Like items that defend well against magic, or swords that can cut through hard scales?"

"...You need a One-of-a-Kind to protect against a class 4 or 5 spell. I think your weapon could take on any enemy, though."

"Hm..."

In fact, Sodom's Fire was a weapon with the highest Attack possible in the game at 50. On that note, everyone defending the Sleepless Castle had a weapon with 50 Attack, but each of them had varied effects. Sodom's Fire burned its target, and Yu's Grenades dealt AOE damage by default.

(In any case... I better go down to one and find out for myself.)

He couldn't make all the decisions he needed from hearsay. It did seem necessary for him to make the trip himself. Fortunately, now that he had summoned Tahara, he had nothing to worry about when it came to leaving the village behind. In fact, the Demon Lord figured that Tahara would produce

better results than he could if given full reign.

“North, huh...? Well, I’ll make the trip one day.”

“...Mister Fox. If you’re going north, take me with you.”

“Take you?”

“...I may not look it, but I’m a B ranking adventurer. I’ll come in handy.”

Yukikaze tugged on the Demon Lord’s sleeve. It did feel wise to take a guide or someone experienced in the trip with him. It would be difficult to pry the advisors away from their tasks at the village, and it was too dangerous to take any of the youngsters. Tron the Firebrand, in particular, could be hunted down as soon as she set foot outside the village.

“All right. If it’s not too much trouble, I’ll take you up on it, soon. We should always stand on giants’ shoulders, first.”

“...You can count on me. I will help you.”

With glee, Yukikaze stared right into the Demon Lord’s eyes. While she said some bizarre things now and again, she was actually a very attractive girl, the Demon Lord realized. Even though she was a boy. If her and the Demon Lord were to travel alone, people might start taking notice of the obvious kidnapping.

“...But that’s not all. If you call now, we’ll throw in Mikan at no additional cost.”

“Says you! And what do you mean, ‘throw in’!?”

“Hm... Please and thank you, then.” The Demon Lord relented.

“No thank you! You two have fun.”

“...What kind of fun? Mikan’s a naughty girl.”

“You shut your mouth, already!”

Reconnaissance

——Yahooo, Holylight.

A man was visiting the Adventurers' Guild. With a worn-down helmet on his head, he was intently looking through the quest board.

(No new quests to take me out...)

Still a little incredulous, the man sighed and his shoulders relaxed. He was Wo Wungol, the leader of the infamous bandit gang, the Mole. Since his encounter with a Holy Maiden the other day, his life had not been the same. Despite having his rear end handed to him, he had managed to successfully sneak into the village of Rabbi and steal some water, night after night.

(They haven't noticed...? But they...)

For the first time in a while, he hadn't had to worry about water, but the privilege didn't last long. After the Demon Lord returned to the village, the bandit had barely been able to get close to the village of Rabbi. The Demon Lord and a Holy Maiden were bad enough, but now they seemed to have acquired some human resources. Like any seasoned bandit, Wo Wungol could sense danger a mile away. Upon seeing Yu and Tahara, he immediately halted his attempts to even approach the village.

(Dammit... These parts are getting harder and harder to live in.)

The eastern regions of Holylight were a wasteland, practically ignored by the rest of the country. This was precisely why a man like Wo Wungol could survive for so long out here. However, now that the Demon Lord and his people had moved in, things were changing. Drawing up the map of Holylight in his mind, the bandit considered where to run off to. While conditions were almost as destitute up north, there were militant forces everywhere, making it extremely dangerous. There wasn't much reward to be had, either. The center of the country was just as dangerous for him, considering it was under Queen's watch.

(So I'm left with west or south...? That's not good.)

The western and southern parts of the country were bountiful land ruled by the nobles and the Madame, which meant there were plenty of rewards to reap. While there were a good number of private militias, none of them had had much experience in real battle, so they weren't a match for this bandit gang. The problem was that the people who ruled those parts had the money to buy brute force, chiefly mercenaries and adventurers. Like hungry beasts, they

were always sniffing around for a pot of gold. If Wo Wungol were to start working in the south or west, he would soon become prey to one of them.

(I'm really running out of options, here...)

Thinking of his future, the Bandit couldn't help but feel gloomy. War raged on outside the country, and there were countless gangs of bandits and thieves more powerful than the Mole. He would either be hunted down by the government, go on the run from the adventurers chasing his bounty, or be consumed by a bigger bandit outfit than his. Wo Wungol's future seemed bleak no matter how you thought about it.

(Should I just become a mercenary, then...?)

The Northern Nations had been at war for a long time. It was a place where groups of mercenaries were used as convenient pawns, most being discarded entirely after the job was done. However, making a name out on the battlefield could lead to many offers from surrounding nations. Another option was to become part of a famous group, like the fearless Heaven's Ward or Five Stars, which were as organized as military forces, or join under a well-known bandit, like Redbeard, who led numerous pirate ships.

(Tsk. With the team I've got right now... It'd be different if I at least had Fuji.) Reminiscing about his old comrade, the bandit grit his teeth. The fierce warrior who tore up Holylight by his side had since become a Holy Maiden's lapdog. As Wo Wungol grunted and stared at the board, a nonchalant voice was heard from the entrance.

"What's up, miss? How's the quest coming along?"

(Crap, that guy...!)

Seeing Tahara waltz in, the bandit shrunk his neck into his shoulders and tugged his helmet down. He was the man who popped up in the village of Rabbi out of nowhere... and an extremely dangerous man at that.

"I'm sorry, sir. No one has accepted it, yet..."

"Hmm... Didn't think it'd be this hard to find an artisan for it."

"It is a long-forgotten trade, after all..."

“I could just dig it, but that defeats the purpose.”

The bandit picked up on that particular word. Digging in this world usually meant for Spell Stones, but he didn't seem to be talking about that.

“You won't get any water by digging a well anywhere in this country...”

“I'm telling you, it doesn't matter if we get water from it or not. I just need someone to build some sturdy wells.”

Thinking of the future, Tahara planned to build wells in various locations. Naturally, he wasn't looking for a water vein to come with it. As long as the Demon Lord could make more buckets, the wells would produce water regardless of how dry the land was.

“S-Still... Anyone would think of losing their pay or having failure deducted from it if there's no water after digging the well.”

It was only natural that the receptionist would feel this way. Who would want to accept a sketchy quest asking for a well without water? Anyone could easily picture the customer complaining about this until they refused to pay.

“Agh! Everyone in this country's got to broaden their minds! Everyone's so... cautious, I guess?”

Tahara had not been in this world for long. He had no way of knowing an adventurer's perspective on quests nor the lifestyle of artisans. Still in the dark, he had much to learn. Years later, Tahara would learn to master the systems of the trade like deposits and daily payouts as he earned the moniker of “the tycoon of Holylight”, but that's another story.

“I heard putting up quests was the mainstream here. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

It was the golden rule of an adventurer to be skeptical of sketchy jobs, and artisans did the same. After listening in on the conversation, the bandit couldn't help but jump in, disregarding the risk he was putting himself in.

“Bro... You're seriously looking for folks to dig a well?”

“Huh? I don't have time to put out a quest like this for the laughs. Are you on a job right now? Want to dig some wells?”

“You’re making me laugh. There’s no guarantee you’ll pay.”

“Guarantee, huh...? Would a contract do the trick?” Tahara said.

The bandit responded with booming laughter.

(He just doesn’t get it.)

“Who do you think I am? Some sort of high-and-mighty noble? The only thing a piece of paper like that would do is wipe my ass.”

Hearing this, Tahara blinked a few times, taken aback. He realized that the normality of this world was quite different from his own. If he wanted to hire some people, he had to adapt.

“I see. At this rate, I doubt anyone will trust a half-now, half-later offer... Looks like I need to show you people enough money to blow your preconceptions away if I want to hire some folks ASAP.”

“Heh. Enough money to blow away our preconceptions? Dream on, bro.”

With that, the bandit turned towards the exit and kept walking. He had spoken too much. Back in the day, Wo Wungol had dug several wells out of thirst. Remembering the suffering during those times, the excitement when he saw water, and the many wells that dried up in days after he spent so long digging them... Remembering those hopeless days, he couldn’t help but interject.

“So, Old Man... Did you give up on snooping on the village, or what?”

“W-What are you talking about...?”

The bandit turned around to see Tahara’s eyes piercing his soul. While his face was wearing a loose smile, his eyes were dead serious.

“I kept an eye on you for a while, but you seemed harmless. You look like you got some muscles. If you’re hurting for money, I’ve got a job for you.”

Tahara was hurting for manpower, in fact. He needed workers, of course, but he also needed some security at some point to defend the village.

“W-What a joke...”

The bandit spat out and rushed out of the door. Tahara watched him leave

with the same smile.

Those Who Carry the Weight

——Gatekeeper, a fortress in North Holylight.

A fortress facing the Northern Nations. This was the central hub of the militant nobles. The man in charge of the fortress was their leader, Marshall Harts himself. He wasn't the kind of man to smile easily. On this day, however, he was wearing a quiet smile.

"Welcome back, Sambo."

Standing up, Harts approached Sambo and clapped his shoulders several times, with force, before embracing him. Tears fell from Sambo's eyes at the warm welcome from his leader, whom he gave all of his adoration to. Harts wasn't Sambo's master, though; he was only the leader of the nobles who faced the Northern Nations. Still, their bond was akin to that of a knight and his squire, built over generations. The nobles felt nothing but trust in Harts. That was the intangible treasure that the rugged Harts had earned by always jumping into battles near the border to protect their land without a thought for self-preservation. Everyone here had fought back-to-back with one another, even sharing food in times of need. Their bond was unyielding, and could not be so much as scratched by any amount of money. In fact, many of them were sick of the corruption in the capital, and considered Harts the nation's leader.

The nobles on the border had all fought off the relentlessly invading Northern Nations, making them more militant than aristocratic. While nobles in the capital concerned themselves with parties and art, these ones fought on the frontlines. They scoffed at the trifles the central nobles were concerned with. There was only one person these battle-prone warriors trusted in their time of need, and Harts had the strength to not betray that trust. Now that he had such strength, regardless of his own feelings on the matter, he was in a very dangerous position.

"L-Lord Harts... I apologize that it took me so long to return here."

“No matter. Just having you here gives me courage.”

“Lord Harts...”

Harts made a loud clap, and numerous barrels were brought into the room. After breaking the lid with a chop, he shoved a goblet inside to scoop up some alcohol. Anyone would have pegged him for a warrior, but not a noble.

“...Today, we celebrate... the return of my friend.”

As Harts held up his goblet, the men surrounding him followed suit by scooping up a goblet full of drink and holding it up. It was still early in the day, but the room was filled with cheers: “With Lord Sambo back, we have nothing to fear!”

“Tonight, we drink until we drop!”

“Look at the smile on our leader’s face! Be merry!”

“Lord Sambo, I’ll later make sure you haven’t lost your touch in battle!”

Merriment ensued in this room of the fortress, and the loud voices of these men echoed through the entire building.

Just when the sun was beginning to set, Harts returned to his room.

(The Madame...)

In his simply-decorated room, Harts drank from his glass. One wasn’t enough, so he continued pouring drinks down his throat. He was conflicted by the joy of having his old friend back and the bitter taste of knowing that he owed a favor to someone he didn’t necessarily want to.

(The empress of the capital... Her and her sister are hard to deal with...) Harts only considered the Madame the leader of the party scene, and her sister someone foolishly wasting her life on art. They were the embodiment of nobility. While Harts himself was also a noble, he had both the body and mind of a warrior. Recently, he even felt that anyone with the title of nobility should be brought down. If the Holy Maidens represent the nation at the top, and warriors supported them by defending them from internal and external enemies, all Holylight needed was the people below them. Nobles were no longer necessary. These past few years, Harts couldn’t help but keep thinking

about this conclusion.

(Still, Sambo's return is huge...)

Sambo was sort of an emotional leader to the warriors. His presence would bring a huge boost in morale. To prove this point, the entire militia partied the night away at his return. This wasn't a debt that could be settled with a simple letter.

(How should I thank her...?)

No matter how much money Harts could scramble up, it would be pocket change to the Madame. On the other hand, he didn't have any pieces of art that she would find valuable. Harts couldn't deny it. He knew the answer to his question all along.

(...We are to defend her in her time of need.)

A request far more valuable than money. It was a matter of life and death, after all.

(What those sisters lack... is military strength.)

Harts was correct in his assessment. The Butterfly sisters did not possess their own militia. Sure, they could gather up as many mercenaries as they wanted, but mercenaries were only toy swords. In the face of a militia hardened by war, they might as well be trees waiting to be cut down.

(The other thing the sisters are lacking... is male support.)

Again, he was correct. On the flip side, the warring nobles also lacked female support. Some even publicly denounced them as nobles, calling them the savages of the north.

(Could she be planning a coup...!?)

Holylight was engulfed in utter turmoil. Harts couldn't help but consider the grim possibility. Who could have blamed him? With money and strength, and male and female support combined, he couldn't help but imagine that they would meet the requirements for some happening.

——A room deep within the Holy Castle.

In the Altar of Prayer deep within the Holy Castle, White was determined... to rescue her sister.

“It cannot wait another moment...”

She held in her hand the Holy Staff of Omega, a Legendary weapon. While its stats were powerful on its own, this holy staff stored magic within itself to perform a particular miracle: teleportation within Holylight. Only by expending all the magic stored in the staff, while also utilizing the magic circle at this altar to drastically boost her own magic, could White perform this miracle. She, of course, pictured the village of Rabbi in her mind. The Demon Lord had finally bared his teeth and ensnared the empress for his cause. As far as White was concerned, the time for idle observation was far behind her.

“Ember Angel, please lend me your strength...”

Her action had to be the rescue of her sister and fellow Holy Maiden, Luna. Whether she would decide to fight against or negotiate with the Demon Lord, her hands were tied as long as Luna was a hostage under his thumb.

As White prayed, light emanated from the magic circle. Ordinarily, a Holy Maiden would only leave the castle while heavily guarded, but White was acting alone today. She was facing the Demon Lord who took down the King of Devils, after all. If she took guards with her, it would only be to have them killed.

“Demon Lord... You won’t get away with this any longer! **Leap of the Ember Angel.**”

White’s body was engulfed in light and disappeared. When she opened her eyes, she was greeted by a village of Rabbi much different from the one she remembered.

“...What?”

She remembered it being a run-down, nearly empty village. In front of her, though, many people were hard at work dragging lumber and rock to and fro. Some carried hammers and pickaxes while others carried sandbags.

“What’s happening...?”

She couldn’t count how many people were at work, but she noticed many

magicians in the mix, as well as specialists paving roads. It was a construction project of an enormous scale that could change the layout of the entire area. At the edges of the village, there were at least twenty magicians wielding the Earth element to apparently build moats or stone walls and surround the village.

“I didn’t... make a mistake... did I...?”

White wandered into the village, dumbfounded by the sight around her. Suddenly, a shout was heard from someone sitting on a lookout tower. It was Tahara, who ordered this team with a blueprint in his hand.

“Hey, lady. You the magician with the Light element we asked for? It’s those Spell Stones, right there. They’re going to the business district, keep that in mind.”

“W-What!?”

“What the hell are you standing around for? Who shows up to a worksite in a white dress, anyway!? You think this is a joke? This ain’t a ball, lady!”

“W-W-What!?!?”

“Go ahead and get it done, will you? Oh, and clear out those pebbles in the drains. They’ll keep water from flowing.”

Before White could retort, Tahara moved on to giving directions to another worker. Because of her sincere nature, White began to pour her Light magic into the Spell Stones. Soon, she remembered what she had come here for.

“Why am I...!? Who is that obnoxious man, anyway!?”

“S-Sister... What are you doing here!?”

“Luna!?”

The dramatic reunion with her enslaved sister. In Luna’s hand was a carrot, while White held a Spell Stone glowing in a smooth light.

The White Angel and the Demon Lord

Upon seeing Luna, White squeezed out her voice, quivering. Even in the midst of the commotion, her clear voice resonated.

“Luna, we are leaving. That Demon Lord is playing tricks on your mind.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

White gritted her teeth at Luna’s nonchalant attitude. She had come here ready to fight for her sister with her life. Luna, on the other hand, held up the carrot in her hand, saying something stupid like: “Bigger than you thought, right?”

“Why are you boasting about your carrot...!? We’re going home to the Holy Castle.”

“Go home? I can’t. We’re renovating my land! Oh, right. We’re calling it ‘mad modding.’”

“...Mad...!?”

Were they going to send the world into madness, starting with this village? Imagining the end result, a shiver ran down White’s spine.

“Besides, how is he paying for such a large-scale construction!?”

“Something about selling a Holy Coin... I don’t really know.”

“He... s-sold a Holy Coin!?”

Whether or not they were talking about the same thing, the sisterly conversation went on as smooth as butter, and White was boiling. She respected tradition and considered the Holy Coins to be revered relics. As a basic moral, she was opposed to trading such relics. But this wasn’t all; White was in for far worse of a surprise.

“Luna. They’re all looking for you over there.”

Tron approached, flowing to and fro through the air. For some reason, she was holding a pinwheel. It came with the Hot Springs Resort, but Tron seemed to have taken a liking to it?

“Again? What now?”

“There’s a big rock in the way. Can you blow it up with your gold sparkles?”

“All right. No one can get anything done around here without me!”

“...Hurry up.”

“Hey, let go of my clothes! Oh, I’ll see you later, Sister! Kyon, show my sister to the Hot Springs.”

White could only watch as Luna and Tron rushed off. Her intuition as a Holy Maiden told her that the girl was definitely a mixed blood... a cursed Firebrand.

“This way... Hoppity!”

Taking White (now aghast) by the hand, Kyon showed her to the Hot Springs Resort. After seeing what she did, White was completely beside herself, unable to even react in shock at seeing the hot springs facility.

(Luna is already taken in by evil...)

It was only natural that White thought this. First the Demon Lord and now a Firebrand. No matter how leniently White assessed the situation, she couldn’t deny that Luna had lost her sense of obligation as a Holy Maiden and fell for the dominion of evil.

“Lady Luna will join you later. Please enjoy your bath... Hoppity.”

“Bath...”

“The sauna is the Madame’s favorite... Hoppity!”

“Sauna... The Madame...”

While she could only parrot words without emotion, White’s natural politeness drove her to follow the Bunny into the resort. She would have been astonished by so many things she saw along the way, if she only had any sort of mental capacity to feel anything at the moment.

(How can I deliver Luna from evil...?)

“There is a changing room inside. Please take your clothes off there before going in... Hoppity!”

Kyon left, having shown White the way, and she continued onward. Lost in thought, she had no mind to check her surroundings, and continued into the men’s quarters.

(The only way to liberate Luna must be to take down the Demon Lord, somehow...) White could think of a few miracles left behind by the Ember

Angel. These were what White had planned to use against the King of Devils to seal him away once again, should it have come to that. In order to use them, though, she needed a little more time.

(Bath, she said...)

White often cleansed herself before performing various rituals. Back in the day, she would cleanse together with Queen and Luna before performing ceremonies as a team. With this unexpected surge of nostalgia, White quickly stripped. She thought this might be the perfect opportunity to talk with Luna alone. In any world, nudity is a show of intimacy, romantically or otherwise. The conversation, too, could turn naked.

(This could be my last chance to convince Luna...)

With all of her clothes removed, White appeared to be a bona-fide angel. Her long, pink hair glowed as if it was coated with some protection, and her body was perfectly contoured, as if it was sculpted by the angels themselves. A million men would surrender at the sight of her breasts alone. Her appearance was mystically attractive, one could even spend hours staring at her shapely lips alone.

White opened the door that lead to the hot springs without so much as a thread on her body. Immediately, her vision was filled with white steam, enveloping her in a comfortable warmth.

(What is this...?)

White stopped in her tracks at something she had never seen before, let alone understood.

“These... are hot baths? All of them?”

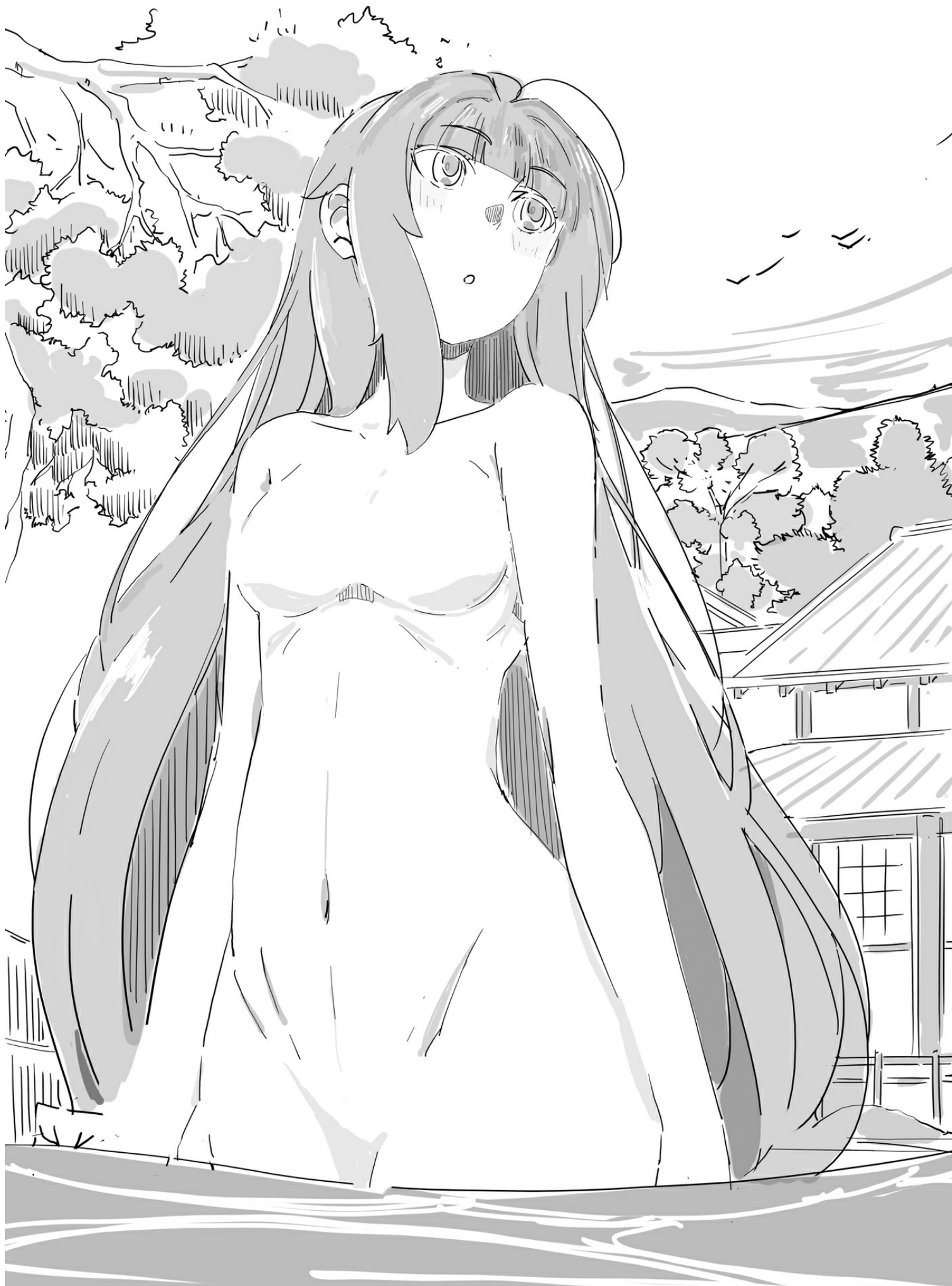
White had vaguely anticipated a tiny bathtub filled with purified water, whether it be cold or hot. Of course, the tub in the Holy Castle was much larger and more extravagant than the norm in this country, but compared to this facility, it was a child’s playroom. The hot springs could easily accommodate a hundred people at once.

“What is Luna... or that Demon Lord, rather, thinking...?”

Looking around, White noticed something more interesting. In the distance, she spotted a courtyard surrounded by rocks and strange vegetation. The area seemed filled with tranquility. Drawn by the strange allure, White walked to it.

(Another bath... Outside...!?)

The stargazing bath.



White had no idea what was going on, though. Why was there a bath outside? Why was it in such a tranquil garden? Why was the bath made out of rocks? She couldn't answer any of that, and everything about this space was beyond her capacity of understanding. Most shocking of all, however, was the cursed Demon Lord taking a bath with a defiant expression.

"D-Demon Lord!"

White couldn't help but scream at seeing her devious nemesis. She had forgotten that she was naked as the day she was born. The Demon Lord slowly turned around and raised a brow. He seemed composed, and almost too calm in the face of this surprise encounter.

"Hm... It's not every day we have someone like you infiltrate the place."

"Y-You ambushed me...!?"

"Hm..."

Spending a moment in contemplation after White shouted, the Demon Lord continued:

"This is a stargazing bath. Anyone who causes a ruckus here is either an uneducated child or incredibly brash. I would like to believe that you are neither..."

White was enraged at his taunting words. She braced herself to ask this evil existence one last question...

The gears in the Demon Lord's mind were spinning faster than they ever had before. If White were to let out a clichéd scream right here and now, his reputation would fall so hard it would crash and burn. In these situations, it seemed that the man would always take the blame. Comparing his situations to false accusations of sexual assault on a crowded train (a common concern for men in Japan), the Demon Lord secretly shuddered in terror. Because of that, his first move was to try and make sure that White wouldn't scream.

(I won't get thrown in jail for some stupid crime like 'ogling the Holy Maiden,' will I...?)

Raising his cup of sake from the tray floating on the water, he took a sip from

it. His gesture must have made him appear as calm as the breeze, but the Demon Lord was panicking on the inside, and his hand was ever-so-slightly shaking.

(Dammit! Why does shit hit the fan every time I'm taking a bath!?)

Was it a curse or a blessing? Despite the crowd of people working outside, he had decided to start drinking in the stargazing bath midday. And now he was burning White's naked body into his memory. A truly unforgivable and evil being.

(Why is this Holy Maiden in the village, anyway? And this is the men's quarters!)

The realization hit the Demon Lord. He didn't imagine that she mistakenly came in, since he had no idea that she was so lost in her thoughts that she couldn't see her surroundings.

(This isn't some kind of honey trap, is it...?)

The possibility came to his mind, but the Demon Lord discounted it immediately. Although there may be a time in the future when he would be subject to such a tactic, it would not be executed by the leader of the nation. Now this man's thought process led him to his usual stance.

"Well, you've come all this way. It seems you have something dire to bring to my attention. I consider myself to be rather open-minded, if I do say so myself."

Blowing smoke to see what would happen. The Demon Lord had begun to realize that this tactic proved surprisingly effective. Often, his opponent would lose composure at his intimidating presence and spill the beans on their own.

"Open-minded...!? How could you...!?"

"Before we begin, I must say this is a disturbing sight. Please."

With that, the Demon Lord handed her his towel. Finally, White realized that she was naked.

"Ah! Y-Y-Y-You saw me nak..."

"Why don't you join me in the tub? It would be a shame, and a great loss to the country, if you were to catch a cold."

“...!”

White was infuriated by the sarcastic proposal, but wrapped her body with the bath towel and jumped into the water. She seemed to be trying to cover her skin as much as possible. Her face was painted red with humiliation and anger. This was the first time any man had seen her naked, and he called it ‘disturbing.’ Pity the Holy Maiden.

“Now, let’s hear it. Why are you here...?”

Titling his cup back, he gazed up at the sky. Seeing this, White’s face twisted further in wrath. The Demon Lord was exuding an attitude that screamed that her naked body was not even worth looking at.

“Demon Lord. What are you doing with the Mada...ah!?”

As a gust of wind blew away the white steam, White lost her words. She realized what should have been obvious.

The Demon Lord was also naked. And his body was chiseled to the point of giving him an even further overwhelming presence. Now White blushed for another reason entirely.

“Is something the matter, Holy Maiden White? You won’t say that a leader of this nation is taken aback by a naked man, I’m sure.”

The Demon Lord chuckled brazenly before tying his long hair up with a black rubber band. The Demon Lord was losing count of how many he had had so far, but another battle against a Holy Maiden was about to commence.

The Steam-Veiled Duel

“Is something the matter, Holy Maiden White? You won’t say that a leader of this nation is taken aback by a naked man, I’m sure,” the Demon Lord declared with grand bravado. These words were steeped in his desperate plea that ‘me being naked isn’t a big deal! This isn’t sexual harassment, I swear!’

(If rumors start going around that I showed my ding dong to a Holy Maiden...)

He couldn’t imagine a fate better than being jailed for life or burned at the

stake with the bonus of carving his name into history as the most heinous sex offender. Drinking more from his cup, the Demon Lord glared up at the sky with a look as if to kill any god that was up there. No matter how many prime numbers he listed in his head, he kept remembering the nude encounter from a moment ago, which curdled a pool of lava in his loins. In accordance with the rest of his physique, the Demon Lord's... horn... was enormous, reminiscent of Gáe Bulg, the mythical spear said to penetrate all. With his entire body now a weapon, the Demon Lord let his gaze drift around the sky.

(Where does the blue sky end...?)

Despite gazing up at the heavens in the manner of Zhuge Liang, the ancient strategist, just as a semi couldn't stop on a dime, an active volcano needed time to cool.

"That's right... I feel nothing from your naked body!" White exclaimed.

"Wonderful. I'm glad we can focus on our conversation, then."

One party had her face bright red to the brim, while the other looked up with gritted teeth. At first glance, it would appear that they were, indeed, enemies.

"Now you have the Madame under your thumb. What are you doing to this country!?"

"Under my thumb? I'm insulted. Both Luna and Madame are staying in this village of their own volition. I have never once coerced anyone to do so."

"How do you have the gall to...!"

White couldn't help but approach the Demon Lord, and stare into his face. Despite her angered expression, she was mysteriously beautiful. Besides, although she had wrapped herself in the towel, her shoulders were exposed, along with the top of her twin peaks (that could ensnare the soul of any man alive), creating a long and deep canyon down the middle.

"Don't get too close to me. Your body's a little too much for me."

"Y-You...! H-H-H-How badly must you mock me!?"

"Mock you? I am always sincere. I only tell the truth."

"T-T-T-Truth...!?"

White quaked at the overwhelming humiliation and tears formed at her eyes. Ordinarily, she would not have been so overtaken by her emotions. Unlike her sisters, she had plenty of social skills and knew how to compose herself with elegance. However, this was the first time any man had seen her naked, and the first time she had seen any man naked. Worse, that man was the Demon Lord, whom she considered to be the root of evil. On top of that, he was calling her body ‘disturbing’ and ‘too much.’ After taking these comments at face value out of confusion, White’s heart was torn to shreds.

“As for the Madame, the water will show you, in a way.”

“How can this water show me anything...!?”

“Relax, and soak in it up to your shoulders.

With that, the Demon Lord shut his eyes as if to escape the sight of her. He figured that, if he turned to the darkness, the lava would subside. White was glaring at him for a few moments, but after the Demon Lord remained wordless and motionless, she reluctantly sunk into the water.

Some time of silence passed, save for the sound of construction outside. Tranquility filled the air. After spending a while with that non-sensual noise and darkness, the Demon Lord finally released his frown.

(Good. When there is light, there is always darkness. I am nothingness. I am inside nothingness.)

“Ah... Something’s... Ooh, my shoulders... Ahhh...!”

(Stop moaning like that! Why does she have to have a cute voice, too!?)

“W-What is this... I’ve never felt... something... so...!”

(Dammit! You’re doing it on purpose! Is that it!?)

Feeling the lava begin to resume its tumult, the Demon Lord muttered something. From a bystander’s perspective, it could have looked like the Holy Maiden cornering the Demon Lord.

“This stargazing bath not only revitalizes you, but separates you from your day-to-day. At this facility, you can forget about your life for a moment and recharge before tackling tomorrow.”

“Forget... my life....”

“There are other baths that help with dry skin and keep it moisturized, for example. It’s not a front that the Madame will rehabilitate here. The comfort you’re feeling now should be proof of that.”

With that, the Demon Lord presented her with a sake-filled cup. He kept his gaze forward, but still carried a persuasive attitude. He was trying to get White drunk to put everything about this encounter in the past.

“Y-You want me to drink this...?”

“Are you afraid of a drink offered by the Demon Lord? Even though your caution and cowardice as leader of the nation is one of the causes of the troubles of this country.”

“Y-You have no right to...! Anyway, you can’t poison me! **Angel’s Spoon!**”

As White activated her skill, her eyes gently glowed. This was a skill that detected any poison or harmful agent in a substance, acquired by those in particular positions in the Church. In turn, the Demon Lord replied harshly.

“As far as I’m concerned, the higher-ups of this nation are the real poison to it. They allow the majority of their people to suffer without a second thought. What’s worse, they don’t even try to break the status quo, nor propose any policies that could do so. In my country, we call people like them ‘useless.’”

No holds barred. In a sense, the Demon Lord was exuding powerful willpower to get out of his current predicament. Of course, all of that was said to save his skin, but it deeply resonated with White. She couldn’t counter anything the Demon Lord had just said.

“...I’m sure it appears that way from your point of view. It must be quite the show to see a child like me run around in vain.”

White powerlessly accepted the cup, and looked down at the sake. The clear liquid shimmered in the light, but White shone much brighter, with an indescribable sense of femininity about her.

(I can see how Helen caused the Trojan wars... In this country, I guess I should call her an angel.)

The Demon Lord was breathless as White appeared to have come to life out of a painting. The revered air about her had dissipated the lava in the Demon Lord's loins before he knew it. White tilted the cup, and the sake poured to her lips.

"This..."

In fact, the sake was also an item from the game, and had properties to recover Stamina. With moderation, normal sake had health benefits too. In Japan, it was even said to be the root of a hundred medicines.

"This is a drink from my country. It has been enjoyed for ages."

Taking the cup from White, the Demon Lord took a sip.

White let out a whisper about sharing the cup, but the Demon Lord was oblivious, and ruthlessly threw the sake down his throat. The truth was that they had already shared the cup when White took her first sip, but she must have been distracted in her sadness. The Demon Lord scoffed at her. As far as he could tell from the news, the average age of girls losing their virginity only declined by the year. It wasn't uncommon to hear stories of girls losing their virginity in their pre-teens. A woman worried about exchanging a kiss through a cup was an endangered species.

"What? Do you think our lips touched through the cup...? You're not a virgin girl, what are you..."

His disrespectful remark was cut short as he realized that he was speaking to a Holy Maiden. White's slender shoulders quivered as she squeezed out these words.

"...What if I am?"

His luck was bad and his timing was worse. White had just been thoroughly ridiculed by Queen the other day. To top it off, Queen had declared 'you're such a prude, Sis. You'll end up an old maid for sure.' Secretly, White was hurt. After hearing that her two younger sisters had found potential suitors, she was feeling left out.

"Oh, yes, I'm an old maid! I'm a virgin! Do you have a problem with that!?"

Aided by the open atmosphere of the stargazing bath and the buzz from the sake, White ended up saying something she never would have otherwise.

“N-No, I don’t have a problem. In fact, virtuous women are preferred. Why don’t you be proud of it?”

“How can I be proud of such a thing!? You’re making fun of me!”

“Not at all. Actually, I commend your stoicism.”

“Prude... Stoic... What do think I am, a golem...!?”

The Demon Lord, panicking on the inside that things had really hit the fan now, maintained a serious tone and stuck his hand into the black void and produced an item. An Angel’s Halo, armor worn on the head. As its name suggested, it was a glowing halo that floated above the wearer’s head. While its Defense was garbage at a mere 2, many female players wore it for its cute design. There was also an item called Devil’s Horns which served as its counterpart. Also quite popular despite its low Defense.

“W-What is... this...? How do you have the halo of an angel!?”

“I want to gift it to you, who lives up to the title of Holy Maiden.”

The Demon Lord gently placed the halo on White’s head. He wore a smile on his face, and even White had to admit that he was dashing. With his long hair tied behind his head, the Demon Lord was even rugged. His sculpted body, sharp appearance, and cunning wit were qualities of maturity White had never encountered in a man before.

“Keep at it, so you may wear this halo with pride. I am not your enemy...”

With that, the Demon Lord vanished into the steam. He had simply Quick Traveled to the changing room, but White was convinced that he had vanished into thin air.

“An Angel’s Halo... How would a Demon Lord...?”

White mumbled, her mind wandering. In contrast, there was only one thought in the Demon Lord’s head: ‘When a girl is upset, give her a present.’ A ridiculous philosophy that every woman out there would surely object to. For White, though... this item was nothing she could disregard. She rushed out of

the stargazing bath and stood in front of a mirror. The glimmering Angel's Halo floated above her head. White was breathless at its solemn beauty and divine illumination.

Northbound

The Demon Lord was smoking a cigarette in front of the hot springs resort, waiting for White to come out. While he had wrapped this encounter up without causing a scene, he was the kind of man to always follow through.

(It's just like a field trip... I'll be happy when I get her home safely.)

Eventually, White came out of the resort's entrance, but she was still wearing the halo above her head.

(She's still wearing it...? I mean, it does suit her perfectly.)

The Demon Lord just wanted to cheer her up by giving her a cute little angel-themed gift. He figured that the Holy Maiden would be into these things. While the Game itself was deadly, there were actually a lot of cute items to appeal to the female players, a significant portion of the player base. Some examples were floral dresses, gold bracelets, black and white French maid outfits, knee-high socks, platform boots and high heels, dog and cat onesies, giant cat paws, tails, pleated skirts, mini-skirts, even tube socks and navy-and-white striped panties for some reason. This just went to show how perverted the players of his game were.

"Holy Maiden White, did you come to this village by a carriage of some sort?"

"N-No..."

"You came alone?"

"Yes..."

White couldn't say any more. No matter who she was speaking to, she couldn't just mention miracles willy-nilly. White had to keep her answer vague.

"I see. Then I will escort you back to the Holy Castle."

“Huh? How in the world will you... Oh...!”

Without letting her get a word in edgewise, the Demon Lord pulled White close to him by her waist. He had no ulterior motives, he just wanted to be certain the leader of the nation had no chance of injuring herself in any way.

“U-Um! W-What are you going to do...?”

“You have nothing to worry about. Lean into me.”

He whispered in White’s ear in a low voice that reverberated in her eardrum. His strength and assertiveness defied any chance of resistance. The Demon Lord was entirely on another level from any man she had ever encountered before.

“Y-You’re... Ah!”

“...Hush. Enjoy the quiet in moments like this.”

The Demon Lord placed his index finger onto White’s lips as she was about to say something. The Demon Lord thought nothing of this, either. He just didn’t want her to bite her tongue in transit. Still, White began to flush, and her body became rigid.

“Wings, carry me away... **Quick Travel: Holy Castle.**”

As the Demon Lord spoke some fake incantation to conceal his skill, both of them vanished, and appeared in front of the Holy Castle in an instant. In White’s view, the familiar Holy Castle appeared. At this impossible event, White shuddered from head to toe in terror. Who could have blamed her? This was exactly the miracle she had performed earlier... a blessing of the Ember Angel.

“W-Who are you...!?”

“I did tell you once that seeing is much better than listening to rumors.”

“Oh...!”

White felt her heart swell. He had told her that during their meeting in the castle.

“You are returned, safe and sound. That’s all that matters.”

True, White was without a scratch. In fact, she was better off than before after taking a bath in the hot spring and drinking the Stamina-healing sake.

What's more, the Angel's Halo shone above her head with divinity.

"This may go without saying, but our encounter tonight should be kept between us."

"Yes..."

White nodded powerlessly. She couldn't go around spreading gossip about this night, anyway. Worst case scenario, it would send the country into chaos if the people found out that someone could use the same miracle left behind by the Ember Angel... That someone had the power to bestow onto others a divine halo reserved for the heads of Angels.

"Just to be clear... no one will find out about what happened tonight."

"O-Of course...!"

White rushed to affirm as the Demon Lord almost sounded desperate. Still, she had to ask.

"Who are you, really? I don't think I know the answer anymore..."

At this question, the Demon Lord's expression became contemplative for once. He didn't know the answer to that question, either. His body belonged to a character in a game who carried the title of the Demon Lord, and his mind belonged to Akira Ono from modern-day Japan. Who was he? How could he possibly explain? After a while, the Demon Lord spoke with determination.

"There is something I need to ask you for help with, one day. Like I've said before, I want to research the Ember Angel."

"...But why...?"

"...Because I was summoned by the Still Angel."

"By the Still Angel!?"

White was astounded by that answer, but soon accepted this conclusion. If that were the case, so many things now made sense that didn't before. It explained why that finicky Madame practically flew away from the capital to be by his side. It explained how he could perform the same miracle as the Ember Angel did, and how he could bestow an Angel's Halo upon someone. It also explained the otherworldly facilities that seemed impossible to have been built

by human hands. White's mind spun, connecting all sorts of dots.

"Do you oppose the Ember Angel...?"

"I have no intention to. I only want to ask a few questions."

With that, the Demon Lord finally let go of White's waist. Lost in their conversation, he seemed to have forgotten that he was still holding her until now. For some reason, the Demon Lord began taking the halo on and off of White's head, staring at her intently.

"Um... W-What..."

"Just as I thought, an Angel's Halo suits you well."

"...!"

Just as White was about to speak, the Demon Lord flourished his pitch-black coat. White could hear his calm, deep voice coming through his back.

"Until we meet again... Holy Maiden White."

With that, the Demon Lord vanished. White just stood in the same spot for a while before taking off the Angel's Halo from her head and holding it tight against her ample bosom. Her cheeks red, White seemed happy.

There were a few theories that came to her mind. One of them was about the famous angel, Lucifer. A being told in legends as either a fallen angel or a Demon Lord, who rebelled against the Great Light in times of old. Many ancient literatures tell of him splitting the continent in two and 'conquering the night.' While untold in legends, there must have been others like him. Some legends even told of devils siding with angels.

(An Angel's... Halo...)

The halo White held in her hand shone as bright as ever, with blinding divinity, with no sign of dimming. White could no longer convince herself that someone who could create such a thing was evil.

(I must be destined to return you to the angel you are...)

Embracing the halo, White blissfully closed her eyes.

—The village of Rabbi, night.

(That was Russian roulette... Dodged that bullet.)

Sitting in the hallway that lined the exterior of the hot springs resort, the Demon Lord was smoking a cigarette while looking up at the moon. His expression was that of a man who had accomplished a grand project. A bystander might have called his behavior despicable, given that he saw a Holy Maiden naked, enjoyed a bath together with her, and gave her liquor to muddle the situation. On his face, though, there was a tint of brimming pride.

“Master Demon Lord! Here you are.”

“Hm, Aku... Come here.”

The Demon Lord had pointed to the spot beside him, but Aku hopped right into his lap. Recently, Aku had been physically affectionate with him without any hesitation. The Demon Lord usually let her be, but was a little taken aback this time. Aku had worn her yellow yukata again, and now the Demon Lord could feel her soft bottom on his thigh.

“Listen, Aku. It’s okay now, but you have to remember to keep some distance from men. I’m a little worried at how trusting you are.”

“I don’t go up to any other man like this, Master Demon Lord!”

“Alright... If you say so...”

“Yes I do!”

Aku leaned back onto the Demon Lord. She seemed to trust him wholeheartedly. He pulled her closer and pat her head.

“Master Demon Lord. You’re leaving tomorrow to head up north, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I can Quick Travel. It’s not a real journey if I can come home whenever I want.”

“...I know. But I’ll still be lonely.”

Aku looked up at him, holding onto his shirt. The Demon Lord flashed a concerned expression for a moment, but responded with a cheery tone:

“If I see something cool, I’ll bring it back for you. Something to look forward

to.”

“...Please be safe, Master Demon Lord.”

“Ha ha! Who do you think I am?”

He was a bona-fide Demon Lord after all, despite his general ridiculousness. Even his advisors possessed incredible combat strength. If the Demon Lord wanted to, he could bring mayhem to this entire world, let alone this continent.

“Where’d you go, Aku? I told you, you have to be my cuddle pillow tonight!”

“Luna’s selfish.”

Followed by quick-paced footsteps, Luna and Tron appeared from around the corner.

“Aku’s right here on my lap.”

“Y-You pervert! My butt is one thing, but now Aku’s!?”

“Right, I forgot to tell you. I took your sister back to the castle.”

“Y-Y-Y-Y-You tainted Sister, too...!?”

“I’m sleepy. Bedtime.”

Luna began to make a scene at the Demon Lord’s response, but Tron concluded it with her declaration in a tired voice. That being said, they simply moved to their bedroom. The same kids making the same kind of ruckus, cramming into the Demon Lord’s futon. Aku was to his right, and Luna was to his left, and Tron laid on top of him. The Bedmuda triangle.

(How the hell am I supposed to sleep like this!? I’m done!)

And so, the Demon Lord didn’t sleep a wink that night, and was greeted by the morning to start on his journey.

—The following morning.

The sky was still painted in the pre-dawn grey, but a large carriage had already arrived at the entrance to the village. Inside of it were Yukikaze and Mikan. The carriage could easily fit eight adults. Since the Demon Lord had turned down any kind of bon voyage, only Tahara and Yu were there to see him

off. The truth was, as long as he could Quick Travel, there wasn't really a point to a grandiose send-off.

"Yu, you're in charge of the hospital. Keep at it to improve our reputation."

"Yes, sir. I will handle everything there. Oh, Mister Secretary... Your tie."

Yu approached the Demon Lord, and caringly straightened his tie. There was nothing wrong with his tie to begin with, so he suspected that Yu just wanted to go through the motions. At first glance, she could appear like a wife sending her husband off on a business trip.

"Tahara, you're in charge of the rest of the village. Send me a Communication if there's anything urgent that comes up."

"Yessiree. I don't plan on doing any screw-ups that'll make me bother you, though, Mister Secretary."

In fact, it would have to be a serious emergency for something to be too much for Tahara to handle. If this genius couldn't resolve it, there was no way that Akira Ono could be of any help. The only time Tahara would require his assistance would be when he was in need of some brute force.

The Demon Lord gazed over the entirety of the village. Under the mid-dawn sky, a few Bunnies had begun working in the fields already. A farmer's morning started early. Looking around various locations in the village, the Demon Lord could spot numerous large-scale projects that were to resume in a few hours. This village was changing, all because a single man had come across it.

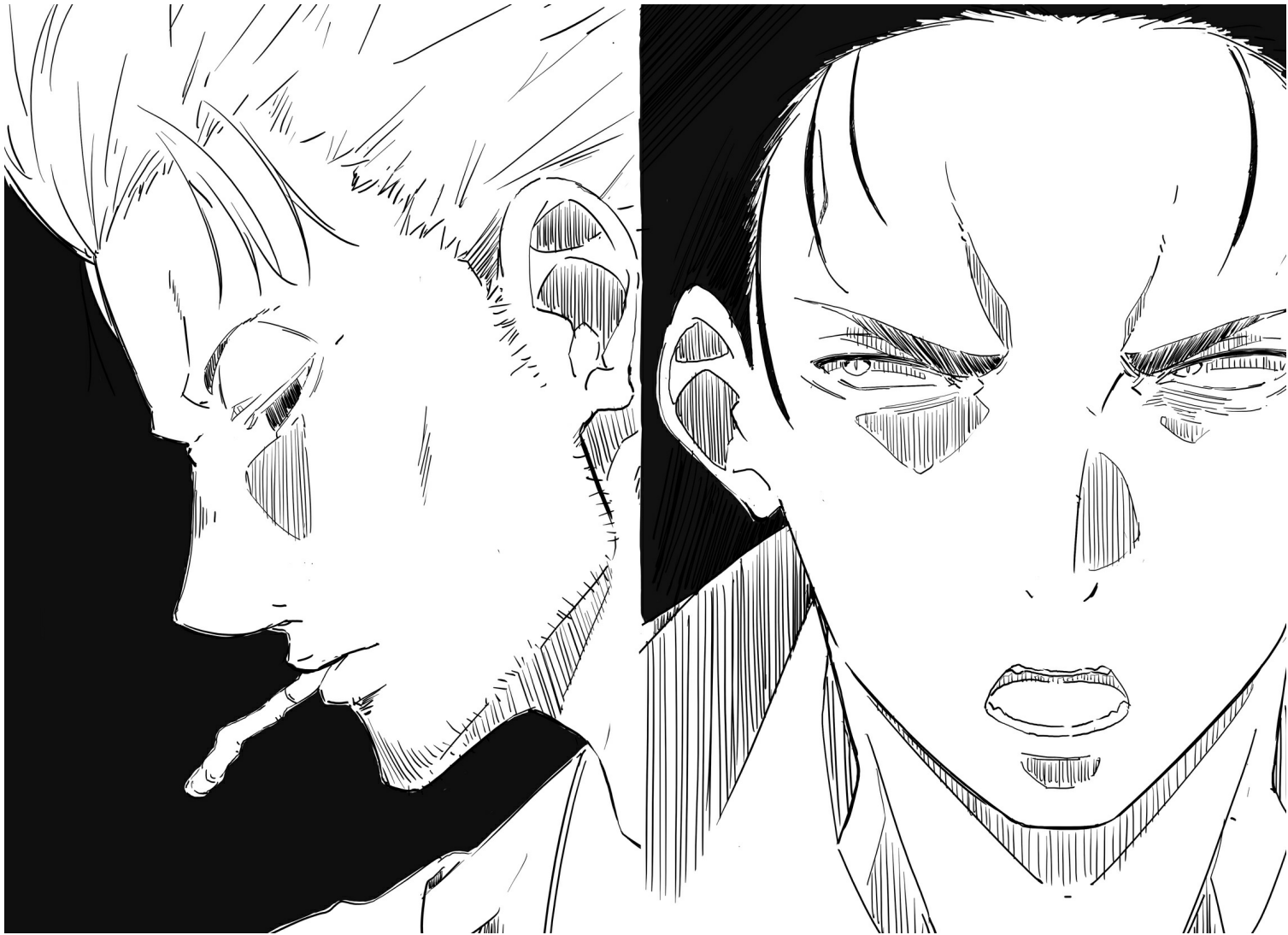
(I got them in this deep already. All I can do now is give my all to what I've started.)

Seeing the village's transformation in action, the Demon Lord reaffirmed his determination. He spotted the Hot Springs Resort. In it, there were many people whose fate had drastically shifted because they had met the Demon Lord. Now he had more people to protect than ever. That was the Demon Lord's honest take away when he closed his eyes for a moment in contemplation. And, in order to protect those people, the Demon Lord was determined to grow even stronger. If he didn't conquer his weakness to magic, he would pay the price for it sooner or later.

When the Demon Lord opened his eyes again, Yu, who had been gleefully holding his tie, froze. In his eyes, Yu saw a glimpse of an all-powerful god. ...The Demon Lord gave Tahara one last instruction.

“If anyone comes near this village with ill intent, destroy them. Every last one of them. Understood?”

“...Yes, sir.”



Tahara answered concisely. He just managed to maintain his expression, but he couldn't stop his body from quaking. Tahara had sensed absolute power in the Demon Lord that he couldn't even stand a chance against. Flourishing his pitch-black coat, the Demon Lord climbed into the large carriage. Just as he did, the carriage took off in a jolt. Tahara and Yu simply stood there, watching the carriage depart until it faded into the distance. After some time, Tahara mumbled:

"For some reason, I... thought of an old memory, just then."

"An old memory?"

"Of the first day I met the Secretary."

"...Interesting."

Tahara produced a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. It was all crumpled from having been shoved in there without care, but Tahara didn't seem to mind.

"It's nothing too special. It just occurred to me that... if I had turned down the Secretary back then... I would have been dead, right then and there."

Yu seemed to have some thoughts on the matter, as she fell silent. Both of them, and in fact all of the department members in the Sleepless Castle, had been recruited by the Demon Lord. While each of them had a different story to tell when it came to their introduction to him, every single one of their stories *began* with the Demon Lord.

"Hell could freeze over, and I'd still never best that man."

"That's an obvious statement. You're a paramecium compared to the Secretary."

"Para— You didn't have any better candidates for the metaphor?"

"Oh, I hope he returns soon."

"He just left!"

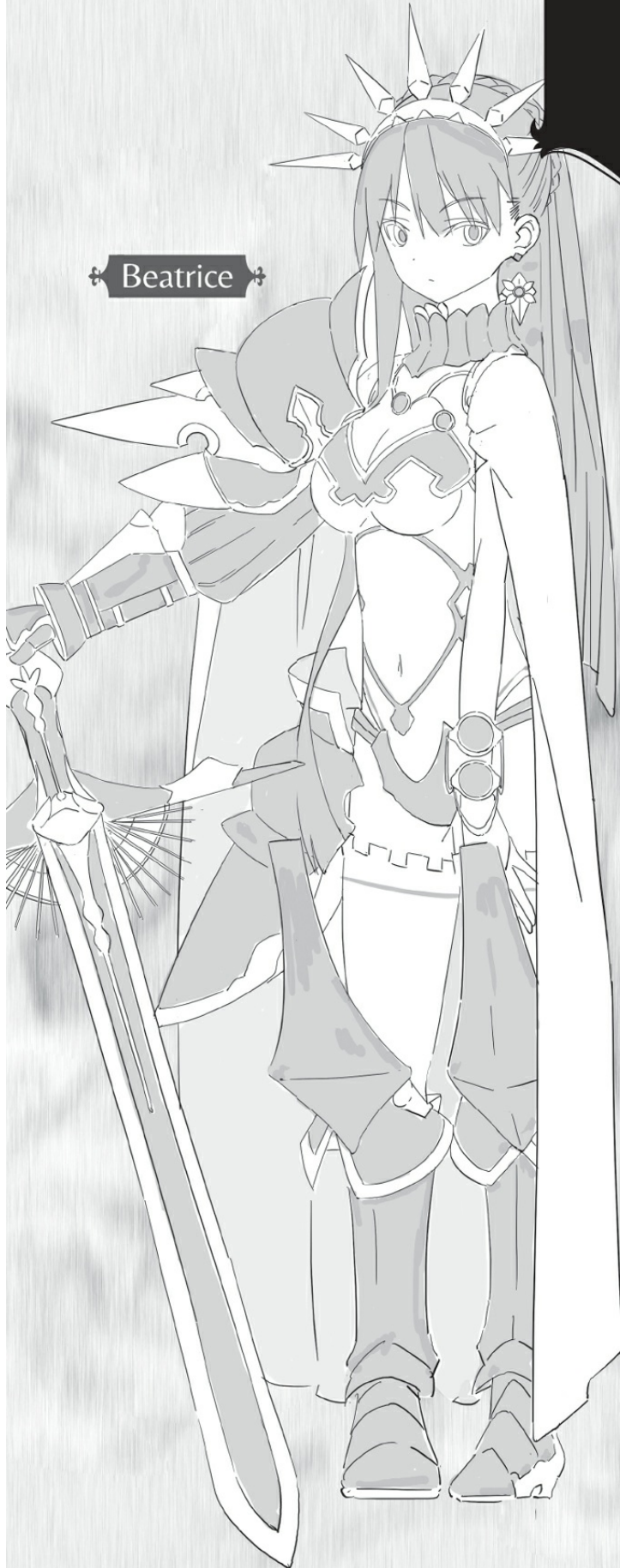
Even as the two advisors caused a ruckus, the carriage carried on. Its destination was the northern wilderness engulfed in war and mayhem. There

were sure to be new encounters, along with numerous dungeons and ruins waiting for him there.

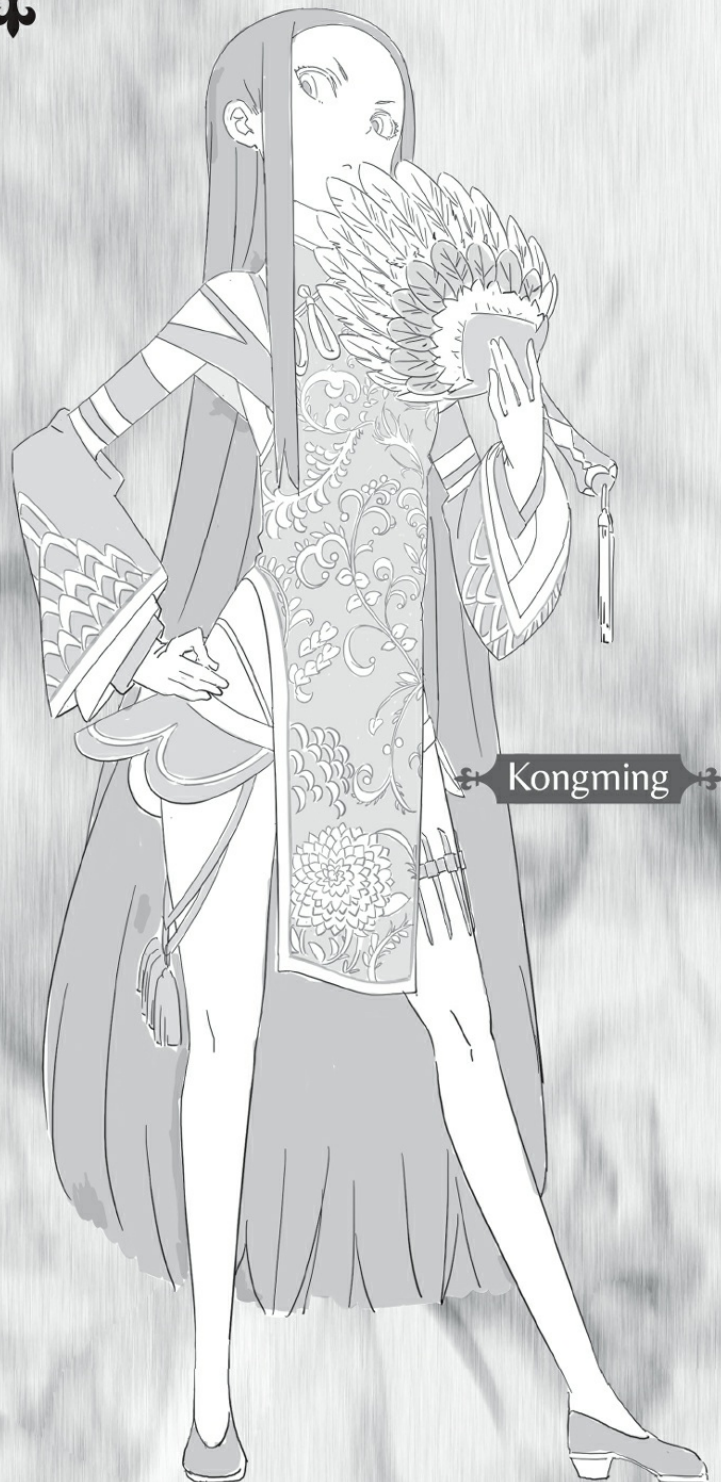
The chaos caused by the Demon Lord would soon reach the center of the continent... but not for a while, at least.

Side Story

Beatrice



Kongming



Side Story: An Outcast from the West, Part 1

The sun had gone down — or maybe it had vanished. Either way, there was no more light in the sky above.

There was a group of prisoners trudging up a narrow, steep road. People were connected by chains or ropes tied around their waists, and each of them wore a collar on their neck. In the Northern Nations, north of Holylight, there was no end in sight for the constant battles. Countries of various sizes were endlessly at war with each other. Nations sprouted up like bamboo shoots after the rain, and were extinguished just as often. The deluge of conflict burned farms and fields to ashes, mass-producing casualties each day and night. The enormous body count had decimated the infrastructure, causing a lack of food supply, a number of plagues, and countless refugees.

The Western Nations, west of the Northern Nations, painted a similar hellscape. There, three powerful and evenly-matched countries were in turmoil. Each battle ended in the victors marching away with loot, which sometimes included humans. Addressed as slaves or war dogs, they naturally held no human rights under their enemy's rule. Food, water, shelter, and of course pay, were given scarcely at best. It was par for the course for them to be worked to death by their captors, but some met even more gruesome fates. Some were subjected to inhumane experimentation or sacrificed as a catalyst for a spell. Apparently, humans were creatures that, once enough hatred curdled in their minds, stopped seeing their enemy as the same species as them.

The Tsardom of Light, a particularly powerful and militaristic nation among the Western Nations, was notorious for its inhumanity. This was a country that worshipped the Great Light, which once led the angels in combat against the devils. They were exceptionally cruel to their enemies. In any world or age, when religion came into play, those who opposed a theocracy were branded as heretics, and treatment of them was often gruesome and disgusting.

“Keep walking, heathens!”

“Foul traitors against the Great Light!”

It appeared that the slowly-marching band of captives was treated as such. To the far west, there were countless island states that had formed an archipelago. One of them must have been raided.

“How dare you defy us? Know your place!”

“You truly have spat at the heavens.”

As they yelled these things, the knights whipped the captives, and occasionally beat them with oak clubs. While this was done in part for the emotional satisfaction of the knights, it served the purpose of making an example of them for the other countries. They were headed to Hellion territory, far off in the distance. Throughout their long journey, they intended to perform the cruel show for any nations they passed through.

“Tsk. Filthy demi-humans...”

“You taint my eyes!”

A knight swung his club into the back of a particular captive, full-force. With a short cry, the captive fell to the ground. Amidst the countless scars on the back of this prisoner was a pair of wings, albeit only the base of them. The wings themselves might have been cut off or lost in battle.

“Demi-human... Be devoured by devils.”

“Why don’t we just drop it off a cliff?”

“I’d be the first to do it, but orders are orders.”

The captive slowly stood and began walking again. Stay on the ground, and they would only be met with endless beatings. The band marched tediously, but the knights were not in a hurry. While parading their captives, they enjoyed local delicacies, spirits, and prostitutes. This was practically a vacation for them.

“We’ll be in Myrk once we’re through here... Not much to tap there.”

“Not a single brothel to be found. The lamb’s something to eat, I guess.”

After coming to a wider highway, the group was finally awarded a short break, so the knights could approach the government of the New Kingdom of Xenobia

that controlled these parts. Even this sick circus needed permission to pass through foreign land. The bishop that led the parade wore official garb and led an excessive amount of ceremonial guards to the capital.

“We have quite the entourage, Bishop.”

“The girl who runs this playground is a bit overconfident. We shall demonstrate to her the glory of the Light.”

“Ruler of the North, was it? Someone doesn’t know their place...” The commander said, and the bishop agreed with a bitter taste in his mouth. The name was much too grandiose for a northern savage oblivious to anything but war.

“Let the apes fight. Sooner or later, they will kneel before the Light.”

“...The Pope has his eyes on this land, too?”

The commander’s eyes shone for a moment. A mouse trying to nibble at as much information as possible from the bishop he ordinarily couldn’t come close to.

“...Commander. That is something you needn’t concern yourself with.”

“...! My apologies, Bishop.”

Clergymen held incredible power within the Tsardom of Light, and commanders ranked below them. As for the priests, bishops, temple keepers, rectors and friars, as well as archbishops and cardinals above them, they were untouchable. The nation’s people even believed that looking directly at the Pope, who was above them all, could blind them from the all-too-powerful light he emanated. Rumor had it that water touched by the Pope could heal any ailment.

“We must educate the monkeys of the north all the same...”

Puffing his chest, the bishop proudly entered the capital. Inside, though, the city streets were bustling with people. Shops were filled with all sorts of goods and the streets were filled with people buying and selling them. With many adventurers and merchants in the crowd, it was easy to see that the country was bountiful in both money and production.

“Hmph. What arrogance.”

“...Indeed.”

Who knew what arrogance the bishop was talking about, but he spat this out, disgusted. In any case, energy and growth of other nations was no cause for celebration.

“That’s... the palace.”

Right in front of them was a majestic structure. The bishop couldn’t help but groan in amazement at its scale. The ceremonial guards were all affected by the sight as well.

(Foolish girl... Trying to scare me off?)

This was something that wasn’t there before, and it could be assumed that a great amount of manpower and riches were spent building it. In this world, the size of castles and palaces was an important tool to demonstrate the wealth of the ruler.

“She seems to have, uh, scavenged a lot...” The commander said timidly, and the bishop simply agreed. Win enough battles and the reward was boundless. Even manpower wouldn’t be hard to come by.

“She must have scoured madly with greed. The girl up there even banished her own father.”

“I-Is that true?”

Although frowning at the ignorant commander, the bishop didn’t seem to mind the opportunity to lecture him on the history of this nation. The self-important types always liked to showcase their knowledge.

“When the girl was ten, she banished her own father to rob him of the crown. That’s why they like to call themselves the ‘New Kingdom.’”

“I see...”

“Ever since, they have been absorbing more and more city-states and smaller nations. Some even started calling her the Little Ruler of the North.”

“Ah... That’s incredib....ly savage, indeed.”

The bishop continued, giving the commander a look. This briefing was in part to keep him from making a fool of himself in front of said Little Ruler.

“That was when she was twelve. Two years after that, they absorbed the neighboring Principality of Marmook, and Palma Kingdom two years after that. And here we are.”

“She really is a ruler... t-to her people, at least.”

“A ruler of savages. But keep that to yourself.”

When the Tsardom acquired new land, it was a crusade, but when other nations did the same, it was savagery. That may seem lacking in logic, but perhaps that was the effect religion could have on people.

“Now, let us greet the girl, shall we?”

The bishop had met the girl in question once before when she was still called the Little Ruler. Now he planned to visit her domain with malicious intent. All the while, he calculated the great impression he would make on his superiors if he could report back on the political status of countries he passed through on the way.

Eventually, the group was shown to the throne room. There were countless officials lined up inside, filling the room with intimidation. Among them were renowned generals and cunning strategists, as well as leaders infamous in the surrounding nations. These figures stood out like stars in the ensemble, all glaring at the visiting party. On top of that, a thin, golden curtain veiled the throne, hiding the occupant from the visitors' view.

(Stupid girl... Enough with the empty threats.)

The bishop, seasoned in diplomatic encounters, continued without batting an eye, while the commander walked stiffly, intimidated by the onslaught of looks from the room.

(I knew I should have brought at least a high knight... This weasel...)

As the Tsardom was at war, all of the high-ranking military leaders were busy on their own missions. A high knight would not have been available for such an inconsequential job.

“It has been too long, Your Highness.”

Kneeling in front of the throne, the bishop executed his formality. He remained still waiting for a response, but none came. When he looked up from confusion, the curtain parted in a slow, dramatic fashion.

(She’s...!?)

A girl was unveiled, sitting confidently on the throne, and crossing her legs with a holier-than-thou attitude. Her garment was littered with flashy gold, and her luscious golden locks draped over it, as if they too were woven from golden thread. While her appearance was astonishingly attractive, her attitude was extremely aggressive. She cast a gaze that said she looked down upon anyone from a mile above. It was no wonder that her people now called her the Golden Ruler. An athletic allure exuded from her crossed legs, and the bishop secretly swallowed a gulp of saliva. He couldn’t comprehend how different she looked from their last encounter.

(She’s really that girl from before...!?)

The commander and the other guards were just as breathless, staring at her. If this was a battlefield, they would have all been killed already.

“You’ve come a long way. Admirable.”

Even her tone was aggressive. She spoke like she was addressing a subordinate. In an attempt to gain some power in this exchange, the bishop rose.

“And, Your Highness...”

Eloquently, the bishop praised the rise of the New Kingdom while subtly reminding the ruler that they wouldn’t be able to maintain their lifestyle if they were to defy the Tsardom. However, a surprising response came back from the throne.

“You are permitted to pass. Be on your way.”

“...!”

She dismissed them as if to say that she was too busy to speak with the likes of him. She was treating him as if the Tsardom was occupied by Xenobia. Her

people were astounded by their ruler's gall at first, but their expressions soon changed to that of amusement.

The Tsardom and the Northern Nations had a complicated relationship. Worn out by the constant war effort, the Northern Nations had begun to create cease-fire seasons, but that wasn't much more than a bandage on the wound, and did nothing towards a true solution. There was no way for dead ones to return home, after all. The workforce of the entire civilization dwindled as young men were drafted to war and tradesmen and farmers died in the battlefield, leaving towns and fields to be decrepit. While most nations struggled to feed their people, the Tsardom took to exporting their abundance of food for a great profit. The warring should have brought about a breakpoint somewhere along the way that would conclude the violence once and for all, but the Tsardom continued supplying all belligerents with the food they desperately needed.

The advisors in the room all pressured the bishop without a word — they were well aware that the Tsardom fattened itself on blood money.

(Savage apes... I am an acolyte of Light! Stop looking at me like that!)

The bishop's expression twisted in discomfort. In a sense, the Tsardom of Light was solely responsible for prolonging the wars among the Northern Nations.

"Ah, you seem busy, Your Highness. This old man will be on his way. I must say, though, I am truly amazed at how much you've grown, Your Highness."

The bishop was still in his forties, but he emphasized 'old man' as he spoke with sarcasm, gazing up at her alluring legs.

"When we met last, you were still a girl. Oh, how time flies. Perhaps that's just my old age talking."

It was crude to compliment a ruler of a nation on her growth, to say the least. A few protests erupted from the advisors in the room, and the ruler raised her brow ever so slightly. At that moment, a woman appeared from behind the curtain as if on cue. The chancellor of the New Kingdom of Xenobia, famous for her prowess in the role.

“It brings us incomparable joy to have you complement our ruler’s growth...”

The chancellor looked down on the bishop from near the throne, her long hair that reached down to her waist gently swayed. In her hand, she held a peculiar foldable fan.

“If you wouldn’t mind, we would love to have you come observe our operations. Your input could be of great value to us, Bishop.”

“Oh, an outsider like me...? Are you sure?”

“It will be an amusing story to tell when you return home,” the chancellor declared with confidence, and the bishop scoffed as he stood apart from his parade.

(They may be savages, but it wouldn’t hurt to take a look...)

There was a chance that he could snag a glimpse at the secret of the New Kingdom’s rapid growth. Soon, the advisors in the room knelt one after another before the ruler and sought her guidance. The bishop watched them from aside, but cold sweat soon began trickling down his forehead.

“Your Highness, on the lack of water in the farmlands I reported the other day...”

“I remember. Permission granted.”

“The aforementioned plague prevention has gone over budget...”

“We will pull some funds from the national reserve.”

“On expanding the pastures that train our military horses...”

“You make the call.”

“As for the retreat for injured soldiers...”

“Carry on, as is.”

“Your Highness, to research the Six Dungeon Waterfalls...”

“Denied. Invite the two S-ranks we spoke about.”

“General Mueller has reported suspicious movement from the Myrk guerillas near the border...”

“Burn down a few of their ghels (houses). Hm? Don’t worry. It’s my idea.”

Split-second decision making. The countless reports were getting resolved in the blink of an eye by the ruler’s decision. Most of it was left to each advisor’s discretion, but she gave anyone who needed it a push, and each rejection came with a reason.

(She takes care of things this fast...?)

This break-neck speed was night and day from the snail-paced debates in the Tsardom. There, many clergymen sabotaged each other, engaging in power struggles. The more empty seats above them, the better their chances were at advancing. The exporting of food to the Northern Nations and prosecuting heretics were just about the only two policies that were ever approved unanimously.

(If we’re not careful, this girl could sneak up on us...)

The prideful, but not incompetent, bishop calmly assessed, as far as he could tell, that the girl delegated a lot to competent subordinates and took responsibility for their actions. Surely, her advisors were able to perform to the best of their abilities this way. No great leaders ever intervened with inconsequential matters. That only stopped the flow of work where it mattered.

Eventually, all matters were taken care of. The bishop turned down the invitation for lunch and scuttled out of the palace. The chancellor, with a subtle grin on her face, followed.

“That’s rather sudden. Why are you in such a hurry, Bishop?”

“Hmph...”

After ordering the commander and the soldiers to wait outside of town, the bishop turned to face the chancellor. Her fan waved to and fro in her hand, a vindicated expression on her face.

“I would be careful where you tread. It won’t be long until the Light takes the Island Legion.”

“Is that so?”

The chancellor’s expression remained unchanged. There were two other

powerful nations than the Tsardom in the west. They would fight at times and cooperate at times to keep any one nation from expanding. It was similar to the triangular structure of ancient China. In this case, their dynamic was complicated by the Island Legion. Feeling like the chancellor was seeing past his bluff, the bishop made the mistake of talking too much.

“We have an interesting cargo, this time around.”

“Interesting, you say?”

“A demi-human. Apparently a Holy Maiden’s servant, at that.”

“My, my... how fascinating.”

The chancellor, monikered the ‘Ice Cold Chancellor’ and feared in neighboring nations for her cunning intellect, allowed her face to slightly twitch. While not as bad as the Tsardom, Holylight also had strong prejudice against demi-humans. How could a demi-human be anywhere near a Holy Maiden, who was at the top of the country?

“Bishop. Do you mean a Bunny?”

The chancellor was aware that that particular species of demi-human was given a village in the countryside. In response, the bishop proudly wagged his index finger to say ‘no.’ He grandiosely spoke with a stuck-up expression, as if he were a teacher explaining a lesson.

“In fact, it’s a Falconite.”

“Oh... That is interesting. However, I do recall that your nation and Holylight have a long-lasting friendship.”

The chancellor’s eyes gave off an icy shine. The demi-human part aside, if they really were a Holy Maiden’s servant, it could escalate to an international conflict.

“Ha ha ha! There is no way that a Holy Maiden, of all people, would keep a demi-human by her side. If she did, that would be a much bigger problem. The Light would require us to take some action.”

In any case, he seemed determined on getting rid of said demi-human. The bishop all but outright said that he considered Holylight a second-class nation.

“I believe that Holylight will soon realize the mercy of the Great Light is greater than that of the angels they follow. That is information that your ruler may benefit from.”

The bishop left with a shrug on what sounded like a threat. Contemplating how to process this news, the chancellor headed to the ruler’s private room, which was thoroughly guarded to keep any unwanted characters from coming in. In the entirety of the New Kingdom, the chancellor was the only one freely permitted to enter. Beyond the several layers of inspection, the fortress-like private room in the palace depths was strangely quiet. This was because soundproofing and eavesdrop protection were put in place to not even let a single sound escape the room unnoticed.

“Your Highness, it’s me.”

With a light knock, the chancellor held up a card in her hand and unlocked the door. She quickly stepped inside, and checked that the door was locked again. She looked around the room to find no sign of the ruler, just a lump in the extravagant bed.

“Your Highness, I know you are tired...”

“I don’t wanna!”

The ruler shouted back from under the covers before the chancellor could finish. Only her head was poking out of the covers.

“That old man was staring at my legs! The! Entire! Time! Eww!”

“Your Highness...”

“Staring at my legs, saying how much I’ve grown!? Yuck! For real! I had goosebumps the whole time!”

“Your Highness, please be careful not to act like this before any of your advisors...”

With a long sigh, the chancellor shook her head, exhausted. If anyone were to see this, her image as the Golden Ruler would be far out the window, over the horizon even.

“No! No! No! I don’t wanna! I’m taking tomorrow off!”

“Your Highness, a ruler doesn’t take a day off.”

“Then, you be ruler, Kongming. I retire.”

The chancellor, Kongming, pulled back her hair, and gazed up to the ceiling. Where did she go wrong?

“Beatrice, knock it off. The ruler is irreplaceable.”

“This all started when you banished daddy, Kongming.”

“If we had let that moron keep ruling, this country would have collapsed! And get out of bed already!”

“So why am I stuck being the ruler? You should follow through with it, Boss!”

As a sign to never give up and never surrender, the Ruler, Beatrice, dug herself deeper under her covers. Having been called ‘Boss,’ Kongming blushed, and frantically tried to peel the covers off of the bed.

“How many years has it been!? You’re the ruler of this country now!”

“I will never forget the days you’ve bullied me, made me a lackey, and sometimes even charged me a friend fee. You’re the worst, Boss Lady. You’re a demon.”

“Stop! Forget about that! You know, that didn’t happen! None of that happened!”

“I’ll n-never forget... I will never forget it for the rest of my life. I can’t pretend like those days I’ve spent running to get you cigars in the cold rain never happened.”

“Noooo! Forget it!”

A gruesome battle between the one who wanted the covers off and the one who wanted them on ensued.

It all began when Kongming, a straight A student, was selected as a friend-slash-tutor for Princess Beatrice. Kongming, who had been praised as a prodigy from a young age, acted like the obedient tutor on the surface, all the while treating Beatrice like a lackey behind closed doors. Oh, the follies of youth.

Even now, with an entire nation in their grasp, their childhood had never left

them. Although their public titles had changed to the Golden Ruler and Ice Cold Chancellor, they were still just schoolmates in private.

“L-Listen, Beatrice... The Tsardom parade has an interesting member...!”

“Interesting...?”

“Th-That’s right. Apparently, a Holy Maiden of Holylight had... Pff!”

Beatrice reached her arm out and around, slapping a pillow in Kongming’s face.

“I don’t care about Holylight. I’m just a showpiece. Just go ahead with one of your schemes, Boss, do what you want!”

In truth, every policy of the New Kingdom of Xenobia was proposed, planned, and decided upon by Kongming. Beatrice was ruler in name alone and only served as a lively façade. Still, she was seen by neighboring nations and her advisors as gorgeous, fearsome, and courageous, revolutionary for scouting anyone with talent, even commoners, and giving them important roles in the government. She was, indeed, one of the best puppet heads in the history of anywhere.

“L-Listen... They’re carrying an interesting demi-human! We can use this to drive a wedge between the Tsardom and Holylight!”

“I don’t care about some faraway country!”

“I’ve told you already that a Dragonborn has appeared in Holylight...!”

Hearing this, Beatrice finally stopped throwing pillows. Kongming, placing importance on information, had made sure to send informants into Holylight, too.

“But you said it was a bunch of hogwash, Boss.”

“Yes, I... did!”

Seizing her one opening, Kongming ripped the covers off of the bed and maneuvered Beatrice into an arm lock from behind.

“Rrragh! Not fair!”

“Give up already and finish your duties as ruler...!”

Beatrice struggled, but Kongming was much stronger than her slender stature suggested. The feeble ruler was submitted in the blink of an eye.

“Now listen. Something’s fishy about that country, right now... I even hear there’s a man who calls himself the Demon Lord.”

“T-There’s a Demon Lord right behind me, right now...!”

“You little... Now you’re calling me a Demon Lord...!?”

“C-Can’t breathe! Demon Boss Lord, I can’t breathe!”

“What kind of name is that...!?”

Tangled up in the bed, their serious conversation continued.

“Don’t you get it? If we cleverly leak this info to Holylight, it could be the first step in driving them apart. I need you to remember these things so you don’t drop the ball when it matters...!”

“N-Never... Just you watch, I’ll forget it all!”

“You remember useless crap from forever ago...!”

“Y-You don’t get it, Boss... How lonely it is to eat your lunch alone in a bathroom stall...”

“Noooo! Forget it, already! I said, forget it!”

Still in the lock, the pair rolled up and down the bed. Who could tell whether they were a good pair or not? In any case, their next moves would end up affecting this world in a major way.

You Unlocked Some Information!!

The Tsardom of Light

A large nation located to the west of the Northern Nations. They worship the Great Light and are led by the Pope, who preaches the teachings of the Light. In addition to its two paladins, the country holds an Order of Knights with uncontested strength, solidifying their power. As the country is blessed with abundant farmland and temperate grass fields, it leads the continent in produce production, supplying the Northern Nations with food. In a sense, the Tsardom is responsible for prolonging the war in the Northern Nations. Since there are no storage dungeons in the country, they trade surplus food for various items.

The New Kingdom of Xenobia

What used to be a small, dime-a-dozen Northern Nation transformed after the princess banished the previous king and seized the throne. Ever since, the country has absorbed small neighboring countries and city-states, leading to its leader earning the moniker of “Little Ruler of the North.” After overtaking two major nations, her title evolved into just the “Ruler of the North,” or “the Golden Ruler.” The kingdom is led by the decisive direction of Beatrice Constance Castilla I, with Kongming (AKA the Ice Cold Chancellor) supporting her.

Side Story: Hot Springs Resort Concerto

A woman was walking elegantly down the hallway of the hot springs resort. She carried incredible weight and exuded immense pressure from her thick body. If an ordinary man were to face off with her, his groin would probably shrivel up. This woman was the Madame, the empress who ruled the party scene in the capital. Her days were almost entirely spent in this resort, learning the effects of each hot spring and every detail of the facility. The expansive knowledge and experience the Madame was accumulating were reserved only for her; no matter how much anyone paid, no matter how powerful their house was, everyone else was only allowed a one night's stay at this hot springs resort.

(This resort will entrance every woman on the continent some day...)

The Madame was absolutely right. In what world could there be a bath that revitalized one's skin the longer one spent in it? Since that fateful day, the more the Madame learned, the more she was astonished. The beautification and whitening of skin was incredible, but even the baths that were just meant to relax the body could only be explained as divine. The Madame was recalling the magic words that seemed to melt her heart:

—*Everything I say becomes reality.*

His undaunted statement and dark aura that seemed to swallow everything whole... and that deep voice that lingered in her ear. The Madame realized that she was completely intoxicated by him. She was frustrated at herself for coolly self-assessing, but had to admit that it was the truth and she couldn't change it.

(I can't remember the last time I've felt this way...)

In the glitz and glamor of the party scene, there were countless men who approached the Madame, but none of them were looking at her. Without hearing a word from them, the Madame could see in their eyes that they only wanted money and power... She hadn't paid them any mind most of the time, but once in a while, she would feel an overwhelming sense of loneliness. No

matter how many handsome men swarmed her, they had nothing to offer that the Madame wanted. Not a single thing. Everything they could possibly offer, she already had. Money, power, status, glory, fame... Every man had only ever begged for her to give. Not a single one of them had given anything to her. Upon meeting the Demon Lord, however, the Madame's perception of men was completely changed.

(All of the tears I've cried and the hopelessness I've felt, it was all to meet him...)

The Madame could feel her hair hydrating and her skin revitalizing each and every day. Moreover, she could hear the thick layer of fat on her body screaming as it began melting away. Out of everything that a man could have given her, nothing would have been more impactful than this.

(Before he returns from up north...)

She had to lose the weight. She had to become beautiful. She wanted to approach her ideal form and receive a genuine compliment, not one spoken out of politeness. Out of all of the men in the world, she wished to be praised by one alone. In short, she was in love. The Madame was aware of this and kept her emotions bottled up. She couldn't want it just yet.

When she arrived in the changing room of the hot springs, she stripped off her extravagant dress. When she opened the door, she was greeted by a woman's utopia, as per usual.

"Oh, it's been a while..."

"Woah! M-Madame... G-Good evening!"

Inside, Aku was bathing in the pot bath. Since it was deep, her hands were gripping the ledge of the tub, the rest of her arms concealed. There was something adorable about her posture.

"It's alright. No need for formalities, here," the Madame said with a gentle smile as she leisurely rinsed off with a showerhead.

Because of her thick fat, her movements weren't swift, nor was she light on her feet, but her appearance exuded a mysterious class that captured even Aku. This must have been the product of the Madame spending most of her life in

the limelight, polishing each and every movement of her body. In a world like hers, even a single movement of the eye or finger could be scrutinized.

“E-Excuse me...!”

Aku suddenly shouted, and the Madame slowly turned around. While she acknowledged that Aku was someone the Demon Lord kept close and carefully protected, whether or not Aku had something within her that warranted such treatment, the Madame could not yet tell.

“H-How are you so beautiful, Madame!?”

Normally, these were pleasantries the Madame was sick of hearing. People lied through their teeth to people with power in order to buy their attention, to garner favors, to boost their reputation, *etc.* After meeting countless people and surviving the party scene, which was the epitome of fakeness, the Madame was skilled at seeing through people’s intentions. Aku’s eyes, however, were perfectly genuine and clear. The Madame was the one who was surprised, as Aku’s eyes reminded her of the sun.

(What is this girl...)

With differently colored eyes, Aku even appeared mystical.

“My, my... You’re so kind.”

While she responded with nonchalance, her interest in Aku only grew.

“I-I want to be... a beautiful, mature woman like you, Madame...!”

That was enough for the wise Madame to understand it all. There wasn’t any mystery to it: the girl was in love too. In love with someone who soared above all else, who definitely was the first of his kind in any history. Ordinarily, there would be nothing to a little girl like her with no status or power falling in love, but for better or worse, Aku was actually close to the Demon Lord.

(From her point of view... Of course she’s in a rush.)

The Madame could easily imagine that the Demon Lord would eventually be surrounded by beautiful women. There was no female in any world that could withstand the charm of such a powerful being. Overwhelming strength, guts, and mysterious powers that seemed stronger than magic... He was definitely

worthy of the title of 'Demon Lord.' The higher he rose, because of their closeness, Aku would feel like she had to grow up that much faster. That urgency seemed like a very perilous thing to the Madame.

"Aku. There is absolutely no need for you to rush growing up," the Madame said, slowly, to try and calm her.

The Madame almost added 'Look at me. I'm not giving up, even at my age.' Aku was still thirteen, after all. The Madame knew that, at that age, Aku had infinite chances and no need to rush on anything.

(In fact...)

She had a feeling that the Demon Lord would be happier if Aku just acted her age. While she had only thought so out of intuition, she completely hit the mark. In truth, the Demon Lord wasn't looking for any sociability, class, or etiquette from Aku, as if he wanted to take her to parties. In fact, considering where things were headed, the Demon Lord was the one who should begin acquiring those things.

"B-But, the way I am, I don't know how much longer I can stay by Master Demon Lord's side..."

Aku lowered her gaze as she confessed her fear, which the Madame wholeheartedly sympathized with as another woman. The more she was attracted to the Demon Lord, the more she, naturally, felt like she had to catch up and become a person worthy of his affection. The Madame would go so far as to say that any woman must strive to do so under the philosophy that a woman who is always carried by her partner and adds nothing to the relationship would sooner or later be left behind.

"I understand why you're nervous, Aku. He keeps an especially close eye on you."

"I-I'm not pretty, I'm not good at anything... I don't know why he's so good to me..."

The Madame was won over by Aku's humility. While this could have been interpreted as a humble-brag by some, she sensed that this was a sincere and serious concern for Aku. Having finished at the shower, the Madame walked

over to Aku and joined her in the tub, holding the girl in front of her.

“Woah!”

When she did, water flooded out of the tub like a waterfall.

“Oh, my! This is a luxury that we could never have before, isn’t it?”

Soaking their entire bodies in precious water (heated with Spell Stones, to boot) was the height of luxury. Seeing that hot water overflow was an amazing sight. The most surprising thing, though, was that the tub was suddenly refilled until there was as much hot water as before.

“Y-You don’t have to share a tub with me, Madame! Someone like you shouldn’t...!”

“Look, Aku. Just like this tub of water, you have so many chances for do-overs. That’s how young you are.”

When the water was depleted, it immediately regained what it was lost. What was youth good for if not to bounce back the next day after going a little too far?

“I-I’m a bathtub...?”

“Ahaha! Maybe you are.”

The Madame laughed heartily. Luna had her own innocence and naivety, but Aku’s innocence was something else.

“Maybe this is why the Demon Lord likes you, Aku.”

“S-So, I should stay in here?”

“Aha ha ha! Oh, stop. You can’t show off in here, can you?”

Still laughing, the Madame was sure that Aku didn’t need any noble-like etiquette. In fact, if she were to focus on such a thing, it could do more harm than good. What Aku needed were cute, age-appropriate outfits and nutritious meals... but most of all, she needed to live a free-spirited, exciting childhood. It was a very special and precious time in her life that she would never come back to. The Madame believed that the best thing for Aku would be to appreciate the normalcy of her everyday life.

(Now I have another goal to accomplish...)

To guide this girl to become a princess worthy of standing beside him. The Madame believed this was a task that no one else but her could take on. She considered Yu to be too smart, and not fit for the spousal position. If anything, she was the chancellor to a ruler. While this was only a personal desire of hers, she just wanted the Demon Lord to go home to a place where a kind girl like Aku was waiting for him. Perhaps this stemmed from her political beliefs. When the leader of a nation had no room to breathe nor stability in his life, that state of mind was directly reflected in the people. Therefore, politically speaking, Aku was an extremely important piece, too. As the Madame let her thoughts on this matter wander, the entrance door flew open.

“Aku. Found you.”

“Tron?”

“And the beautiful lady, too! Shining bright as ever!” Tron said.

“Oh my...”

Tron the Firebrand had joined them. She had the rare gift of seeing the color of people’s souls. To her, the Madame was an endlessly noble and beautiful woman. In the Madame’s soul, Tron could see her strong determination to overcome her hopelessness, even after fighting tirelessly with it for decades. In her eyes, the Madame was a beauty second to none. Tron’s sincerity was obvious to the Madame, too.

“Now you have me stumped. I’ve wanted to hear someone say that for so long, and here you are...”

Before she knew it, the Madame was laughing. Those words she had longed and waited for had been given to her all too easily. Twice in one day, for that matter.

“Why don’t you join us?”

“Yep. I want in too.”

Tron, after taking a shower, cheerfully jumped into the tub, and the Madame caught her with ease. The tub easily fit the three and had room for more. The

three blissfully closed their eyes, feeling the perfect temperature of the water.

“I’m going to keep coming here and be pretty.”

“Oh. You want to draw someone’s attention, too, don’t you?”

“Wait! You don’t mean Master Demon Lord!?” Aku blurted out in surprise, but Tron was quick to deny it.

“No. Not the Demon Lord.”

“O-Oh, okay...”

Aku sighed in relief. Since Tron was a similar age to her (maybe?), Aku seemed particularly concerned about her.

“...But he also *is* the Demon Lord.”

“What!? Which is it!?”

Aku was left confused at Tron’s paradoxical remark. She had only told the truth, though, since the Demon Lord was Zero and Zero was the Demon Lord... but Aku was unaware of this. On the other hand, the Madame had interpreted what Tron had said as a representation of a child’s fickleness. In fact, every day children changed what they wanted or even liked to eat.

“Well, no matter who it is, it doesn’t hurt to improve yourself, ladies...”

The Madame thought of the future. These girls were directly brought here by the Demon Lord, and were sure to become important characters very close to him. She felt the obligation to help these two grow up to their full potential so they could provide much-needed relaxation to the Demon Lord. In any age, a throne was a lonesome place to sit. At times, this could have catastrophic repercussions on the world. Perhaps the Madame’s heightened political intuition had picked up on the loneliness of Akira Ono, somehow. In contrast, Tahara and Yu viewed the Demon Lord of the Empire as the dictator of the millennium, and would never think of questioning his mental health.

(I doubt Yu or that handsome Tahara thinks about these things...)

In that case, the Madame thought, what she had to do was becoming clearer. First, taking on the tiresome interactions with nobles and to control them as she saw fit. This would lead to lessening the burden on the Demon Lord and putting

more money in his pocket. Secondly, the Madame was determined to watch over these two girls and help them grow in the right direction.

“All right, you two. Let’s head to the stargazing bath.”

“O-Okay!”

“I want some wine!” Tron chimed in.

“Of course. I brought a good bottle from a vineyard in my land.”

Cheerfully, the trio headed to the stargazing bath. A peaceful encounter that took place after the Demon Lord had headed north.

Epitaph: The Day a World Died

——New Year's Day, 2000.

That day, Sho jumped to his computer straight out of bed and visited a particular website. It didn't matter that it was New Year's Day, he was enamored with a video game called "The Far East City of Chaos." He barely slept or ate, devoting his entire life to it. Sho was a hardcore gamer to begin with, having gotten into video games of all types before, but this was the first time he had really been captured by an indie game.

"That GM's nuts, but us players aren't too far behind." Sho mumbled with a little bit of self-deprecation. While any game produced by a cooperation was subject to all sorts of restrictions, none of those applied to a game created by an individual. This was the year 2000, nonetheless. It was fair to say that the internet was still in its infancy. The World Wide Web was flooded with all sorts of independently-made websites, and text-based sites were all the rage, while there was only the occasional low-budget indie game that blew up in popularity. The internet wasn't organized, but cluttered, and had an atmosphere akin to a dive bar. Sho was listening to the musical hits in Japan at the time, like LOVE Machine and Apollo.

"Hm..."

When he accessed the usual website while bobbing his head to the music, he was met with a pitch-black screen. Wondering if he had clicked the wrong bookmark, he tried again from his bookmark folder only to get the same result. In the middle of the black screen, only the following could be read:

I had to shut down this world, as its details were lacking.

Look forward to my next world.

Akira Ono

For a while, Sho could only stare at the screen, aghast. Eventually, he started to quake in anger.

“What... the hell...!?”

He had spent two years lost in the world of this video game. In an instant, it was all gone... save for two sentences and a signature.

“This has got to be a mistake... There were over a thousand players...!”

Sho immediately opened the forums he had bookmarked. This time, he was met with posts and replies filled with confusion and despair. No one had seen this sudden shutdown coming. The forums had erupted into chaos.

“...This is a joke, right?”

“Hey, Ono. It’s still early for April Fool’s, LOL.”

“Are you effing kidding me? How long do you think I’ve spent on this game, asshole!?”

“If you were going to shut down, you could have just talked to us first.”

“What ‘next world’? This guy’s a moron.”

Sho agreed with many of the comments, some of them wholeheartedly. It was a free game and he hadn’t paid anything for it, but he had still invested a lot of time into it. Pulling out everything he could think of, Sho managed to contact Akira Ono directly via instant messaging.

“Mister Ono, this is a little inconsiderate, don’t you think?”

“That world was incomplete. The next one will be much better.”

“...Next one? Do you think any of us are going to come back after being ditched like this?”

“Yes... I know you will.”

Sho wasn’t able to grasp how he could be so confident in the matter. He couldn’t shake that the shutdown was done in a manner worthy of a scandal. There had to have been a million other reasonable ways to shut down.

“I don’t know why you’re so cocky about it... The players have turned their noses away already. It doesn’t matter what kind of game you’re going to make

next, no one's going to care." Sho typed off. In fact, Sho had no intention of playing in Akira Ono's next world, no matter what that may be. What if it got shut down like this one? If he was going to play the game, even if it was free, he knew he would invest a significant amount of time into it. Only to have that vanish again? No thanks.

"My world will continue evolving forever... Everyone will come back." Akira replied, and Sho went hot with rage. Not only was Akira not listening to what he had to say, it was as if Akira was speaking about a natural occurrence. How self-centered could he get?

"Oh yeah? Then suit yourself."

Sho closed the messenger with that and went back to the forums. 'It's no joke. He really shut it down,' he typed. There were a few dozen top players of the game who were famous among the player base, but Sho was a whole level above them. As he had always been the type to place responsibilities upon himself, he tried to calm the chaos in the stead of the GM. While many of the players were thankful for Sho representing the community in his conversation with Akira, they were outraged at the GM. Sho, concealing his own frustrations, proposed that the GM must have had his reasons, in attempt to keep the peace. He didn't like the idea of his beloved game leaving a nasty taste in everyone's mouths either. For weeks, Sho lurked on the forums, repeating what he had learned, and managed to mitigate the outrage from time to time. Thanks to his efforts, the pushback dwindled. The forums became less populated by the day until there was no one else left.

Sho was a player who would later gain incredible influence in the next world.

Back to New Year's Day, a girl was reading through these chaotic forums. Despite being in her room, she was wearing a gothic Lolita outfit, and even wearing an eye patch on one eye. Her name was Myu, and she was one of the prominent players in the community. While she was still in grade school, as her appearance would suggest, she had a particular talent. In the Far East City, she had killed countless players.

"Aww. Ono's quitting." The girl muttered as she typed in the chatroom between her and her playmates.

“Hey virgin. It’s shut down for real.”

“I’m not a virgin! But shutting down out of the blue on New Year’s...?”

The one addressed as a virgin was Kiyo. Like Myu, he was another famous player on the side of the murderers. While he had slaughtered player after player through detailed calculations and strategy, Myu was the polar opposite — a berserker type. While their characteristics were as different as they could be, they were one in the same in practicality — they both experienced euphoria from killing their enemies.

“It’s hard, but we can look forward to his next world.”

“How are we supposed to kill time until then...? All the other games aren’t cutting it anymore.”

“Yeah, all the other games are cooperative.”

“It doesn’t do it for me unless I can take someone down in-game and know that there’s someone behind it...”

These two, through playing Far East City, had fallen head over heels for the joy and despair of PvP, and most of all for the cry-out-loud ecstasy of slaying another player. They were both serial killers, through and through, although being the odd pair of a Lolita girl and a virgin.

“Ugh. Back to fighting mobs and monsters...? Bleh. I want to kill some people, you know? Piss off someone I don’t even know. Make ‘em red with rage.” Myu typed out her desires in contrast with her cute appearance. Kiyo responded with nothing but agreement.

“You said it. I don’t know what it’s gonna be, but he’ll make some screwed up world again. It’s just not the same if I’m not popping other players.”

“But you know, virgin. You’re ‘popping’ in your hand and the occasional watermelon, right?”

“Shut up! How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a virgin!?”

“You’re a virgin because you deny it like that, Kiyo!”

They continued to yell at each other through the chatroom. In the next world, they would become the sinister duo, massacring anyone who defied the

Empire.

Back to New Year's Day, a mother and daughter were watching the forums erupt in chaos. A rare sighting of parent and child sharing a common interest in a video game.

"Mom, it's really shutting down!"

"My my, that's not good."

The mother replied calmly, but the daughter was filled to the brim with frustration. She had just started sixth grade, but had abandoned her studies entirely to play Far East City. Even though her mother had scolded her at first, after being pushed by the daughter to try the game one time, she fell for it. She went out for wool and came home shorn.

"What the hell!? How long do you think I've spent grinding my character!?"

"Hmm... When you're all grown up, there are a lot of things you have to think about."

"Damn it! I just got a good parasite armor two days ago!"

"Hey, watch your language, young lady."

The daughter's name was Jo. She was the one who would create the bomb to knock down the Sleepless Castle on that fateful day in 2016. The mother's name was Akki. She had repeatedly accomplished the feat of killing serial killers until finally receiving a special ability quite different from Zero's.

Meanwhile, Akira, who caused the whole debacle... Was sitting in front of his computer, day in and day out, in order to create his new world. A week had passed since the shutdown, during which Akira had eaten almost nothing, and slept only an hour or so here and there before getting back to work. Some would have called him mad.

—XX has entered the chatroom.

XX signed into the password-protected chatroom Akira had kept open.

"Hey, Akira. You wanna hear my prophecy?"

"Prophecy...?"

Akira responded, almost like he couldn't be bothered to.

"You've barely eaten, right, Akira? Or slept."

"Huh? How'd you know?"

"I know everything about you, Akira."

"Ew. Fuck off. Actually, get a job, first."

"Sorry, you're breaking up. Bad reception."

"We're typing!"

Even as they went through their usual routine, Akira didn't stop smacking the keys. So many windows were open on his screen, and some strange scratchy sound could be heard from the console. He was creating a new world, a new arena, with all of his soul. Countless lines of code filled the screen, making him look like a sort of mathematician. While Akira wasn't a professional programmer, he had innate intuition and the tricks of the trade. Through trial and error, he had built his own theory of programming and used it to design games. At the same time, he poured an enormous amount of money into it without so much as a second thought.

"Akira, aren't you done with the next world, yet? I'm so bored? Hurry it up, already."

"Shut up. Fuck off at the speed of light. Also, get a job and pay your taxes."

"Taxes are canceled this year."

"I didn't know your authority superseded the prime minister's."

"RIP in peace, taxes!"

"Hey, I'm not complaining, LOL."

Even as they joked around, Akira didn't stop. At incredible speed, he punched in line after line into the various windows on his screen, almost as if he had multiple pairs of eyes and brains that were each working at the same time.

Eventually, he pulled out his back-up computer and began typing code with a hand on each keyboard.

"You're funny, Akira."

“Huh?”

“I know you’re hard at it, now. You’re sweating to make a world that ends in a week, right?”

“...Well, yeah.”

“We... I didn’t see that coming.”

“I’m going to break down the concept that time spent on an MMO translates to skill.”

“Yeah, you’re funny.”

“Stop being amused and get a job. Make your parents proud for a change.”

“Ha! My parents have been silent statues for a long time.”

Akira stopped at reading this. He couldn’t understand what exactly that meant.

“Uh, you mean they’ve passed away?”

“Nah, they’re alive, but they can’t even form a thought anymore.”

“G-Gotcha...”

Some sort of ailment to the brain came to mind. Akira imagined a person, barely surviving on life support.

“Hey, Akira. What would you think if I told you XXX’s parents are in the same boat?”

“What?”

Akira hesitated. That was someone from whom he hadn’t heard after they disappeared on New Year’s Eve. He had sent a few emails since him and XXX were close, but he hadn’t received any responses.

“...Who gives a shit?”

Akira replied harshly, but his wound still ached. With time, the sense of loss only seemed to grow.

“One day... XXX’ll be back to see the new world.” Akira added.

“Yep. Sure hope so. LOLOL.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

“It’s okay. You’ve got me, regardless. Don’t be sad.”

“Whatever. I’m going to finish this world, and I don’t care if I’m alone when I do it.”

With that, Akira dove back into his work. While society and the entire world greeted the new millennium with jubilee, Akira began his lonesome battle. As time went by, there were fewer and fewer people by his side. XX, at times with a grin and at other times with a complicated expression, watched Akira through it all. XX watched him like a best friend, mother, or lover, depending on the season. Even when everyone else had left Akira, XX remained by his side, true to their word.

— —Six months later.

XX turned on the computer and extracted a particular file from a folder. The file had to do with the Far East City. XX had saved the file before it was all erased and indulged in nostalgia by viewing it from time to time.

A white figure appeared behind XX. The door never opened. The figure had teleported there without a sound. The figure parted their shapely lips.

“...How long are you going to hold onto that?”

“Right back at you. LMFAO.”

Despite the figure’s sudden appearance, XX didn’t act surprised nor turn around. XX continued talking to the white figure behind her.

“Nostalgia, am I right? I wonder what Akira’s new world’s going to look like.”

“Why should I care what that selfish boy does?”

“You two are so obvious. Major tsundere going on, here.” XX mocked, and the white figure burst out: “You’re selfish, too, by the way. You just up and leave everything out of the blue and do whatever you want. No wonder you two get along so well.”

“I’m not crapping in diapers anymore, y’know? At some point, I gotta stop living life by mommy’s orders.”

“And I’m left wiping your ass.”

“It’s not like I asked you. Just go, already.”

“...You called me here.”

“Oh, really? My B, I’m so forgetful, you know?”

“...Fuck off.”

“Wow, the language. Would love to have Akira hear you say that.”

XX chuckled and opened the file from the world that was erased. It contained the worldview of and stories from the Far East City. XX loved this chaotic world.

“Light vs Dark? Nah, that’s old news, right? All covered in dust.”

“Your room is what’s covered in dust.”

“Ha ha!”

XX just laughed it off. Garbage littered the room, but XX seemed to have no intention of cleaning it.

“Yep. I like messy worlds, you know? Decrepit, dark, hopeless... Except for a single, clichéd ray of light.”

Blackness appeared on XX’s monitor.

·The Far East City of Chaos — Worldview·

A world that isn’t our own. A future that was never meant to be.

In the year 19XX, war erupted in the Middle East. The war, instigated by a Middle Eastern dictator, triggered retaliation and revenge. With each day, the war zone expanded. The participants of the war increased exponentially, until a finger pressed a particular button. During what would later be called the Terminal War, dozens of nuclear missiles showered the Earth, decimating 70% of fertile land around the globe. Starvation, radiation poisoning, viruses, and lack of medical supplies all contributed to the world population declining at rapid speeds. Rioters and refugees filled cities as chaos crescendoed. The surviving people in power moved to create new cities in order to protect themselves and their wealth. Cities began construction in the relatively less damaged countries: England, China, Japan, America, and Australia. The

completed cities were each named Europe City, Continental City, Far East City, Freedom City, and South Hemisphere City, respectively. The surviving people of wealth rejoiced at the completion of the cities that would protect them.

Five skyscrapers in total stood among the wasteland that Earth had become. People rotted away outside their gates, locked out of the cities, the world crumbling around them. The lamenting people of Earth call these... the Cities of Chaos.

·Far East City — Outline·

In order to keep out refugees, rioters, and immigrants, the metropolis was constructed in the central region of Japan, with Tokyo at its epicenter. The city is surrounded by seven layers of walls defended by an enormous self-defense army. As the city holds electric plants, large-scale distillation facilities, and food factories, it can sustain a population of ten million on its own. As protection against radiation and radioactive rain, an invisible barrier surrounds the entire city, as well as a laser wall to protect the city from attacks. Approach the city without caution and even tanks will be zapped to ash, let alone pedestrians.

If you pay a fortune, you can enter the city after thorough radiation cleansing with heavy surveillance. While each city has its own prices, the price of a day pass into the city easily surpasses the average salary of those outside the walls. Naturally, most people die without ever stepping foot inside a city. While this is unrealistic for most anyone, with enough money, you can even become a resident of the city. Also, some individuals deemed beneficial for the city may be invited to move in (i.e. doctors, scientists, skilled military officers).

Around each city, people have formed a secondary city using structures that, somehow, survived the war. The residents of these communities are literally called second-class citizens. Another set of walls surround the secondary city, outside of which are decrepit structures and barracks that comprise the tertiary city. Outside the tertiary Far East City is a wasteland as far as the eye can see. Exceptionally, perhaps because of its vast landmass, the Continental City spawned all the way out to a fifth city.

The planet is littered with radiation, with practically no healthy land left on Earth. The air is also heavily polluted. Spend one day outside of a city, and your

lungs would be painted pitch-black. Dust covers the sky, shutting out the sun most of the time. Occasionally, radioactive rain could be seen. Without a protective suit, you would be hard-pressed to step foot outside.

You are a third-class citizen, resident of the tertiary city. You are worth less than a pile of garbage. In these parts, various groups have formed in order to survive the harsh environment. You can choose which group to join:

- The group led by the Blood-Soaked Holy Mother that is attempting to conquer the Far East City.
- The group whose members don't hesitate to kill other players for their money and goods.
- The group whose members trade for profit with the goal of becoming residents of the Far East City.
- The group that will serve as mercenaries to anyone willing to pay the price.
- The group of bounty hunters who make a living going after criminals with bounties on their heads.
- The group that spreads the teachings of the Way of the Messiah, a religion observed mostly in the Freedom City.

In addition, you can customize yourself and choose which paths to take. A Mech Warrior created by cybernetic technology, a Wielder who uses various skills, Spellcasters who use magic, Tradesmen, who are skilled in things like business or farming, are only a few options. In the Far East City, you live however you want. There are no laws or moral boundaries, here. Besides, a third-class citizen like you has no effect whatsoever on this world. So, I have only one thing left to say... Live an ugly life, and die an ugly death.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

Reading the nostalgic intro, XX burst out laughing. The messy worldview and the antagonistic intro both drew XX's attention. This is what got XX into the game.

“Akira’s the best. Like, he’s dead-on my type.”

“Good for you.”

“What’s with the cold shoulder? You’re the one who got so into the game you started the new Way of the Messiah group.”

“Too long ago to remember.”

“Whatever you say. Now beat it. I want to go to bed.”

“...What do you want from this world? No, what are you planning to do in this world?”

“Nothing. Just play and sleep. Hey, look. This part about magic spells? I was the one who taught the gist of it to Akira...”

“You just explained it to him. I was the one who helped with the actual programming. And fuck off at the speed of sound.”

“No way. I already decided to live out my NEET life right here.”

“I’ll still keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t do anything stupid.”

“Sounds fun, weirdo. Nighty night!”

With that, XX jumped into bed and curled up under the covers. The white figure watched for a while, but eventually sighed and disappeared.

The white figure had jumped to a giant building. The office at the top floor held a sign that read “42 — OMG,” which was a world-renowned video game company. The white figure took a seat at the luxurious leather chair in the CEO’s office, as an elderly gentleman in a butler’s uniform expertly poured a cup of tea. An elegant aroma filled the room. Without a word, the white figure sipped the tea.

“Any changes...?” The gentleman asked.

“Still unemployed. I have no idea what’s gotten into...”

A frown crept on the white figure’s beautiful face. Remembering how much trouble XX had brought about was causing a headache.

“Still obsessed with Akira as ever.”

“Excessively fond of Mister Ono, it seems... In my personal opinion, I suspect that Mister Ono may have a... gift, in that department.”

The gentleman insinuated something. The wise white figure immediately picked up on it, and denied it.

“Don’t be foolish. I have no interest in that boy.”

“Is that so...?”

The gentleman let out a polite chuckle and topped off the teacup.

“In any case, keep up the surveillance.”

At this command, the gentleman took a deep bow and left the room. Once alone, the white figure couldn’t help but let out a sigh.

“To think they were left behind for this... That one’s almost at a breaking point.”

The white figure, eyes closed, appeared to be concerned about something.

Epitaph: The Day A World Was Born

Another six months passed after the conversation between XX and the white figure. Akira had created the new world over the course of that year — a world where the Empire ruled over all. Reviewing the numerous files he had completed, the ruthless Game, the Sleepless Castle, the Demon Lord and his advisors, Akira shouted: “It’s my best work yet...! I’m a freakin’ genius! Ha ha ha ha!”

Pumping his fist into the air, he burst out laughing. Whether he was a genius or not, Akira’s determination was unparalleled. He had created an entire world all by himself. It wasn’t an easy feat.

Akira uploaded the files onto his server one after another and launched the game. On the screen was the Demon Lord of the Empire, wearing a dauntless grin.

“What’s up, Kunai? Nice to meet you, I guess. Well, from today on, you... will be what I am.”

It was another indie game, which were much more prevalent during the internet’s infancy. What set this game apart, however, was that the creator of it was an endlessly determined man who never gave up.

——A particular day in 2001.

A pair of twins noticed the change. As identical twins, even their facial expressions and gestures were exactly that.

“It looks like Ono’s back in the game,” said the older brother, who went by the name Max online.

“Yep. The website’s updated,” said the younger brother, who went by the name X online.

With a synchronized, show-boaty gesture, the two brothers each pushed up their glasses with one finger. The website, which had only displayed a small block of text since the shutdown, had finally changed. In red font, it read ‘A

New Age Program — Coming Soon.'

"A new-age program, huh?"

"What kind of game do you think it'll be?"

"We'll see. He's a madman, conservatively speaking."

"A new game's fine and all, but no one got to beat Maria..."

There had been many battles over the Far East City, but no player had emerged victorious. X was still bothered by this fact. His brother Max seemed to have thoughts on the matter, too, as he gently added: "Let's pay him back double in this so-called new-age program."

"When's 'soon,' anyway? Today? Tomorrow?"

X began dangling the leg he had crossed over the other. Seeing this, his brother pushed his glasses with the same show-boaty gesture again and said: "Dear foolish brother. Cease that unsightly mannerism immediately. You embarrass me."

"Dear moronic brother. You're the one who's been tip-tapping your fingers on the desk."

The brothers stared each other down for a moment. It wasn't that they didn't particularly get along, but each considered themselves superior to the other. In truth, both of them were extremely intelligent. As they were still students, they always competed with each other on tests, and were close to the top of the national ranking of standardized testing.

"We'll see who comes out on top soon enough when this comes out."

"Yeah. It'll be me, though."

With the younger brother's immediate comeback, Max grew visibly upset.

"Foolish brother! You just have to have the last word, don't you!?"

"Shut up, you frameless-glasses-wearing douchebag!"

They jumped up and began wrestling on the spot. These twins would be two of the top players in the Empire-controlled world, too.

A few days later, Sho noticed the change in the website. However, he was lit

up with anger rather than joy. Without so much as an apology, he had really created what he called a new world. The worldview and intro text were tacked onto the page without much thought. By a force of habit, Sho clicked on the intro.

“It’s ridiculous. Who in their right mind would ever register to...?”

He opened the intro to be greeted by an astonishing set of features. The most noteworthy of them was that the game would end in a week. While basic data like player names would be saved, everything else would reset each week. Sho was astounded by the bizarre system.

“What the...? How can you call this a video game?”

Leveling up characters, growing them, and collecting items to make them stronger. That was the backbone, the fun part, and the point of an RPG. Without that structure, how could it stand as one?

“He was all confident before, but this has to be a Hail Mary...”

Sho’s anger gradually left him as something like pity replaced it. There was no way that a game like this would ever become popular. At the end of the day, Sho was still grateful for the fun he had playing the previous game, all for free. As a result, he pitied this video game that absolutely no one would play, and also its creator, Akira Ono.

“All right... I’ll register for it, at least...” He mumbled, as if preparing to send Akira Ono off on his deathbed.

——A particular day, midnight.

Sho had downloaded the new game and jumped to the registration screen. He had no interest in the game itself, but the idea that everything would end in a week made it seem more casual, so this gave him the push to register. He had no idea that his life was about to change forever.

“A week-long battle to the death, huh...?”

A character called the Demon Lord of the Empire appeared on the screen, along with various rules. Surprisingly, the Demon Lord was also named Akira Ono.

“What’s this supposed to mean? ‘Come and get me’? As cocky as always... Woah, hold on!”

Sho couldn’t help but call out the tagline that appeared on screen, which read, ‘Real-time battle royale, 24 hours a day.’ An explanation that the game would be running 24/7 followed this tagline.

“Are you kidding me...!? People have school and work, and, you know, lives!”

The system seemed to completely ignore the normal life cycle of human society. Sho couldn’t believe it. If this was the case, players could barely sleep or go to work.

“Was ‘revolutionary’ the review you were hoping for...? You just went too far.”

Next, Sho’s avatar, along with a customization screen, appeared. There were a significant number of parts. As someone who didn’t half-ass these kinds of things, Sho spent a considerable time customizing his avatar.

“How much did you put into this...?”

The graphics were way too good to be an indie game. Sho could tell that Akira, who never compromised on his worldview, must have forsaken every other aspect of life and dumped every cent he had into the game.

“I’m sure graphics are outsourced, but... Oh, they have lines.”

In addition to the character name, Sho could input lines for his character to say on particular instances. The number of those instances was shocking.

“A line said when killing another player, when activating a skill, when encountering enemies, and even when dying...?”

Sho made sure to input something for each and every one. What he set up so far was apparently basic data, and would be carried on after the week ended. It also seemed that lines could be changed any time in the arena. Now, a map of the arena appeared on screen, with the note that it would be randomized each week.

“Even the area resets, huh...? Down to a tee.”

Sho was reaffirmed that Akira had no intention of letting any player

accumulate anything. With this system, everyone always started the game from scratch. There was no distinction between veterans and newbies. Experience wouldn't necessarily translate to strength.

Sho clicked through to see various bags spinning at high speeds. He clicked them and his starting items appeared. It looked like even those would be randomized. Rip a good item, and even the less skilled could have an advantage. Sho had acquired a fork, a loaf of bread, and two bottles of water. Apparently, the fork was a stabbing weapon with an Attack of 1 and a Durability of 3.

Finally, the Demon Lord of the Empire and his advisors appeared on screen, with a button labeled 'To the Arena' at the center of the window. Seeing this, Sho couldn't help but feel excited... and quickly shook his head to regain himself. He had only registered out of pity, after all. He wasn't going to play the game for real. Sho clicked the button, and his screen blacked out before displaying, in blood-red font, 'Dive into the Infinity Game.'

"...!"

A ridiculous thought crossed Sho's mind: there was about to be a real battle to the death. A bizarre sense of nervousness enveloped him, forcing him to stare at the screen with dead-serious eyes. A beach faded into view. Even the characters' starting points seemed to be randomized.

"Alright. The layout's kind of like Dynasty Warriors. WASD to move, click to attack. Mouse moves the POV, jump, spring, slide..."

Sho, already accustomed to these sorts of keyboard controls, got the hang of things quickly. He could also use items or activate skills with the function keys, similar to North American MMOs.

"But how am I supposed to fight with a fork...?"

As Sho mumbled so, his screen flashed red!

"W-What the...!? What's happening!?"

He noticed that what must have been his HP had decreased, as he was under attack. He moved his cursor to see a little girl swing an ax. The sight was nothing short of a scene from a horror film.

“How did you...!?”

“Won’t you... die for me?”

The eerie text appeared on screen. It must have been one of the lines the other player had registered during character creation.

“You little...!”

Sho had experience with various games, after all. He dodged the sudden axe attack and retaliated with his fork.

—Weapon destroyed. Your fork broke!

“Yo! Why would you break with one hit!?”

“Won’t you... die for me?”

“Shut the hell up!”

Sho successfully sprinted away from this ordeal, but cold sweat dripped down his face when he saw the gauge labeled ‘Stamina’ rapidly decreasing. Despite this being a real-time battle royale, there was a limit. Sho figured that, whether he wanted to search for something or fight someone, he had to plan out his moves if he didn’t want to end up immobilized from running out of Stamina. If he did, he was a sitting duck. It would be like a sheep left alone in the middle of a wolf pack.

“Dammit... I got to look for a weapon.”

He headed for an area labeled ‘suburb.’ It seemed most likely that he could find something here. He spotted a command called ‘Search’; when he clicked it, various items appeared in exchange for some of his Stamina.

TV — Throw weapon — 12 Attack — 1 Use

Ripton Tea — Heals Stamina — 10

Kitchen Knife — Stab Weapon — 8 Attack — 5 Durability

“These don’t seem too good...”

For having spent Stamina to conjure them, they didn’t seem worthwhile. At

this time, Sho realized that, excluding what he had equipped on his character, he could only hold five items at a time.

“I have to think about what I carry, too...”

His inventory could easily fill up with things he didn’t really need.

Suddenly, his screen flashed red!

“Dammit, not again!”

“Eeeeexxxx!”

“What the hell are you!?”

Sho turned around to see a man wearing glasses and holding a club.

“Younger brothers are always the best! Eeeeexxxx!”

“Psycho...!”

Dodging the club, Sho stabbed back with his kitchen knife.

—Weapon destroyed. Your knife broke!

“You... Pansy!”

Sho couldn’t help but scream at his crumbling arsenal. Just when he thought he was done for, loud gunshots echoed in the area and the man’s body convulsed. From the distance, another man with a machine gun came running.

“There you are, foolish brother... Die...! Die!!!”

“Brother!”

The two players went at each other as Sho hobbled away. A few seconds later, text appeared on his screen:

—XX:XX Max shot X to death.

(Last words: I don’t need to input anything, here. It’s pre-determined that I’m going to win. How could the apes defeat a genius like me?) “Oh, come on! It broadcasts your last words!?”

As he ran away, Sho clicked open what was called the News Report to find

countless records of deaths. There were numerous new players and numerous casualties.

“It’s midnight, guys... For real!?”

He opened what was called the Survivor List to see a column of avatars and their respective comments.

“Myu, here! Play nice, please!”

“Kill everyone.”

“Ono! It’s me! I’m gonna kill ya!”

“Not a virgin. Just wanted to make that clear.”

“That girl Ren’s super cute, though.”

“I will be the last one standing. I will be... the Pirate King!”

Sho let out a chuckle at the variety of comments. For some reason, it was starting to become a little fun.

“Everyone’s your enemy though...!”

He punched, barehanded, a player that was about to attack him. It felt amazing.

“Ha ha... This is wack...!”

Sho didn’t know what was whack about it, though. Everywhere he looked, there were enemies. He couldn’t let his guard down for a second, even when doing something else. It felt like being stranded on an island full of zombies or monsters. Like he was the protagonist of a Hollywood blockbuster. As he kept running, he started to approach a player just standing there, one who didn’t seem to grasp the controls, yet. Without hesitating, Sho threw the TV at this new player and pummeled them. The other player seemed surprised, but Sho kept beating until they fell to their knees.

—XX:XX Sho beat Hoshi to death.

(Last words: I wanted to... take it easy...)

“Ha ha! Hah ha ha ha!”

Sho burst out laughing. He just killed another human being on the other side of the screen, and with no mercy. He didn't understand the overwhelming sense of victory. Sho couldn't stop laughing just imagining the other player's expression at that moment. If his enemy was just an AI or monster, he would not have been this excited.

"Alright. You can take one of their belongings when you kill a player."

Not all, but just one. This seemed to require some foresight, too. He may need to take something that he didn't necessarily benefit from, just to keep other players from obtaining it. He noticed that the weapon the other character had was a plate, which seemed useless. Through the several combat encounters, the Durability on Sho's suit had decreased to 3. Remembering that fact, Sho decided to take his enemy's armor.

"His armor's... A schoolgirl outfit...?"

Sho hesitated for a few moments. Putting it on his male avatar was bad. However, if the Durability of his suit were to reach 0, he would be left naked and with drastically reduced Defense. It was unthinkable to try and survive this cut-throat arena with no armor.

"I-I don't have a choice... Not if I want to survive. I got to use what I can."

Ditching the suit he had been wearing, Sho donned the schoolgirl outfit with a slight elation. Instantaneously, his avatar changed to that of a creepy man in teenage girls' clothing.

"Ha, I look like a pervert. But what's this... strange sensation I'm feeling...?"

Sensing a presence, Sho turned around to find a man wearing a helmet and carrying a pickaxe.

"Wait, is that you, Sho...? Do you see yourself!? I didn't know you'd gone full pervert, LOL!"

"...!"

Sho writhed reading the text popping up on screen. He hadn't expected to be called a pervert from someone in a video game, and this late at night, nonetheless.

“I have not a lick of shame for the way I look!”

“Oh, crap! Here comes the pervert in a schoolgirl uniform!”

The two went into combat, but perhaps taken aback by Sho’s determination, the man wearing a helmet ended up on his back. Seeing this, Sho cried in victory, panting.

“Witness... the power of Sailor Sho!”

Screaming some nonsense, Sho robbed the man of his possessions and sprinted away. The game, now in full motion, caused quite the commotion among players in the middle of the night.

Meanwhile, Akira was rolling in laughter as he watched the various encounters all around the arena. With a can of beer in his hand, he seemed to be enjoying the show of the players’ excitement and confusion.

“This is hilarious! I’m so glad I made it. Totally worth the farm.”

This video game, much too intricate to be created by an individual, had only been completed with the money made from selling off the farm Akira’s parents had left him. Was it an extravagant hobby? Debatable. Akira could have retired right then and there if he had kept the farm, and he shared and ran the game free of charge. Clearly, he wasn’t in it for the money. Some might have called it a complete waste of inheritance, while others might have seen it as Akira donating his money and time for the enjoyment of others. His nature carried on into the distant future, where we would spend money like water. No amount of time required would make Akira change his priorities from putting his own world above money.

“Get a load of this, XXX... This is my new world.”

Lighting the cigarette in his mouth, Akira squinted at the screen. No matter how long he waited, that particular name never appeared on the list of registered players.

It was already past 1AM, but as far as Akira could tell from the News Report, players were still at it hard and strong.

—XX:XX, Floaty was blown to bits by XX.

(Last words: Off to the underworld!)

Akira did a spit take with his beer.

“Stop playing around and get a job.”

Although, as someone who spent the last year lost in his own little world, he had no right to criticize anyone. Eventually, Akira logged in as the Demon Lord of the Empire and entered the Sleepless Castle. While he had outsourced the game’s graphics, this area was, of course, the most expensive. In short, it was a giant, near-futuristic fortress illuminated in white. It had carried on most of the functions of the Far East City. Even the battleship Musashi was afloat in the bay nearby with the sole purpose of demonstrating the Empire’s strength.

“I better finish the battleship fast... So they can see it from the beaches and ports.”

He looked over at the super-gigantic battleship near the ocean’s horizon. Akira wanted to implement it sooner, as it seemed to epitomize the Empire, but he ran out of time.

“Lots of bug reports, though...”

Most of them were about missing graphics, but there were various other reports about missing displays, items disappearing, *etc.* If he didn’t fix these quickly, the players would lose trust in him.

“Please fix it soon.”

“Part of my character stats is glitching.”

“The punching animation...”

“I can only hold five items!? Come on!”

The forums were being filled at incredible speed with requests and bug reports. The foundation of Akira Ono’s acting chops were built here, along with his guts to act dauntless in a pinch. He responded with confidence to the outcry.

“All problems will be addressed by the next event. Any emergencies will be dealt with immediately. Thank you for your patience.”

While his response exuded confidence, he was panicking on the inside.

(Dammit! I think the save process is glitching!)

As he desperately looked for the culprit file, the sound of a can cracking open could be heard. Even now he was reaching for another drink.

(I can't find it! Where did I screw up!?)

Chugging his beer, he scrambled to find the issue. On the forums, though, the more stress he was under, the more arrogant he became.

"All of the issues mentioned so far are expected. Don't worry."

Thinking that all was expected, the players were relieved.

"Just leave it to Ono, it'll be fine."

"Yep. He'll fix it in no time."

"Three minutes, tops. Right, Ono?"

(What do you think I am, an instant ramen!?)

Akira wanted to shout back at the forums, but if word were to spread that the game was riddled with bugs at launch, it would hurt its reputation. Akira continuously scrambled to fix bug after bug for the entire week. Still, issues kept arising. As the number of registered players grew, the more it strained the server. Eventually, Akira was notified of the discontinuation of his server contract, and he madly looked for another one he could sign up for. While the players were too busy to sleep, the same could be said about Akira. As he had intended, a world ruled by the Empire provided a harsh environment for all, but not even this world's creator was an exception. For weeks after, he would rinse and repeat the process of finding a server host only to be kicked out. The game was just too big for any individual service to hold. It was large enough to justify a corporation owning and operating it.

(What am I supposed to do...!? I just keep getting canceled on!) From the point of view of the server companies, they didn't want to support any application that strained their servers like Akira's did. It didn't help that the internet wasn't as developed back in the day.

As Akira's corner grew tighter and tighter, he received a particular email, with

a lead for a suitable server overseas.

“A foreign server...? Didn’t think of that one.”

Akira jumped to the website to, of course, be greeted with blocks of English text. Just looking at it gave him a headache. It would take him an immense amount of time to translate and read through it all. Server contracts already came with complicated fine print as is.

“Why don’t these idiots have a Japanese version!?”

While Akira’s outrage was unjustified, a language selection box appeared on the top right of the screen, as if it had heard his call.

“O-Oh... There it is. My B.”

He immediately switched to Japanese. Apparently, it was a test server where they wanted to see how much weight the server could carry.

“This could be the one...”

Akira inputted the necessary information to apply. Surprisingly, he received a same-day response. In Japanese, nonetheless.

“‘Ready for transfer when you are’, huh...? Yes!”

Finally resolving his lingering issue, Akira thrust his fists into the air. For the past few weeks, he had jumped from server to server, which caused a lot of issues for gameplay. Since many players had been complaining about it, Akira wrote in the forums with his usual boisterousness.

“The wait is over, everyone. The Japanese servers were too weak to handle my world, so we’re going overseas. Continue to enjoy smooth gameplay in our new server.”

He really had no right to be so high and mighty about it, but the players responded with applause.

“You did it, Ono!”

“Going to the big leagues... It’s getting real.”

Most players didn’t have a grasp on the workings of a server, and just gave a knee-jerk reaction to the ‘overseas’ descriptor.

(Alright. If the server's stable, I can keep modifying the game...) He would continue to put more and more weight onto the server. However, this one in particular didn't budge no matter how much Akira poured into the game. Moreover, it was extremely cheap. While he was relieved of one major problem, Akira couldn't shake a remnant of sorrow in his heart. He still hadn't seen XXX, who had always supported him through trying times.

(Should I just send an email or something...? No, I should wait.) He might have been stubborn, or perhaps prideful. Days turned into months, and even after years of running the game, XXX's name would never be registered to it. This was a thorn that stuck into the heart of the Demon Lord, there to stay for many years to come.

Postscript

Thank you for reading the second volume of our newly published edition! The author, Kurone Kanzaki, here. By the time this volume is published in Japan, we should be in 2019 already. The era of Heisei is over! I hope everyone is doing well in the new era. As for myself, I'm working on volume 3 (as of Nov. 2018). By the time you are reading this, I will have finished the next volume and enjoyed a leisurely soak in a hot spring. That's what's happening... It has to be... Please...

In volume 2, we saw some old characters, characters I'm sure you never expected to see again, and some new characters. I hope you enjoyed them all. As the Demon Lord's life gets busier in the book, I'm busy at work writing and working on the anime, commuting to Tokyo quite often. Thanks to the anime adaptation, I have had the opportunities to meet with various people in publishing, and many creators of various professions. Every day is really exciting! These are all experiences I never would have had if I had never put my pen to paper. I can't help but acknowledge that Demon Lord, Retry! has completely changed my life. It's a miracle. It's magic. It's destiny. (What am I saying?)

In the new year, I'm looking to go as hard as I can on publishing the next volume and completing the anime adaptation. I hope you can come along with me for the ride.

For those who have suffered all the way through the postscript, I have good news. The voice talent for the anime is absolutely incredible! I almost keeled over seeing the cast list. Maybe I was blessed with a cheat code by the Goddess... Or ensnared in one of the Demon Lord's schemes...

Now that I've given my usual spiel, I'll wrap it up nicely.

Thank you to everyone at Futabasha, everyone working on the anime, Mister Ino who draws me gorgeous illustrations, and Mister Minotake who is turning this story into a wonderful manga!

See you again in volume 3!





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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 2

by Kurone Kanzaki

Translated by Adam Seacord Edited by Jack Diaz

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2020