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Demon Lord, Retry!

DEMON
LORD,
RETRY!

3







❖ Akane Fujisaki ❖

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—Somewhere at midnight.

“So, Akira. What are you doing in a place like this?”

“Not much. Just a place I used to like.”

They were on the roof of a relatively tall apartment building. For some reason, Akira had brought XX along to gaze down at the sea of lights that stretched over the horizon. Naturally, they were trespassing, and there were no railings on the rooftop, only a water tank.

“Are you going to ask me out? Should I make a save file real quick?”

“You really are...” Akira turned around, chuckling. XX joined in with the grin of a mischievous cat, which soon vanished after hearing Akira’s response.

“Yeah. I want you to... make that save file.”

While the countless constructions of the city gleamed like gems in every color of the rainbow, their silhouettes alone flickered like a mirage.

—Epitaph, Finale

Raising Sim

In short, the place was a pile of trash. While that might have been an exaggeration, that was how Akira saw it. So, he expressed his impression without reservation. Back in those days, he was young. His emotion superseded his thoughts and concerns.

“Hey, XX. There’s no space to walk in here.”

“Yeah, just kick stuff out of the way. As long as I can get to my bed and PC, I’m good.”

“Empty cans... And change on the floor? What is your room, a donation box?”

“Hahaha! You’re funny, Akira!”

“The funny thing here is your place.”

XX didn’t show any sign of disdain in response to his comments, but booted up the PC and began typing. Unable to stand the state of the room any longer,

Akira began throwing one thing after another from the floor into a trash bag.

“Hey! That’s a treasure of mine!”

“Listen. Anything left on the floor next to a bag of chips is not a treasure. That’s why I’m throwing it out. It’s more important to make a comfortable space for me.”

“Oh, wait. Those are the beer bottle caps I was collecting!”

“And? So, what?”

Akira didn’t stop. He kept tossing junk into the trash bag. While Akira wasn’t a neat freak or anything, he didn’t feel like sitting on a floor literally covered with junk.

“You really are self-centered, Akira. Can’t believe you’re just doing your own thing at someone else’s place.”

“I can’t believe you live in this place! Here, I’m opening the curtains. Get some fresh air in here! There we go, let the good air in... Put away the things you never use...”

“Stop! The morning sun would melt me! What are you thinking, putting a NEET in sunlight? You trying to kill me!? I want to live in darkness.”

“The tragic thing is, I’m not a NEET. I’m a part of the workforce. On top of that, I’m a genius with unhidden talents basking in sunshine.”

“...You’re already drunk, Akira?”

“I haven’t had a sip!”

After almost an hour of wrestling with garbage, the room seemed impossibly larger than before. Albeit, all Akira did was move the pile of stuff into garbage bags and into the kitchen.

“Didn’t expect to walk straight into a landfill... Why am I cleaning on vacation?”

“Wow, my room seems bigger somehow! I didn’t even know it looked like this.”

“Don’t act like you weren’t on your PC the whole time. What were you up to,

anyway?”

“Following in your footsteps, Akira. Tried making a game myself.”

“Oh yeah? Show it.”

On the screen was an aquarium in which green, spiky, saw-like fish swam. XX moved the mouse to throw a cartoonish chunk of meat, placed at the right of the screen, into the tank. The green fish all started toward the piece of meat and chopped away at it.

“What is this, a fish raising-sim?”

“Nah, just something random I made up. Cool, right?”

“Nope, this is definitely crap.”

“For real...? You don’t get how cool this is? Okay, old man.”

Laughing, XX threw all sorts of things into the tank. An umbrella, a car tire, a wardrobe... the fish chomped at them all, devouring every last one of them. A strangely surreal scene. Next, XX threw in... a human being. Immediately, something about the fish changed. They had been only leisurely nibbling away at the objects, but as soon the human being entered the water, the fish approached with incredible speed, and gnawed away in a mad rush.

“Hey, XX? Why is it weirdly graphic and stuff when it’s a human?”

“Hilarious, right? Look at the fishies go, LMAO.”

“Jeesh, all that blood...? And they actually leave the bones? Why’d you put so much effort into this part? Oh, the bones sink to the bottom of the tank, too.”

“Right? This part took a lot of work, let me tell you. But if you throw this guy in, it cleans up the bones. Well-thought-out stuff, here.”

“Wow! A red fish started eating up the bones on the bottom! So, what’s the point!?”

“Ow!”

Akira smacked the back of XX’s head hard. At the time, there were a few games here and there that simulated raising fish or other pets, but this wasn’t one of them. Who could tell what the point of the game was, at this point?

“How do you beat this game, anyway? What’s the ending?”

“There isn’t one. You just keep feeding the fish.”

“Stupid. You’re stupid.”

“Why’d you say it twice?”

“So stupid.”

“Triple attack!?”

Distancing himself from the bizarre game, Akira turned to take a drink. Even as he complained, he had a smile on his face, and seemed to be having fun, after all. XX turned away from the PC, chugging a can of beer.

“Ahh! But, man, is this life boring. Maybe Shibuya will just blow up, or something.”

“Get a job.”

“If I work, I lose! I don’t want to be a loser!”

“See, the definition of a loser, is...”

“La la la! I can’t hear you! I can’t hear you!” XX shouted, hands over ears.

In 2004, Akira Ono’s game had steadily grown, acquiring a large number of players. A huge hit, to say the least. As he was basking in the golden era of his creation, he received a particular email.

Dear Mr. Ono, would you be interested in running your game as a large-scale MMO at our company?

The letter was signed “Mickity☆,” an OG player who had been playing the Game from its inception back in 2001. The next day, the world Akira Ono had created would come to a major turning point.

Chapter 5: The Labyrinth of Love

The Empire and the Fantasy World

—Dive into the Infinity Game—

In the world of the Empire, a select number of humans have awakened with a special kind of power, skill, or ability.

In the world of the Empire, everything is quantified.

The world of the Empire is unlike our own — a future that was never supposed to come.

The Empire invaded the nations of the world with great success, conquering 60% of the world thanks to their overwhelmingly advanced technologies, as well as the large number of Wielders born with new powers within their borders. Their technology and their Wielders became the legs of the Empire, guiding them in a direction of insanity. As a result, the cruelest, most despicable, and most extravagant nation in the history of its world, simply known as “the Empire,” was born.

However, the expansion of the Empire halted once they had conquered about 60% of the world. They had simply grown too large. Naturally, not many of the colonized nations would allow a takeover without resistance. Terrorism and coups stormed the world. In addition, the civil conflicts over the various profits to be gained within the Empire had rendered the dominating nation as motionless as a beached whale. Above the never-ending storm of revolt and tumult, high-ranking officials gathered day after day with no sign of progress.

Then, one day, a man proposed something to the higher-ups of the Empire... A very entertaining game that would bring happiness to the Empire. It would put smiles on the faces of God’s People, the residents of the Empire, and even offer salvation to the citizens of conquered nations. The Empire, with their preference for extravagance in everything, decided to use the Game, rather

than barbaric oppression or massacres, to strike down the insubordinate conquered nations and solidify internal structure. The contestants of the Game would not only be selected from citizens of conquered nations, but also from central figures and high-ranking officials who had fallen from grace in some way. One wrong move, and yesterday's victor could be headed for the guillotine. There was no room for mercy anywhere on the ladder. A hellscape in camouflage. The man who drew up this proposal was Hakuto Kunai, later known as the Demon Lord of the Empire.

——Near a point along the border of Holylight.

(I was sleeping... I haven't had a dream about those times in years.) "Hey, why is she sleeping on my lap...?"

"How should I know?"

Yukikaze was sound asleep on the Demon Lord's lap, and her quiet breathing could be heard in the carriage.



Yukikaze's face was like fading snow, the portrait of a beautiful young girl. To the Demon Lord, she seemed more beautiful than an actress on TV. If he found out what was between Yukikaze's legs, even he would surely be astonished.

(Dang. My head's still all foggy...)

Still lacking sleep, the Demon Lord turned to the window of the carriage with a sleepy gaze. Outside, he could see the same old dried-up land and bone-dry air. He had often looked at numbers to wake up before, but he had unfortunately left his wristwatch at the village for fear of damaging it during his dungeon crawl.

"Mikan, was it? What's the current year and month...?"

"...Huh?"

"Just answer me."

"What's with you...? It's July 10th, of the year 2000 on the Holy Calendar. So what!?"

"...The year 2000. Ha!"

The Demon Lord chuckled in nostalgia. Mikan surely had no idea what was funny or nostalgic about it. Her already annoyed expression grew more stern.

(Strange that the two worlds share the same calendar, time, and even language...) Even the odd mixture of hiragana, katakana, kanji, and Latin alphabet in this world seemed to be a carbon copy of modern-day Japan. For the Demon Lord, it was awfully convenient. On the other hand, a completely different impression came to his mind.

(I guess it's... sloppy workmanship.)

Whether or not he was correct in this assessment, this was the most fitting descriptor he could come up with at the moment. In every aspect, it was like someone had copied and pasted over the language and scripts of modern-day Japan into this world.

"You said it was 'war season' now, didn't you?"

"..."

“Did you hear what I said?”

“You’re just full of questions, aren’t you!?”

Ruffling her red locks, Mikan barked back at the Demon Lord. Her red eyes and slender body gave her a wild air, like a Doberman, when she snarled. Her bronze skin, along with her athletic outfit that revealed much of her shoulders and legs, added a healthy sensuality to her appearance.

“I’m tired of answering your questions, so here are the answers to your next few! The Northern Nations are in war season from April to September, and at ceasefire from October to March! Got it!?”

“Sorry, you were going too fast, and I didn’t understand a thing you said. Come again?”

“Gah... You’re killing me...! The Northern Nations are.....”

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear it over Yukikaze’s snoring. One more time.”

“She’s as quiet as a mouse!”

Opposite Mikan’s roaring red locks, the Demon Lord laughed, his shoulders bouncing. He enjoyed teasing women like Mikan. For her, though, he was nothing more than a nuisance, of course.

“Are you really a human in the first place? From the way you took down Carnival... It’s super hard to believe.”

“How insulting. I am most definitely human.”

“Humans, just so you know, don’t... Woah!”

Riled up, Mikan went to stand up, when the carriage rocked from driving over something in the road. Mikan was knocked off her balance, and her red lingerie revealed itself to the Demon Lord. For a few moments, silence befell the carriage’s interior.

“...didn’t you?”

“Hm?”

“You saw my underwear just now... didn’t you?”

“The only thing that I see, and have seen, is the blue sky above,” the Demon

Lord said, full of confidence. Hearing this, Mikan began to shake.

“What’s that supposed to mean!? Don’t go into that ‘tragic hero smolder’ crap!”

“Well, I suppose the sunset also appears in the sky.”

“Y-You stared long enough to tell the color!?”

“I’m just talking about the sky... What are you going on about?”

The Demon Lord shrugged. He was an expert at counterattacks. He had maintained an unaffected expression while saving that particular color of red in his memory bank. Truly an unforgettable evil.

“Why am I always surrounded by people like this!?” Mikan shouted, clasping her head in her hands, waking Yukikaze. She looked like a snow fairy waking from her midsummer slumber.

“...Mister Fox, your lap... it’s so harrrr?”

“Keep this in your mouth, so you don’t go saying weird things.”

The Demon Lord had learned his lesson. Before Yukikaze could say anymore, he threw an Ice Cream Bar he had created into her mouth. While it was a useless item that only healed 7 Stamina in the arena, this was surely a priceless delicacy.

“...Fo fard, Miffer Fof.”

“You learn a few tricks with age.”

The Demon Lord proudly laughed, tossing a Candy to Mikan. While this only healed 5 Stamina, since it could be found in packs of ten, it came in pretty handy in a pinch. Par for the course, it came with an excessive variety of flavors, like strawberry and cola. Not that he did it on purpose, but the flavor of the pack he threw at her was tangerine, or ‘mikan’ in Japanese.

“...Like I’m going to trust something you’ve pulled out of your pocket.”

“It is very sweet. Popular with the ladies.”

“Trying to bribe me with sweets? I’ll have you know I’m not that cheap.”

Mikan rummaged through her bag and produced a magical item: a strange

doll holding a red flag and a white flag. Seeing the doll, with pity, the Demon Lord asked, “You... still play with dolls?”

“You...! It’s called ‘Mr. Just Use Me’! How do you not know what this is?”

“How could anyone come up with such a ridiculous name...?”

“Huh? Simple and straightforward, why not?”

Mikan presented the candy in her hand to the doll. Soon, the doll solemnly raised the white flag and uttered: “It’s cool.”

The Demon Lord nearly fell out of his seat.

“What is that ridiculous thing!”

“Hmph, you’re the embodiment of ridiculous. This is an important item that tells me if there’s anything harmful in a food or drink.”

In fact, it was a very famous magical item. It had the same effect as an Angel’s Spoon. Adventurers without a cleric in their party dreamed about this item.

“You found that in a dungeon too?”

“No. I went up to the City States and bought it. It was well worth the good money I paid, but... this! Is so! Sweet!” Mikan blurted out after unwrapping the candy and throwing it into her mouth.

The most common sweet food in this world was raw sugar. While they also had the likes of fruit and honey, there was nothing comparable to hard candy, of course. Mikan couldn’t help but smile at this sweet taste she had never before encountered.

“It tastes like tangerines... It’s my flavor...”

“...‘My flavor’? You’re a pervert, Mikan.”

“Shut up!”

While the two bickered, the Demon Lord began thinking about another matter: the City States. Since there was no comparable example on modern-day Earth, he was having a hard time imagining their nature.

“Can you tell me a few things about the City States?”

“I’m never telling you anything again!”

“...I’ll tell you, Mister Fox. I want to licky licky again once I do.”

While Mikan turned up her nose, Yukikaze came back with another borderline comment. The Demon Lord continued asking questions without acknowledging it. He must have figured that he was running out of time to remain ignorant. He had to learn as many things about this world as possible, moving forward.

While Yukikaze explained the simplified nature of the City States, the Demon Lord was having a hard time processing it. Apparently, each city was its own nation, collectively forming a union. Each city was a sovereign state and had their own set of laws, but considered themselves a large nation combined. While it was most likely established as a method of defense against the wars raging in the Northern Nations, this was a system completely different from the concept of city states on Earth.

(I suppose it’s like each prefecture in a region of Japan being a sovereign state, but forming a collective nation. I guess issues that can’t be dealt with on a state level could be handled when they get together.) At this point, the Demon Lord was imagining the islands of Japan. He kept that in the back corner of his brain as a point of reference, but only as reference. As a general rule, this man trusted the things he saw with his own eyes, heard with own ears, and smelled with his own nose. Furthermore, those became the center of his decision making. While this could depict a calm and calculated person, his true nature was something a little different. He was someone that always put himself in the center of his world. He judged everything for himself, and valued his judgment above anyone else’s. Under certain circumstances, he would easily succumb to the lure of self-righteousness, but for better or worse, he was the Demon Lord. As a ruling dictator, his nature, that is to say his inclination to always maintain his own will under his own judgment, was one of the prerequisites that could not be taught. Throughout history, whenever a person of this nature had taken power, they had produced both great progress and great destruction.

“Maybe I should go to the City States one of these days.”

“...Take me with you when you do, Mister Fox.”

“Not me though! Never!”

The cacophonous carriage carried on until the Demon Lord and his party left the area surrounding Yahooo, passed the fortress on the nation's border, and entered the Northern Nations. Passing the border during this time of year would not have been an easy feat if it wasn't for the Madame's letter, which the Demon Lord presented at the checkpoint. An embodiment of the power of the connections he had earned.

A Threesome Journey

——The suburbs of Suneo, in the Northern Nations.

The carriage went smoothly down the highway and was approaching a city. While the Northern Nations had been long at war, these parts were evidently peaceful. Looking around at the expansive vineyards on either side of the road, Mikan cheered up.

"It's been a while since we were last in Suneo! So excited for the wine!"

"Is that... what this country is called...?"

"...It's a small but wealthy place."

The Demon Lord groaned at its bizarrely pop-culture name, but the two girls seemed to be treating it as an ordinary name for a country. A small creek flowed by the vineyards, painting a stark contrast against the wasteland of eastern Holylight.

(Vineyards, huh...?)

While the Demon Lord wasn't picky when it came to drinking, he had never seen a vineyard in real life. He found himself enjoying the view somewhat.

"The food is great here, too... Now that I mention it, I'm getting hungry."

"...You're just thirsty, Mikan. In heat, all year."

"You're the one who's always in heat!"

As he listened to their conversation, the Demon Lord's interest in the food in this nation was piqued. He hadn't really had a chance to sit and enjoy a proper meal since coming to this world.

“Food, huh? What do you recommend around here?”

“When you’re in Suneo, you have to have oysters!”

“Oysters...? Are they safe?”

The Demon Lord was secretly surprised. He had been avoiding the dish, from his preconception that it should not be eaten raw.

“Don’t you get it? That’s why we have Mr. Just Use Me.”

“That ridiculous doll...”

The Demon Lord nearly clasped his head, recalling the scene from a moment ago. He couldn’t very well have that doll assess each and every food or drink they would come across.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind letting you use it too... For five bronze coins a pop.”

“Thanks for your generosity, but I don’t need it.”

This man (and every player in the game) had a skill called Taste Test. This was a must-have tool for any player, since items in the arena could be poisoned. However, because it cost 20 Stamina to use, it wasn’t something that players could activate left and right. Still, since poisoned items would damage the user the same amount a non-poisoned item of the same variety would have healed them, not knowing whether or not something was poisoned was a big risk to take. If an item would normally heal the player’s HP by 100, they would take 100 damage from the poisoned version of the same item. Many players had died from poison by skimping on Stamina.

(Heh, a lot of things are coming back to me...)

The Demon Lord alone smiled, reminiscing on the world he had created. What a mean little game, that was. Healing items are used when players have low HP to begin with. Imagine their despair when their last hope for survival spelled their very doom. For many of them, it meant instant death... Their screens blacked out, and notified them of their demise.

—Game Over—

The item you used was poisoned by [insert player name]. Here’s a message

from your marvelous killer: “LOL, poisoned to death!? So freaking lame, LMAO. Go back to kindergarten, noob. LMFAO.”

“WASTED.”

“Say goodbye to the cruel world.”

“The poison content in this thing is over 9000!”

“Surprise, motherfucker.”

“Now you got Ligma.”

“That’s finger-lickin’ good!”

“The old you can’t come to the phone right now... Why? ’Cus you dead!”

“F”

Recalling the various messages left behind by the players, the Demon Lord’s shoulders quivered. Some taunted their victims while others tried to make them laugh. In some cases, the repeated poisoning had festered a grudge between sets of players. The arena had become a melting pot in that way.

“Hmph! Don’t come crying to me later,” Mikan said, bringing the Demon Lord out of his memories. He decided to say something non-controversial.

“Well, I’ll just cook it, then.”

“You really don’t have a clue, do you? Oysters are best when they’re raw!”

“...Mikan likes it raw. Raw dog.”

“Where’d the dog come from!?”

As the Demon Lord brushed off their bickering, the carriage finally came to a halt. Outside the window, he could see a nice and cozy inn. They had arrived in a town.

“Now let’s eat! Let’s eat ’til we drop!”

“Lunch with Mister Fox. The oysters will keep his... spirits up.”

“You two better behave at the inn!”

“...I can’t wait to taste Mister Fox’s prairie oysters.”

“I can’t stand it anymore! Why oh why do I have this pervert for a partner!?”

The trio climbed out of the carriage onto the street. Yukikaze and Mikan had always attracted attention due to their contrast in color, and now they had the Demon Lord thrown into the mix. Everyone walking down the street stopped and stared, whispering their theories on who that party could possibly be.

“...This is La France. We stay here often.”

“La France in Suneo, huh...? I think I’m getting a headache.”

Mikan threw open the door and marched right inside. Perhaps from hunger, she stomped in like a raging bull. Seeing Mikan and Yukikaze, the owner called out, cheerfully.

“Hey, if it isn’t Mikan! Didn’t expect to see you during war season... Spending the night?”

“Sorry, chief. Just for a break and meal this time. Our usual, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Mikan greeted and joked around with the adventurer-looking patrons of the inn and seemed to be having a good time.

“Hey now, Mikan. What are you doing here this time of the year? Let me guess. One too many games and now you’re penniless.”

“You make me sound like a bum. Don’t forget about the two silver coins you owe me.”

“Crap, you still remembered...!”

“Hey, Mikan. Come drink over here.”

“If you’re buying, I’ll think about it.”

“No way, that’ll blow my entire reward!”

Seeing their familiarity, the Demon Lord shrugged his shoulders. He guessed that a woman like Mikan was very popular among the brutes of the world. She talked like one of the guys, tossed back jokes, and even had a healthy sensuality about her.

When Yukikaze entered after her, the adventurers all began to whistle.

“Hey, Yukikaze! I’ve been dying to see you!”

“I’ll buy! Why don’t you come sit with us?”

“Y-Yukikaze-chan... I love you...”

She seemed to be extremely popular in her own right, but her reaction was very cold, in contrast to Mikan’s. It seemed that her cool attitude and expression gave her her popularity.

“Hm. An inn-slash-restaurant, by the look of it...”

Seeing the Demon Lord enter after the pair, the crowded room instantly fell silent. They stared at his bizarre outfit, and jet black hair that was extremely rare on this continent. Many were overwhelmed just by his intimidating gaze as he inspected the place.

(Stonework walls and pillar. Looks like they got a real kitchen, too.) The Demon Lord was simply accessing the foreign construction, but the crowd was enveloped with so much tension that you could probably hear a pin drop in the room.

“...What’s with the scary face, Mister Fox? Come sit.”

“I wasn’t making a face.”

He accepted Yukikaze’s offer and sat at a table. The owner had been frozen by fear upon seeing the Demon Lord, but he seemed to regain some courage seeing how Yukikaze spoke to him. He approached the table timidly.

“Y-Yukikaze... You’re traveling with this gentleman this time?”

“...Yes. Mister Fox is my partner. On the streets and in the sheets.”

“I’m not your partner. Anywhere.”

“...Bring a bucket of hot water to the room when we’re done.”

“Y-You got it... A-And you, sir...?”

“Bucket, huh...? How much is it?”

“T-Three bronze coins for cold water, and five for hot...”

“Hm. I’ll take a hot one.”

That was most likely used to clean up in the room. On this continent, baths were luxuries reserved for nobles and wealthy merchants. Most people cleaned with just a cloth and a little bit of water.

“While we’re here, I wouldn’t have minded a hot towel service.”

“...I can give you a hot service.”

“Not what I meant...”

The Demon Lord explained the Japanese culture of restaurants providing hot, steamed towels before meals for the patrons to wipe their hands with. It didn’t seem to register to Yukikaze why a restaurant would provide such a thing complimentary.

“I think there’s a market for it. You get dusty going anywhere in this world.”

Because most of the roads aren’t paved, the Demon Lord assumed. While it wouldn’t have been the case if the roads were paved, carriages and people going down dirt roads would, naturally, raise some dust.

“...I don’t think that’s feasible, Mister Fox. The inn would lose money on it.”

“Let me ask you something. Those buckets of water. Do they sell well?”

“...Decently. The guild won’t give you jobs if you’re not presentable.”

“Interesting...”

Hearing this, the Demon Lord sensed some mechanism behind the scenes. He guessed that the inns and the guild had a deal. If adventurers couldn’t get jobs without a certain level of cleanliness about them, they were forced to buy water. Even if the guild was promised only 10% of each sale in return, they would have jumped on the deal. It didn’t hurt the guild to have its rough-and-tough members clean and presentable, either. In any world, it seemed that commoners were taken advantage of everywhere they went, a little bit at a time.

(Back in Japan, for example, everything was taxed...)

Sales tax, registration and license fees, local taxes, income tax, alcohol and tobacco tax... there were countless examples. Even the government-run lotteries were nicknamed “the poor-man’s tax.”

(But once laws are set, and it becomes a rule of society, it becomes acceptable...) Not that he did this often, but the Demon Lord began to contemplate governmental tax systems. He personally would have abolished sales tax altogether to encourage spending, since less spending directly led to a worse economy.

“...Are you all right, Mister Fox? Do you want a hot service after all?”

“Not the one you’re thinking of.”

As the Demon Lord sat exasperated by Yukikaze, Mikan came back to the table, carrying a large tray. There were numerous oysters lined up on the tray, and the owner brought over some ale.

“Now let’s dig in! We’re splitting the check, by the way!”

“...Oysters. Not the prairie kind, though.”

Mikan held Mr. Just Use Me up to one of the oysters as she chugged a glass of ale. The Demon Lord could only shrug at her gallant drinking.

“This is the stuff! Ahh, I feel alive!”

“What a dad you are.”

“How dare you! I’m a young maiden of seventeen!”

Before the Demon Lord could comment back, Mikan poured vinegar onto one of the oysters and slurped it down.

“Mmmm! It heals all the stress I get from you two!”

After using Mr. Just Use Me herself, Yukikaze squeezed a lemon onto an oyster and sucked it down. Seeing her do this, the adventurers in the room erupted in cheer.

“I want Yukikaze-chan to suck on me...!”

“M’Lady may blush if she heard you.”

“Now now, gentlemen. Let’s keep it in our pants.”

Rolling his eyes at the crowd’s reaction, the Demon Lord used his Taste Test command for the first time in a while. The oyster in his hand glowed white, indicating that it was safe to consume. If it wasn’t, it would have glowed red.

Suspicious of the glow, Mikan barked at him: “W-What did you... just do?”

“The same thing that doll did. I checked for any poison.”

“You’re not a cleric. You’re the avatar of evil, if anything.”

“...Mikan, you’re the avatar of...Hrm.”

“Why don’t you have a drink, Yukikaze!?”

Mikan poured ale down Yukikaze’s throat to physically shut her up.

“...You drank from this glass after taking it raw... Are you trying to knock me up?”

“Will you never stop!?”

(They never stop...)

Ignoring the pair, the Demon Lord took an oyster. He could feel a longing in his throat satisfied at the first taste of seafood in a long time.

“Hm. Not bad.”

“...You like it raw too, Mister Fox? Erotic violence?”

“I have no idea what you’re saying anymore...”

The next plates the owner brought were boiled clams and green pea soup.

“...I always eat these to rejuvenate from a long trip.”

“Hm. It’s been a while since I’ve had one of these,” the Demon Lord said, recalling Fishing, one of the skills in the game. It was something he had prepared for players who weren’t good at combat, but it had proven surprisingly popular, to the point where there were special arenas created only to host fishing tournaments.

(Seafood created by the Empire should taste really...Hm?) He turned in the direction of the murmuring crowd to see twenty or so well-built men entering the store. The smell of their sweat and musk filled the restaurant.

“Yukikaze. Who are they?”

“...Miners who dig up Spell Stones. They’re sweaty.”

“Ah, no wonder they have the muscles.”

“...They smell bad.”

Yukikaze slyly buried her face into the Demon Lord’s suit, saying “I need to refresh my nose with your scent, Mister Fox.” The Demon Lord, on the other hand, was more interested in the miners’ loud conversation.

“That coward king... He doesn’t give a damn about us!”

“What do you mean, Mister Goda?”

“That coward... told us to protect the mining mountains ourselves!”

“Ourselves...? We’re facing down a foreign army!”

“He doesn’t want to stick his nose into conflict... All he cares about is counting money, and especially doesn’t care about men like us who get our hands dirty.”

“If they’re not here to protect us when we need them, what are we paying our taxes for...?”

The Demon Lord listened, interested, as he sipped on his ale. It seemed like the foreign military had begun to invade even the mines.

“All that coward talks about is condolences and discourse, he doesn’t get the picture!”

“M-Mister Goda... Keep your voice down a little.”

“How do you expect me to do that, Honekawa! We’re going to starve at this rate!”

Hearing the two distinctive names, the Demon Lord nearly spat out his ale. He didn’t know if he should have been amused or scared.

“Y-You two... I’m going up to the room. Let me know when we’re leaving.”

As if to avoid the whole situation, the Demon Lord left his seat in a hurry. His journey up north seemed to be filled with turmoil already.

Yukikaze

Race: Human — Age: 16

Weapon Snowy Valentine

A staff that boosts the effects of Ice magic. Embedded with a Snow Crystal, called ‘the ice that never melts.’ While dwarves are known to only seldom craft items for humans, a particularly skilled dwarf crafted this weapon for Yukikaze after taking a liking to her. A top-tier weapon without question.

Item Santa in Black — Black Wind

Crafted by a talented dwarf from an outfit called Santa in Black. Worn by a medium-rank devil. It boosts the wearer’s overall Magic Defense. Another top-tier piece of equipment.

Level: 13 — HP: ? — Stamina: ? — Attack: ? — Defense: ? — Dexterity: ? — Magic: 23 (+15) — Magic Defense: 15 (+15)

A B-rank adventurer with four stars. One of the best Spellcasters in the world, whose talents bloomed early. She wields class-4 spells, and is on her way to mastering class-5. If she were born a girl, she might have been a candidate to become a Holy Maiden. She likes the Demon Lord.

Side Story: An Outcast from the West, Part 2

With outcasts in tow, the parade from the Tzardom of Light continued down the highway. Despite their incident in the New Kingdom of Xenobia, they had some pep in their step. After leaving Xenobia, they went around the land of Myrk, which was controlled by fearless nomads, and passed through another small nation before regaining their strength in the Republic of Edogawa. Their conduct was unbecoming of followers of the Light, as they had caused a ruckus everywhere they went, from high-end bars to brothels, and ceremoniously whipped their prisoners to demonstrate the ruthlessness of the Tzardom.

“We are almost at Euritheis, Bishop.”

“Hm. Our pilgrimage nears its end.”

“I am speechless.”

“The Light will be pleased.”

While all they had done was torture their prisoners, taste local wine and delicacies, and sleep with prostitutes along the way, they had somehow convinced themselves that their mission had a higher purpose.

“Bishop... Are we safe in this country?”

“You really don’t know anything about the politics around here, do you?”

“I’m ashamed to say it, Bishop... I apologize.”

“No need.”

The bishop nodded with glee, betraying his disdainful choice of words. In his eyes, military leaders were a lowly species reliant on violence. This commander seemed somewhat redeemable, given his sense of shame of his own ignorance.

“Monarchy fell quickly here. Then, a colosseum fighter rose up and eventually took control of the national army.”

“Incredible...!”

In the war-torn north, there were always nations springing to life, ceasing to exist, being swallowed up, or getting flipped upside down in coups. At times, a man would wake as a king one day only to end up nailed to a cross before sundown. This country, Euritheis, seemed to have suffered that sort of turbulent fate as well.

“His name is Jack. Now he has started some business and does very well for himself.”

“I-I see...”

“Something the matter?”

“N-No, Bishop... It’s just...”

In contrast to his attitude in Xenobia, the bishop’s tone was not critical. In fact, he seemed to find it amusing. This Jack, in fact, seemed like just the kind of man the bishop would have normally insulted as some lowly ape.

“Fret not. Unlike the girl of Xenobia, Jack understands how the world works.”

“I-I see...”

The commander could only nod uncertainly at the bishop, but he soon understood what he meant. As the parade approached the capital, many citizens poured out onto the streets to welcome them. This was a huge difference from the nations they had passed through. The welcoming ceremony climaxed when they entered the castle in the capital. Soldiers in lavish armor lined up in formation, as a band dressed in flashy costumes cheerfully played their instruments. As the commander watched in shock, one stunning woman after another came up to the parade to greet each man.

“B-Bishop...? What’s...?”

“As I’ve told you, Jack understands the way of the world. He recognized the reign of our Tzardom.”

While the commander seemed nervous at this degree of welcome he had never experienced before, he couldn’t help but grin at the wave of gorgeous women trotting towards them.

“Sir High Knight, won’t you visit me at my inn, tonight? I would love to have

you over!”

“Let me touch your sword, Sir...!”

“W-Wait a minute... I’m no knight...”

Many of the women went as far as to hand him a piece of paper with their address on it. Even as the commander struggled to react, his expression became more elated with every interaction.

“T-This is troublesome... The women here think I’m a High Knight...”

Catching the bishop’s glance, the commander hurriedly cleared his throat and straightened his back, but he received no scolding.

“No harm in it. Our journey is nearing an end. Once we return to our homeland, we will each be another step closer to the almighty Light. Nothing to fear.”

“I-Is that true, Bishop...!?”

The bishop’s words implied an upcoming promotion. The bishop must have assessed this commander to be a pawn he could easily handle.

“What’s up, Bishop? I’ve been itching for you to get here...”

Eventually, a fearsome man appeared with numerous advisors in tow. Seeing the bishop dismount his horse, everyone else hurriedly followed.

“It has been too long, Jack.”

“...You said it. You’re looking a lot more criminal than you did last time. You’d fit right in with my chief officers, here.”

“In your dreams, Jack.”

The two shared a familiar laugh and patted each other on the shoulders as they entered the castle gate. One could catch a glimpse in this interaction of how close Jack’s ties to the Tzardom of Light were.

As the band carried on the fanfare, a man standing atop the castle gate muttered to himself: “Heh... That’s the party of the Light...? What is the world coming to?”

Wearing worn-out armor, he seemed to be an ordinary man in his 30s, save

for his exceptionally sharp glare. Perhaps from lack of funds, he had a piece of leaf in his mouth instead of a cigar, moving it up and down.

“They’re from the Tzardom we’ve heard so much about, Eyze. They look like they’re loaded!”

“Heh, I bet they are. The Light’s a rather business-savvy god, it seems.”

Eyze chuckled with sarcasm. He was one of the guards who guarded the gates of Euritheis, tasked with picking out any dangerous figures among those who passed through. The young man next to him was a new hire.

“Oh, but what about the crowd behind them? They look pretty beat up...”

“Slaves about to get sold. That’s what happens when you lose a war.”

“Wait, doesn’t the Tzardom worship the Great Light...? T-They sell people!?”

“They’ll sell anything for a coin. The Great Light’s the light reflecting off of those gold and silver coins.”

“N-No...!”

Eyze had a good laugh at the expense of the newbie’s naive reaction. Soon, he was sure, his green compadre would become as jaded as he was.

“Judging by how cheery the boss is, there’s going to be a good deal.”

“W-What’s the deal...?”

“The thing. The one that gets you high above the clouds.”

“You mean...”

“I guess they’d call it a pain reliever.”

The new guard’s face turned green, as he apparently had heard enough. In the castle, the lavish party continued in welcoming the Tzardom’s troupe, but Jack and the bishop had excused themselves at a certain point and began their secret meeting in a glitzy room.

“You’ve prepared the goods?”

“No duh. I’m not about to disappoint one of my best customers.”

“We’re taking the sea route this time.”

“Smart move. Less chance and risk of getting caught.”

There was a large chance of bandits striking at night when traveling along the main road. Often, entire militias would turn bandit. Depending on the goods, they could have very well been attacked by some mercenaries, too. On the other hand, the sea route was relatively safe, and allowed for transporting much more of the goods at once.

“Hellion territory, huh...? That’s devotion if I’ve ever seen it.”

“With the Light’s guidance, it is our duty to face any tribulations that may come our way.”

As Jack spat out some sarcasm, the bishop took it as if it were breeze in the wind.

“...I hear one of your prisoners is a demi-human.”

“News travels fast.”

With a chuckle, the bishop recited the pre-meal prayer. While it was almost inaudible, Jack curiously watched the bishop’s mouth. After his prayer, the bishop solemnly took a bite of the ground veal. It was an extravagant take on the dish, with bread crumbs and egg yolk mixed in, seasoned with sugar and spice.

Eating a piece of fruit from his plate, Jack muttered lowly, “What if I told you that I wanted it...?”

After chewing the bite of meat in his mouth thoroughly, the bishop grimaced.

“You do like your elaborate meals, don’t you? This is one I’ve never seen before,” he remarked, ignoring the question. On their plates were many thin slices of apple peel, which were (peculiarly) all buttered, fried, and sugared. “Hm. The sweetness of butter and apple melt together in your mouth.”

“Hmph! No rush. Answer me when you’re ready.” While Jack raised a brow at the bishop’s attitude, he didn’t show any sign of anger. He was expecting a giant payload for this deal, after all. The bishop’s thoughts seemed to be in a similar place, as he appeared to be nothing but pleasant, unlike how he acted in Xenobia. The Tzardom troupe would purchase a large quantity of dangerous

drugs here before heading to Hellion territory by ship. They would sell the flock of prisoners in Hellion territory before heading home. This was one sinister parade in the shadows of the Great Light's glorious title.

"You performed one interesting prayer just now."

"...How do you mean?"

The bishop poured the alcohol from his glass down his throat in a dignified manner. It was an amaretto, made from apricot and an assortment of other fruits and herbs. The strong alcohol blushed the bishop's cheeks a little.

"If I heard you right, you were praying to the Goddess, not the Light."

"...Now, Jack. Perhaps you've had too much to drink."

"Unfortunately, I'm sober."

While Jack had been drinking the same strong spirit, he wasn't intoxicated in the slightest. This man could handle his drink as well as his notoriety suggested.

"I'm not one of your inquisitors. Who's going to give a shit?"

"Hmph..."

"To tell you the truth, I much prefer the fickle Goddess of Destiny over some grandiose Light."

"Tactless to say so in front of a bishop..."

"Why not pray to a gorgeous babe, if anybody?"

Moira, the Goddess of Destiny. She was a character of mythos, often depicted alongside the Great Light and Lucifer, the Fallen Angel. The goddess had plenty of uproarious legends, like turning a poor man into a tycoon overnight, changing a man's moment of death, and even forcing the Great Light itself to follow a destiny she set forth.

"Did you know, Bishop...? The Goddess is a lot more popular with the folks on the street."

"The Goddess of... Moira, is said to be closer to man, because of her fickle nature."

Nearly using the goddess' full title, the bishop hurriedly corrected his syntax.

In his country, any discussion of the goddess was practically outlawed.

“Ha ha! How inconvenient for you. All this power doesn’t get you far, does it?”

Jack laughed in the bishop’s face, as he looked like he just bit into a lemon. There was a reason for the goddess becoming taboo — according to mythology, the Goddess of Destiny suddenly disappeared one day. On the fateful day when Lucifer fell from Heaven... the Great Light suffered a historical loss against the sudden uprising. It was said that this was the day that turned the course of the Great War. That was also the story of how the Ruler of Night was born. While the truth of it was up for debate, there had always been those that secretly believed that the Goddess of Destiny had rebelled against the Light along with Lucifer.

“Nowadays, people pray to the Goddess of Destiny for health and longevity, success in battle, and even for good luck in gambling. She’s staying pretty busy.”

Jack laughed, amused. The Tzardom’s gag law held no ground in other nations. It seemed that the goddess and her various tales were much more approachable than the Great Light, which was nowhere to be found. Even the bishop had long lost his faith in the Great Light. He, too, was once a devoted young man, but as he grew older, he learned the nooks and crannies of life. After getting his hands as dirty as he needed to get ahead, he had earned the title of bishop. Each time he crossed a perilous bridge along the way, he had prayed to the Goddess of Destiny, and he had been rewarded for it. Who could have blamed him for substituting his faith in the Light for faith in Destiny? While their backgrounds were different, his experience was similar to how Luna came to believe in the Wise Angel. People devoted themselves to entities that granted their wishes.

“Jack, I didn’t peg you for the religious type.”

“Didn’t say I was. People like you and I are too worldly. That light could be blinding.”

Jack lit his cigar and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. His life, too, had consisted of one perilous path after another. Surely, there were times when he prayed to the Goddess of Destiny without telling another soul. Picking up on

this fact, the bishop uttered a sentence he never would have in his home country.

“The Goddess of Destiny favors the strong-willed.”

“I agree. The weak will never be more than prey.”

As these two were sharing a drink... The captured prisoners were crammed together in a stable with no doors. With garbage and debris around them, it was like they were huddled on the streets of the slums.

“Eat it.”

“Thank the Light for your merciful treatment.”

There were some breadcrumbs in the box presented to them, but it was far from a meal. More like bird feed, if anything. Still, the starved prisoners swarmed to the box, shoveling crumbs into their mouths. Watching them, the Tzardom’s soldiers burst out laughing.

“Look at that! And they think they’re human!”

“These must be a type of bird or swine.”

“Don’t spill it! You better lap up every single one of those crumbs on the ground!”

“Hey, where’d the demi-human go...?”

The soldiers looked around them. The demi-human seemed too weak to eat, laying on her back and looking up at the moon. She had torn-up clothes, revealing fresh whip wounds all over her body, and she was dirty from head to toe, but her portrait was still undeniably beautiful. In the moonlight, she even had a sense of mystique. One of the soldiers gulped.

“H-Hey... Why shouldn’t we have a little fun, huh?”

“Wh... With that thing!?”

“They’ll all be dead when we get there, anyway. So...”

With that, each of their eyes began to gleam. One of the soldiers grabbed the demi-human by the shoulders, and forcibly brought her to her feet.

“L-Little something for the road... Let’s have some fun.”

Breathing heavily, the soldier tried to drag the demi-human into a dark corner.

“...Let me go.”

“Shut up! I’m going to give you a taste of a real human!”

“What hopeless scum you are... Arfgh.”

The soldier slugged her as hard as he could, and she fell to the ground. Seeing that, the other soldiers couldn’t seem to contain themselves as they all jumped on the demi-human. At the same time, the other men began advancing on the good-looking women. It must have seemed unfair for them to be stuck on watch while the rest of their troupe was partying in the castle.

“L-Let go of me!”

“Nooo!”

“H-Hey... Is that what your Light commands you to do!?”

“Shut the hell up, you stinking heretics!”

“Now now, people of the Tzardom, calm yourselves...”

After the area erupted into a cacophony of shouts and screams, everyone came to a halt, hearing this voice seemingly come out of nowhere. The voice belonged to Eyze, who had been atop the castle gate earlier.

“Who the hell are you!?”

“You’re telling us what to do!?”

“No, no, I wouldn’t dare... But don’t you think it’s a little tactless for a troupe of the glorious Tzardom to mess around with that filth in our lavish capital?”

Even those about to take off their clothes came to a halt. They must have realized that causing a dishonorable commotion now could cost them dearly in the near future, especially if the bishop were to catch wind of it.

“That being said, I understand your frustration. The rest of your comrades are enjoying amazing food and wine with babes at their sides.”

“T-That’s right...”

“He’s right! It’s not fair at all...”

The men and women of the Tzardom troupe chimed in.

“Right, I get it. So, we at the Jack of All Trades would like to host your welcome party.”

“What?”

“For real!?”

Perhaps he thought that merely calming the storm now could lead to the same situation in a few days. Eyze skillfully manipulated them in order to keep the noise down.

“Now, please enjoy yourselves at an establishment of your choice. Of course, everything is on us.”

“W-Wow...!”

“B-But, what about the watch...?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be taking care of that, too.”

“R-Really...? Jack’s business didn’t get its reputation for nothing! They know how to entertain.”

Hearing Eyze’s invitation, they all got up, muttering all sorts of excuses.

“Now, that was an embarrassing display I’ve made.” “We would have gone too far to give any compassion to them.” “If you could not bother the bishop with any of this...”

“Of course. You must have been overzealous with your enthusiasm to complete your mission.” Spouting pleasantries, Eyze cheerfully sent all of them off. The new hire behind him approached Eyze as they watched the Tzardom troupe leave.

“A-Are you sure it was all right... to do that?”

“Yeah. Boss would rather pay up than have them cause a scene out here, too. He should be smiling ear-to-ear right now from that deal.”

“O-Okay...”

“Hey! You guys get back to the stable!”

Scared by Eyze, the prisoners returned to the stable with a begrudging look in their eyes. From their point of view, the Tzardom, Euritheis, Eyze, and everything around them was the same.

“W-We helped them out... I feel kind of ripped off.”

“That’s just how the cookie crumbles. I wasn’t trying to help them, anyway. I’d rather be one of them than be forced to keep watch listening to raping and screaming.”

As if they had forgotten about those two guards, the Tzar’s soldiers cheerfully patted each other on their backs and went out into the city.

“In any case...”

“What’s wrong, Eyze?”

“They’re all going to die.”

Jolted by the sudden notion, the new recruit turned back to Eyze. Eyze had been working as a gate guard because of his rare ability to tell benevolent and malicious people apart, and he was especially sensitive to looming death. Thanks to this ability, he avoided as many dangerous people as possible and managed to survive this long.

“W-What do you mean ‘die’...?”

“I dunno, that’s just what I see. Besides, no one’s going to miss them.”

With that, Eyze yawned and looked up to the moon, bored. Outside the stable, the demi-human girl was on her back, covered in dust.

“You head back in too. If you can’t stand, I’ll give you a hand?”

“...Don’t bother.”

“All right.”

Eyze said nothing more. At the same time, he tried his best to not look at her, in order to avoid seeing where the poor little girl would end up.

Those Who Swarm

—An underground facility in an unknown location.

“That dragon... Don’t think you can get away with this...”

Utopia had been unable to conceal his frustration since the incident. His followers had expended three Satanic Crosses (each created through an excruciatingly long process) with nothing to show for it. Carnival, a powerful medium-rank devil had vanished, and even the high-ranking devil Allit, the Duke of Darkness, had been defeated. A devil’s nightmare. According to Utopia’s estimation, they should have at least greatly damaged the barriers protecting the Holy Castle, even if they didn’t have the firepower to take it down completely. All calculations were torn to shreds, however, by the unthinkable appearance of a Demon Lord and a Dragonborn. This scenario would not have even held ground as a joke before. Of course, Utopia did not believe in the resurrection of the Demon Lord, but considered it to be like a fairy tale. If such an existence had been resurrected, Utopia was sure that it would have appeared in Hellion territory to rule over it and all of its inhabitants. By this time, such an existence would have swept through the entire continent in a storm of bloodshed.

For Utopia, there was a figure that he couldn’t ignore, who piqued his interest much more than some con artist who called himself the Demon Lord.

The other one.

Once, he would have brushed it off as a rumor, but this was the Dragon’s second appearance. Utopia could kill the Dragon a thousand times, but his thirst for vengeance would still not be quenched. The Dragon, while claiming neutrality, practically sat at the top of the demi-human pyramid, which included the Anima. Time and time again, the Dragon had interfered with the war between Hellions and the Anima. In the end, the Dragon had sided with the Anima for the simple reason of “having his home torn apart,” before obliterating tens of thousands of Hellions with his unparalleled power. To top it off, he gave a portion of his blood and power to a Dragonborn to rule over the Anima. His task, according to the Dragon, was to “keep the unruly Anima under control, and keep them from engaging in stupid conflicts with the Hellions.” The Hellions would have argued that appointing someone with his own power to rule one side of the conflict was far from neutral of the dragon. This was why

Utopia could not ignore the new Dragonborn. From the Hellions' point of view, he was surely another enemy sent down by the Dragon.

"Lord Utopia... Where did this horde come from...?"

Warlkin addressed Utopia, who was lost in thought. Numerous people, men and women of varying age, had been gathered in this location. Every one of them were skin and bone, and seemed to lack any willpower to protest. They seemed too drained to even take a step, their eyes devoid of any spirit. Warlkin felt something ominous about those eyes.

"No need for concern. I am giving them salvation."

"...Salvation...?"

Warlkin turned to Utopia inquisitively. He seemed rather strange to Warlkin recently. Before, he had always acted with the confidence and guidance of the great leader that he was. Lately, he had been on edge, raising his voice even over trivial matters.

"Just as happiness comes in many forms, so too does salvation."

Warlkin couldn't help but internally sigh at the riddling reply. Utopia had no intention of giving a straight answer. Many Satanists had died in the last battle, and many of them didn't get along with Warlkin. While most of them were hot-blooded, he was the odd man out, always the type to construct logical steps to achieve a plan. While everyone around him clamored for death and destruction, he alone had calculated a meticulous plan and ambushed the Holy Maidens before using Tartarus. In fact, he had them cornered. While his scheme ended in a failure, it was only due to the unexpected Zero. There was nothing wrong with his plan itself, and yet all Warlkin had to show for it was a reputation as a coward. The Satanists had a custom, like many isolated groups throughout history, that shamed survival without victory. They found beauty in a warrior's death.

(Stupid... What good would I be dead...?)

Since Warlkin had the ideals to better his country at his core, he didn't subscribe to this belief. Once his life would end, so would his patriotism.

(Where is this nation headed to...?)

Warlkin pondered, looking up at the throne.

——Dona Dona's manor

Azur opened the door and twisted his handsome face ever so slightly. Inside, a hulk of a man was straddling a little girl, pummeling her body as hard as he could. Every part of the girl's face and body was bruised and bloated from internal bleeding. At a glance, she only looked like a bag stuffed with meat.

"Milligan, you've captured another girl from the slums?"

"Don't glare at me like that. I'm just goofing around."

The girl had been long dead, but the man didn't seem to pay mind to that fact as he continued bludgeoning her body.

"It will hurt our lord's reputation. I've told you before."

"Don't be such a square. Your precious Lord Dona gets more toys than anyone."

The man's name was Milligan. He was one of Dona's long-time mercenaries. While Azur ranked above him, he didn't have to answer to Azur. Dona liked Milligan's wildness, and let him do as he pleased. Perhaps he liked to have a rabid dog around for protection.

"Orders from our lord. You are to head to the village of Rabbi and research..."

"Hey! I finally get a chance to play with some Bunnies, huh!? Hell yeah!"

"Milligan. I said, 'research.'"

"Tsk... A-All right. Cool it with the eyes, man."

After Milligan exited the room, Azur rang a bell for the man-servants of the manor. He couldn't have any of the female servants witness such a scene.

"Bury her, please. With reverence."

"Yes, sir."

The servants seemed to be accustomed to this chore. They quickly wrapped the girl's corpse in a black cloth before carrying it out of the manor. Their expressions lacked any real emotion, as they must have concealed it all to earn

their living. In actuality, working in this manor brought in good money. They all started out giddy of their good pay, but eventually their enthusiasm would dampen, and over time, they all became expressionless. Azur would have described it as a faceless manor filled with gold.

(Not that I have a face to speak of...)

Azur twisted his lips with a sense of self-deprecation as he contemplated the village of Rabbi, where a man who called himself the Demon Lord lived. For some reason, the man had traveled north beyond the border. Azur's master, Dona, was quick to react. While contacting the Demon Lord was forbidden by the Holy Maidens, Dona came up with the childish excuse that, as long as the Demon Lord was absent, he was free to search the village. Although, no one could stop him from acting upon childish instinct and logic. The only thing keeping him from crossing the line entirely was White. A sense of foreboding flashed over Azur.

(There might even be a secret order to steal the music box from the village if it's there...) Azur could tell that it was excruciatingly humiliating for Dona to have that music box slip out of his clutches. Each day and night since the auction, Dona had been cursing Buttersauce. One might have wondered why Dona didn't bet, say, 100 gold medallions if he wanted the item so badly. But this is where the prideful nature of nobles came into play. The elegance of winning by a small margin through a one-time psychological battle was the only form of noble victory. If Dona had written something like '100 gold medallions' on that sheet, the room would have rolled their eyes at him. He would only be left with some nasty comments by those in the room, not respect.

"Milligan... There's no way he's not going to make a mess out of this."

While Azur acknowledged this, he had no way of stopping him. Milligan was one of Dona's own projects, and owed no loyalty to anyone else. All Azur could do was pray for the mess to be a small one. Of course, life wouldn't prove to be that easy... In the village of Rabbi, there was a man trusted by the Demon Lord and a terror-inflicting witch, after all.

Rookie

——Near the borders of the Republic of Edogawa.

The carriage carrying the Demon Lord was approaching its destination: the most bustling city in the Republic of Edogawa. It was located in the southwestern region of the Northern Nations, neighboring Animania across a mountain range.

“Is that really what this country is called...?”

“Sounds kind of historical, doesn’t it? Why do you complain so much?”

The name “Edogawa” reminded the Demon Lord of a certain child-detective, but he doubted that Mikan would understand.

“What’s the town called? It’s not ‘Conantown’ or ‘Case Closed City’ or something, is it?”

“...The town of Rookie. That’s where the Bastille Dungeon is.”

“Rookie, huh? So it’s a town full of noobs.”

“...Very perceptive, Mister Fox.”

Since Yukikaze gave a round of applause for him, the Demon Lord struck a pose staring out of the carriage.

“You idiot,” Mikan mumbled as she tossed a piece of candy into her mouth.

As much as she complained, it seemed that she enjoyed the sweetness of the candy.

“Wh-What, is this!? It’s spicy!? My throat feels breezy!”

“Hm, it seems you got the menthot flavor. Menthol, I mean.”

“...Now you’re easy and breezy, Mikan.”

“Hey, you want me to just go? I think I’ll just go!”

After calming Mikan down enough so she wouldn’t leave the party, the Demon Lord asked a few questions about the town of Rookie. According to the two adventurers, the name of Rookie was born out of the Bastille Dungeon. It originally had a different name, before it was renamed due to all of the rookie adventurers gathering at the dungeon.

“Bastille, hm? That doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“...Deep down in the dungeon, there is a prison-like structure.”

“Oh. So it used to be a facility to keep something contained?”

“...I don’t know. A prison of love?”

“There’s something wrong with your verbal cortex.”

Then the Demon Lord continued his questions. He wasn’t usually such a detail-oriented type, but he made sure to find out as much as he could about any information he deemed necessary. He was the type of person to never clean his room, but cleaned it meticulously during spring cleaning.

How were so many things still found in the dungeon? Why didn’t the dungeon run out of items? Where were the monsters in the dungeon coming from? Why haven’t those monsters been hunted to extinction? Did monsters procreate? In a sense, all of the Demon Lord’s questions were rudimentary, yet neither Yukikaze nor Mikan could answer them, as they hadn’t even considered these questions before. For people born in this world, these things were only natural and nothing seemed strange about them. Just like no one in modern times would question a power line along the streets. On the other hand, if someone from this world were to see such a thing, they would have a million questions to ask about the power lines, the poles that held them, and so much more.

“...Do you prefer to be a warden?”

“What are you talking about?”

“...Or a prisoner of the dungeon, Mister Fox?”

“Neither. I don’t enjoy confinement, one way or the other.”

“...So cool, Mister Fox.”

Yukikaze stared at the Demon Lord with rosy cheeks. Of course, the Demon Lord didn’t say anything special, but his appearance, coupled with his attitude, somehow gave reverence to everything he said. Giving them a side-eye, Mikan sipped on her water with a frown on her face. The menthol flavor didn’t seem to have left her mouth yet.

“Don’t enjoy confinement, my butt. You’re already confining me.”

“...Mikan likes to be tied up. Candle wax too.”

“Hm... I’m not one to judge anyone’s kinks, but be careful out there.”

“I can’t stand these people anymore!”

—The town of Rookie.

“This town’s pretty developed,” the Demon Lord said cheerfully.

The opposite reaction from the one he had upon seeing Aku’s village or the village of Rabbi for the first time. He didn’t dislike bustling towns, but he didn’t mind the solemn air found in places like temples, either. In short, he wanted it all.

As expected, people walking the streets of the town looked to be adventurers. Some carried swords, others looked like stereotypical mages, and some were transporting large luggage on the backs of camel-like animals.

(A lot more civilians than I imagined. Making money off the adventurers, I guess.) In a town full of adventurers, specialized businesses emerged to serve them. In addition to food and drink, they needed tool shops and inns, as well as demanded bars and brothels.

(I’ve heard that, throughout history, towns naturally formed around military bases.) The Demon Lord wasn’t wrong. A military base signified thousands of potential customers. A business opportunity not to be missed.

“Adventurers, merchants... and a decent number of wealthy-looking people.”

“All this country’s got is the dungeon. No one’s stupid enough to invade it when Animania’s next door.”

“Hm... A clever moat of sorts.”

“Something like that. A lot of wealthy people evacuate here during war season. Just so you know, I’m not talking to you. I’m just talking to myself.”

Seeing Mikan talk while looking the other way, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but chuckle. For all of her complaining, she had a kind nature.

“I do thank you. I like people who can compensate for my shortcomings or do things that I can’t.”

“I don’t want you to like me. Again, just talking to myself.”

“Unfortunate. I wanted to invite you to my salt and tangerine bath as a token of my gratitude.”

“What could that be!? ... Talking to myself, of course...”

Mikan couldn’t help but now turn to look back at the Demon Lord. She loved the fruit that was her namesake. Yukikaze then uttered an icy comment:

“...Mikan likes playing with herself.”

“Shut up, Yukikaze!”

“...By ‘playing with herself,’ I mean...hrm!”

Mikan covered Yukikaze’s mouth to force it shut. Her bronze skin contrasted against Yukikaze’s alabaster skin, making the already bizarre scene into a spectacle. As he listened in to them with one ear, the Demon Lord carefully surveyed the passing people and his surroundings. While part of this was so he could come back with Quick Travel, he just wanted to cherish the things he saw with his own eyes.

He made sure to fully swallow everything he was told, too, before processing it through his own internal filter and storing it into his memory bank. While this might have seemed like an ordinary process, the Demon Lord did it for every single piece of information he received. For others, that was surely extraordinary. That’s how Akira Ono was able to create his own world over the course of fifteen years — extraordinary willpower and solitude. Creating a world, finishing it, and vanishing it all on his own. He was sort of a god, dictator, and Demon Lord in that way.

“Room’s not bad for the low rate...”

Poking around the room, the Demon Lord ran his hand along the wall. It looked like the walls were made out of some sort of dirt, but they felt very hard to the touch, so they must have been cemented with Earth magic. Depending on the power level of the spell’s caster, it could temper dirt as hard as concrete. Since many of the rookies that gathered at this town would drink and brawl, even a cheap inn had to be of sound structure. Down to every door and chair, things were extremely well made.

“...Why here, Mister Fox? If you don’t have money, I can be the breadwinner.”

“I’m not ready to be a housewife. It’s all part of the experience... It’s something I can only do now.”

In fact, the Demon Lord was not short on funds at all. He had sold the Holy Coin of Ramd (that Yu acquired) for a whopping 120 gold medallions. While he left 110 of them with Tahara, he was still holding onto ten of them. In this world, that was a small fortune. When he had Aku, Luna, or Tron in tow, he couldn’t casually stay at a cheap inn out of safety concerns. When he had his advisors with him, he would have to rent a good room to keep up appearances. Things like this he could only do on a solo mission.

“...I’ll support you from now on, Mister Fox. Three square meals and a nap. I will serve you day and night.”

“You’re a freeloader creating machine, aren’t you?”

“...You can sleep in all day, Mister Fox. I’ll take it all in at night.”

“More like a waste-of-space creating machine...”

Frowning, the Demon Lord tied his hair up. Ever since his encounter with White, he often used some sort of hair tie to bunch up his hair while winding down. The pre-Demon Lord Akira Ono never had long hair, so this took some time to adjust to.

“...Don’t you ever want a haircut, Mister Fox?”

“It was a feature I really liked.”

“...A feature?”

“Never mind.”

“...But I like your hair up, too. You’re handsome, Mister Fox.”

Standing on her tippy toes, Yukikaze touched his hair with both hands. In her eyes, the Demon Lord’s black hair had a very exotic allure. In fact, no one in this world had pitch-black hair. Everything about the Demon Lord — his outfit, onyx eyes, and jet-black hair — exuded a foreign aura... to say nothing of his overwhelming power. In this world rich with non-human species, humans were

not exactly at the top of the food chain. In many senses of the word, humans fell prey to other species, save for a few exceptional cases. In this world, strength was justice, suavity, and power. It was only natural that the Demon Lord was particularly popular among adventurers, who prioritized strength above all else.

“Let’s rest for the night and head to the Bastille Dungeon tomorrow.”

“...I would happily be imprisoned with you, Mister Fox.”

“I should have asked you this sooner... How old are you, exactly?”

“...Just turned sixteen. Mikan’s a year older than me.”

“What a baby,” the Demon Lord mumbled.

From his perspective, at the high-school-graduating age of eighteen, he could see only a glimpse of maturity. He wouldn’t consider anyone under twenty to be a fully-fledged adult.

“Well, kid. Play hard, eat a ton, and work on yourself while you’re still young.”

Grabbing Yukikaze by her collar, he carried her out of the room like he would a cat. With a quick wave, he then relentlessly slammed the door in her face. In spite of this beautiful girl(?)’s advances, the Demon Lord didn’t even go for a nibble of the bait. On the other hand...

“...Mister Fox does really care about me.”

Yukikaze’s misunderstandings were compounding. In her mind, their feelings for each other were mutual. Time and time again the Demon Lord had suggested that through actions like this. At this point, she had begun imagining their wedding. If the Demon Lord were to find out, he would be astounded. Just as his willpower was strong, so was Yukikaze’s. Who knew where this tug-of-war was headed?

——The next morning

Mikan woke up on time, got ready, and left the room. She was emphatic about punctuality, and made sure to be ten minutes early to everything. She was a rare specimen among the majority of tardy adventurers. Her discipline

aided in her raising the difficult-to-wield longsword to the Master Level, as well as climb the ladder to become a B-rank adventurer.

“That Demon Lord better be up by now...”

Already irritated, Mikan headed towards the Demon Lord’s room. While her stoic self and the mischievous Demon Lord were never destined to get along, he saw her as an easy target for mockery.

(If he’s still snoring in there, I’ll kick the pillow out from under his head...) As she reached the door and held up her fist to knock, she could hear two voices from within. The frown on her forehead slightly lessened.

(At the very least, he *seems* punctual.)

However, there was something strange about the conversation she could overhear.

“Hm. I didn’t expect so much to come out. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“...So much white stuff... Mister Fox... It’s too much...”

“Nonsense. I’m far from satisfied.”

Whap! Whap! A forceful sound — that seemed to pound on Mikan’s insides — could be heard. She rushed to open the door.

“What are you two doing!?”

The Demon Lord was beating the dust out of the mattress by the window. An awkward silence filled the room.

“Just dusting the mattress... What did you think we were doing?”

“...Mister Fox is a Demon Lord in the bedroom.”

“You and your phrases!”

And so, the bizarre trio embarked on their way to the dungeon. The Demon Lord was about to pop his dungeon-crawling cherry...

Mikan

Race: Human — Age: 17

Weapon OGREBLADE

A longsword previously held by an ogre variant. Mikan has attached numerous Spell Stones to increase its weight. Its destructive powers are top-notch, and no one could doubt Mikan’s swordswomanship for being able to wield such a weapon.

Item SCARLET PANTHER

A high-class armor made from the hide of a red panther. Very flexible and non-impeding, it absorbs a lot of damage from blunt and cutting attacks.

Level: 12 — HP: ? — Stamina: ? — Attack: 15 (+15) — Defense: 10 (+10) — Dexterity: 20 — Magic: 3 — Magic Defense: 5 (+5)

A four-star, B-rank adventurer. In a world where most adventurers are Rookies, she sticks out against the crowd. She has learned various longsword skills through her large amount of combat experience. One couldn’t ask for much more from a frontline warrior. Her favorite food? Tangerines (or mikan, in Japanese). Her least favorite person? The Demon Lord.

The Line

——Fort Arthur, on the border of the Republic of Edogawa.

In addition to being the home of the Bastille Dungeon, the first destination of most adventurers, the Republic of Edogawa had another important characteristic: the fact that they were the neighbor of Animania, home to various demi-human species. Animania was formed not only by Animas, but also from a melting pot of elves, dwarfs, giants, and many other species.

While Edogawa's fort on the border was manned by numerous soldiers, there wasn't really a defense to speak of on the Animania's side of the border, only an expansive forest. They didn't consider any invasion by humans to be much of a threat. In fact, their physical and magical capacities, as well as their weapons and armor, were on another level from those of their human neighbors.

It was another day of complaining for the soldiers guarding the border.

"Dammit. I can't wait to go back to Doyle."

"You said it. We could drop dead any day out here."

While the town of Doyle behind them had all the entertainment facilities they could want, they were at a frontline base. Brothels and bars could only be found in their daydreams. Those kinds of things were taboo at this active stronghold.

Now a pair of Star Players had paid them a visit: Mynk, the S-rank adventurer, and Olgan, the Hellion.

"I thought we were going to relax at Suneo..."

"Sorry. We need to deal with this, first."

"You know I broke all sorts of bones, right?"

"Hurry up and heal them, then."

While Mynk complained, Olgan was having none of it. In the meantime, a group of demi-humans had appeared, parting the thick forest. If the Star Players weren't there, the fortress would have erupted in panic. Olgan jumped off the

side of the fortress and approached the group. Mynk silently followed. The group was comprised of a Minotaur with large horns protruding from their head, and a dwarf. While Mynk and Olgan couldn't see them, they could sense more figures further into the woods. Stroking his beard, the dwarf stuck out his hand.

"Where's the stuff, lass?"

"Here."

She produced some things from her bag (Mr. Handy). The dwarf inspected them for a while by tapping them with his finger and holding them up to the light before giving a nod.

"These are it. Claws of a Molten Eater and fangs of a Catberus."

The demi-human residents of Animania, for the most part, disliked humans and hated Hellions. While humans were endlessly enchanted by the craftsmanship of dwarves and elves, the same could not be said for the other way around. This was simply because of the gap in their products' quality, in addition to the difference in currency. Naturally, trading proved to be difficult under these conditions. The only exception that held any sort of value for the residents of Animania were monster parts that could not be obtained in their own country. Of course, every part they wanted had to be harvested from extremely dangerous creatures which only a handful of humans in the entire world could hunt. These two Star Players were on that very short list. The dwarf turned his head toward the forest behind him; a cat folk, with cat ears and tail, and a giant emerged. The soldiers murmured at the sight of them, and Mynk whispered into Olgan's ear.

"Hey, why are they always together?"

"Drinking buddies."

"Then, can't we just bring them alcohol?"

"Apparently our spirits are undrinkable to them."

"Seriously, where do they get off...?"

"Dwarves have always been picky about food and drink."

Mynk's impression of the demi-humans, who looked down on humans as inferior, was not favorable. Olgan, on the other hand, seemed to value this trade, and kept a straight face.

"Hey, cat. The rest is your job."

"Be sure to give mew some drinks later, old man! Fire Drink and Thunder Water, too."

"Shit, Thunder Water, too...? You got some thick skin, you know that?"

"I'm a cat, after all. Of course I have thick fur."

The cat and the dwarf argued for a minute. When they settled down, the girl with cat ears approached the humans.

"The same topic, purr usual?"

"Yes."

The cat whispered something into Olgan's ear. Olgan nodded at times, and grunted or sighed heavily at other times.

"Its powers are growing..."

"Yep. I'm feline bad for you!" the cat said casually and retreated into the forest. The rest of the party followed without a word. The meeting concluded with a cut-and-dry silence, no greetings. Olgan fell deep in thought when Mynk gently tapped her shoulder.

"So, did you get the info you wanted?"

"...Yeah."

"Let's go. No sense standing around here."

"Where to?"

"Let's catch a break at Doyle. The black phoenix that slumbers in my right eye whispers the same to me."

"Right. Black phoenix, huh? You just want to sleep in a warm bed."

Mynk and Olgan's exchange continued as normal.

"Oh, speaking of... apparently the paladin boy's in this country."

“Hmph, that hypocrite. It’s never enough...”

“Come on, it’s cute. Thanks to people like him, my darkness has a chance to shine.”

Olgan rolled her eyes before floating up in the air. Mynk jumped her way up onto the fortress, and the pair started on their way to the town of Doyle.

The Bastille Dungeon — Level 1

(It’s crowded... but the energy isn’t bad.)

The Demon Lord cracked a smile upon seeing the bustling plaza. Some were yelling into the crowd to sell food or drink, some had herbs laid out for sale, and some were even recruiting party members to go into the dungeon with. The Bastille Dungeon was at the center of the city, surrounded by the town. It was no exaggeration to say that the dungeon itself was the economic engine of the area and a business in its own right. Where people gathered, all sorts of business opportunities were born.

“The entry fee was one gold medallion, right?”

“That’s right. And the government takes 10% of the revenue you earn from selling the items and monster parts down there... Just talking to myself, by the way.”

“10% isn’t too unfair for a tax. Rather reasonable, in fact.”

“Are you kidding? We’re risking our lives every time we go in... Still talking to myself, though!”

As he overheard Mikan “talking to herself,” the Demon Lord realized that this dungeon was a money-printing machine for the country. Various items and monsters replenished themselves in the dungeon, so the government was reaping a killing in tax revenue by having adventurers do all of the legwork hunting and collecting them. They weren’t hiring these adventurers in any capacity, so it wasn’t the state’s problem if any of them were to get injured or died. The adventurers were practically a colony of ants raking in money for the government until death.

(Even the supply of adventurers is automatically replenished...)

The Demon Lord formed this kind of impression, but he didn't say it out loud for fear of insulting many of the adventurers there. This time, he asked Yukikaze about something he was wondering.

"You said most of the Northern Nations have at least one of these dungeons or ruins, right?"

"...Mm-hm. Many places are much more dangerous than here."

"I see. That's how they can be at war all year long."

"...What do you mean?"

"A source of income, I should say. Never mind."

Since monster hides, horns, fangs, tails, and things of that nature were valuable, these dungeons were like an endless goldmine. As they approached the entrance of the dungeon, he could see numerous shops crowded together, vitalizing the area despite the early hour. A branch of the Adventurers' Guild stood closest to the entrance, accompanied by the tax collector's office right next to it. It seemed that dungeon-crawlers would come out of the dungeon and immediately sell the loot at the guild.

(This is a straight-up day-labor site.)

With no kind of social security to speak of, the crawlers earned only from their day labor, paying taxes on the spot. The Demon Lord could imagine that any money left over from their loot disappeared on booze, women, clothes, and the like. This might have been a fine lifestyle for the young and healthy, but when the adventurers grew older, injured, or ill, they would no longer have the ability to dungeon-crawl. Of course, neither the Adventurers' Guild nor the government would lend a helping hand at that point.

"No surprise that a bunch of them retire, never getting past the Rookie stage. They're just laborers with no prospects for the future."

"...You're right, Mister Fox, but adventurers can win big, too."

"Like finding a rare item?"

"...Mm-hm. I know some people who've won big and bought a house or a

farm.”

(Playing the lottery with your life until you’re ground down to the bone... Not that I don’t appreciate that kind of lifestyle.) At the end of the day, the Demon Lord didn’t dislike the ‘go big or go home’ mentality. That’s why he had poured so much detail into the casino, which was extraneous to the game, and repeatedly updated it. His excessive work and gambling spirit was epitomized in the most difficult game of chance in the casino. If a player had won at that game, that week’s Game would have ended then and there, providing the winner with a special ending and liberating all of the players. That being said, not a single person had managed to win at that game...

“A lot of them have large bags or boxes on them.”

They were shouting out prices like ‘six bronze medallions!’ Some were approached by adventurers and negotiating.

“Who are they, Mikan?”

“Don’t say my name... Those are porters. They carry your loot.”

“Hm. So you can make them carry the load.”

“The good ones can take apart monsters, too, so they can get pretty expensive. If you want one, you’re paying for them.”

“I don’t need one.”

The Demon Lord could throw as many items as he wanted into the Item Folder. It was as if he had a pocket that connected to another dimension. Technically, each player in the game could only hold up to ten items, excluding their equipment. They could carry five by default, and could add on up to another five (one at a time) by purchasing Back-up Back Packs at the shops. On the other hand, the advisors of the Sleepless Castle held ninety-five of the Back-up Back Packs from the start of the game, allowing them to hold a total of one hundred items.

(Even the Back-up Back Packs act like their design...)

Just as it was for Bases, the Back-up Back Pack ignored the size and mass of the item. One could easily throw a pick-up truck into one of those. When that

kind of effect came to life, what else could one describe it as other than magic?

(Now, let's farm SP off some monsters. I doubt I'll come across a magical item here.) It was a rookie dungeon, after all. The Demon Lord's objective for this expedition was to become accustomed to the dungeon itself, as well as with the adventurers around him. He didn't know the next time when he would get to dungeon-crawl with a party. Part of it was that he had to keep up appearances if one of his advisors or the kids happened to tag along.

"Oh, and you're acting as a porter."

"That's my role?"

"...Because you're not registered as an adventurer, Mister Fox."

"Can't be helped. Let's go with that for the time being."

"Oh, and you're going to carry as much as we tell you to!" Mikan triumphantly declared in an attempt to retaliate for all of the stress he had caused her.

"Porter, huh...? You can leave it to me."

"I'll show you what it means to be an adventure...err!!?"

The Demon Lord pulled Mikan close by her waist before picking her up under his arm and walking on. Considering that Mikan was carrying a longsword, this would not have been an easy feat for someone with ordinary strength.

"L-Let me go! I-I didn't tell you to carry *me*!"

"...You're dead, Mikan."

——B1 Level of the Bastille Dungeon

(This is a dungeon, huh...? Wonder who made this thing...)

The party was greeted with a passage after descending the long flight of stairs from the dungeon's entrance. It seemed like a mine shaft dug ages ago, like a stereotypical cave in fantasy pieces. Besides, the pathway was wide enough to fit twenty men shoulder-to-shoulder. Who could have made this place? That question kept coming back to the Demon Lord.

"Mikan, how long has this dungeon been around, anyway?"

“Grr!”

Mikan growled towards the Demon Lord. She seemed to be on edge after he carried her under his arm a minute ago. Mikan prided herself in her physical strength, and she couldn't even put up a fight against him. Part of it, surely, was humiliation.

“There's not much to fear when there are so many people.”

Since a large number of adventurers had poured into the dungeon, it seemed more like a crowded tourist destination than the beginning of an adventure. While they were still on the first level, the atmosphere was far from that of a life-risking endeavor.

“...Lots of people until we get past the third level. Much less after that.”

As Yukikaze answered, a large-snail like creature emerged from the dark corner of the pathway. It was knee-height, and approached the party as it twisted its boneless body.

“A Sand Snail. Wow, does that take me back.”

“...Reminds me of my Rookie days.”

(It's just huge and gross...)

While Yukikaze and Mikan watched the creature with nostalgia, the thing was an unbelievably large snail for the Demon Lord. No amount of salt seemed enough to dissolve this one.

“Heh. Let's hunt one for old time's sake.”

Swinging her longsword, Mikan diced the snail's soft body, then drew her dagger from her waist to swiftly remove the shell from its body.

“Mikan. That shell's the loot?”

“That's right. If you shatter this and mix it in dirt, it hardens it.”

“Hm. Building materials, then.”

“...It gets rock hard.”

Mikan tossed the shell to the Demon Lord as if it was a basketball. He caught it effortlessly, and inspected it with a serious expression for a while by stroking

it, tapping it, and focusing on details.

“About how much do you get for one of these?”

“...Depends on the season. Usually, about five bronze coins for three of them.”

“It goes for more before big battles.”

“I see. In order to build fortresses and bases, I bet. Probably useful for rebuilding damaged areas, too.”

A similar phenomenon took place in the real world, where construction materials flew off shelves after natural disasters. Throughout history, while disasters and wars wrought casualties, they also stimulated all sorts of demands. Through constant war, the Northern Nations, strangely enough, were invigorating various markets.

“...Carry it... Snow Dolly.”

With the wave of Yukikaze’s wand, a large wagon emerged, made of snow and ice. This was a dolly that followed behind the castor, and could carry various goods. Since adjusting its temperature allowed one to freeze the goods on it, it came in handy when transporting meat without letting it spoil.

“...Stick it in, Mister Fox. The rock hard... erm.”

“Suck on that for a while.”

The Demon Lord threw a piece of candy into Yukikaze’s mouth as he tossed the shell onto the dolly. As an expert thrower, both motions were flawless. If he wanted to, he could throw anything with the precision of threading a needle.

“I’ve been wondering... What happens with the monster carcass?”

“Huh? It disappears after a while.”

“Even though this shell won’t?”

“I can’t explain it. It’s a different object once it’s been cut off, right?”

“It’s just so sloppy and vague...”

When the Demon Lord mumbled his complaint, a loud voice and the sound of a whistle could be heard from further into the dungeon. Yukikaze and Mikan’s

expressions shifted at hearing the whistle. After listening for a combination of three peculiar sounds, the pair became excited.

“That signal... It’s a Monster Party! Now we’re talking!”

“...Let the party begin.”

“Party?”

The Demon Lord noticed the adventurers around them starting to run. Most of their faces were red with excitement, as aggressive shouts and even laughter could be heard from them. The adventurers began setting up torches and Spell Stones along the walls and ceiling to rapidly light up the dungeon.

“All right! Let’s go, guys!”

“Yeah!”

The adventurers roared back in response to Mikan’s call. The excited voices spread like a massive wave, and they could hear the stampede of a crowd behind them. Grabbing hold of the longsword from her back, Mikan sprinted into the dungeon without hesitation, like a wild panther.

“...Wait until I come, too, Mikan.”

“I’m not one to miss out on a party.”

Enjoying the energy of the crowd, with a flourish of his coat, the Demon Lord began to run.

Monster Party and the Village of Rabbi

——A Monster Party spawn location in the Bastille Dungeon.

The crowd of adventurers were frantically culling Sand Snails. Somehow, countless Sand Snails and Giant Crows were rushing towards them. The adventurers hunted one monster after another, storing their loot into bags and boxes. All of the porters were busy running back and forth, too. While the beak of a Giant Crow had some value, the best prize for hunting a Giant Crow was its feathers. While they were often used for arrows, they were also used to decorate clothes and armor as well. About twelve feathers could be obtained

from each crow, which sold for one bronze medallion as a set. Naturally, though, if any of the feathers were damaged, the price decreased.

Everyone around the Demon Lord was in a frenzy of dismantling snails and plucking crows. With more and more people rushing over from behind them, the whole dungeon was filled with cacophonous energy. No wonder people called this a party. Mikan had joined the fray, gleefully wielding her dagger. While these targets were pennies to a dollar compared to her usual loot, it seemed that Monster Parties had an irresistible excitement for an adventurer.

“...Back in the day, Monster Parties kept us afloat.”

“Something like a bonus,” the Demon Lord mumbled.

For the adventurers, though, matters were surely more dire. Many of them didn't know if they could afford shelter or food for the day. To top it off, their career could end in an instant if they were to get hurt. It was only natural for them to want to make and save as much money as possible while they still could. However, as he watched the crowd of people in a commotion, the Demon Lord was reminded of an entirely different time...

“This brings me back...”

“...Mister Fox?”

“Oh, just reminiscing.”

With nostalgia, the Demon Lord stared off into the distance. He was remembering various scenes from the game. The time when it was so populated that people could barely sign up, when someone won big at the casino and caused a whole commotion, all of the special event battles, and the once-in-a-blue-moon raid of the Sleepless Castles. All of these scenes had been burned into his memory in black and white. They didn't hold their colors anymore.

“This is their party. I don't want an outsider like me to crash it.”

As the Demon Lord turned his back, he could hear loud footsteps approaching from the end of the dungeon. As the footsteps grew nearer, a giant, rusted, metal-plated golem appeared.

“Crap! Here comes Tin Man!”

“Someone stop it with magic!”

“No one’s got a trap on them!?”

The Tin Man golem was slow. Still, it remained undaunted no matter how many rookies swung their weapons at it. In fact, swords broke and hammers bent. When the Tin Man forcefully swung its arm out, three adventurers went flying.

“...Mister Fox. That thing’s a little too much for rookies.”

“Hm...”

Yukikaze looked at the Demon Lord expectantly. Mikan began to run over to Tin Man with her longsword in hand, but a red beam fired passed her before she got the chance. It was the Demon Lord’s Sodom’s Fire. In an instant, Tin Man’s face blew up like it was a toy. Tin Man stood still for a few moments, as if it couldn’t comprehend what had just happened, before falling to the ground with a loud crashing noise. The adventurers who had gathered for the party all turned to the Demon Lord.

“Excuse the intrusion... Please, party on.”

“...Party on.”

As the Demon Lord turned to leave, Yukikaze followed after with a cute wave of her wand. The adventurers were taken aback for a while, but the commotion continued to grow again. The party wasn’t over, after all.

“W-Who was that!?”

“What did he throw...?”

“Snap out of it! This is our meal ticket right here!”

“Hold on a second! Who gets the Tin Man parts?”

“The guy who killed it ain’t here. Jump on it!”

“Forget the Sand Snails! Peel the metal off of the Tin Man!”

While the men snapped out of their surprise and swarmed the Tin Man, the female adventurers began chatting about another matter. Many were

starstruck by the Demon Lord's overwhelming strength and distinguished appearance.

"What a handsome man... Who is he!?"

"Is the chick next to him his girlfriend?"

"Dammit... It's all about the looks, isn't it?! A girl's gotta be cute in this world!"

Amidst the clamor of the adventurers, Mikan shouted out, "don't ditch me like you came here alone!"

She would have made it easier on herself if she had just left the dungeon then, but Mikan wasn't the type to do that. She was the type to chase the hurricane. With Mikan following the pair out, the adventurers delighted in their first monster party in a while.

—The hot springs resort in the village of Rabbi.

"Madame, what is this oriental masterpiece...!?"

A lucky group of thirty noble wives were collectively breathtaken at everything about the resort, from its fantastical aura and wind chimes ringing to the breeze, to the polished floors that showed their reflections and the beautiful Bunnies in revealing outfits... There was nothing like this facility anywhere else in this country, maybe not even in this entire world.

"Please. This is a door called a Fusuma."

"D-Door...? If this is touched every time someone enters the room...!"

"Its beauty shines brighter with use."

The Madame returned a smile filled with confidence at the murmuring ladies. Thanks to Tahara's detailed explanations, the Madame was now fluent in describing the resort's facilities. She wasn't just the sole provider of the figurative ticket for the facility, but also the pioneer of knowledge for the ladies. Her power and knowledge regarding the facility only boosted her charisma in it. With the chattering group in tow, the Madame continued toward the hot springs. There, she had further astonishment for them in store. Once they

experienced that... they would never be able to truly leave the facility. They would never be free from it.

(That Madame's some character.)

Tahara came out of Stealth Stance to reveal himself standing in a corner of the hallway. Each one of those thirty noble wives was the leader of their house, the ones who wore the pants in their marriage. To be revered as a leader among them was no easy feat. She was truly an empress.

(Pretty soon, we might have a big ol' treasure hoard on our hands...)

Scratching his head, Tahara lit a cigarette. The truth was that a night's stay at this resort was not all that expensive, since the Demon Lord declared that 'a gold coin would do.' While the equivalent of \$1000 might seem expensive, it was an incredible bargain considering the amenities that came with it. The thing was, the price for the stay itself didn't really matter. To improve the Demon Lord's reputation, the listed price was best kept comparable to the high-end hotels in other cities. The real profit would come from the referrals taking place under the surface. A deal had already been struck with the Madame that she would split any goods and money that were sure to be sent her way. There was no need for an unreasonable price setting. Initially, the Madame had made it clear that she didn't want a single bronze coin, as long as she could live at the resort, but the Demon Lord insisted that both parties had to win in order to hold up a bargain. Reluctantly, the Madame agreed to the Demon Lord's insistence. As he blew out delicious smoke, Tahara recalled his meeting with the Secretary, the only man that stood above him.

Listen, Tahara. Any local goods you obtain, sell them to a merchant named McDonald in the city of Yahooo, much lower than market price. Build a good relationship with him. It's more urgent to build one trustworthy partnership than casting a wide net. Make him think that a relationship will make him good money.

So, the plan's to have him buy our stuff for a good price with that money we helped him make?

Naturally. In business, trust is built from making your partners money before, and at times more than, yourself.

Makes sense. And what do we do with the money we make...?

Use it all to improve and expand the village of Rabbi. It's obvious that the 110 gold medallions won't cut it after a while. And don't skimp on the Bunnies' food, housing, clothes and pay. We will make it rain gold on this village.

...Is that part of 'garnering a reputation,' Mister Secretary?

That's a part of it, at least...

That's where their conversation had ended before the Demon Lord headed north. While the Demon Lord's last line suggested some implication, he didn't really have any subtext in mind. He simply thought that their business wouldn't last if the houses or clothes of their Bunny employees were tattered. However, Tahara inferred another meaning from it.

(Making gold rain on this run-down village? That's a presentation of our power and prowess to those around us. All the surrounding villages are going to be hella jealous. They'll eventually end up questioning the competency of their own lords.) Heavy taxation without any benefits... A gloomy life to live. And on the other side, the grass is golden. Who could possibly stand for that?

(This is a non-violent invasion, with a nice and thick sugarcoat on top of it.) Tahara recalled a certain sentence. Even with his brains, he was struggling to discern exactly what it meant.

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

"All right... I mean, it's not a rotten deal."

The way of the Empire, naturally, was violent occupation. The invasion the Demon Lord was working on now, however, was of a different color. In fact, this was the sort of invasion that would make the occupants beg for their villages to be taken under their rule.

"Gra hah ha! Mister Secretary's as fearsome as ever. I hope I never cross his path."

Putting his cigarette out in a portable ashtray, Tahara stepped out of the resort. He had much work left to do, after all.

Tahara's Inspection

Ever since the group of noble wives were led to the hot springs by the Madame, they had been in a tizzy. They were convinced, upon seeing the spotless tiles, numerous tubs, the steam that filled the area, the vibrant baths and the showers that emitted hot water at the push of a button... that they were in a bonafide fairytale paradise.

“What is this soap!?”

“My hair... My dried up hair is all hydrated...!”

“Ooh... I just want to melt in this bubble bath...”

“Rock... bathing...? I’ve never done anything like this before...”

The group seemed endlessly amazed, confused, and elated. How could they have helped it? They were in a paradise where all of their dreams came true. The promised land that all women dreamed about. As the Madame explained the amenities to one wife at a time, the female Bunnies entered every now and again with glasses of water and juice, each chilled with plenty of ice. At the star-gazing bath, guests could request chilled wine and ale, too. This paradise melted them from the inside and out.

(There’s no way out now, ladies...)

The Madame smiled as she soaked in her favorite herbal bath, Green Forest. Her smile wasn’t a malicious one, though. More like the grin of a child who had successfully pulled off a prank. Just the knowledge of this dreamlike facility was worth a fortune. To top it off, these women were the inaugural guests. They would pride themselves on that fact, and brag about their experience to everyone around them until their ears fell off. In noble society where novelty is treasured, the fact that they had experienced this first would profit these ladies down the road. Free advertisement.

“I’m never leaving this bath...!”

“And I’m not leaving this electric bath... Ooooh!”

“This deep bath is so relaxing.”

“Please... I want to try that bath, too.”

“No! This tub is mine!”

Watching the group squabble like schoolgirls, the Madame couldn't help but burst out laughing. She had enough self-awareness to know that, if she hadn't been in acquaintance with Luna, she likely would have ended up among these ladies.

(Splitting it down the middle...)

The Madame guessed that the referral fees for this facility would become much more expensive than they imagined. Why split it down the middle? The Madame recalled her asking Tahara that very question. At the same time, she remembered Tahara's sleepy eyes and seemingly inattentive demeanor.

(Isami Tahara. He's a scary man... And a good-looking one.)

The Madame felt a sense of terror about him. The Demon Lord's right-hand man would surely kill anyone his order dictated him to without mercy. Even if his target was a literal angel. And the blue light gleaming deep within his eyes that appeared every now and again... That was something that never tired a woman.

(Although, it still couldn't hold a candle to the Demon Lord's allure...) For a woman like the Madame, who had seen many men in her time, both the Demon Lord and Tahara were exquisite specimens. Their allure, a combination of dripping masculinity and life-threatening danger, was practically magical. As the scent of the forest enveloped her, Tahara's voice replayed in her head.

Splitting it down the middle means we're eating out of the same bucket. At the very least, we don't have to worry as much about being stabbed in the back. I'm sure you're familiar with these kinds of things.

He was right. No one was stupid enough to kick their partner off of a see-saw when they wanted it to keep going. They'd end up losing out themselves.

Besides, moving dead money around isn't a bad deal. If people at the top do nothing but sit on their money, the economy comes to a halt and starts rotting, and the people down below end up suffering. That's how it works, no matter what world you're in.

The Madame saw the Demon Lord as someone who was going to force the

economic wheel to turn, turning the dead money into means and vitality for the commoners. In a way, the Madame wasn't misunderstanding.

(That Demon Lord will eventually take this country and the entire continent by storm...) The Madame had no objection to that. In fact, she fully supported his efforts. As far back as she could remember, the Madame had always cursed the body she was born with, and prayed to the Angel to change it. Her dire prayers were never once answered, until the Demon Lord, someone darker than the void, had vanquished her destiny. His deep voice replayed in her ears.

(Welcome... to my world.)

Every time it did, the Madame was electrified from her head to toe, from fear of the unknown. Still, his voice carried a mystical reverberation that convinced the Madame that she would be guided through to the end.

(That Demon Lord is my angel...)

According to legend, the Demon Lord was an extremely fearsome existence. Oddly enough, the moniker of the fallen angel Lucifer (who was said to rebel against the Great Light in the days of old) was 'the Demon Lord.' The Madame couldn't help but imagine the fallen angel when she saw him undauntedly exclaim that he made everything he said a reality. She was confident that the Demon Lord she knew would have no problem defying the heavens. In fact, he would surely grab the heavens by its throat, pin it to the ground, and try to bend it into submission.

(An angel and Demon lord, all at once. I could search the whole world and not find anyone else like him...) The Madame sank into her tub as she imagined such things. The fragrance of the forest quietly overtook her. She relished the sensation of lying in a tub of hot water in the middle of the woods.

—Construction site in the village of Rabbi.

"Good thing these constructions are going on."

"We barely get by during war season..."

Still in Stealth Stance, Tahara was walking around the village. While most of the workers were full-time carpenters and construction workers, there were

quite a few adventurers among them, too. Their physical strength and vitality was well-suited for manual labor, and their pay from the village was five bronze medallions. With the current market, it was a sweet deal for them to earn that much without risking their lives. Of course, the full-time carpenters specialized in this kind of work made at least double that. It was only natural that there was a pay gap between meatheads and professionals who had spent years honing their technique. Perhaps, in any world, the smart way to live was to hold down a day job and gain experience and technique in that field.

In that sense, adventuring was the polar opposite of a typical day job. Since no adventurer would dungeon-crawl alone, each day's loot had to be divvied out, which made the job even more unstable. Dungeon-crawling with a twenty-man team, for example, would be much less dangerous than going with a smaller party, but the expected pay in that case would never put enough food on the table for everyone. As a result, most of them took on dungeons in teams of two to four, since that provided a reasonable balance of safety and share of loot. Many rookies had died charging into a dungeon alone, and it wasn't uncommon to hear of a few adventurers getting cocky and going down with a team too small, only to never return.

"The public bath here is amazing!"

"You said it. I almost want to move here just for it..."

"They're not going to make an inn, huh?"

As he listened in on people's conversations, Tahara checked the progress of construction in detail. He had paid particular attention to the road that was to be the backbone of the village. He had it paved with good-quality stone and repeatedly coated with magic to make sure it would never crack. This was because he was sure that many carriages would be going back and forth on it.

(I better increase the number of shuttle carriages...)

As the adventurers pointed out, the village had no inns. Workers were shuttled in via carriages from the Holy City and Yahooo. They were living ads, too. To spread word of mouth, Tahara had to have the workers return to their cities each day. They would return to their cities and tell stories of the public bath, say that there were jobs available in the village of Rabbi, and talk about

the mysterious large-scale construction taking place. Ordinarily, this would come across sketchy if it wasn't for Luna being in charge of the village and the construction. With her authority alone, the project suddenly became a public development. Just like the reliable image of Uncle Sam, this provided the workers with peace of mind.

(Speaking of the Holy Maiden...)

Tahara arrived at the Bunnies' residential area to find Luna standing atop a wooden box, looking self-important. They were in the process of moving the farms to this area, but a much better soil was being used. It wasn't any ordinary soil, but a very nutritious soil that was called 'Something Reddish Brown.' They further mixed in plenty of the Empire's fertilizer. Any crop would spring up in this soil.

(I'd love to grow all sorts of vegetables, to be honest...)

Tahara would have preferred to go wide in the market by selling things like cabbages, cucumbers, eggplants, potatoes, radishes, and onions alongside the carrots, but the carrots were by far the most popular crop on the market. Since only Bunnies could successfully grow them, they had a complete monopoly. As a result, Tahara was forced to reach the conclusion that growing carrots was the most profitable course of action.

"Make some elegant carrots worthy of my name!"

"...How's a crop supposed to be elegant?"

"Ahh! Don't pop out of nowhere like that! You stalker!"

"Why would I ever stalk you, little girl...?"

Lighting his cigarette, Tahara watched the Bunnies happily at work. He had been alternating the farming team and facility-worker team at the moment, but planned to eventually assign each Bunny permanently according to aptitude and preference.

"We can probably make the farm even bigger... Impressive work," Tahara mumbled as he blew out smoke.

The Bunnies were much too productive for their numbers. 'Having a knack for

farm work' would have been an understatement.

(I bet the earth and the crops love the Bunnies as much they love them back...) That was a conclusion only Tahara could reach, as someone who was unconditionally loved by all firearms. During the Game, pointing a gun at this man was a terrible idea. Guns would frequently jam, causing the attack to miss. Worst case, the gun would misfire and destroy itself. Considering that the mainstream weapon of the Game could not be used against him, Tahara was the most troublesome enemy out there. While he was somehow popular among female players, he would always be jeered at by the male players with comments like: 'Sister-lover!' 'Look at that annoying face!' or 'Just die, already!'

"S-So... When's he coming back?"

"Hm?"

"Y-You know! W-When is he...!?"

"Oh, Mister Secretary? Jeesh, you and Yu..."

Tahara shook his head, exasperated. His boss was a chick magnet, as always. Even in Tahara's original world, the Demon Lord was one of, if not the, most famous person in the entire world. As the host and master of the Game, he frequently appeared on TV, occupying every single screen in the world by himself. Movie stars had nothing on him, while the viewers mostly felt hatred for him instead of adoration.

(I mean, I guess people knew our names and faces, too...)

By the same accord, the advisors of the Sleepless Castle were also celebrities. They had special programs aired on TV, so everyone knew their names. Each of them had an astronomical bounty on their head, enough for one to spend ten lives in the lap of luxury. All Tahara really had to do was watch people of this world not have a particular reaction upon seeing him to be confident that he really was in an alternate world.

(I remember the secretary had some fanatic fans...)

As it probably was the case with many TV-popular celebrities, there existed a fanatic fan club in support of Hakuto Kunai, called The Nine (since the name Kunai started with the Japanese Kanji that meant '9'). They would wear various

hats, arm bands, and accessories decorated with variations of the number 9. Throughout history, no matter how despicable or criminal that person was, there had often been groups that treated those notorious figures like ordinary celebrities. Akira Ono had written that backstory to add a bit of dark humor, which of course, became a reality in the Empire's world.

"I guess you're one of The Nine, little girl..."

"Nine?"

"Never mind that. I'll just tell him you miss him."

"W-W-Who's missing who, exactly!? I couldn't care less if he never came back!"

"Uh-huh."

Tahara brushed her off as he walked further into the commoners' area.



The Advisors

(Alright, these commoners got it right.)

Tahara nodded in satisfaction as he looked around at the numerous standing bars and food stalls. This area housed the public bath in its farthest corner, and these pop-up businesses tightly lined the road leading to the bathhouse. At night, the area lit up as bright as a Japanese summertime festival.

Most restaurants and shops in these parts were simple structures with simple merchandise. It's also worth noting that there was no rent for any establishment built in this area — any revenue went directly into the seller's pockets. In exchange, Tahara had warned them, any unpopular establishment would be cycled out without mercy. Only keeping popular businesses would lead to the overall quality of the district improving. He didn't expect any monetary revenue from this area, however; only more people and energy in the village.

"Tron, they have skewered Raging Chickens over there!"

"I want to eat them!"

He noticed Aku and Tron happily touring around the food stands, and couldn't help but wonder... *What was Aku's deal?*

(Tron, I get.)

She had incredible physical strength and the mysterious power of seeing people in colors. Tahara could see how those talents could be appealing to the Secretary and worthy of an invitation. Tahara saw it as the Secretary's nature and duty to hoard anyone with the right talent, no matter how hardened a criminal they may be. But, as far as Tahara could tell... Aku had no such talent.

(She's just some kid... Or is there something about her that I'm not seeing?) Tahara didn't understand. In fact, Hakuto Kunai would never have given Aku a second glance. That's why this was so confusing for Tahara, who had no idea that Akira Ono was inhabiting Kunai's body. Anyone less than omniscient would not have reached the conclusion that Hakuto Kunai kept Aku around because the Akira Ono inside of him had a fondness for her.

(Either way, she's our precious cargo.)

If Tahara had to choose one person to protect in this village, he would have chosen Aku without hesitation... even at the cost of anyone else's life.

(She's not like Ren or Akane, either...)

Hakuto Kunai was fond of the gifted, even if they were still children. He invited anyone whose talents he admired to the Sleepless Castle and granted them appropriate status. Tahara couldn't help but think that there must be something extraordinary about Aku.

(I mean, she's not a bad kid. Guess I'll think of her as 'the Secretary's fave' for now.) Tahara headed to the field hospital. In the witch's lair, there was already a huge line of patients, most of them suffering in poverty. After Tahara had run carriages to neighboring towns and villages advertising cheap medical care, the place was packed.

"I haven't had a headache since I took that medicine..."

"My bruise doesn't hurt anymore since I put that Salonpass on it...!"

"Doctor Yu... She's too beautiful..."

"She only has to touch me to..."

While they were still few in number, there were some nobles there through their connection with the Madame. Everyone who had been treated had been spreading rumors that Yu was a goddess of healing. Surely, her name would soon spread through Holylight.

"Her beauty reminds me of the moon!"

"The moon's reflection on quiet water, perhaps."

"But that building was amazing... It showcases the wealth and power of the Demon Lord the Madame was talking about."

"Who gives a crap about the building!? At my old age, I've fallen in love all over again...!"

For the most part, the hospital was well-received. While the reasonably priced and flawless treatments played a part, Yu's beauty seemed to grab hold of

peoples' hearts more than anything. For Tahara, who knew how she was on the inside, it wasn't funny. But for the patients, she appeared to be a goddess of salvation. In fact, Yu *had* used her various medicines to faithfully heal these people. Well, she was treating them... but for her, each day was filled with experimentation, new discoveries, and joy. In addition to prescribing medicine, Yu also performed surgeries. The silver lining was that the patients were not able to see Yu's face as they were put under anesthetics.

(I bet every day has been like a dream for Yu...)

Guinea pigs formed lines out the door to come see her each and every day. She must have been ecstatic. Of course, she did properly heal everybody, so no one was losing here.

(I don't care if I get the flu, I'm never stepping foot in here...) Just imagining it sent shivers down Tahara's spine. It almost felt like she would toy with his brain, not just his body... In fact, she could.

(I guess it's time to take care of the other thing now...)

——Outside the village of Rabbi.

That night, Milligan was hiding in a bush a slight distance away, intently watching the village of Rabbi. The village was nothing like the desolate village he had remembered; it felt like he was daydreaming. The run-down place was transforming into something. What it was, he didn't know. Milligan was a skilled mercenary and a formidable force on the battlefield, but nothing more. From the outside, he was just a rabid dog getting off on thrashing his violent tendencies against those weaker than him.

(I don't know what's going on, but I can still snatch a couple of little Bunnies.) He lusted over young girls. The only moments he really felt alive were when he was beating and breaking those girls, treating them as if they were toys as they begged for their parents. He lived solely for this hobby now. Even for him, though, a Bunny girl would be a first. Because there were many legends left behind that the Bunnies were adored by the Wise Angel, they were respected yet kept at a distance. But he was finally given the green light by Dona, his boss.

When Milligan took a step forward in ecstatic excitement, a drawling voice

interrupted him. A weirdly nonchalant voice that almost made the listener feel laid back too.

“Hey, brother. Where’re you headed?”

“...Hm?”

Milligan turned toward the voice to find a man lying down on a board atop the village fence. Judging by the weird metal rod in his hand, Milligan pegged him to be a guard. He almost burst out laughing — he had encountered many guards in his life, but had never met someone that seemed so unmotivated. A guard laying down on the job? It would be more useful to put up a scarecrow.

“I mean, I already know the answer. But like, formalities, you know?”

“Sorry to bother you so late.”

Milligan thought it best to manipulate this idiot into bringing him into the village rather than killing him outright. What he didn’t know was that this particular “idiot” was aiming his sniper rifle at the intruder, poised to kill... he also didn’t know that no one could escape that bullet now.

“Got lost in the dark. Hate to impose, but...”

“Sure.”

Pop. Milligan heard a sound he had never heard before. In that instant, his right leg was blown clean off, knocking him down on his side. Milligan lost consciousness from the shock, but soon regained it from the pain. He tried to scream, but couldn’t find his voice. Yu, standing behind him, had injected something into his body.

“Hey, Tahara! Don’t damage my sample!”

“You’re just gonna tear it apart and put it back together... Same diff.”

“You can’t just willy-nilly... You have no clue as to the proper treatment of guinea pigs!”

“Why would I want to know that?”

Listening to this conversation, Milligan desperately moved his hands and managed to sound the alarm using a precious magical item that sent a beam of

light to a distant location. But there was no sign of the back-up Milligan had thought he'd brought.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Your little friends are in here."

Yu opened her Backup Backpack with a smile and showed the contents to Milligan. Upon witnessing what the warped, white space inside the bag held, Milligan silently screamed. All of his men were in there, entangled with each other in eldritch shapes. Not only were they bleeding from countless places, their hands and necks bent in ways they weren't supposed to, and there were plants with ominous fangs and needles growing around them, as if to suck their blood.

"N-No, please... It's true, I was just lost..."

Tears flowing down his face, Milligan desperately pleaded his innocence. Realizing that his missing leg no longer hurt only amplified his terror. Yu's expression remained unchanged, though. If anything, her smile only widened. Milligan turned to Tahara with a dire expression, looking for a saving hand. He was only met with an ordinary expression, as if he was merely discussing what to have for dinner.

"You've been peeping at our village since day time."

"N-No... I was, lost..."

"Oh yeah? Tron, what's your verdict?"

"He's lying. Guilty."

"Right? My gut's telling me that he's a piece of shit even flies won't eat."

Tron had appeared out of nowhere, joining in the fun. Even if Tahara had (impossibly) believed Milligan, Yu never would have. He was as good as dead.

"Now, let's begin... You'll be a part of our very important soil."

"L-Let go, please... Help...!"

Yu grabbed Milligan by the hair and dragged him away. He was like a pathetic worm being snatched by a monster.

"Yu, play with it all you want, but get all the info we need first."

“Don’t worry. You know I’m good at both torture and playing doctor.”

“Yeesh. You hear that, Tron? I don’t care how sick you are, don’t go near that place. Yu, I’m not sure I want to know the answer, but... What do you mean, ‘soil’?”

“I’m growing a new plant. With human bodies as feed, she grows off of their blood and nutrients. She’s going to bloom a beautiful... flower.”

“A-Alright...”

“I want to gift the Secretary that flower when he returns from up north.”

Hearing this, Milligan desperately tried to break free, but his body remained motionless. Someone speaking about something so horrific had the expression of a teenager writing a love letter.

“Tahara. Don’t you think the Secretary will like it?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“I knew it! When I tried it with his friends earlier, I think the flower became more vibrant when I induced certain levels of pain in them. This one’s got a lot of work to do.”

“R-Right...”

Leaving Tahara’s frozen expression and Tron innocently waving her goodbye, Yu carried off her new fertilizer with a jubilant attitude. Being dragged by the witch, Milligan squeezed out: “I-I don’t know, nothing... I was just told I can come and play!”

“Don’t worry... I’ll make sure you tell me all about it. For example, I have a skill called Censorship, which allows me to manipulate information. Humans, in a sense, are just a collection of information.”

“W-What are you...?”

“Take your age. That’s a piece of information. If I manipulate that to make you eight, you’ll be a child again, excited to tell me everything. Ooh, I can manipulate your sex, too. It could also be fun to manipulate who your parents are. Once I’m your mother, you’ll open up to me.” Yu explained her skill like a teacher giving a lesson. With each new example, more blood drained from

Milligan's face until he appeared as white as a ghost. Originally, the Censorship skill was created to reset one's kill count in order to defend against powerful attacks that dealt more damage the higher their enemy's kill count was, like Zero's Righteous Hero and Do or Die. But, since every little backstory came to life in this world, her skill had many more uses now. The ability to manipulate any piece of information could be used for incredible good or horrendous evil.

"I want to make the Secretary proud, so I'm counting on you. I'm going to pull out all the stops, too!"

"H-Helb..."

"Hah ha ha ha! You idiot!"

Yu finally burst out laughing at Milligan's pathetic cry. Her witch side finally came out.

"No one is going to help you. Did you ever let anyone go because they cried for help? I don't think so. So I'm not helping you, either. Why would I? You're going to die, and not as a human, but as a plant. You'll forget all your words soon."

"N-No... Noooooo!"

"Oh, that's a good cry. I've been thinking lately. Even an ant mustn't disrespect the Secretary by soiling the sole of his shoe. The ants should clear the way for him. Don't you agree?"

As she gleefully went on, she stored Milligan and his torn off leg into her Backup Backpack. The next morning at the village of Rabbi was peaceful, as if nothing had happened. In fact... nothing had happened at all.

Keep Starving Tigers Separated

A girl who appeared to be a farmer was walking through the city of Yahooo. Her name was Hanzo, the chief of espionage for the New Kingdom of Xenobia. She entered a house and removed all of her clothes.

(This is going to be worse than I thought...)

Recalling the events from the other day, the girl sighed a little. She had visited

the village of Rabbi under the guise of delivering a letter from a noble-seeming knight... As directed by Kongming, of course.

(That building...)

When she saw the Hot Springs Resort, a building of her homeland came to mind. It was uncanny. Her ancestors had passed down, through generations of storytelling, that they sailed across a long, long ocean from the far east. The legends had faded over generations, but Hanzo couldn't help but remember them upon seeing that construction.

(And that elusive man...)

Her expression twisted in distaste as she remembered the grinning face. It was like hammering a nail into mud when dealing with that man. She had come all the way to the village of Rabbi, after hearing that the demi-human being transported used to be Luna Elegant's servant, but she was greeted by Tahara instead of the Holy Maiden.

(He seemed to be in charge of the village. And what's with the large-scale construction going on...?) There were countless things to contemplate and to report. As she organized all of the new information in her mind, she swiftly dressed in her Ninja outfit. Once she finished, numerous shadows appeared in the room, seemingly out of nowhere. They were all girls wearing the same garb.

"Lady Hanzo, how did it go?"

"...Don't call me that."

"Wha...?"

"I told you to call me Cocoa."

"Well, that's..."

The shadows looked around at each other, seeking direction. Hanzo was the name given to their leader generation after generation. It had never been changed before.

"I-It is a proud name that carries the legacy of our clan..."

"I can't stand being called by that hideous name!"

“I don’t know what to...”

“Imagine this rosy-cheeked girl of eighteen being called Hanzo! What am I, some man in his fifties with five-o’clock shadow!?”

The other shadows in the room secretly sighed at Hanzo’s usual conniption. Sometimes it was Kotone, sometimes Touka... in any case, Hanzo would force her subordinates to address her with a traditionally feminine Japanese name.

“T-Then... Lady C-Cocoa...? About the mission...”

“Make it sound cuter! Put some love into it! It means love in your heart, okay!?”

“I’m sorry to have to say this... Lady Hanzo, you are acting like... ‘that girl.’”

“Don’t call me Hanzo, I said!”

Hanzo was an extremely talented woman in espionage and stealth, but because she was raised to live in the shadows under the strict training of their clan leader, she now craved all things girly.

“In any case... Who is that man?”

The foreman of the village of Rabbi, who came from somewhere in Holylight. As none of the other shadows seemed to have found the answer, no one could answer Hanzo’s question. The man practically fell out of the sky one day, after all.

“Should we dive deeper?”

“No. There’s a strange woman there, too.”

With just a glance, Hanzo could tell that she was dangerous. It even felt like the woman was housing hundreds of devils under her lab coat. Hanzo decided that, barring any direct orders, it would be too dangerous to go in any deeper.

“We’ll keep our distance from the village for now. Start gathering rumors in the capital.”

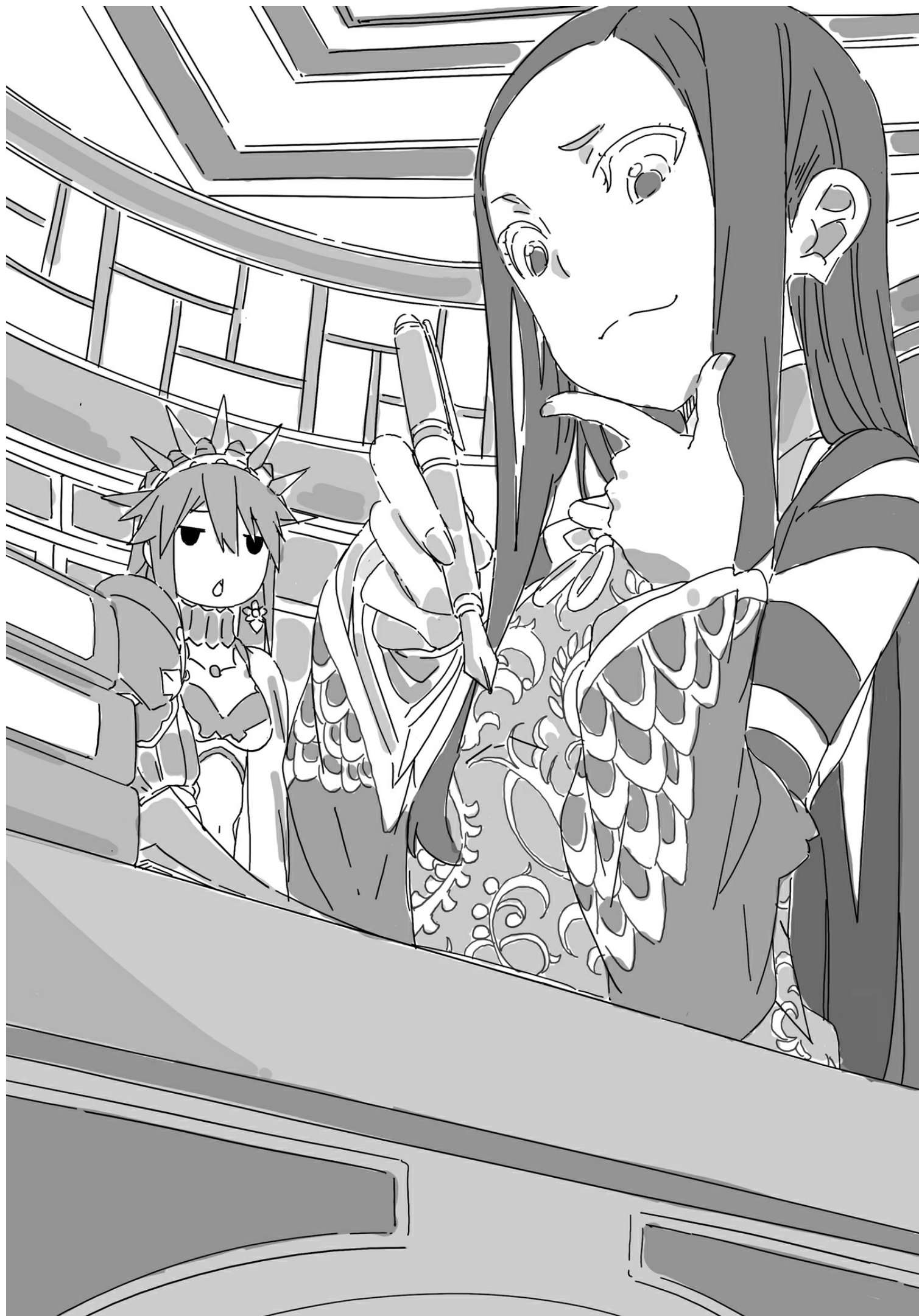
The shadows scattered at once, leaving Hanzo alone in the room. She closed her eyes for a while, contemplating Holylight and the shift it was undergoing. The rumors of the Demon Lord’s appearance, of a Dragonborn defeating a high-

rank devil, and now the large-scale construction in a run-down village. Even Hanzo and her long experience in the shadows couldn't figure this one out. The only thing she knew for sure was that powerful devils had been defeated.

"There's no sense dwelling on this any longer... I'll wait for the chancellor's orders from here."

The moment she uttered that to herself, Hanzo vanished from the room as well.

Meanwhile, the chancellor was frantically scribbling something down in Beatrice's private quarters. She would go from crossing her legs, which peeked out of her Chinese dress, to cackling out of nowhere as if she had been possessed. Watching Kongming the Ice-Cold Chancellor act like this, Beatrice didn't hold back her glares of disgust.



“Another one of your evil schemes, Senpai?” Beatrice asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m doing it all to serve our country.”

“No, you’re not. You just like watching people writhe in agony in the palm of your hand.”

“W-What kind of person do you think I am!?”

“You’re not a person. You’re a devil.”

“You little... W-Well, all right, Beatrice. I’ll explain it to you.”

After barely holding back a few choice words by digging her palm into her face, Kongming explained her current scheme... She called it “Starving Tigers,” a strategy of pitting two powerful forces against each other like starving tigers fighting over a piece of meat. The grand objective was to take both tigers out at once when they were worn out from fighting each other. If she succeeded, she could reap massive rewards for little cost. Even if she didn’t get as far as taking them out, Kongming would consider her scheme a success if she could only create some kind of wedge between the currently allied Tzardom of Light and Holylight. Kongming was deploying other tactics as well, though...

“While we’re at it, we’re going to drive a bigger wedge between the Tzardom and the paladin,” Kongming declared, elegantly waving her fold-out fan. Destabilizing her enemies and recruiting forces that could knock them off balance was her forte and preferred strategy. Secretly, she had been gently whispering into the paladin’s ear the entirety of the bishop’s party’s behavior. She had been hoping for the paladin to become tired of it and join her side one day, but just sowing the seeds of distrust had been widely effective — the paladin had stopped appearing on the battlefield.

(It was important to spill all of the Tzardom’s shameful behavior, after all...) Kongming’s eyes squinted further, making her appear as devious as ever. Beatrice turned her nose at the familiar sight, standing up from the bed.

“You’re really a piece of crap, Senpai. Do you remember when I tripped in the middle of that dance party? ...Because you put olive oil on the soles of my shoes?”

“W-What are you talking about...? You must be tired, Beatrice.”

“Don’t try and deny it! Who else would do such a thing!?”

“Beatrice, you suffered a terrible injury to the head that day. Ever since, you began telling me stories of the past that never happened at all,” Kongming said, with a sorrowful look in her eyes.

She was trying to brush everything under the rug this way.

“Senpai? Ever heard the saying ‘liar, liar, Kongming’s pants on fire’?”

“Stop making up colloquialisms! And don’t stand while I’m here... Sit down.”

“Does it bother you that much that I’m taller than you now? Does it? Does it?”

Beatrice looked down on Kongming, as if to rub it in. While there wasn’t much of a difference in their height, it must have been a dire difference for these two. Seeing Beatrice looking down at her with smug victory on her face, Kongming’s shoulders began to quiver.

“Don’t look down on me, you idiot! I’ll put you in your place!”

“And the truth comes out! Somebody! Come imprison this evil chancellor!”

“You’re going to be the one locked up...! You want to eat your meals on the toilet again!?”

“I hate this country! I’m running away, just you see!”

“You’re not getting away... Not you...!”

The couple rolled around on the bed, entangled, and continued their bickering. No one knew how Kongming’s schemes were going to play out.

Bastille Dungeon: Level 5~7

After leaving the Monster Party, the Demon Lord’s group went further down into the dungeon at remarkable speed. This was a dungeon for Rookies, after all, so B-rank adventurers like Yukikaze and Mikan could traverse it with their eyes closed. While the monsters from the first to the third level were pretty much the same, as soon as they reached level 5, a monster called the Raging

Chicken took the Demon Lord by surprise. The meter-tall bird had attacked them out of nowhere. Mikan easily decapitated the thing, but a giant chicken charging humans was a shocking sight for the Demon Lord. For him, it was more terrifying that an enlarged version of a familiar animal attacked him than it would have to be attacked by something like a lion or bear.

“Pluck the feathers, chop the meat.”

Gleefully, Mikan sang her song off-key as she took apart her kill. In the way she swiftly plucked the white feathers and sliced off the meat, the Demon Lord could see how experienced she was.

“How much does that thing go for?”

“...The meat is a commoners’ delicacy. Feathers have a lot of uses, too. The whole thing will sell for two silver coins.”

“A pretty good kill then.”

That meant a profit of one silver coin per member in a tandem party, or five bronze medallions in a four-person party. While that didn’t seem enough to risk one’s life on, that could quickly change when more of the monsters showed up.

Meanwhile, during their conversation, Mikan continued taking apart the monster with expertise.

“I’m impressed, Mikan. That’s good work.”

“Heh. If His Majesty the Porter was taking it apart, we could hunt a lot more without wasting time... Just talking to myself, though.”

Mikan’s glare and sarcasm didn’t seem to affect the Demon Lord. He wasn’t really carrying their spoils anyway. He had just been tossing them in Yukikaze’s wagon.

“Okay! All done!”

“...Thank you. Whitening.”

With Yukikaze’s cleansing spell cast on her hands, Mikan looked refreshed. They seemed to make a good team after all. Watching them, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but smile. Just as it was back in the game arenas, watching a well-coordinated team could be a lot of fun.

Then, a gurgly voice seeped into the air, as if to spoil the moment.

“What’s up, Mikan?” The voice called.

The Demon Lord turned around to find a chubby man with a pimple-scarred face. Immediately, he sent a Communication to Yukikaze.

Yukikaze, who is that guy?

...I can hear Mister Fox’s voice in my head. Is this what marriage is like?

What are you talking about? Who is that guy?

...That’s Endjoy, a D-rank. He’s after Mikan’s cherry.

To each his own.

The Demon Lord almost wanted to wish him luck for going after this bucking bronco. Still, Endjoy’s attitude seemed too familiar to her.

“What’s with the cold shoulder? Why didn’t you let me know you were down here?”

“Huh? Why the hell would I do that?”

“It’s you and me, babe. Come on.”

“Ew!”

While Endjoy was acting ridiculous, Mikan’s attitude was harsh enough to match it. Then Endjoy turned to the Demon Lord with an exaggerated gesture of ‘oh, I didn’t see you there,’ and a smug, condescending grin to boot. The Demon Lord nearly clocked the guy in the face, but managed to control his temper.

“Mikan, don’t tell me you’re into geezers now... Ogghhh!”

Endjoy’s comment was stopped short by the Demon Lord lightly flicking a pebble into his stomach. While he could absolutely control his temper, he didn’t shy away from teaching the disrespectful youth a lesson.

“What, a stomach ache? You must have eaten too much ice cream.”

The Demon Lord’s comment didn’t seem to reach Endjoy, as he was struggling to breathe while holding his gut. When he dropped to one knee from the

agonizing pain... A loud fart echoed out of his rear. After a moment of silence, the Demon Lord spat out in laughter, which he covered with a large clearing of his throat before steadying his expression. With a solemn tone, the Demon Lord said: "Letting it rip in the middle of a dungeon... And you fancy yourself an adventurer? I must say, you should take this more seriously."

"W-What the hell..."

"What? Is that a special skill of yours to allure monsters to the stench?"

"I'll... kill you...!"

When Endjoy tried to stand, enraged, a second blast was released.

"I don't get it... You disappoint me," concluded the Demon Lord, as if he had any prospect for Endjoy. Unable to withstand this barrage of insults, Mikan finally burst into laughter. Of course, the Demon Lord could already barely even remember the guy's name. If he were to ask again, he would only remember him as 'fart guy.'

"Draw your weapon! I'll kill you!"

"Really...?"

The Demon Lord threw another pebble, which scraped past Endjoy's rear. With friction igniting the gas... a handy flame erupted on Endjoy's pants, bright enough to illuminate the dungeon nicely.

"Hot! Hot! Water! I need water!"

"A fire act, now? Why don't you risk your life doing something more useful?"

"...Endjoy the show."

Yukikaze's comment caused the Demon Lord to start laughing, too. Laughing along the way, the party headed down to level 6, leaving Endjoy behind to frantically run around trying to put out the fire.

"I'll kill you... I'll kill youuuuu! Agh, hot!"

When the party had reached level 7, the Demon Lord stopped in his tracks. He had received a Communication from Tahara.

"I'm going to meditate for a moment. Have fun, you two."

“...Okay. I’ll protect you, Mister Fox.”

“Meditate? You think you’re so cool, don’t you?”

Even as she showed her disdain, Mikan turned to a Raging Chicken with her longsword drawn. At the end of the day, she seemed to be enjoying this nostalgic dungeon after all.

What is it, Tahara? An emergency?

Nah, just an incident report. We took care of this idiot that came to the village, yesterday... According to Yu, he was working for that noble, Dona Dona. Just like you planned, Mister Secretary.

It took long enough...

The Demon Lord managed to play it cool. In fact, this was the first time he had even heard the name Dona Dona. All he could think about was the unforgettable tune.

Looks like he was after the music box, like you planned. You’ve always been good at dangling good bait. This is why you went and advertised your absence by crossing the border, right?

Ha. That was never my intention.

Heh, yeah right! Well, now we can openly call him out for it. What do you want, his mines?

We’ll add this to the docket of our meeting when I return...

Alrighty. Man, really... I don’t want to find out what it’s like to have you as an enemy.

The Demon Lord faltered and stumbled against a wall, leaning on it with his arms. It felt like all the energy was sucked out of him.

(What the hell is he talking about!? What about the music box!?) Of course, the Demon Lord had only sold the music box for money, but it seemed that Tahara and Yu had mistaken that for some kind of scheme... an intricate, ensnaring one at that.

(It feels like I’m the one in the trap!)

The Demon Lord, of course, couldn't say that out loud, but decided to ask something he had been wondering about.

Anything unusual about Luna...?

After the debacle with White, he wanted to make sure that no part of that event had gotten out. He couldn't even imagine how much of a mess Luna would cause if she found out that (albeit by accident) he had shared a bath with her sister.

(And she seemed to be troubled...)

He recalled the night of a particular conversation they had. Luna had always had a fighting spirit and a reckless side, but it seemed like that temperament was getting more extreme. The Demon Lord could have been blamed for part of that, egging her on in competing against her sisters.

...Dang.

Tahara remained silent for a while, speechless, for some reason. While the Demon Lord was terrified that the incident in the hot springs had gotten out, he hadn't expected this response: *There's just been a report from Xenobia, or something. You didn't plant this too, did you?*

...I don't know what you're insinuating.

Fine. I'll give you the report anyway.

Upon hearing the content of the report, the Demon Lord let out a sigh of relief. While he didn't really understand what was going on, he considered it a hundred times better than him bathing with the most prominent Holy Maiden coming to light.

Apparently, Luna's servant's being transported up there, but it's just out of the blue. Don't know how true it is.

I see.

Mister Secretary. Is this something I can pass on to Luna?

The Demon Lord considered this for a moment, when Luna's saddened face flashed before his eyes.

—Do you have any friends?

Remembering Luna's uncharacteristically quiet attitude, the Demon Lord decided to give a safe answer.

We don't want to give her any unconfirmed intel, but let her know whether or not the servant is all right. Knowing Luna, she'll act up for a while, but go easy on her.

For real...? We're going to play their game, huh?

(What...?)

The Demon Lord sensed foreboding subtext in Tahara's response, but couldn't figure out what it was. So, he rushed to add:

Of course, investigate the intel first.

The Demon Lord just thought that, if this servant was Luna's friend, she'd want to know. Tahara, on the other hand, already knew that the New Kingdom of Xenobia was starting some sort of mind game. While Tahara hadn't spent as much time in this world, he expected to be able to pin down what Xenobia was after once he learned the relationships and histories of the neighboring countries.

Hmm. It'll cost us a bit, but it's not a bad deal long term.

Tahara was confident that the Secretary would not be satisfied by controlling a mere nation. It was only a matter of time, he expected, until the Demon Lord would make some big, flashy moves in order to swallow up Holylight and its surrounding countries.

(Planting seeds again... Just like with the music box.)

More excuses to start war would only serve them better. Throughout history, it was common practice for any group to use a moral grandstand as justification for conflict.

Oblivious to Tahara's intentions, the Demon Lord was wondering about something else.

(The friend's being transported as a slave, right...? I guess that'll cost a pretty penny.) The Demon Lord was actually relieved that Tahara didn't suggest taking

the friend back by force.

The cost won't be an issue. The benefits we'll reap down the line will be well worth it...

He couldn't stop thinking that, once her friend returned safely, that pesky old Luna would settle down a bit. Considering that, no amount of money was too much of an investment. The Demon Lord had built up enough of a foundation to afford that luxury, even if they were to rip him off.

Right. Then I'll start looking into that on my end. Might take a little bit, is that cool with you?

That's fine.

While they appeared to be having a coherent conversation, the price and goal that each of them had in mind could not have been more different.

After concluding his Communication with Tahara, the Demon Lord sighed in relief... just as Yu sent him a Communication.

Did you get the report, Mister Secretary?

I did. Good work. I'll contact you with further instructions.

Yes, sir. And, there is something I want to give you, sir, when you return. I've been growing some beautiful flowers.

Really!?

He couldn't help but overreact, surprised by his mad-scientist advisor taking part in such a homely hobby. Of course, Akira Ono didn't recall writing any kind of backstory for that. He couldn't help but smile at learning of Yu's feminine pastime.

I didn't know you had an interest in such things. How wonderful!

T-Thank you, sir! I will grow them as best as I can to your liking.

Mm. I'll look forward to seeing them.

Thank you, sir. I'll be awaiting your return.

After his conversation with Yu, the Demon Lord lit his cigarette, relieved. Yu, who loved dissections and taking things apart above all else, was undergoing a

positive change. He couldn't help but feel excited about that. Yu herself was ecstatic after this Communication, probably that she was going to make numerous inhumane bastards wish they were never born... The Demon Lord would never find out about that, though.

(Tahara's trying to peacefully solve things financially, and now Yu's growing flowers...?) His smile grew wider, considering his advisors' changes in a peaceful direction. At this rate, it looked like he would have the quiet days he longed for before too long.

"Alright. Why don't we stop here for the day and head to dinner!"

"...Dinner with Mister Fox... How wonderful."

"Who made you the boss? You're just the porter who doesn't carry anything," Mikan complained as she tossed her kill into the wagon. In fact, Mikan and Yukikaze had been the only ones hunting today. The only thing the Demon Lord had done was roast Endjoy, both literally and figuratively.

"Come, now. I'm buying."

"For real!? I'll get the most expensive stuff on the menu and make you regret it!"

"Watch yourself, or your butt might catch on fire too."

"...Mikan would like it. Hot melted candle wax."

"I'll set you two on fire! Turn you to ash!"

And so, the party survived their first day in the dungeon.

The White Light

After leaving the dungeon, the party went directly to the Guild, where they received payment and paid taxes on it. Just like a day labor site, they weren't going to let anyone evade these taxes. In fact, the party was taken to the guild under heavy supervision by the guards.

(The full reward...)

The Demon Lord had kept an eye on payout in comparison to the prices

Yukikaze had told him, and everything was bought out full price. They backed up their decision by pointing out the minimal damaging and precise processing of the carcasses. Naturally, most rookies would have a much different outcome. By the time they caught the Raging Chickens, each of them was tattered and heavily damaged. Combined with their inexperience in taking the monsters apart, it wasn't uncommon to see Rookie game bought out for 30% less than this.

"Your processing skill, along with the condition of the game, directly affects your reward."

"...Yes. Mikan is great at taking things apart."

"Come on, it's time to pay out. We didn't really talk about it, so an even split."

Mikan handed Yukikaze and the Demon Lord a third of the reward each. The Demon Lord shook the small leather bag, enjoying the clinking sound of bronze and silver coins within it. That being said, he didn't go dungeon-crawling for money.

"I don't really need my cut."

"Take it!" Mikan insisted. Her raising her voice caused the people around them to turn and look before walking again, losing interest.

"Sure, you're a failure of a porter, but your work down there doesn't affect your cut up here. Remember that every single time you go into a dungeon."

"I see..."

The Demon Lord picked up a lot from that comment. He did have an incredible imagination — enough to create a whole new world on his own, after all. The Demon Lord theorized that there must have been an incident like that before, and was confident that a porter shortage followed because of it. As long as they were entering the dungeon, portering too was a dangerous occupation. Who would volunteer to risk their life working on commission? Especially when a party member could lower their pay for claiming that they underworked. The adventurers were the ones to suffer without porters, which would eventually lead to the collapse of this nation's taxation system.

"I'm sure the government began cracking down on that kind of thing."

“Huh? Well... Yeah, they did.”

Mikan raised a brow at the Demon Lord’s comment that skipped over a few steps in logic. This was how he always was. At times, he could go off on a chain of imagination from a single word. Until proven otherwise, the conclusion he reached was solidified as fact. ...This was the thought process of a dictator. Unchanged by others, he never doubted his choices. This man, albeit vaguely, understood this could be a shortcoming. As a result, he began gathering people around him and listened to various voices. The fact that Hakuto Kunai, the final boss of Akira Ono’s creation, kept a group of advisors he had scouted around him was an indication of his ideals in real life.

“Hey! The heroes are back!” Someone called out, causing a commotion. The kids led the charge outside and the adults followed.

“Hero!? There’s a really a hero here?”

“Huh? No duh. You really don’t know anything, do you?”

“...The Tzardom of Light has two paladins.”

As he secretly contemplated how cool of a ring ‘paladin’ had, he ran towards the center of the commotion.

“My hero!”

“Over here!”

“He’s so white... He glows in the light!”

A large crowd had gathered at the entrance of the city, resembling a celebrity appearance on Earth. All of them were waving and smiling, trying to garner this figure’s attention.

“The white horse really does suit him.”

“...White.”

“Hmph. A hero atop a white steed. A stereotypical... huh?”

Seeing the figure, the Demon Lord’s eyes widened. It was a man atop the beautiful steed, but a rather fat one with a protruding gut. On his face rested a gleaming pair of silver glasses. He had a large white box on his back, with two

rods protruding from it. All the Demon Lord could see was a brave soul on his journey home from the comic market.



“Don’t tell me... That’s what they mean by ‘hero’?”

“What are you talking about? Sir Weeb is most definitely a hero.”

“That’s his name, huh!?”

The Demon Lord couldn’t help but break character. Both his appearance and name were fully committed to it.

“...Sir Weeb has the moniker of ‘White Comet.’”

“He is white, but isn’t he just pale from never going outside?”

“...The other paladin has the moniker of Red Devil.”

“Those are the other way around... Where do I start?”

Two newtypes came to the Demon Lord’s mind, but he tried to ignore that image. His ridiculous name aside, Weeb gave a quick wave to the crowd and dismounted his white horse, stopping the string of carriages he was pulling behind him. Seeing this, the children formed a line at once, erupting in cheer. Before they knew it, numerous guards had gathered and started to organize the crowd. To the Demon Lord’s surprise, what happened next was a food distribution. Weeb gave out bread and cheese to the children and a bowl of wheat porridge to the adults, using a large pot. Now it was understandable why everyone welcomed him with smiles.

“Does he always do stuff like this?”

“He goes from one Northern Nation to another for at least half of the year. Amazing, isn’t it?”

Mikan answered the Demon Lord with an impressive attitude. In contrast, the Demon Lord was skeptical. He wasn’t really into donating and volunteering. In fact, if a person asking for donations were to live in a nice home, he would call them out to sell the house and donate the money.

“Is this stunt for popularity? Or are heroes forced to do these things? Or else, does that Tzardom order them too?”

“How cynical are you? The Tzardom keeps telling him to stop, but Sir Weeb keeps buying kids bread out of his own pocket.”

“That’s quite interesting.”

“...In his own country, he is criticized for sticking his nose into foreign affairs and courting favors.”

“...Really?”

The Demon Lord’s expression changed. His skeptical gaze changed into that of a bird of prey, a piercing glare that wouldn’t have missed the slightest change in the man’s expression.

“Dinner’s canceled. You two go enjoy yourselves.”

“Did you forget that you were going to buy!?”

“Get something to eat with this.” He tossed them a coin.

“Huh...? Hey, this is a gold medallion! What are you thinking!?”

The Demon Lord tried to leave it at that, but Yukikaze grabbed his sleeve. Her expression was filled with sorrow. Even the Demon Lord couldn’t help but feel guilty for clouding that flawless face. He added, gently, “well, uh, hrm. Get anything you want. Split it if there’s too much food.”

“...Dining with you is more important, Mister Fox. I don’t need money.”

“Then let’s go tomorrow. There’s no rush, really.”

“...Promise? If you don’t, you have to sleep next to me.”

Yukikaze held out her pinky, and the Demon Lord frowned. Just imagining doing a pinky promise in the middle of the street gave him a headache. Without mercy, Yukikaze wrapped her pinky around his and one-sidedly solidified the promise. The Demon Lord watched this happen to him with an apathetic gaze, then disappeared into the crowd.

“...Dinner or sharing a bed? It’s a win-win situation for me.”

“You’re pretty sneaky, aren’t you?” Mikan mumbled before becoming enchanted with the glittering gold medallion in her hand, jumping into the air with a triumphant fist to the sky.

“We’re going to feast tonight! It’s his money, I’m going to eat it all!”

“...In the same bed. Together ’til morning. Stuck together. Melded together.”

The pair left with smiles on their faces, each with a different reason to be happy.

—The slums of the town of Rookie.

Weeb was walking down a quiet alley at night. With a tattered cloak covering everything but his ordinary face, he almost looked like a beggar on the streets. He was in a part of town that every city here had: the slums. Where there was light, there was darkness, and the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. Even the financially bustling town of Rookie was no exception.

Lower class residents and adventurers gathered at the dimly lit food stands here and there, shoveling cheap, disgusting food down their throats. Weeb approached a stall and spoke to the owner.

“What do you have today?”

“Wheat porridge for three bronze coins. Four if you don’t have your own bowl.”

“All right. One please, with the bowl.”

“Got some dried radish, too. That’s two extra bronze coins.”

With the wave of a hand, Weeb refused the add-on and took the bowl of wheat porridge. He sat on a rock in the alley and sipped on it.

“Price went up from last year. Fried potatoes cost two bronze coins more now, but come in a smaller portion.”

“Oh, really...?”

Someone responded to Weeb talking to himself. It was the Demon Lord, concealing himself in Stealth Stance. Weeb didn’t show any sign of surprise, though, and continued. “The oil was bad, too. It’s been used for a while... That can’t be good for you. No more lard for stir-frying vegetable scraps, and there’s no salt in this porridge, either.”

“You have an eye for detail.”

“Not as much as you do.”

With a chuckle, Weeb sipped on the porridge again. With close to no flavor, it

was difficult to swallow. Compared to the porridge he had served earlier, which had been properly seasoned, he couldn't help but be disappointed.

"You're interesting. Immoral good deeds are better than moral inaction."

"Immoral... I can't argue with that."

"Don't get me wrong. It's a compliment... Not everyone can tour countries all year to serve people on the streets. Especially when it endangers your status in your own country."

"Status... I just do as I please."

"Your own decisions are that important to you...?"

The voice chilled Weeb to the bone. He looked up for the first time, hand instinctively reaching for his sword. The Demon Lord's tone was malicious enough to warrant it; it felt as if countless hands had sprouted from the earth and were entangling him...

"...Now, I must ask you. What do you want?" Weeb said, but the Demon Lord continued his long silence. While he couldn't be seen, Weeb could feel his playful attitude.

"Interesting. You're interesting. Very interesting."

When the Demon Lord finally spoke, it may as well have been a child's reaction. He implied no malintent. That was his honest reaction.

"I want you."

Straightforward. Cutting right to the chase. A display of how sincere the Demon Lord was being.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but you terrify me. Ever since I felt your eyes on me, I've been trembling."

"Sorry about that. I have to see everything for myself before I make a decision."

"It's admirable that you keep doing your own work despite your power."

"When I have enough men, I'll delegate the crap out of my work. With more capable people under me, my life gets easier, work becomes more efficient, and

more people benefit from it.”

“Simple, yet true.”

Having finished his porridge, Weeb stood to leave. The Demon Lord called to him, “I’m developing the village of Rabbi in Holylight right now. One day, I want you on my side... I will have you on my side.”

“...You don’t cease to terrify me.”

Weeb left, without turning around. The Demon Lord walked in the opposite direction. The first encounter between the hero and the Demon Lord.

——While Light and Darkness crossed paths...

Deeper into the slums, one bottom-rank adventurer was sulking. He was wobbling closer, then farther from a food stand over and over. There was no force behind his steps whatsoever.

“M-Miss Michi...”

“It’s you, Hammer. Got scammed again?”

Michi, a middle-aged woman, acknowledged the portly, middle-aged man approaching her. Upon her comment, Hammer apologetically shrunk his heavy body.

“Someone sold you some weird crap, again? You did get your cut, didn’t you!?”

“W-Well... I did, but they used it to pay for their food...”

“Get it together! They’re just stomping all over you, making you their money bag!”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Stop apologizing! Dampens the mood around here!”

Her thunderous scorn caused Hammer to roll up like a roly-poly. Michi raised her voice again, even more frustrated by his miserable state.

“I’ll give you one bowl. Eat it and scram.”

“T-Thank you so much... Again...”

Without even answering, Michi swiftly filled the wooden bowl and handed it over. It was filled with rice, an extremely rare crop on this continent. It came with a good portion of cheese on top, like a risotto.

“O-One of these days, I’ll pay you back double...”

“Don’t you act like you got a spine!”

“B-But I know things are tough with you, Miss Michi...”

“My business must be screwed if even you’re pitying me.”

Michi turned her nose up. Hammer was an adventurer notorious in Rookie for being useless. Michi’s food stand in the slums wasn’t turning much of a profit, either.

“W-Well... I-I was thinking of catching a gig in Euri...”

“Don’t matter where you go. You’ll quit the minute your feet get wet.”

Hammer had come to this town to make a living as an adventurer, but suffered an injury soon after his arrival. Now, he was scraping by each day collecting scraps in the dungeon.

“T-There’s a big fleet of ships going out of Euri... Hiring a bunch of porters.”

“Ha! You’ll fall overboard and drown before you know it,” Michi laughed.

Since she frequently watched Hammer trip over nothing on the street, she couldn’t imagine him surviving on a ship.

“I-I’ll make enough to come back, and bring back any pay I can...”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before.”

Michi kept on, and Hammer’s head drooped even lower. Not that Michi had any malice towards him, but Hammer was just too pathetic. She couldn’t keep her mouth shut as she watched this grown man get bossed around and mocked by adventurers that were at least a decade younger than him.

“T-This time... I’ll bring some back.”

“Don’t let people bully the money out of you. I wouldn’t expect anything else from you, though.”

Gazing up at the murky sky of the slums, Michi sighed. Hammer just barely kept from tearing up at how pathetic he was, and choked down the contents of his bowl. Neither of them had a clue as to what was being transported over in Euri.

March of the Demon Lord

—Outside the town of Rookie.

Outside the town, there were many carriages parked and some tents set up to accommodate Weeb's party. When touring the nations, he always made sure to set up camp outside town, since he would be approached non-stop by people of importance if he stayed anywhere within it. Some only wanted to thank him, while others tried to piggy-back off of his success, use him for their own benefit, or even headhunt him for their own country. Those offers contributed to his worsening reputation in his home country. So, now, even in scorching heat or frigid blizzard, Weeb had taken it upon himself to stay outside of any town he visited.

There were few knights that accompanied him. Any knight found to be traveling with Weeb would catch heat with the higher-ups of the Tzardom and be knocked off their career ladder. While Weeb had hired a coachman for each of his carriages, he was only joined by three proper knights.

"Sir Weeb has a woeful expression upon his face."

"Perhaps something troubles him...?"

"What could it be?"

The trio was called the Trinary in White, all of them skilled knights. In a word, they were brawny. With muscles built like mountains, these were unparalleled fighters who had conquered battlegrounds with Weeb. Each had a spine of steel and devoted themselves to the paladin. By this point, the higher-ups of the Tzardom had given up on them. While the Tzardom only saw them as a band of troublemakers, they had to keep some sort of tether on them to keep them from serving another country and causing even more damage to the Tzardom.

"But look how Sir Weeb glows...!"

“How white he glows!”

“I feel purified just from gazing upon him.”

Just as the knights described, Weeb was enveloped in a white light. It was no hallucination, but caused by the box on his back. It contained a weapon more powerful than any Legendary, causing the box to constantly emit the Whitening spell. No matter how rough or dirty the battle, Weeb’s body would always remain spotless. The untainted paladin. Weeb had been sitting on a rock by the bonfire, but finally spoke up.

“Do any of you know of the village of Rabbi?”

“Of course we do,” Kaiya, leader of the trio, answered. The other two were Ultima and Mushroom, by the way.

“As I recall, there is a large population of poor Bunnies living there.”

The trio agreed with Weeb’s statement. The Tzardom of Light and Holylight did have a decent relationship. While they had the religious difference in what they worshiped, the Great Light and the Angels shared some characteristics. The Great Light was only recorded in literature for having led the Angels. No one knew if it really existed or what deeds it had accomplished. In that sense, one could say that the Tzardom of Light was a more faithful theocracy by nature. On the other hand, the existence of the Angels had been proven, and many of their doctrines were practical. One could say that Holylight was less devoted.

“What about the village of Rabbi, Sir Weeb?”

“I’ve heard a few times during our journey that the Demon Lord has appeared in Holylight.”

The Trio chuckled, unsure of what to say. Of course, the Trinary had heard the same rumor, but had brushed it off.

“With all due respect, Sir Weeb, the Demon Lord...?”

“If that Demon Lord resided in the village of Rabbi, what would you make of it?”

“W-What... Do you mean?”

“Never mind... It was a silly question.”

Weeb turned back to the bonfire. The eyes under his glasses were endlessly calm and clear. By just looking at them, the knights were filled with an indescribable sense of fulfillment. They muttered to themselves: “What a beautiful person he is...”

“Sir Weeb is our true light.”

“How I wish his strong arms could hold me ’til morning.”

When Mushroom whispered that to himself, the air changed. Their glares sharpened as if they could kill.

“Shut your filthy trap, Mushroom.”

“I will be the one to receive Sir Weeb’s blessing one day.”

“Keep dreaming! Neither of you pieces of filth will taint the White Light!”

They were powerful, honorable knights that could stand up to their own country. Unfortunately, all three of them saw Weeb with a romantic eye, mixing their chivalry with infatuation. It seemed that the hero had just as much to worry about as the Demon Lord did.

——A cheap inn in the town of Rookie.

“Oh, today’s a day off?”

“That’s right. We always rest the day after we go into a dungeon.”

The next morning, the Demon Lord and Mikan were having breakfast in the inn’s lobby. Yukikaze was still asleep. Not that she was oversleeping, but she needed to sleep in order to recover. The pair had learned through their years of adventuring that plentiful rest recovered both HP and Stamina, so they made sure to reserve a day for rest after dungeon-crawling.

“Good call,” the Demon Lord nodded, sipping on his cup of bitter coffee. In baseball, for example, the starting pitcher would never pitch the very next day. He wouldn’t perform as well, and that could lead to injury. Especially when it came to life-or-death combat, it only made sense to make sure to go in fully rested.

“You two know what you’re doing, surprisingly. Good for you.”

“Where’s all this coming from? Are you sick?”

“It’s just that, when I was sixteen or seventeen, I only thought about goofing around. Considering that, you two are standing on solid ground.”

“Weirdo...”

Mikan disregarded the comment, but the Demon Lord was sincere. In the peaceful modern-day Japan, who could say that they were completely independent, making a living off of risking their lives each day? The Demon Lord had a newfound respect for the pair, and for Weeb.

“Not that I’m interested... But what did you do when you were younger? Where did you come from, anyway?”

“When I was your age, I went to school.”

“School? Like where you’d train to be an adventurer?”

“I guess it’s a place for learning basic academics... Actually, by interacting with a variety of people, perhaps it was a place to learn human relationships, or human society as a whole on some small scale.”

The Demon Lord’s explanation surely wasn’t very clear for Mikan. It would be difficult to accurately describe a school to someone who’d never seen one, but Mikan did listen with decent curiosity, her ruby-red eyes staring at the Demon Lord.

“You’re technically a human, then? Jury’s still out, though.”

“We’ll see... I may not be the one to decide that.”

“Huh?”

“I’m headed out for a bit. Since it’s your day off, why don’t you play with this?”

The Demon Lord produced a Pop-up Pirate from the pitch-black void and handed it to Mikan.

“W-What’s with the tiny barrel!? Wait, how were you carrying this!?”

“Take turns stabbing the barrel with the little swords. First one to make the

pirate pop out loses. When Yukikaze gets up, you should give it a try with some sort of wager.”

With that, the Demon Lord left the inn. Left behind, Mikan inspected each part of the barrel, confused.

(Now let’s farm some SP with those monsters.)

Using Quick Travel, the Demon Lord jumped to the seventh level of the Bastille Dungeon they had explored the day before. He didn’t need to pay admission to get in this way.

——Bastille Dungeon, level 7.

Just like the day before, it was a dark cave. With light-imbued Spell Stones implemented on the walls here and there, it was decently illuminated. Noticing the Demon Lord, the monsters began to swarm.

(I wonder what their levels are.)

He launched a big kick against a charging Raging Chicken. The chunky bird was blown away, crashing into the wall. The Demon Lord checked the admin screen to see that his SP had increased from 29 to 33.

(That one was level 4.)

In the game, a successful first attack added a bonus of 1 SP. Beyond that, players would earn the SP equivalent to the level difference between them and their enemy. The SP system was a little more complicated when it came to retaliating attacks, but the Demon Lord didn’t expect to not make the first move against any monster here.

“I’m glad my level’s low,” the Demon Lord mumbled to himself.

All of the advisors in the Sleepless Castle were at level 1, too. Because of their powerful stats and skillset, the EXP requirement to level them up was set astronomically high. There were a few more reasons why this was the case, but in the game, a higher level didn’t necessarily guarantee an advantage. Akira Ono had disliked trudging through games by power leveling. In his world, players had to fight smart or die.

(Let the farming begin...)

The Demon Lord carried on through the dark cave. The monsters here were all unintelligent, guaranteed to attack the Demon Lord without sensing his overwhelming upper hand. They were merely sacrificial lambs for his growth.

The Ruthless March

“Like strolling through an empty field...” the Demon Lord muttered to himself.

He wasn’t particularly cheerful about it. In fact, he seemed rather disappointed. This dungeon was for beginners to take on, after all. There were no signs of dangerous monsters until deep down. With his Demon Lordly powers and all, he couldn’t expect any worthy opponents here.

“You again. Can’t get enough, huh?”

A Tin Man stood before the Demon Lord. Peeling off its metal coating could earn any adventurer a pretty penny, but this was an enemy most Rookies would struggle to take down. However, before the Demon Lord, this monster was no more than a tin can. The Demon Lord approached without another word and slammed his fist into its metallic body. Without even having to use Sodom’s Fire, the Tin Man went flying, scattering shrapnel everywhere before crashing into the wall. In the dungeon today, the Demon Lord had fought all of his battles hand-to-hand, exploring various combat styles.

“No money to be made, but this is perfect for farming SP.”

After defeating each enemy, the Demon Lord had not touched them at all. He had no technique nor inkling for taking apart or processing these monsters. The evil Demon Lord had a fountain of gold, after all. No need to scrape for pennies by dismantling these dungeon creatures. Defeating one monster after another, the Demon Lord kept going down.

When he finally reached level 10, something changed.

“One more idiot crawling on his own!”

“Today’s a lucky day.”

A pair of rough-looking adventurers appeared, flashing their knives. Their

looks alone gave off a dangerous vibe. In fact, the stench of blood, like that of rusted metal, filled the air. The Demon Lord wrinkled his nose at it.

“I’d ask you what you want... But I have a good guess.”

“Ooh, smart one. Leave every coin you got.”

“Hold on... He doesn’t have any loot on him.”

No one could blame the muggers for being confused. While someone confident in their skills could dungeon-crawl alone, they usually carried with them a porter, or at least some sort of box or bag to carry their loot. This man, though, had nothing of the sort.

“I doubt I’d walk away scot-free, even if I did pay.”

The Demon Lord glanced over at a headless body on the ground, where the stench was coming from. The headless body seemed fake somehow, like a well-made dummy. He was having a hard time registering the fact that it was a real body.

“That guy got tonight’s special... Thought he could fight his way out.”

“You don’t want to turn out like that, do you? Now, pay up.”

“Dead men tell no tales... I’m sure your livelihood is at stake if you get ratted out up on the surface. You dealt with the situation.”

Despite the predicament he was in, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but imagine the American Gold Rush era. When gold mines were first discovered, everyone mined for themselves, until someone discovered an alternate way to earn their gold... killing and stealing from those who had mined their share. A less laborious and time-consuming method. It was clever, albeit immoral, of course. As the Demon Lord took a step forward, one of the muggers snapped a spell.

“Now, stay right there... Deep Sleep.”

“Ragh...!”

The Water spell cast from the mugger’s finger caught the Demon Lord’s eyes. That instant, the Demon Lord’s knees buckled and his body faltered. A class 2 Water spell, effective against monsters as well as humans. Since the Demon

Lord had no Magic Defense to speak of, it was critically effective.

“Gr... Ragghhhhhh!”

Then, a dark and sinister fog rose out of the finger on his right hand, enveloping his entire body in darkness in the blink of an eye.



Like the flick of a switch, something changed. Completely. Who appeared there was Hakuto Kunai himself, the rightful owner of the Demon Lord's body. Kunai took hold of Sodom's Fire and stabbed it into his own thigh, with the intention of overriding the drowsiness with intense pain. While it made sense in theory, acting upon it was another matter entirely. It wasn't in the realm of an ordinary human's thought process to make the snap decision to stab himself.

As he rose to his feet, hatred overflowed from him, enough to vibrate the air. In his eyes, a crimson light gleamed, reminiscent of a roaring flame. Leaving a trail of crimson light, Kunai closed the distance in an instant, grabbing hold of the mugger who cast the spell by the face. Lifting the man with his right hand alone, Kunai began crushing the man's head.

"Peasant... What did you do?"

"Hrgh... M-My face...!?"

"Have you not enough intelligence to understand my question?"

Kunai increased the pressure. With a sound that seemed too bizarre to come from a human body, the mugger's face became disfigured down to the bone, as if his head was a ball of putty. Kunai's almost elegant fingers tore through the mugger's skin, muscle, and skull.

"M-Magic... A... water... spegh!"

Without a word, Kunai swung his arm, smashing the mugger against the wall. He splattered with a strange crunch and painted his surroundings with his blood. The mugger, now lifelessly strewn about on the floor, seemed more like a dummy than anything.

"Magic. This is an annoying world."

"H-Help..."

The other mugger was flat on his ass, trying to crawl away backwards. Soon, his back hit a wall, leaving him with nowhere to run. Kunai turned to the surviving mugger and approached him step by step. Kunai's expression was that of someone observing a strange creature, or studying the behavior of an insect.

"I will... never... I'll give you my money. All of it...!"

“Peasants always repeat the same mistakes.”

“What?”

A small ray of hope illuminated the mugger’s expression. Kunai’s tone was terribly calm, without a hint of an intention to kill him. The mugger thought that perhaps the man wanted something else from it, whether it be information or something monetary. The correct answer, however, was neither.

“When you beg for your life, make sure your opponent has any capacity for mercy...”

Kunai raised his foot and stomped his heel straight into the mugger’s face. His head went flying as it sprayed all sorts of fluids, painting another red stain on the wall. Looking around at the three carcasses in the room, Kunai grumbled, “this idiotic creator... I need better entertainment than this.”

With that, Kunai looked down at the ring on his right hand. The ring showed a gauge that seemed to be filled with blood, which decreased over time. After checking this gauge, Kunai wore an uncharacteristic smile.

“Well, he is causing a certain kind of chaos... Ha ha ha...”

With the red light trailing from his eyes, Kunai went to the level below.

——Bastille Dungeon, level 11.

“Fuck that bastard... Acting like he owns this body.”

The Demon Lord lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke. Losing control of himself came with an extreme sense of disgust.

“Killing people left and right...”

As if he were stomping on bugs. That was not combat. On the bottom of his foot, the Demon Lord could still feel the vivid sensation of trampling and crushing the mugger’s face. Recognizing the SP he was wasting, he still produced a Bottle of Water and rinsed off the sole of his shoe.

(But... this is weird. Why am I so calm?)

It was the same way back in the Shrine of Wishes where he had met the Still

Angel. There were countless dead bodies there, too, with an unbearable stench leaking from the organs strewn out on the ground. He had observed that sight as if he had seen it many times before.

(I'm used to seeing dead bodies...? That's ridiculous.)

The Demon Lord's seed of doubt only grew, though. In an attempt to check something, he returned to the level above and was dumbfounded.

(The bodies... are gone...!)

The red stains that looked painted on, the headless body... all of them were gone, as if they had never existed at all. Mikan's casual comment came to mind.

They disappear after a while.

He remembered that dead monsters disappeared after a period of time. However, he didn't pick up on any implication that this would be the same with humans. At the same time, his clothes with infinite Durability began repairing themselves, reversing the hole in his thigh like nothing ever happened. Like it was all just a dream.

"Freaking creepy...!?"

A vision came to him in a powerful flash. In an instant, he was standing in the middle of Shibuya, as he remembered it to be. With bustling crosswalks, and skyscrapers that epitomized the pinnacle of human evolution. Then, his vision gradually lost color as the skyscrapers came crumbling down. Before he knew it, countless cracks ran through the asphalt, as thousands of people fell to the ground. Rotten corpses walked around him and pitch-black crow-like birds flew above him.

(What the hell...!?)

The Demon Lord shook his head as if to shake off the terrible sight and lit a cigarette, shaking. As he inhaled the Stamina-healing smoke, his head gradually cleared up.

(This thing...)

The Demon Lord looked down at the accursed ring. When his body was taken control of by Kunai, he felt a powerful source of willpower from the ring, as well

as the effects of it.

(The ring wants me to bring chaos and destruction to this world. Do that, and my wish comes true.) For the time being, he could conclude that this was the will of the Still Angel. Through this ring, Kunai seemed to be searching for something.

(You think I'm going to let you walk all over me...!?)

The irritated Demon Lord slowly regained his undaunted expression. A million choices came to mind.

"I'm going to be the only one getting his wish granted around here..."

Whispering that into the empty air, the Demon Lord headed further down into the dungeon.

The Bastille Dungeon Level 12~15

"So this is the prison they were talking about."

The Demon Lord was facing a prison-cell-like space with metal bars. That being said, the metal bars were rusted and deteriorated here and there, so the space could no longer serve its purpose. Even just a quick glance told the Demon Lord that the cell was created a long time ago.

"They just dug into the wall and installed metal bars... Pretty archaic."

He curiously inspected the space all over by knocking on the bars and running his hand along the wall, but there didn't seem to be anything noteworthy. The Demon Lord was almost expecting the stereotypical human skeleton, but the cell was very clean, to his disappointment.

(It's like someone cleans it regularly. Now that I think about it, the whole dungeon is too clean.) Despite the heavy traffic, there wasn't a single piece of trash around. This wasn't a tourist destination, but a battlefield of life and death — it would not have been strange for him to see chipped blades, blood marks, or even a body part. The Demon Lord couldn't help but think that someone was managing the dungeon. Like a high-end apartment complex, someone had to do upkeep to keep it this neat.

(If so... Who's doing the job? It's like there's a band of uber-powerful janitors...) the Demon Lord contemplated as he roundhouse kicked the monster charging towards him. The monster crashed through the metal bars behind him to neatly end up in the cell. As far as he could tell, the bars were ordinary metal, nothing special about them.

"This was a prison back in the day. No doubt about that. And there's someone still keeping up the place."

At this point, the Demon Lord cracked a joyful grin. His curiosity was definitely piqued. Yukikaze had told him that the dungeon went down 20 levels, but that there was nothing special down there. Just a dead-end, and no one of this world questioned it. This was just another office for the adventurers, after all. Not somewhere they would be seeking to fulfill their curiosity. It was a more grounded place that decided whether or not they could put food on the table. No one else here had the luxury of dungeon-crawling for a hobby.

"Now I have to know more about the groundskeeper."

The Demon Lord took the stairs further down. There were almost no adventurers who came down this far, preserving the silence around him. As the Demon Lord advanced to level 15 demolishing monsters all the while, his sharp glance spotted something dimly illuminated. A small wooden box. Inside was something the Demon Lord had seen before, but was too bizarre to be in this world.

"You're kidding me... Is this a gun...?"

The Demon Lord stared as if to burn a hole into the gun-like object in the box. Then he poked it with his finger. He was acting like a teenage girl scared of something she had never seen before. He would have blushed in embarrassment if anyone had seen him.

"I better have Tahara take a look at this..."

When it came to guns, Tahara could do no wrong. With that in mind, the Demon Lord stowed the gun (still in the box) away in his Item Folder. Tahara was already handling everything back in the village, but he was just the best man for the job. The Demon Lord, on the other hand, was at his best in ruling, combat, and scheming.

“I guess I’ll head back to the inn for now.”

Using Quick Travel, he returned to his room at the cheap inn. While Quick Travel was already broken for its cost of 30SP for any jump regardless of distance, it bordered on ridiculous that he could use it to escape a dungeon as well. While the skill couldn’t be used mid-combat, it was more of a miracle than a magic spell when it came to how much of a time-saver it was. When the Demon Lord returned to his room, and hung up his pitch-black trench coat, he noticed a strange lump in his bed. He peeled back the comforter to find Yukikaze fast asleep in her cute pajamas. For a few moments, the Demon Lord’s thoughts (and body) froze.

“Why are you in my room?”

Yukikaze didn’t answer. She was fast asleep.

“Wait, how did you get in in the first place?”

“...Come inside? Mister Fox, you want to— hrm?”

“Suck on this.”

He threw a piece of candy into Yukikaze’s mouth as she woke, reacting to a particular keyword. It was an art form at this point. Rolling the candy in her mouth, Yukikaze gently sighed.

“...I bribed the innkeeper to open the door with the master key.”

Her confession, though, was less gentle than the Demon Lord had expected. He covered his head with his hands, trying to push back down the encroaching migraine. First the muggers in the dungeon, and now this little trespasser.

“Is there no order in this world...?”

The Demon Lord grumbled, but he was in no place to talk. Considering how much of a mess he put Holylight in, trespassing into his bed was a misdemeanor at worst.

“...Mister Fox. That pirate game, it was a really fun toy.”

“Good to hear. It’s a traditional party favorite.”

Of course, that was another useless item with 1 Attack, but it served its

entertainment purpose just fine. According to Yukikaze, the adventurers were having a blast betting pocket change on it. There were heated games taking place in the lobby as they spoke.

“Hm. May as well give it a try. It’s been a while.”

“...Mister Fox, if you’re going to give *anything* a try— hrm?”

“Suck on that.”

“...It hurts so bad, but it tastes so good.”

After another round of their routine, the Demon Lord went down to the lobby. He could hear excited voices from below, as a large number of participants seemed to be playing with the game. It was a classic table-top game for a reason.

“Alright! I win! Now that’s three bronze coins each. Pay up!”

“Dammit! This red girl’s too good!”

“This stupid beard-face!”

“One little jab and out he pops...!”

As the adventurers cursed out loud, Mikan gleefully scooped up the bronze coins thrown onto the table. While this amount of money was only pocket change for her, Mikan was beaming as bright as the sun. Like any good adventurer, she seemed to enjoy gambling as well as winning. She was gambling with her life every day, after all.

“Looks like we got ourselves a party.”

With a dauntless smile, the Demon Lord approached the table that hosted the game in the center of the hall. The adventurers naturally parted the way for him. Mikan alone awaited the Demon Lord with her arms crossed. Her shapely breasts, slender waist, long legs, and sharp eyes all gave her a beauty like that of a wild panther.

“Oh, you’re ready to give me more money?”

“I like to play the house, mostly. I don’t prefer games of chance.”

“Making excuses already? What, you’re afraid?”

“That’s a cheap attempt at an insult...”

With that, the Demon Lord grabbed the pirate and placed it back into the barrel. He then grabbed one of the small swords — nostalgia in his eyes — and stuck it into a hole in the barrel. Seeing this, Mikan grew an aggressive grin. After having played all day, she seemed confident that she would win. She picked another sword and moved to stab it into the barrel, but then the Demon Lord spoke: “If you’re challenging me, I need an ante.”

“How much? Oh, here’s the change from yesterday first.”

Mikan tossed a leather bag. She didn’t end up using up the gold medallion. She had only used two silver coins, leaving about \$20,000 worth of coins in the bag. The Demon Lord took it and let the contents rain down onto the table.

“T-Those are gold coins!”

“Look at all that silver... They’re so bright!”

The adventurers in the lobby were all rookies staying at this cheap inn. The silver and gold on the table shone much too bright for them. Even Mikan, a B-rank adventurer with a record of making 880 gold coins in a month, couldn’t help but swallow her breath at this small fortune.

“What do you think you’re doing...?”

“If you best me, all of this is yours. If you lose, though...”

“If I lose...?”

Everyone’s eyes turned to the Demon Lord. None of them were going to miss a single word he said or a single move he made. After a generous pause, he declared ceremoniously: “Let’s see. You can be my obedient pet for a day.”

“What...!?”

“Would you prefer cat or dog? A rabbit would be fine, too. Of course, you’ll have to end each sentence with ‘meow,’ ‘ruff,’ or ‘hippity hoppity.’”

“I’d rather die!” Mikan screamed with a beet-red face and stuck a sword in the barrel. Without hesitation, the Demon Lord followed suit. After a few back-and-forths, Mikan began to spend more time thinking before each move. On the other hand, the Demon Lord still did not hesitate, as if his glare pierced

through everything.

“What’s the matter? Frozen with fear, little tangerine?”

“Shut up!”

As Mikan grew more irritated, the adventurers around them either gasped or fell silent each time a sword was stuck into the barrel. On the table before them was a pile of coins that amounted to more money than any of them had ever dreamed of earning at one time.

“...Here!”

As Mikan struck the barrel with razor-sharp determination, the pirate went soaring up in the air. The cheers and screams came to an abrupt halt as gloom filled Mikan’s expression. As more voices and cheers refilled the lobby, the Demon Lord smiled elegantly.

“In war, more often than not, the victor is already decided before the first battle begins.”

With this grandiose line, Mikan couldn’t help but collapse onto the table. In fact, the fate of this battle was already set before it began — the hole that popped the pirate was determined by how the pirate was twisted into the barrel. Mikan and the other adventurers had never noticed this mechanism, as they weren’t paying attention while they reset the game.

“Tonight’s a party. I’ll take one for the team to keep it going.”

The Demon Lord shoved the coins from the table into the leather bag and tossed it to the innkeeper.

“Go buy some booze, food, fruits, whatever you can think of. Make sure you use it all up.”

“Use... A-All of this, sir?”

“Every last coin. Also, don’t let anyone into my room again.”

“Y-Yes, sir...!”

Jittering like a grasshopper, the innkeeper bounced out into the street, and cheers erupted in the lobby of this cheap inn once again. For the rookies, who

always made do with the gnarly products of the food stands on the street, this was quite the VIP treatment. Perhaps the Demon Lord tried to copy the paladin in an attempt to garner a positive reputation. Or perhaps he had just enjoyed a round of the nostalgic party game. As he watched the adventurers in jubilee, he recalled a line he had spat out before which didn't mean anything to him then.

(Going in a separate path as the Empire, huh...?)

He had only said it as a desperate justification to his advisors. But now that he knew who was behind his ring, it carried a different meaning to him. Kunai was trying to accomplish something through that ring on his finger.

(Maybe I'll go back to the village just once.)

There was still a mountain of things to do and think about, like the gun-like object he obtained, what to do with Dona Dona or Xenobia, or even just the progress of construction in the village. The Demon Lord nearly began a Communication with Tahara, but reconsidered who to dial. A particular girl's face came to his mind.

Aku. Where are you now?

Master Demon Lord! I was just helping with fieldwork!

All right. I'll be back at the village shortly.

Really!? I'll be right there to welcome you back!

After closing the Communication, the Demon Lord turned to Mikan, still sulking into the table.

"Mikan, I'm headed out for a bit. I'll be back by morning. You should start practicing your tail-wagging now."

"Then stay out!"

For the first time in a while, the Demon Lord would return to the village.

Divergence: Black Hole

Akira Ono was walking down a long hallway on the top floor of a skyscraper. Any Japanese person would have recognized the names of the major

corporations who held offices here. The hallway was long, and Akira had a terrible spell of dizziness. He couldn't even tell if he was walking straight or in circles; even his vision was blurred. As he was hit with a sudden rush of nausea, Akira started for the bathroom with faltering feet, but even this walk seemed terribly long.

(What is this...?)

When Akira reached the bathroom, he was a little surprised. He couldn't see the gender labels on the doors. He could tell that some sort of silhouette occupied the signage of the wall, but couldn't see if the silhouette was wearing a skirt or not.

(Crap. I think I'm gonna barf...)

Stopped in his tracks, Akira tried to regain some vision.

After some time, when he opened his eyes again, he could see a little more clearly. He immediately ran into the men's room, and forcefully threw up the contents of his stomach. He had been drinking with XX the night before, so vomit alone wasn't too unexpected.

"Yeesh. I guess I'm getting old..." He mumbled to himself, now looking in the mirror.

At the time, Akira could decently hold his liquor for being in his twenties. It wasn't often that he would feel it rush back up his throat the next day. After washing his face and rinsing his mouth, he turned back to his reflection.

"Yep. Ten out of ten. He's a genius, too."

He could say all he wanted as he stood alone in the bathroom. In fact, he felt that he had to convince himself, considering the person he was about to meet: Mickity, one of the inaugural players who had been playing Akira Ono's game. Mickity's profession in real life, as he later found out, was an executive director for 42-OMG, a video game company famous overseas. Someone who lived in a different world than Akira.

"Large-scale MMO, my ass. Maybe I'll think about it for a hundred mil," he said, but didn't mean it deep down.

In fact, he kept thinking about what was behind this deal.

(What are they thinking...?)

Truth be told, it was abnormal for such a famous international corporation to show interest in a tiny indie game, and even more unusual that they would try to scam an individual by the same token. If they were really interested, why didn't they just make it themselves? They had limitless manpower and finances. Who would pay mind to a minuscule indie game in some tiny Far Eastern island nation?

"Just so you know, I'm penniless."

Sad but true. The only thing anyone would gain from scamming this man, who spent all of his money creating his own world, was an earful of insults.

"Let's go, I guess..."

Slapping his cheeks, Akira returned out into the hallway. Now it appeared straight. He walked down the long hallway with proud strides and knocked on the door he had been looking for. An elderly gentleman with a monocle and a foreigner in a butler's uniform appeared.

"Uh, um. Akira Ono. Do you speak Japanese...?"

"Welcome, Mister Ono. Thank you for coming all this way," the gentleman responded in fluent Japanese. He was an elder with an impermeable aura about him. Akira had a gut feeling that he was in over his head. He was sure that the gentleman was more experienced and knowledgeable than him, many times over.

"...Um, is Mickity here?"

"I am he."

"... What?"

——A few hours later

After a not-so-short meeting, Akira Ono had returned to XX's place. To save on hotels, he had been crashing here throughout his stay. Although his attitude was not that of someone receiving free lodging.

“How’d it go, Akira?”

“Well, they want to make it really big.”

“That’s awesome! You can buy me drinks when you get some money!”

“Get a job.”

“Not a chance! You know how hard it is for me just to breathe? Don’t you know the pain? I’m moving my lungs and my heart. That’s heavy labor.”

“That’s something literally every baby can do.”

Akira’s harsh comments were already becoming of his future Demon-Lord-ization. As Akira bagged up the trash flooding the floor and tossed the sack into the kitchen, he let out a sigh. The room that he had cleaned was already a mess, again.

“How can you produce this much crap in a day?”

“Whaaaaa? Don’t you get a little bit of byproduct when you’re looking for something you need?”

“Your life is a byproduct.”

“Damn! You’re really a piece of work, Akira! You asbestos! Polyethylene!”

“You know that’s just plastic, right?”

As he popped a beer can open, Akira glanced over to see XX playing a bizarre video game. There was a black spiral in the middle of the screen that sucked everything in. People, horses, cars, buildings, everything was being swallowed up by the black swirl. It was a creepy sight to see.

“Did you make this one, too?”

“Hmm. It’s like a... prophecy, I guess?”

“Huh?”

Akira scoffed, tilting back his can of beer. He adamantly rejected the likes of prophecies, dream horoscopes, guardian angels, palm reading, *etc.* He believed that his life was his to pioneer, and didn’t need to believe in any of that.

“That’s dumb... You make decisions to create your own future.”

If some wrinkles in one's hand determined that person's life, there would be no point in talent, hard work, or even luck. That seemed ridiculous to him. Surely, there must have been a few people out there like Akira, who had never experienced failure. They were confident that anything could be conquered with their own hard work and talent.

"You aren't a part of the herd, Akira, but I don't think you could take on the big spiral."

"What big spiral?"

"It's right around the corner... The black hole."

"What are you going on about?"

The usual dabbling in the occult, Akira thought. XX loved the thoughts of spirits and supernatural events, claiming that there was the ghost of a suicide victim haunting this very room.

"Where is that suicidal ghost, anyway? Never seen it."

"I think he's out. He's scared of you, I think."

"What'd I ever do to him...?"

"He's a middle-aged gay guy, but you're not his type, I don't think."

"A middle-aged gay guy!?"

Despite Akira's overblown reaction, XX only laughed. Even as they talked, the screen displayed rapid movement as trees, children, cars, and even test tubes were swallowed up by the black swirl. The swirl grew bigger by the second.

"What does this swirl want?"

"I don't really know."

"And no ending for this one, either."

"Nah. It's been sucking up a lot, so I think it'll blow up in the end."

"...So you're just going to blow it up to wrap it up."

The pair burst out laughing, and toasted with their cans of beer.

In the future, XX's prophecy came to life with eerie poignancy. The year was

2004, when a monster was born, ready to swallow up the entirety of Japan's internet culture. Personal websites were deleted, blogs were abandoned, and the concept of individuality became buried as everything gathered at a singularity. Perhaps that was the blackhole XX was talking about.

"Ugh. I wish a warhead would drop on Harajuku, or something."

"Get a job so you can buy a warhead."

"Or that Tokyo Tower would come falling down."

"Get a job so you can buy a saw."

"You wanna cut it down? Make it come crashing down?"

"One...one...zero..."

"Hey, Akira! Are you dialing for real!?"

The screen flashed to black and the spiral swallowed up all of the desktop icons, too. Once there was nothing more to swallow, or when it was bored, a forced reset. Everything would line up at the same line. That grown adult over there, and the cute girl over there... They all had the same first-day-of-school look.

Congratulations, and welcome. The world will soon explode. Happy graduation. Everyone will equally drop dead.

White's Return

——The Holy Castle in Holylight.

A little earlier than when the Demon Lord began crashing the dungeon and Yu began her garden project, the Holy Castle erupted in a commotion surrounding the leader of the Holy Maiden, Angel White. Upon her head was the Angel's Ring, emanating a majestic glow. She had no way of keeping this quiet. For the people of Holylight, that's how much an angel meant to them. When White appeared before the Holycastle's front gate, the guard's jaw dropped to the ground before he dove down onto his knees. He couldn't even keep his eyes up before the divine glow of the Ring. The commotion spread fast, as people came pouring out of the castle and crowded around White. Each of them exclaimed

something or another, and some fell to their knees and put their hands together to worship White. With the glow of the halo illuminating White's features, she looked like an angel who had come down to earth.

"Lady White!"

"She's an angel! Lady White became an angel!"

"Look at that divine glow!"

"My eyes! My eyes!"

"Lady White! It's me! Marry me!"

"W-Whua- Whua...! Whua!"

With a gentle smile, White walked through the roaring cheers into the Holy Castle, waving to the people. Everyone, man or woman, lost themselves before her divine beauty.



Her external allure was undoubtedly enhanced by her exuding confidence. The halo atop her head was directly given to her by an elevated existence. With that in mind, White was as confident as could be. Moreover, she had received reassurance, too.

(He said that it suits me well...)

White closed her eyes and recalled the event. In her eyes, the Demon Lord was a legendary rebel, fighting against the Great Light with black wings on his back. The good girls always seemed to be the ones who fall for a taste of evil, convincing themselves that 'only I can understand him. Only I can protect him.'

(Lord Lucifer...)

Recalling his body enveloped in the white steam, her cheeks turned red. His devious brain, his dauntless attitude, his very presence, all ready to trample everything in his path, marching to the ends of Hell. He was the mythical fallen angel... the one who ruled the night in times of old! He had accepted White, and bestowed upon her the halo of an angel. One could only imagine the glee, joy, and elation she felt.

"Lady White...! What is on your...!?"

As White walked through the hallways of the Holy Castle, the commotion only grew louder. As people saw her, they ran to their coworkers to spread the news. The entire castle erupted in chaos until a certain someone emerged. Upon seeing her, everyone straightened their backs and tightened their lips. It was Gran, the living history of the Holy Church. While she was allegedly older than ninety, her presence was as strong as ever. As an advisor, her words carried extraordinary weight.

"White, what's with all the noise!? Have they no respect for the Holy Castle... Aghhh!"

Upon seeing the Angel's Ring glow above White's head, even Gran faltered at its sacred glow, falling to the ground. White rushed to help her up, but Gran's words failed her.

"W-White...! T-That thing... Your head...!"

“It was given to me by someone...”

With a smile, Angel clasped her hands in front of her large twin peaks. An unmistakable angel.

“W-Who might that be...!?”

White didn’t answer, but only smiled quietly. She had been repeatedly sworn to secrecy. Gran picked up something from her response, too. White must have been holding back from taking in vain the name of an existence who had bestowed a halo, of all things, upon her. The angels had vanished from this world long ago. They couldn’t take any chance, no matter how slim, of offending such an existence. This was the one glimmer of hope they had been waiting for.

“I-I see... I won’t ask much. But tell me this. Is this deity in our country? They wouldn’t forsake us by turning to another country, would they?”

Gran had a desperate look on her face. They couldn’t let anyone else catch this glimpse of salvation. White answered deliberately.

“I won’t let that happen.”

“A-All right...”

“Yes. I will serve him by his side, and...”

White couldn’t help but blush at her own choice of words. She couldn’t help but recall how close they were in the hot spring. Gran saw this, and her eyes widened. She picked up on a particular scent.

“Ah! Ah, unbelievable... Don’t tell me that... a c-c-child!? With a Holy Maiden...? W-What is happening...!?”

“N-No... I’m not...!”

“I know, I know. Our situation is much too dire...!”

Gran immediately decided to put a gag law on most of these details. The fact that a Holy Maiden was given an Angel’s Ring was good. Very good. This information could serve as an intimidation against enemies and a brimming hope for their own people. White was popular among the people to begin with, but if they were to cause a ruckus about who exactly bestowed the halo upon

her, he might disappear. Legends told of higher beings with various personalities. Angels and humans were the same, in that sense. Some were quiet, some were boisterous, and some even spent their days in solitude, away from worldly trifles.

“I’ll leave the matter to you, White. Don’t let him go.”

“Yes, I will always... k-keep him close.”

“Hah ha ha! Well said.”

Even as she blushed, White’s determination came through her timid nature. Gran smiled in return. She had known White since she was very young, but had never expected her to experience romance. Gran must have felt a sense of relief for that fact, too.

——A meeting room in the Holy Castle.

When White returned to their usual meeting room, Queen was looking bored, her feet up on the roundtable and her hands behind her head. When she saw the glowing ring above White’s head, she and her chair tumbled to the floor with a loud crash.

“S-Sis! W-What the fuck is that!? A-Above your head...!?”

Uncharacteristically, White wore a teasing grin. Normally, White was the one being surprised and tormented by her sisters. Now the tables had turned.

“T-That’s an Angel’s Ring... What the hell is happening!?”

“Yes. Someone... gave it to me.”

White gave Queen the same answer she gave Gran, but had a clear picture of the Demon Lord as the man he was. Who could have blamed her? While their encounter was short, much had happened during that time. He had seen her naked, sipped from her glass, and pulled her by the waist to accompany him for the execution of a miracle. Then he gave her the Angel’s Ring. He smiled, and said ‘it suits you well.’ Finally... he promised they would meet again. Every time White recalled the encounter in her mind, she felt a warmth kindle in her chest. While it was short, every event was a shock, full of mysterious danger. Her

heart pounded faster with every reminiscence. Queen picked up on something.

“What’s going on... Why do you look like such a woman, Sis?”

“L-Like a woman...!?”

“I don’t give a shit about the Angel’s Ring anymore. Who is it? I can smell the guy on you from a mile away, now.”

“W-Why should I tell you...?”

White misspoke in her sister’s presence. Now she had admitted that there was a man behind it.

“Woah... You, of all people? Does he have a Holy Sword, or something? Or is he like a dragon...?”

“That’s who you’re into! I feel grateful for him, but I...”

“Huh!? You got a problem with Sir Zero!? I won’t take that shit! Even from you, Sis!”

“I-I don’t have a problem with him... I just prefer, you know, a distinguished, mature...”

“You fucking moron! Don’t get it!? Sir Zero’s innocent smile! His power! His gestures! His clothes! Don’t you get how cool he is!? He’s undefeated! Un! Defeated!”

“U-Undefeated? So what...? He performed a mir... N-Never mind.”

White nearly spoke of the miracle in the heat of the moment, and caught herself. Even to Queen, she wouldn’t dare speak of it lightly.

“In any case, I have to meet him. If he can take my punches, he’ll have my approval.”

“And why exactly would I need that!?”

“Huh? I just don’t like this guy. Let me beat him up.”

“Beat... You know you’re a Holy Maiden, don’t you!?”

“Who gives a shit?”

“I do!”

As the pair of sisters continued their screaming match, the sun set on the Holy Castle. However, White had no time to rest. In order to find a deeper meaning behind it all, she had requested the presence of someone. Considering the busy schedules on both sides, it did take a while to make the meeting happen, but it was finally scheduled. She had contacted Madame Butterfly, the woman who continued to affect Holylight in a major way without the aid of any organization.

The Meeting of the White Butterfly

A carriage arrived in front of the Holy Castle, commencing a tense day for all. The carriage was adorned with crests and banners, unmistakable by anyone in Holylight. It was an elegant crest of a butterfly spreading its wings. Any noble would have watched themselves in the presence of this crest. The Madame exited the carriage, wearing a deep blue dress with a beautiful butterfly pattern. The guard straightened his back with a nervous expression and greeted her as loud as he could.

“Oh, you have a lot of energy, don’t you?”

The Madame brushed the guard’s cheek and slyly put a silver coin into his pocket. The guard was startled by it, but couldn’t disrespect the high noblewoman by refusing. Instead, he straightened his back even more to show his gratitude. While nobles were usually disliked by the commoners, the Butterflies were less so. It wasn’t that the Madame in particular had influence over everyone in the country, but more because of monetary reasons. From the mines that the Butterflies owned, they produced good quality Spell Stones well-suited for Earth spells. For the mostly dry Holylight, those were an important resource. For generations now, the Butterflies had never overpriced these Spell Stones, but rather flooded the market with them. The people recognized this, and held the Madame in a slightly better light than most nobles. The Butterflies knew that if they were to overprice the Spell Stones, the land would worsen, and end up biting them later. Their policy wasn’t for compassion or mercy, but self-preservation.

(I can’t remember the last time I was here...)

The Madame walked to one of the farthest rooms from the gate, with ample

soundproofing, where (coincidentally) White and the Demon Lord had had their first meeting. As the Madame sat down, she was immediately served tea and cookies (baked mixture of flour and water). Without hesitating, she took them with an elegant gesture. It was a tense moment for those in the room. While the Madame wasn't a food critic per se, she had a perceptive tongue. Coupled with her blunt remarks, a negative reaction from her could spell doom for any restaurant or chef. Ordinarily in noble society, one would compliment any food prepared by a notable restaurant or chef, regardless of its quality. If one were to criticize them, they would simply be laughed at for being a brute, ignorant of those things. However, the Madame did not follow this unwritten rule. As long as the food was good, she would eat it, even if it was prepared by a nameless sous chef. When someone of her status judged things by their content and not their reputation, those around her were thrown for a loop. She was unyielding in her thoughts and her desires. By living that way, she had many enemies and allies along the way.

(Ordinary...)

The Madame did not make a single remark for the tea (the most important part of the snack) nor the unusual cookie, filling the room with both relief and disappointment. She wouldn't sacrifice etiquette to comment on something that wasn't noteworthy, for better or worse.

Soon, White appeared in the room, causing everyone to exit with a bow.

"It's been too long, little White."

The Madame made the first move right off the bat. With subtext, she made it clear that this was no official meeting, but a private visit. In fact, this wasn't an official meeting, and would not be accounted for in records.

(She really is something...)

The Madame couldn't help but squint at White. Everything about her almost seemed fake, as if she was made completely to order. She possessed the beauty and aura of someone who'd received the Angels' blessing all to herself. Even other women couldn't help but see White with adoration or awe, except for the Madame. She alone, thanks to her nature, did not look away from White's beauty, but faced it head-on. Because of that, the Madame felt a powerful

sense of envy towards White. This was both a show of her pride and her weakness. Until now...

“Yes, it’s been too...”

White froze for a moment. It seemed like the Madame had shrunk since the last time they had met. On top of that, she noticed that the Madame’s skin was brighter. White couldn’t chalk this up to the Madame’s sickness she was told about. On the contrary, the Madame was the embodiment of health, glowing in a way she hadn’t been before — the glow of a woman’s confidence. The Madame lived each day feeling growth and progress, the fulfillment of which could not be put into words. She was filled with hope for tomorrow. How could anyone like that not glow? The guards and servants only didn’t notice her change because they had seldom seen the Madame before.

“...Thank you for seeing me, Madame.”

White managed to conceal her shock and took her seat. Still, she could feel the pressure from the Madame. White’s honest reaction was that the already-intimidating Madame had evolved into someone even more troublesome. And White was indeed troubled, just for a moment, by that glow. The Madame didn’t miss the slightest indication of that, even though White herself hadn’t noticed.

“Aha ha ha ha!”

Suddenly, the Madame burst out laughing. Cackling, without even covering her mouth with her fan, forsaking any semblance of noble etiquette. Even White couldn’t help but frown at the disrespect.

“What is so funny?”

“I never thought I’d see anything this hilarious in my lifetime. You’re jealous of me, little White. Even though everyone from here to the Northern Nations knows of your beauty.”

“I-I would never...!”

“Yes, you are. I can tell... I’ve lived with jealousy that burns hotter than anyone else’s. That’s how I can tell.”

The Madame left no room for debate. In fact, White had felt a slight sense of envy for the Madame. The glow of a woman who lived each day with fulfillment, progression, and the satisfaction of having her hard work pay off was not to be underestimated.

“I’m not here to discuss something like that.”

“Really? It was already worth the trip for me. Much more than that, in fact.”

Even the Madame, notorious for being hard to please, was ecstatic today. The last time she had felt this much joy was when she first set foot into the salt sauna. White, the sole object of the Angels’ blessings, jealous of her? The Madame wanted to roll on the floor and bang her hands on it in excitement. White watched the Madame’s excitement with a cute little squint as she started the conversation:

“I invited you today, Madame, so that we may converse about the man known as the Demon Lord, heart to heart.”

“Oh...”

With this, the Madame’s attitude changed. She hadn’t expected the conversation to go in this direction.

“Please be frank. How do you see him, Madame?”

“Let me think...”

The gears in the Madame’s head were turning as she perceptively picked up on White’s tone. There was no animosity towards the Demon Lord when White spoke of him.

“I have a few theories, but it’s hard to describe him concisely.”

The Madame put off answering the question, a bit ceremoniously. It wasn’t that she was teasing White, but she was just following the custom of noble society. Even the blunt Madame didn’t dive right into confessing all of her thoughts when it came to an important topic.

“Let me ask you something in return, little Wh— aghhh!?”

Now the Madame shouted in astonishment. White had placed the Angel’s Ring, which she had kept hidden in her pocket, on top of her head. The

Madame's eyes widened and her body trembled at the halo's divine light.

"W-What is that...!? I know the Angels spoiled you, but that's just not fair! How much must you mock mortal womanhood!?" the Madame shouted, bearing her emotions.

It was ridiculous to the Madame that, on top of all of her blessings, White now had an angel's halo on her head. It seemed like White was striding over with ease the steps that the Madame and other women were struggling to climb.

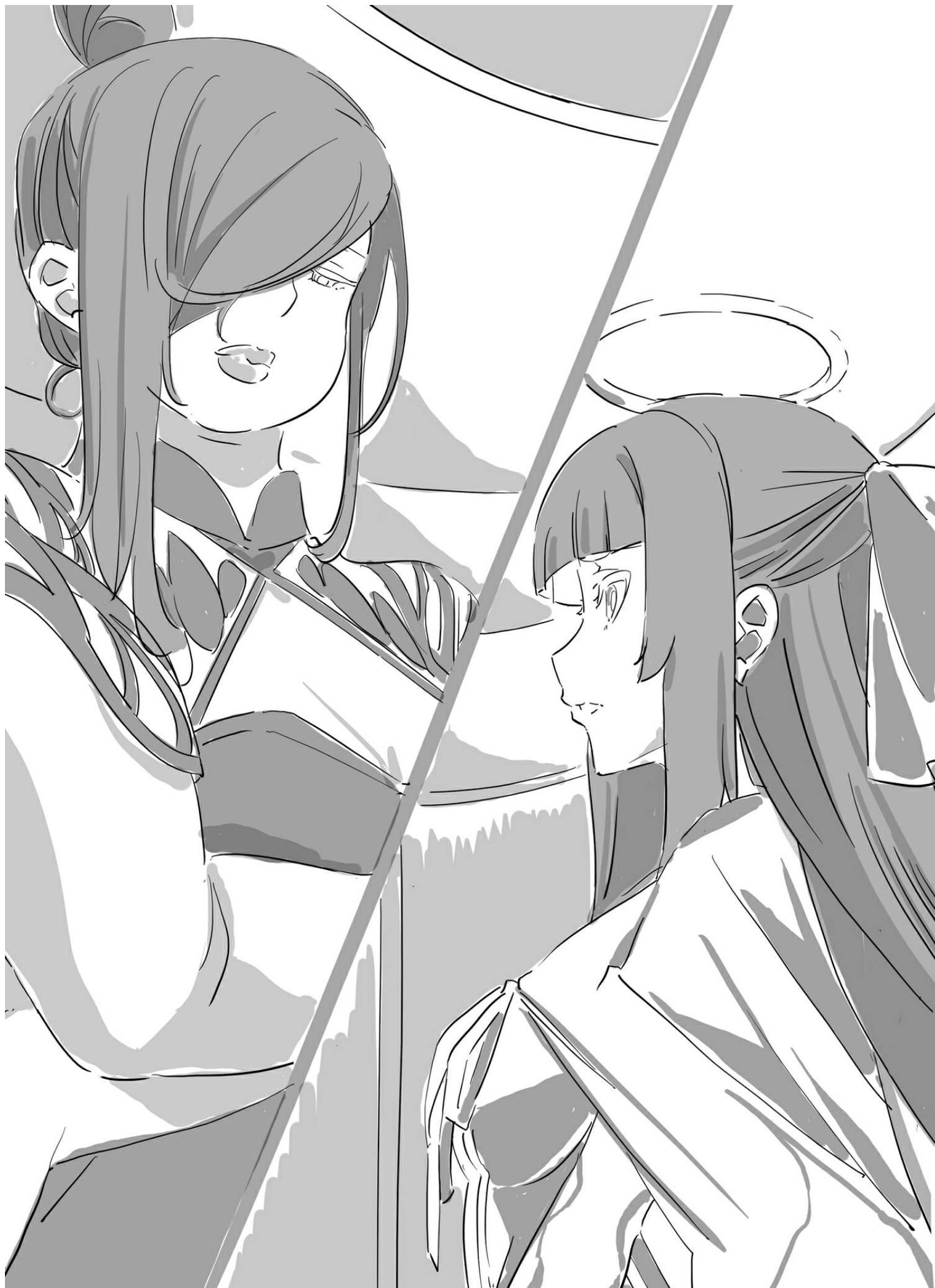
"You should have an idea, Madame, about who could possibly bestow an Angel's Ring to a human."

White's collected tone quieted the Madame like a bucket of cold water. An Angel's Ring... Who could bestow such a thing? The Madame considered the answer and controlled her emotions. After a few deep breaths, she responded as calmly as she could.

"Yes, I have an idea... I'm sure of it now, in fact."

"I see. Perhaps you and I have drawn similar conclusions, Madame."

With that, a prolonged silence filled the room. If that conclusion was to be made the official opinion of Holylight, that would cause quite the commotion. It was chilling to imagine how, not only the people of Holylight, but the Tzardom of Light would react. That was a nation that worshiped the Great Light. Naturally, it would become a national mission for them to hunt down a rebel against their deity.



“War,” the Madame uttered, matter-of-factly.

“That must be avoided. We have a long-lasting relationship with the Tzardom of Light.”

“Sooner or later, it’s going to happen. It might become a huge war that involves the Northern Nations, too. Whose side will you take when that happens, little White?”

“...That’s not a fair question, Madame. That’s why we have diplomacy. To prevent such things.”

“That’s the sane reaction. But there is no way that the Tzardom would let their most-wanted enemy slide with diplomacy. Worse yet, I can’t imagine him backing down from a fight... I think the entire Tzardom would turn to dust.”

While the Madame dropped a scary image here, the Demon Lord himself would have been dumbfounded if he had heard. ‘What do you think I am, some space Kaiju!?’ he might have asked.

“I agree. That’s why we must avoid that scenario.”

Even White seemed worried about the fate of the Tzardom. The Demon Lord, of course, would have completely disagreed.

“I see, little White. You don’t want his existence coming to light.”

“Not at this time, at least.”

“I’m not going to disagree with that, but it’s up to him at the end of the day. There’s a very scary man working for him, you know. I don’t know anything about war, but I have a feeling that all he’ll have to do to finish an international conflict is send his henchman out with a nod.”

This was accurate, at least. Tahara could easily gun down every last important figure in the Tzardom with his sniper rifle, rendering the country powerless. What Yu could do in his stead was more terrifying. She could turn the country into a lifeless wasteland, or maybe a field of flowers. In either case, the Tzardom would become a hellscape of human experimentation. While White and the Madame didn’t know exactly what the advisors were capable of, the Madame had perceptively picked up on a glimpse of it, and White considered

anything to be possible by the hands of the Demon Lord who had performed the same miracle as the Ember Angel.

“You want to keep it quiet for their sake, then... I don’t think the Tzardom will reciprocate your kindness.”

“Still, I want to do everything I can.”

“I suppose you’re right. Unless he tells me to, I’m not about to blab about him... I will always respect and obey his wishes,” the Madame declared with no ambiguity.

Against White, the leader of the Holy Maidens, this was filled with intent to rebel. She had just brazenly promised to follow the will of an individual over that of Holylight’s national policy.

“I can’t blame you...”

White didn’t show any anger towards the declaration, but quietly closed her eyes. What law could stand a chance against that man? White herself no longer considered the Demon Lord evil, anyway.

“The Holy Church has already reached the consensus to keep it quiet and not ask too many questions. I just wanted you to know our intentions, Madame.”

In fact, the Holy Church didn’t even imagine that the Demon Lord was the one who bestowed the Angel’s Ring to White. They were sure to only tell anyone (in and out of the Church) of the fact that a Holy Maiden was given an angel’s halo as it suited their agenda.

“And I have certainly heard them.”

The Madame stood without responding in one direction or another. She was demonstrating that the will of the Demon Lord dictated her choices, one way or the other. There was no point in further debate.

“By the way...” They spoke in unison. It was an uncomfortable overlap.

“Please, Madame...”

“...No, you first, little White.”

They silently stared at each other. White wanted to ask how the Madame lost

so much weight in such a short time, and how her skin was brighter and healthier than before. On the other hand, the Madame wanted to ask how one could be given an Angel's Ring from the Demon Lord. If she could have a beautiful ring like that, she would have given up all of her mines. Still, neither of them could ask it out loud. They both felt like they would lose if they spoke first.

"...N-Never mind, Madame. Please be careful on your way home."

"I-I will... I think I lost my train of thought, too."

With them sharing a stiff laugh, the meeting concluded.

While the meeting didn't generate any results that brought about national change, it was a significant step in the right direction that these two were able to discuss their positions and opinions. At the very least, they were able to take away that they wouldn't become enemies to one another any time soon.

The Demon Lord's Return

Upon his return, the Demon Lord was amazed at how energized Rabbi had become. There were many people running back and forth in the streets carrying soil or lumber. Some could be seen smashing the Sand Snail shells he had obtained in the dungeon, mixing the shards into the soils.

(It's really coming together...)

While the speed of construction in modern-day Japan was impressive of its own right, magic allowed construction even in this less-developed world to happen at least as fast. An experienced spellcaster would accomplish as much as a piece of heavy machinery.

"Welcome back, Master Demon Lord!"

"Aku. How have you been?"

Aku ran to him, and the Demon Lord picked her up and pulled her close to him. Aku then happily rubbed her cheeks against his, like a cat marking her territory.

"A lot has changed around here."

“Yes it has! You really are amazing, Master Demon Lord!”

“I didn’t do anything,” the Demon Lord chuckled.

He had only given an outline to Tahara, to whom he left the entirety of the project. Yu was the one running the hospital with her talent, and the Demon Lord had this feeling that his advisors should have been the ones praised, not him. Of course, he was undervaluing himself. Without him, his two advisors would have never even appeared in this world, never leading to the development of the village. The Demon Lord was the one who came up with the money to hire all of the extra people, too.

“I was in a hurry, so I didn’t bring you anything. I’ll get you something good next time.”

“All I want... Is for you to come home safe.”

Aku’s red eye stared directly into the Demon Lord’s face. Her green eye, shaded by her long bangs, shimmered in the light. The Demon Lord saw something mystical in Aku’s mismatched eyes and enjoyed looking at them. With his hand, he brushed Aku’s bangs aside.

“Master Demon Lord...?”

“Yep. Your eyes are still beautiful.”

“...I-I don’t really like my eyes.”

She didn’t like her eyes because she had become a pariah in her village because of them, to the point where she was forced to hide half of her face. While the Demon Lord knew first-hand how Aku was treated in her village, he stayed true to his heart.

“I like them. They’re calming to look at.”

“Urm...”

As if to hide the blush on her face, Aku wrapped her arms around the Demon Lord’s neck. The Demon Lord didn’t mean any of it in a romantic sense, but just as if he was looking at a pair of mystical jewels. Still, Aku must have been embarrassed.

“I’m almost done with my errand up north. Maybe we’ll go on a vacation once

I come back.”

“Vacation...?”

“It’s hot here. I’m seriously considering building a pool, or something.”

“...Pool?”

“Don’t worry about it yet.”

Aku could not even imagine such a thing. Where a cold bath was the height of luxury, overflowing a place with precious water just to swim in it, not to drink, grow crops, or even clean yourself with, was the height of wastefulness, and totally unproductive. For people of this land, most didn’t even consider the concept of swimming in water.

“Now I’ll go take care of business. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay!”

After gently brushing Aku’s golden hair, the Demon Lord headed to the hot springs resort. In front of it, Yu welcomed him with an attractive bouquet.

“Welcome back, Mister Secretary.”

“Thank you. These are the flowers you were telling me about?”

Yu held a variety of vibrant flowers, in red, yellow, purple, and pink. They were so beautiful as to dissuade one from even touching them, to the surprise of the Demon Lord. He had no appreciation for flowers whatsoever, but even he could tell that these flowers were amazingly beautiful.

“These are even more amazing than I had thought... I appreciate it.”

“Y-Yes, sir! I continuously performed modifications to grow ones to your liking.”

“I see. This is a wonderful hobby.”

As Yu smiled gleefully, the Demon Lord did as well. He was overjoyed that Yu, whom he had designed with a mind to create hellscapes, had started such a dainty hobby. Then he went one step too far.

“This purple, especially... I tremble at its beauty.”

The Demon Lord only knew the names of ubiquitous flowers like tulips and dandelions. He had mentioned this without much thought, except that he didn't remember seeing many purple flowers in the few floral shops he had seen.

"I thought you might say so..."

For some reason, this put a brimming smile on Yu's face. It was amazing how cute a woman of her natural-born beauty could appear when she wore an innocent smile. Of course, if one were to imagine how the purple hue was created, they would see a much different meaning behind her smile.

"A great hobby. Keep it up."

The Demon Lord had said so with almost a prayer-like tone. That kind of sincerity couldn't help but exude into one's voice.

"Y-Yes, sir! I will continue to make improvements on them."

Yu clasped her hands and looked up at the Demon Lord's face. It almost looked like a schoolgirl giving a bouquet of flowers to an older student she admired. Yu was on the taller side for a woman, but was still considerably shorter than the Demon Lord, making them a picturesque pair when standing together.

"Now, keep up with the hospital, too."

With a gentle pat on her shoulder, he left. Yu stood there quivering for a while, but after repeatedly touching the same shoulder the Demon Lord put his hand on, her lips curled up in a twisted shape.

"I have to bloom the little ones some more. Purple was electricity and boils, I think."

Her eyes were glowing in a kindling light, with too much malice for someone with a doctor's title. Further improvements would be performed on her flowers, and very soon. However, no one pitied Milligan the test subject, nor would come to save him. For every little girl he tortured, the agony was coming back to him now a million fold.

(It seems so long since I was last here...)

Once he reached the hot springs resort, the Demon Lord went to the office in

the back. Tahara was waiting for him there, and without so much as a greeting, the genius said: “Hey, Mister Secretary. Can’t we build an inn already?”

“Hm...”

Hanging up his trench coat on the wall, the Demon Lord took a seat on the luxurious genuine leather chair. There was a heavy desk in front of him, making him look like a dictator or some major mafia don.

“Our word-of-mouth start-up’s just about over the hill. Thought it’d be more efficient if we finish that up and have them live closer. We’d need to put up marketing people in the Holy City and Yahooo, though.”

“Good. I was going to suggest the same.”

The Demon Lord solemnly lit his cigarette and gazed up at the ceiling. Tahara took out numerous blueprints, explaining in detail how they should go about advertising in big cities, like flyers in bars, having a street performer orate in the plaza, and even performing little stories to children. All of them came with required costs and manpower, as well as an estimate of guests, required number of rooms for them to stay in, the appropriate level of those rooms, the number of carriages used for their transportation, *etc.* The Demon Lord felt terribly dizzy at all of these numbers.

“Take care of those as needed. I trust your judgment.”

“I-If you say so...”

“In any case, you reserved a lot of room for the roads.”

“Well, I figured we’d need at least two lanes. I think it’ll be more convenient to separate the carriage road and the sidewalk with metal fences. Since we’ll need intersections down the road, I’m thinking about putting in flaggers for signals.”

Hearing the modernity in some of these ideas, the Demon Lord felt cold sweat trickle down his back. “What in the world is he going to make?” was written all over his face. When the Demon Lord exhaled the smoke of his cigarette, a knock came at the door and Kyon peeked her head in, just popping in her rabbit ears and half of her face.

“Mister Tahara, they told me they need water buckets and barrels, hoppity.”

“We ran out again...? Alright, I’ll put another order in.”

“Thank you... Hoppity.”

Hearing the conversation, the Demon Lord mumbled “water buckets.”

The farming quarter had a simple well just for show that pulled up water with the Bucket. However, for the other quarters, they were carrying water over from the hot springs resort using buckets and barrels. The fact that infinite clean water (hot or cold) could be drawn was already impossible in this world, but simply not having taps felt incredibly inconvenient to the Demon Lord.

“It wouldn’t be bad to set up some Springs of Healing in important parts of the village.”

Tahara whistled in response to the Demon Lord. A Spring of Healing, just like a Field Hospital, was one of the Evolved Bases. Fight in that base, and it automatically healed the HP of the user. Palm trees sprung around the spring and exuded a tropical atmosphere that he thought was well-suited for the year-round hot climate of this country.

“In that case, Mister Secretary, can I ask you to set up a Forest of Healing, too? At this rate, the hospital’s going to overflow. The forest wouldn’t ruin the view, and would take some work off of Yu’s hands.”

“All right. I’ll set it up once I fully return from the north.”

Hearing this, Tahara wrote something onto a map, and added a notation with a red pencil. Most likely, things were already expanding in Tahara’s mind.

“Pretty soon, this will be the number one destination on the continent.”

“Mm. Then we will be one step closer to achieving our goal.”

“It’ll be the true capital that the Holy City’s got nothing on. Just like you thought, the neighboring villages are making some noise. Sooner or later, they’ll beg for us to invade their villages.”

“I have no such ill intentions... I only want their money, and perhaps a good reputation.”

To conceal his nerves, the Demon Lord lightly brushed the bouquet Yu had given him. His hand seemed to quiver, ever so slightly. What he had only started to make some money and garner a reputation had transformed into talk of an invasion before he knew it, and now there were ideas about building a new capital. If he had been drinking anything, he would have done a spectacular spit take. On the other hand, Tahara, who knew what those flowers were, could only see him as a Demon Lord ready to drain the blood of the people in order to bloom something spectacular.

“Yeow! Can’t believe you said that with a straight face. How do you do it...?”

Naturally, Tahara reacted this way. It was as if the Demon Lord had calculated all of the chemical reactions to follow, and used his every move to plant explosive landmines all around his enemies while they didn’t have so much as a clue. No ill intentions? It wasn’t even funny at this point.

“Now, about the noble named Dona Dona...”

After reintroducing the topic, the Demon Lord slowly exhaled smoke. He looked like he was scheming something, and Tahara kept quiet. Of course, the Demon Lord had nothing to scheme about. He had never even met the noble.

“He just had to tell me he wanted the music box. I would have sold it to him.”

The Demon Lord just blurted out his honest thought. But, everything about their history prevented Tahara from taking it at face value. It was just a work of dark humor to him.

“Aha ha ha ha! In exchange for all of his mines, right?”

It was a natural reaction. It was as if he were speaking to a fish that took the bait on his fishing rod, telling it that he would have just given the fish the bait, if only it had asked... as he was positioning a knife to gut it. Anyone hearing him would have taken it as nasty sarcasm.

“In any case, we’ll deal with the noble later. I have an idea.”

“Alllll righty. It may be unnecessary, but Yu’s making a file about this Dona Dona. She’s digging deep with her questions.”

“Hm. I’m looking forward to the results of that, too.”

The Demon Lord had chosen to postpone the matter. With his head spinning, it was excruciating to keep thinking. Since his name was Dona Dona, it almost felt like he was going to be carried away sooner or later.

“So, those are the pieces we got through the Madame... We just had the first wave of guests leave the other day, and apparently things are already really heated for the spots coming up.”

“Hm. Not a bad start.”

The Demon Lord took the vases and paintings in his hands, sharply inspecting them. His mafia-boss looks gave this scene undeserved reverence. Of course, he had no eye for art whatsoever.

“By the way, that vase is worth five gold medallions, apparently. The painting you were just looking at is worth seven.”

“M-Mm...”

Hearing this, the Demon Lord gingerly placed it on the floor. He produced the scroll-shaped Item Folder from his pocket and swiftly began storing the art. Their names in the folder were The Vase of Aden and Portrait of Baroness Doryl. There was also cash among them, but the Demon Lord passed it all onto Tahara. He thought it would be much more effective this way than using it himself.

After that, they spoke about which restaurants and stores to set up.

“Hm... I have a few in mind. I’ll go scout them out.”

“It’s what you’re good at, Mister Secretary. I’ll just hang back and watch the magic work. While we’re at it, we’re constantly short-staffed... We can’t get enough workers. I just want to build an inn and rein in the entire workforce.”

“I’ll take care of that, too. You focus on work in the village.”

The Demon Lord pictured the faces of the various people he had met, and contemplated how to recruit them. Kunai’s backstory dictated that he must be an expert in scouting. Failure was not an option.

“Oh yeah, and this is an ‘ask forgiveness later’ thing, but I decided to use the bandit.”

(Bandit...?)

The Demon Lord didn't recall any bandit acquaintances. However, Tahara was grinning at him, indicating that the Demon Lord knew him well.

"That old man's got some connections, it looks like. Leave fishing to fisherman, right?"

"I see..."

"I know you only kept him alive for something like this."

(W-Wait a minute... What is he talking about!?)

Tahara kept grinning, like he had read through the Demon Lord's intentions. The Demon Lord scrambled his brain, but he couldn't recall any old bandit. In fact, it was very possible that he had actively suppressed that memory.

"But we got to do something about that beard... He's already got a ridiculous name."

As Tahara said so, the image of a dirty middle-aged man with muscles and a beard came to him like divine intuition.

"Safety... It's been a long time."

"Ahah ha ha! I was holding it back all this time!"

Remembering the stupid name of Wo Wungol, the Demon Lord nearly did a spit take. At the same time, he remembered that he looked like someone he knew.

(Who was it... Where would I have ever known such a... Oh!) The lumberjack look and the image of sports sprung an image in the Demon Lord's mind.

"Director..."

"Huh?"

"I-I was saying your directive was correct. Use the experts to find out about the underground."

"Right. That old man can dig wells, too. Seems pretty useful."

"All right. Glad to hear."

Who sprung to the Demon Lord's mind was his old boss in the company he

had worked at, Director Aoki. He couldn't help but wonder why he had forgotten about someone that he had interacted with so closely.

(We butted heads a lot of times... But it wasn't like I hated him enough to suppress my memories of him. Actually, he was even very reliable at times.) With a nostalgic memory, the Demon Lord's expression loosened. Seeing this uncharacteristic sight, Tahara decided to finally ask something he had always been wondering.

"Hey, Mister Secretary... Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Why Yu...?"

The Demon Lord immediately understood the subtext in the question. By any standard, she was not the right advisor to summon first. Even the real Kunai, Demon Lord of the Empire, would not have summoned her first. In more ways than one, it was too risky.

"I just thought that, if I was in your place, I would have summoned Ren."

The Demon Lord couldn't help but agree. In any other circumstance, he would have done so. He only decided to summon Yu first because of Aku's injury. That was Akira Ono's decision. Hakuto Kunai would have made a completely different decision.

"To heal her foot?"

"Yes."

The Demon Lord gave his unadulterated, honest answer. He had thought that any excuses would have come off fake. Hearing this, Tahara appeared to contemplate something. The Demon Lord, fearing any more deep cutting questions, solemnly stood and sat down onto the couch opposite Tahara. Then, he produced a wooden box from the Item Folder and placed it in front of Tahara. Seeing the gun sitting inside, Tahara's eyes flashed blue for just a moment.

"I found this in the dungeon up north. What do you think?"

"...It's a gun."

Tahara took the gun and closed his eyes.

“Hm...? It’s a SUN-F, with 13 Attack. It fires 16 rounds using sunlight as its energy source... Huh!?”

“Less Attack than I had thought,” the Demon Lord mumbled. Internally, he was surprised by the using-sunlight part. This technology couldn’t even exist in modern-day Japan. It was truly a work of fiction.

“What’s going on...? There are guns in this world?”

“Not quite, I think. This world has a secret.”

“A prehistoric civilization? Akane would have been all over it, calling it an OOPArt or something.”

“With that in mind, I’m going to keep working up north for a while. Keep up the good work here.”

The Demon Lord stood up and left the office. Tahara had been inspecting the gun with suspicion, when it floated into the air, rubbing its barrel against Tahara’s face. Regardless of what world he was in, Tahara was loved by any and all firearms.

“A prehistoric civilization... How far ahead is the Secretary...? Hey, you’re not soft, you know!? And you’re cold! Get off of me!”

Too bothered by the gun stalking him, Tahara hurriedly threw it into the separate dimension. Him and his boss had a few things in common.

The Demon Lord Goes Scouting, Part 1

After exiting the hot springs resort, the Demon Lord entered Stealth Stance and walked through the village, glancing here and there. If he showed himself, he would interrupt people's work everywhere he went. When he reached the Bunnies' living quarters, Luna's upbeat voice could be heard. It looked like she was barking orders from atop a pile of wooden boxes.

(The Holy Maiden's servant, huh...?)

Remembering what Tahara had told him, he contemplated for a moment, but soon snapped out of it. He had to wait on further information for that matter, and there were many other things to take care of now. Oblivious to the entire situation, Luna kept shouting with self-grandeur.

"Do you hear me? I want it thick and long!"

"You never stop with the innuendos, do you?"

"Ahhhh! Stop appearing out of nowhere, Pervert Lord! You made yourself invisible to stare at me all this time, didn't you!? Didn't you!?"

"What are you going on about? Here. We're going for a walk."

As he half-ignored Luna's gleefully thrown accusations, the Demon Lord grabbed her petite figure and yanked her off of the wooden boxes.

"H-Hey... Don't touch me there!"

"You're not going to wear a blazer, but a formal outfit."

"F-Formal...? Where are we going?"

"Thought I'd borrow you for some good credit."

"Oh, really. You finally get how amazing I am, do you? Then beg me. 'Oh please, Lady Luna, I simply can not do without your—' agghh!"

Two slaps echoed into the clear sky. The Demon Lord's palm had struck Luna's rear in a quick beat. A marvelous technique, ringing two smacks with one motion.

“We don’t have much time. Let’s go.”

“Don’t carry me on the side! Carry me like a princess!”

“Dream on.”

After getting Luna changed, the Demon Lord flew to the city of Yahooo via Quick Travel. He intended to finish everything he and Tahara had talked about by the end of the day. Distance meant nothing to him, and his bottomless Stamina negated the entire concept of exhaustion.

“We’re... in Yahooo. What are we doing here?” Luna asked, still clinging close to the Demon Lord and gazing up at him. Her hands, which had been wrapped around his waist for the Quick Travel, were still there. With her formally dressed as a Holy Maiden, she was drawing all eyes in the city.

“In short, we’re recruiting.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I want good establishments in the village of Rabbi. You just have to smile next to me. You might blow it if you open your mouth.”

“W-Who do you think I am...!? I’m a Holy Maiden, you know!”

“Of course, you’re the Hole-y Maiden. I have never doubted that fact.”

“R-Really...?”

“Yes. You should be proud.”

Despite the slight misunderstanding in their conversation, the pair seemed to be having fun. Thanks to their eventful first meeting, they had always been able to mostly be themselves around each other. The Demon Lord started walking toward McDonald’s shop, but Luna was still attached to him.

“You can let go now. Let’s go.”

“...Hand.”

“Hm?”

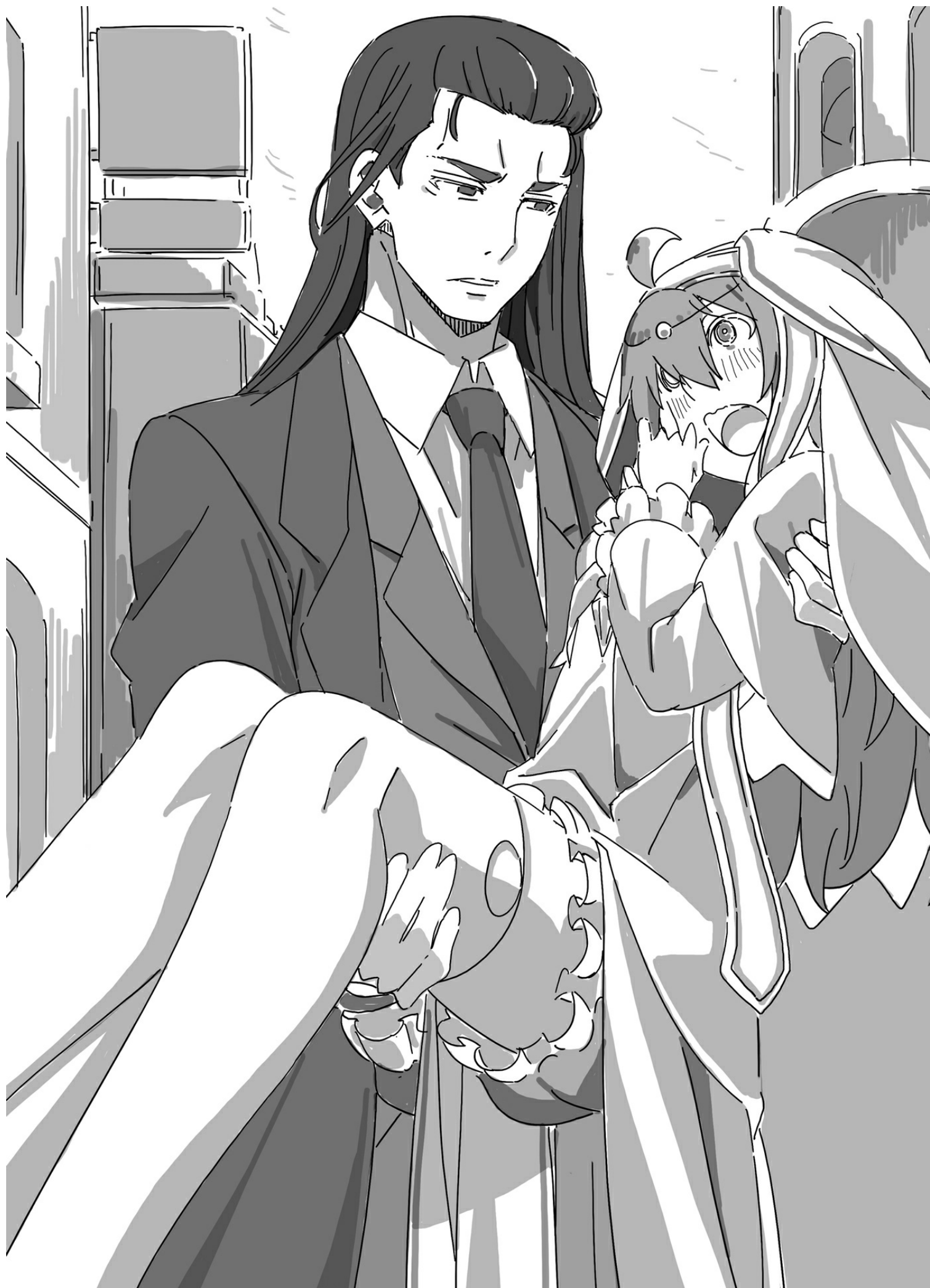
“...You have to hold my hand so you can escort me,” Luna said, looking the other way.

Imagining the Demon Lord, clad in all black, and the Holy Maiden walking down the street hand-in-hand, he felt a little dizzy.

“Fine. If you insist, I’ll escort you properly.”

“Huh?”

Grabbing Luna’s small body, he started walking, carrying her like a princess in his arms.



Part of it was him acquiescing, but he also saw a potential for PR. Once he made up his mind, this man could tackle things that most would hesitate to attempt. For better or worse, of course.

“H-Hold on! I didn’t say you had to go this far!”

“Then I’ll let you down.”

“D-Don’t! T-Treat me... like a princess!”

“You’re a Holy Maiden, not a princess.”

“I am a Holy Maiden and a princess! And Golden!”

“...You’re an idiot, through and through.”

As they went back and forth like this, they arrived at McDonald’s store. The store had expanded since the last time the Demon Lord was here, showing their booming business. In fact, ever since McDonald had encountered the Demon Lord, his finances had substantially grown.

“First, we settle business with the shopkeeper here.”

“Huh. I didn’t expect you to know an art dealer.”

Meanwhile, McDonald saw the silhouette at the door and immediately knew that it was his good friend from across the sea. The Demon Lord was quite tall by the standards of this world. Combined with the air about him, people couldn’t help but gaze up at his presence. But, this time, it was even worse than ever before.

“My, my, Mister Kuna— aaggghhy!?”

Seeing the girl in the Demon Lord’s arms, McDonald shrieked in astonishment. He had guessed that his friend and the Holy Maiden were quite close, but now he had appeared at his doorstep with her in his arms. McDonald scrambled up to his feet and bowed as low as he could go.

“At ease. I’m just a princess today!”

McDonald couldn’t process what Luna meant by that, but swiftly ordered an employee to prepare their best tea in their best tea set. The Demon Lord leisurely sat down onto the couch and placed Luna next to him.

“What? You’re putting me down already?”

“Of course. Who in their right mind would talk business with a woman in their arms?”

The Demon Lord produced a scroll from his pocket and removed one piece of art after another from it, placing them on the floor and the table. It was an amazing sight, but McDonald was not surprised. He was prepared not to be surprised no matter what his friend did, at this point. Still...

“T-This... is the famous vase of Aden!”

McDonald had his limits. He somehow accepted the method of storage he had never seen before. Some sort of foreign magic or new magical item, he thought. But, when it came to art, when it came to his livelihood, he couldn’t conceal his emotions.

“This was given to me by the Madame. I don’t have a place for it, and I thought you’d make better use of it.”

“Madame...? The younger sister, the famous collector?”

McDonald latched right onto that word. ‘The Madame’ could only mean one of two people in this country. The younger of which was a famous art collector, who also happened to win the previously mentioned music box in an auction.

“No, her sister.”

“I see...”

McDonald sighed in relief. He was sure that Madame Buttersauce would have never let go of the Vase of Aden, of all things. On the other hand, her older sister was less interested in art, and could plausibly give it away.

“In any case, these are all masterpieces... the Portrait of Baroness Doryl, the Golden Spoon of Herun, and this beautiful jade necklace.”

“I expect to receive many more like these in the future.”

“F-From the Madame...?” McDonald asked, shaking.

The Holy Maiden in front of him and the Madame. These figures guaranteed that none of these were fakes, and he could see that with his own eyes after

numerous inspections. Just the art pieces in front of him now were worth twenty gold medallions. The Demon Lord suddenly lit his cigarette, and answered confidently.

“From all corners of the continent.”

McDonald was dumbfounded by the daring declaration. It was already surprising that he had been given art pieces by the Madame, and now he was claiming that he would have his hands on various pieces from around the continent. Luna flashed a surprised expression beside the Demon Lord, but soon, something seemed to click in her mind.

“The hot springs, right? How much money is it going to make?”

“It’s not about the money. The whole continent is going to be remade, with that village at its epicenter.”

“So, since I’m the lady of the village, I’ll be the world’s most important princess!”

“Hm... It seems you will.”

“Yay!”

Clinging onto the Demon Lord’s arm, Luna wore an innocent smile. Listening to this conversation, McDonald’s stomach was churning. What was happening? What was about to happen? All he could tell was that something unimaginable was forming under the surface. His intuition as a businessman was screaming at him to not miss this opportunity.

“Mister Kunai, Miss Holy Maiden. It seems that, um, you are orchestrating something huge.”

“I’m just playing in the sandbox,” the Demon Lord grinned, smoke flowing out of his smile. In a sense, this really was like a sandbox game for this man. It wasn’t the type of game that allowed him to build or scrap things with the push of a button, though. All planning and details were handled by Tahara, and the Demon Lord just had to give the green light.

“Now, let’s finish our business. These pieces will be yours for ten gold medallions.”

“T-Ten...? T-That’s hardly enough.”

“With the profit you earn, I want you to start a branch in the village of Rabbi.”

“Oh, you’re recruiting him.”

McDonald was plenty surprised by what the Demon Lord was saying, but the most surprising thing of all was the Holy Maiden still clinging to the Demon Lord’s arm. Luna was feared as a self-centered woman with a temper, but she looked like an ordinary girl now.

“I will gladly purchase these pieces. But, when it comes to a new branch... Well... If I could ask you about the contract...”

“Of course. No need for you to pay rent on the land. We would only have you pay 10% of your monthly sales to the village as a tax.”

“J-Just 10%...?”

“Oh, would you feel easier with a higher tax?”

“N-No no no no, sir! I feel completely at ease with 10%! I would love to pay 10%!” McDonald shouted.

It wasn’t that the Demon Lord was teasing him, nor did he have any calculations for the 10% rate. He simply reused the entire adventurer tax system he had learned while dungeon-crawling. Naturally, people were taxed differently based on the ruler of the land or city. Dungeon-crawling taxes could have an astronomical difference in their rates depending on the place, but the Demon Lord was only aware of the tax rate for the Bastille Dungeon. Yahooo, by the way, as a trading city, had an extremely high tax rate.

(I can make as much money as I want anywhere else... First, I need to gather good stores to gain vitality and trust.) Just as ubiquitous fast food chains populate train stations in Japan, leading to convenience stores, apartment complexes, then supermarkets... the Demon Lord was hoping for a chain reaction like that. If it clicked, this reaction could go on endlessly.

“Then we have a deal. Tahara, one of my advisors, will confirm the details with you.”

“Y-Yes, sir! I look forward to conducting further business with you!”

“Oh, I did have a special present for you.”

“A present...?”

“I made it on the fly, but it might go for an interesting price.”

The Demon Lord handed him what resembled a name card. He had made it from a simple name card printer in the hot springs resort. It read ‘One Night’s Stay at the Hot Springs Resort’ on it. Without understanding what it was, McDonald took it and thanked the Demon Lord. He didn’t expect this little card to cause one big commotion down the road. This piece of paper would later be put up for auction, where the other butterfly, Buttersauce Butterfly, would win it.

The Demon Lord Goes Scouting, Part 2

After leaving McDonald's shop, they headed straight for an apparel store: Fashion Police, run by Bingo, where he had bought Aku some clothes and ordered the Bunnies' uniforms.

"Uh-huh... So you had these people make those perverted uniforms."

"It looks like we'll have them make all sorts of bizarre clothes."

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh."

Still clinging to his arm, Luna coldly stared at the Demon Lord... Most likely because she was never asked to wear one of the Bunnies' uniforms. While Luna didn't want to wear it, perhaps her pride was hurt when she was never even asked.

"I gave you that Blazer."

"Sure, that's a cute one, but... I think some more lady-like... or s-s-s-s-sexy ones would suit me better."

"Ha ha ha. You're hilarious."

"What was so funny!? Did I say something funny!? Huh!?"

Luna jumped up on him and choked him by the throat, but the Demon Lord kept walking nonchalantly, letting her be. Anyone around would have only seen him walking down the street with a Holy Maiden embracing him face-to-face.

They did eventually arrive at the shop, maintaining their position.

"Ooh la la... Mister Kuna— argh!"

Seeing Kunai, a super-mega VIP, Bingo strutted over to welcome him, his hips swaying. When he realized the Holy Maiden was the one embracing him, he couldn't help but let out a hefty grunt. Bingo was more on the feminine side, a complete princess at heart. Letting out such a noise in front of customers was nothing less than humiliating.

"Long time no see."

“P-Please excuse me...! Everyone, on my mark!”

“Welcome to Fashion Police!” Bingo and his employees said, in complete unison.

“A-All right...”

The Demon Lord couldn't help but shuffle backwards, but Luna didn't see anything amiss with this picture. She enjoyed being worshiped, and held a status that called for worship.

“Shopping with Miss Holy Maiden today? I've never seen such a gorgeous couple before!”

As Bingo shook his hips and bit his handkerchief, Luna's eyes brightened. It's worth noting that she was still holding onto the Demon Lord's neck like a koala.

“That's right, I remember! You told me before we'd go shopping in the Holy City together!”

“No. You said that.”

“Oh, man up! At times like these, the man just makes the woman look pretty!”

“Oh...? Interesting.”

The Demon Lord cracked a grin. He thought about making Luna try on every single erotic outfit in the store, but somehow restrained himself upon recalling why he was there. This man was outlandish in all sorts of situations, but wasn't so immature as to forget his goal.

“Good news, Luna. It won't happen today, but I will host your fashion show. A long, long, fashion show.”

“Huh...?”

“I'm excited now. When that time comes, I'll be the man and provide you with all sorts of outfits. I recall some like Sumo Wrap and Naked Apron.”

“W-What are those terrifying names!?”

“Ha ha ha!”

“W-What's so funny! I'm not going to wear any of those!”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Stop laughing!”

As he listened to their conversation, Bingo couldn't control his cold sweats. He had heard that the youngest of the Holy Maidens had a terrible temper, and that it could be disastrous if she were to become upset. But now, she only seemed like an ordinary girl her age. Bingo was losing sight of how to deal with and treat her as a patron.

“We've gotten off track. Bingo, do you want to put up a shop in the village of Rabbi?” the Demon Lord asked bluntly.

Part of it was that he didn't expect Bingo to turn him down, considering their history. In fact, Bingo had made easy money from him so far.

“Two of them, actually.”

“T-Two stores...?”

Without even waiting for Bingo to answer, the Demon Lord pressed on with brazen disregard.

“One will be a high-end retailer for nobles. Women who have gained their confidence in the hot springs will undoubtedly look for an outfit a step above what they have. Their ultimate aspirations will be to pull off those Bunny uniforms.”

“T-That uniform will be their aspiration...?”

Bingo couldn't imagine it. There were countless women in the world, and he would have been hard-pressed to find one who could pull off that revealing outfit. She would have to have a perfectly fit body with immaculate proportions. Considering how much skin the outfit revealed, her skin would have to be very rejuvenated and tight, too.

“The other will be a store with reasonably priced workers' clothes and undergarments. No taxes on this store since we'll build it in the commoners' quarters.”

“N-No taxes, you say...?”

“No rent, either. Any profit you make goes into your profit. I mostly want you

to make workers' and artists' wear."

The Demon Lord gave him the quick rundown, including the same conditions he gave McDonald. Most of it was given without time for Bingo to agree to them, but the shopkeeper wasn't losing anything from this deal. In fact, he had heard so much about the mysterious facility called the Hot Springs Resort from his employees who had visited the village.

"Please, please, please allow us to...! I will make them stores that you will be proud of!"

"Fantastic. You'll hear the details from Tahara, one of my advisors."

With a heavy clunk, the Demon Lord threw five gold medallions on the table. The overwhelming shimmer of gold grabbed a hold of Bingo and his employees' attention. Eventually, it seemed that all of their eyes had turned into gold medallions.

"Here's for the first round of materials. Don't skimp on the clothes you sell to the nobles."

"Absolutely! I swear to it, I will make sure that they will be up to your standards, sir, oh yes, sir!"

"Wonderful... Now, on the double."

"Everyone, this is war! Run, ladies, run!"

With a familiar conclusion, the store erupted in chaos, and the employees sprinted out. It couldn't be helped when the Demon Lord always threw gold at them any time he came. Naturally, the gold traveled far beyond Bingo and his store. Money trickled down to the materials shops, the silk growers, needle makers, accessory stores, and many more. The dead money and the frozen economy of this country were being forced into turmoil by this man. The wheel was big enough to crunch through any pebbles in its course, and to knock off any enemies that stood in its way. With it, the Demon Lord would not slow down... He couldn't help it. He was the Demon Lord.

"Luna, now we'll head to the Holy City... You're still clinging on to me!?"

"W-What do you mean... Aren't you happy a gorgeous girl like me is hanging

on you!?”

“Ha ha ha.”

“Nothing about that was funny! Be happy! Say you’re happy!”

Laughing along, the Demon Lord flew to the Holy City using Quick Travel, popping off one miracle after another. If White were to see, she would have been stricken with a massive headache... for two separate reasons.

Before the Storm, Part 1

At the Holy City, their destination, people were dismayed, shocked, and confused at a variety of rumors circulating the city. One was a rumor that the Demon Lord had appeared, another was that a miraculous doctor who could heal any ailment had appeared, and yet another was that White, the leader of the Holy Maidens, was given an Angel's Halo. Still, the hottest rumor of them all... was about the silver Dragonborn. Because White usually spent her days in the Holy Castle, the people had few opportunities to see her halo. However, the one-on-one between Zero and Allit, the Duke of Darkness, was witnessed by tens of thousands, making for rapid, sensational rumors.

"The Dragonborn protected the Holy Castle."

"Apparently the Demon Lord is Lady Luna's backer."

"I heard there are jobs in the village of Rabbi."

"I wish I could dye my hair silver..."

"Lady White is an angel now!"

"Lady Queen and the silver Dragonborn are lovers."

"The Dragonborn must have appeared to her to protect Lady Queen."

"When's the wedding?"

"I bet it's going to be one big ceremony...!"

With no newspapers or news shows in this world, information traveled through word of mouth and dictated public consciousness. Some information was accurate, while much was way off of the mark. Without anything like the internet, it was incredibly difficult for anyone to fact check anything. In the midst of the storm, yet another event occurred worthy of gossip: the Demon Lord in his pitch-black coat, and Luna walking along happily with the end of that coat in her hand. The crowd around them grew with time, and they clamored away. Seeing the reaction of the crowd, the Demon Lord brushed his hair back with his hand as if to suppress a migraine.

“I guess this is what happens when the Demon Lord and a Holy Maiden walk together. Why can’t you turn invisible with one of your Holy Maiden powers, or something?”

“Turn... In what world can people turn themselves invisible!? I need you to understand that you are the extreme exception.”

The grass was always greener on the other side. For the Demon Lord, the magic users of this world were the truly exceptional ones, but the people of this world saw the Demon Lord and his advisors as the ones who utilized magic on an impossible and grand scale.

“So, where are we going next?”

“I remember a place with good food. I’m going to ask the owner there.”

“Come to think of it, we don’t have a real restaurant in the village, do we...? Then I’ll speak to the manager at Artemis.”

“Ah... Great. Good thinking.”

With newfound respect, the Demon Lord patted Luna on her head. This wasn’t an act, either. He only saw Luna as a child, and nowhere near a woman... yet. Throughout history in any world, women matured much faster than men. There would come a day when the Demon Lord would lose his smile and be tormented by Luna in return.

“H-Hmph! Finally, you give me some credit. I’m a Holy Maiden, remember!?”

“Mm. You’re great.”

The Demon Lord complimented her again, with no minced words. He simply liked anyone that could do something he couldn’t or think of something that he didn’t. This characteristic, on its own, could make him sound like either a good leader or a child.

“Maybe I’ll have Artemis use the dining hall in the resort, instead of a restaurant. No, wait... What if we let the restaurant with the best sales or reviews for a month use the dining hall for the next month? Oh, that’s good.”

“Huh... Competition, then. Good. That’s exactly what the Wise Angel teaches us. No growth without competition.”

“Growth, huh...?”

The Demon Lord couldn't help but glance down at Luna's bosom, the lawless wasteland. A vertical cliff that forbade anyone from entering, much less nurture any competition. No growth would be had here.

“W-W-W-W-What are you looking at!? Just because I'm beautiful, it doesn't give you the right to look at me with those perverted looks!”

“Ha ha ha.”

“What's so funny!?”

With a dry chuckle, the Demon Lord headed to Kanpai. The bar was bustling with adventurers as always. Sammie (the owner)'s cooking must have played a part in it, but the regulars had grown attached to the bar that saw them through their rookie days. When the Demon Lord opened the bar doors, all eyes turned to them.

“Hey, welcome... M-Miss Holy Maiden!? And the gentleman in black!”

“It's been a while, Mama.”

“W-Why are you calling me Mama?”

“Why did you call me the gentleman in black?”

With her healthy stature and attitude, Sammie seemed like an Italian Mama to the Demon Lord. She acted that way, too.

“S-So, are you going to have something to eat, or...” Sammie asked, glancing at Luna.

Even she seemed nervous to see a Holy Maiden in her bar. A modern-day equivalent would be the head of the FBI casually dropping by. Even if they did nothing wrong, anyone would be a little uncomfortable.

“Don't worry. I'm here to recruit you.”

“R-Recruit me...?”

As the Demon Lord began his spiel, Luna began to look around the bar. Her glances were rather sharp, inspecting the atmosphere and build of the bar. There wasn't much discussion to be had between the Demon Lord and Sammie,

as they quickly came to an agreement. Most importantly, putting up a location in the commoners' quarters would be tax-free. On top of that, there was a huge customer base with all of the workers gathered there. No businessperson would pass up an opportunity like this. For the time being, Sammie's apprentice would run the branch in the village of Rabbi, while she would drop in now and again to check on the place.

"Here's something to get you started. I'm looking forward to having good food in the village."

"Wha...? H-Hey! These are gold medallions!"

"It seems only fair in exchange to have your best apprentice."

The Demon Lord placed two gold medallions on the table. For a small business owner like Sammie, every bronze coin counted. Even with her bar doing this well, she had seldom held a gold medallion before.

"The village doesn't expect revenue from the quarter you'll be in. We just want high-quality establishments. I'll put in a word with my advisor about you, Mama. Don't worry about a thing."

"A-All right..."

After the Demon Lord and the Holy Maiden came and went like a tornado, the shimmering reflection of the gold medallions illuminated Sammie's face. Since many of her patrons kept a tab, this big chunk of money gave her a breath of relief. While the Holy City brought in more patrons, it also came with more expensive ingredients. With two gold medallions, she had a lot of legroom.

"Maybe he's... really the Demon Lord."

What came to her mind was what she imagined the Demon Lord to be, and the legend of a hero who only appeared in trying times. Those figures always seemed to come with tragic endings, while this Demon Lord made it seem like any tragedy would beg for his forgiveness.

After leaving Kanpai, the Demon Lord and Luna toured the rest of their destinations from Artemis to the Adventurers' Guild, taking care of business. For these locations, Luna's title made the job very easy. At Artemis, the manager practically agreed just to not upset Luna, and the Guild agreed to a

large scale recruitment of their staff, considering the offer to be like a public project.

(Now, maybe we should head back to the village.)

Since they couldn't very well vanish from the middle of a crowd, the Demon Lord turned into an alleyway when he realized that Luna was acting a bit strange. Luna had lost her usual clamoring nature since they had entered Kanpai.

"What's the matter? Something you don't like about that bar?"

"It's not that... I just feel a little nostalgic."

While he couldn't read the expression on Luna, who was looking down at the ground, her tone was not a cheery one.

"Oh, you've been to that bar before?"

"No, I just remember looking at it from the street."

"I remember you looking around the place without even talking. Different from your usual high society?"

"...It's not that. Back then, I couldn't even go into any restaurants."

That rang a bell in the Demon Lord. He remembered that Aku had mentioned something before.

"Right. You were scouted out of an orphanage, right?"

"Yeah."

After Luna's short answer, the Demon Lord produced a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He figured that this meant Luna had lost her parents when she was young, was abandoned by them, or didn't even know who her birth parents were. Not even the Demon Lord would jest about anything like that.

(Nostalgic, huh...?)

He tried to imagine what Luna's situation was. Naturally, she must not have had any money, or perhaps looked too unkempt for any restaurant. He couldn't help but make a connection with how Aku looked when they first met.

"...You earned your position through hard work, huh? It's respectable.

Nothing to be ashamed of, in the very least.”

“You think I don’t know that...?”

“Then be proud. You achieved something that most people can’t. I lived my life crawling through dirt at times, doing embarrassing things.”

“You? I can’t even imagine that... I think you were mightier-than-thou since the moment you were born.”

“Ha ha! Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not that exceptional.”

“T-Then... Ah!”

The Demon Lord pulled Luna by her waist, and prepared for Quick Travel. Luna wrapped her arms around him in return, but her pink eyes shone curiously.

“O-One of these days... You better tell me about your past.”

“Let’s see. Maybe when you’re a grown woman.”

They vanished from the alley and immediately arrived at the village of Rabbi. The sky was already darkening, on the brink of dusk. The Demon Lord immediately sent a Communication and reported the day’s work to Tahara.

Making work as quick as you always do. Helps us out a bunch, sir.

And there’s something I need to speak to you about. Let’s take a dip in the hot springs.

Hot springs...? W-With you, Mister Secretary!?

What’s the matter? I know you prefer the public bath, but there are too many eyes there.

Tahara did prefer the public bath, and the Demon Lord was the one who wrote that backstory in the first place. Back when he wasn’t rich, Tahara would take his sister to the public bath, and wait for her to come out in the freezing cold. This short story had led to Tahara still preferring the public bath, without paying any mind to the lavish hot springs resort under his nose.

I’ll see you at the hot springs.

F-For real!?

Before the Storm, Part 2

Shortly before the Demon Lord and Luna returned to the village, Tahara had been staring at a map in his office at the resort. With each thought he had, he scribbled on the map, made lists on notepaper, or circled a line of text he had already written. If the Demon Lord were to see this document, he would have been astounded. Of course, Tahara only considered himself faithful to the Demon Lord's intentions by executing the project at this scale, and that he could do much more.

"Journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step, huh?"

While this genius had his mind set on their final base being the Sleepless Castle, his ideal was to create a massive capital and have the castle overlook it. Controlling the world with force and fear was the way of the Empire, after all. Tahara was sure that such an approach would cause something somewhere to crack, making an opening for devastating retaliation. When Tahara reached to write something on a piece of paper once more, the door opened without a knock.

"...Oh, it's just you, Tahara."

"The Secretary isn't back yet."

Watching Tahara, who was scribbling something without even looking up, Yu gave him a look like she was seeing an endangered animal.

"You've certainly changed. You've never shown initiative before."

"Hm...? Yeah, guess so."

"It looks like you're enjoying yourself, though. At work, nonetheless."

Tahara finally looked up at this and wore a dumbfounded expression. Then he moved the red pencil from his ear to the space between his upper lip and nose. After pondering like this for a while, he remarked, "Work, huh...? Oh, my bad. I didn't think of all this as work. Wow."

"Huh? Did you hit your head or something?"

Yu snarled, but Tahara lit a cigarette, unbothered, and savored the puff of smoke he exhaled.

“How do I put this... Everyone’s having fun, right? Before we got here, work just meant a bunch of people dying. Darkness. All I got from it was this powerful emptiness.”

“Emptiness, you say...?”

“But what we’re doing here is different. At least we’re making something. Leaving something behind. That’s a luxury we didn’t have in the old world.”

“Who knows how long that will last? There will always be opposition, and the secretary will not tolerate them. He will strike them down with merciless force.”

“Well, yeah. What I’m trying to say is that, even if we make a thousand suffer, as long we can make a hundred thousand happy, we’re much better off than before,” Tahara explained as he tapped cigarette ashes into his ashtray, but Yu still wore the puzzled expression. Tahara was feeling rather fulfilled by his work now, especially considering his previous blood-soaked line of work. Yu, on the other hand, had no interest in the lives of others. Her conclusion was cut and dry.

“Oh, so it’s just about the numbers.”

“Agh! Don’t you have a shred of a heart, or even a gram of empathy in there?”

“I don’t need either of those things to research the human body. If the Secretary wished it, of course, I would happily extend my research to those things, as well.”

“Research? It ain’t something you can measure with beakers and test tubes.”

Although they shared their love of their absolute leader, their ideals could not have been more different. Tahara would kill a hundred thousand if need be, but Yu would do the same purely for massacre’s sake.

“Anyway. You got the thing I asked you for?”

“Yes. I can attest to its effectiveness.”

Yu produced a small vial from her pocket that contained a clear liquid. It was a

toner that used the water from the carbonated springs. In this hot climate, both men and women had damaged skin. With this, those who never made it to the hot springs could still care for their skin, too.

“Carrots can’t be our only specialty... I’ve got ideas, like this toner and boiled eggs, but we’ll definitely need the Sleepless Castle at some point.”

“Yes. With our castle rebuilt, we can squash anyone that opposes us.”

“Hold your horses. We don’t even need to use it for blunt force. I’m talking about the productivity of the Sleepless Castle. Food plants, factory lines... We can run those to the max, and have it sitting in the center of the country.”

“I understand the need for the food line. What about the factories?”

“We can make electronics, or something.”

“Electronics!?”

Yu was speechless at the idea. It seemed so foreign to this fantasy world. But, even when they had no source of electricity, the hot springs resort operated as intended. The lights on the ceiling turned on, and the automatic doors worked just fine. With that in mind, production of electronics suddenly seemed possible.

“If we really need electricity, there’s Area Modification.”

“Area Modification...!”

The Demon Lord did have such a power. Simply put, the ability allowed him to modify the arena to keep things interesting. Most video games did have an array of fields to host their gameplay in, but performing that in this world would be a display of unimaginable power, akin to the creation of a world. It wasn’t something any mortal should have had the power to do.

“In the old arenas, there were power plants. Stuff like mines, food storage, factories, and hospitals, too. Even ridiculous facilities like a pool or forest.”

“You’re...”

Yu couldn’t help but consider the implications of what Tahara had just rapidly proposed. Of all things, he was planning to turn this fantasy world into one with electronic technology, and even creating parts of the world anew.

“Is that really what the Secretary...”

“You really think the Secretary’s thought of every little idea I’ve had?”

Tahara put out his cigarette with a sigh. Of course, the Demon Lord himself had not thought of any of these things. He would have tumbled out of his chair if he had been sitting here listening to the conversation. After the two fell silent for a few moments, a reserved knock came from the door. Aku appeared, holding drinks in her hands.

“I’ve brought you two some coffee!”

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that, little Aku.”

“Thanks, little girl.”

Both Yu and Tahara treated Aku well. In fact, they treated her with great care. They were sure that there was something important about her, judging from how well their precious Secretary was treating her. They both saw Aku as a rare example of a guest of the Secretary’s.

“So, little girl. Did the Secretary tell you anything?”

“U-Um, I didn’t really understand most of it...”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Um, like he wants to make a p-pool...?”

“...Yeah?”

Tahara grinned, as Yu only stared intently as she sipped on her coffee.

Even after Aku left the room, it was filled with ominous silence. Yu was the one who broke it.

“It does look like he’s thought of everything.”

“No duh. I can’t even throw anything over his head.”

Tahara threw up his hands in the air. Their conversation continued, but eventually came to an end when Tahara received a Communication. As his expression flip flopped throughout the conversation, Yu watched with a curious expression.

“Sorry ’bout that. I’m hopping over to the hot springs for a bit.”

“Now wait a minute...”

When Tahara stood up as he scratched his head, Yu grabbed his hand.



The fibers in his durable Kevlar jacket began to crack.

“What do you mean? You’re not going to share a bath with the Secretary, are you?”

“Ow! That hurts, for real! Let me go, you idiot!”

“Answer me... Or do you want to kiss your arm goodbye?”

“What was I supposed to say!? He invited me!”

“Why would he...! Impossible!”

Finally, Yu’s nails dug into the Kevlar, leaving marks like a cat had scratched it. Yu’s grip, as well as her obsession, was incredibly strong.

“A-All right! I’ll tell him to invite you next time! I’m serious!”

“...You better be sincere.”

“I am! For real!!”

Tahara screamed desperately. He seemed more terrified than in pain.

“If you’re lying, I’ll pour acid down your throat. And poke your eyes full of needles. And cut off each of your fingers with scissors.”

“Why does everything you say have to be scary!? Go back into the horror game you crawled out of!”

Tahara yanked his hand away from Yu’s and practically fled out of the office. If the Demon Lord had overheard this conversation, he would have lost all strength in his legs, his black hair turning white in an instant.

“Hot springs... with the Secretary...!”

Yu laughed, now with an expression of pure ecstasy. When the time would come, God only knew what would happen to them.

Invader

Tahara took off his clothes in the changing room and placed his folded up towel on top of them. While he simply preferred the public bath, he himself exuded an air reminiscent of the yesteryear of Japan. The contrast of his

appearance and his inclination for high-tech guns seemed to verify his extraordinary genius.

“Hot springs with the Secretary, huh...? Never thought this day’d come.”

Tahara took a look around the changing room. Unlike the public bath, it was deserted, like it was barely used. In fact, this side of the hot springs was almost exclusively used by the Demon Lord. Tahara looked at the mirror to see the reflection of his well-toned body on the spotless mirror.

“I’m not training as much as before. If at least Nomura was here...”

Tahara scratched his head as he frowned, although he had a perfect six-pack. His arms, that handled all of the heavy guns, and the rest of his body were built like loaded springs, without anything extraneous about them. Even men would have stopped and stared at his body.

“Guess the Secretary’s already in there...?”

He walked into the hot springs area through the doors and started by rinsing off head-to-toe with a shower. On the arm that Yu had grasped, he could still see scratch marks. Color drained from his face.

“I can’t deal with that rabid woman...”

Just as Tahara mumbled this, he heard a voice from the star-gazing bath in the back. He walked over there to find the Demon Lord sipping on a cup in the tub. Apparently, he had a floating tray of sake with him.

“Thanks for coming, Tahara.”

“Sake in a tub under the stars, huh? You know how to party.”

Tahara stepped right into the hot spring and tossed back the cup offered to him. With the effects of the hot springs and the sake’s effect of healing Stamina, he felt heavenly.

“Whoo! Now this is where it’s at!”

“I prepared some things to go with it.”

On another tray, there were octopus salads, edamame, chilled tofu, and sashimi in a neat display. A Snack Platter that the Demon Lord had produced

with SP. On their own, these items healed anywhere from 20 to 40 Stamina in the game, as opposed to the set's 15. This led to the item's poor reception in the game, but in this world, variety seemed much more treasured than the amount of Stamina it healed.

"Sashimi, too...! Ah, that's good!"

"Maybe we should start thinking about obtaining some seafood."

"Hrm. Fishing's the fastest way, but it burns up Stamina..."

"Mm."

Fishing was a Survival Skill that allowed the user to fish in any area for 30 Stamina. There was a ridiculous variety of what they could catch, too: fish, of course, as well as black abalone, shark fins, tuna, giant squids, sea bream, pufferfish, fishes with human faces, seaweed, sea shells, *etc.* The game hosted various other exploration skills, too, such as searching for water veins, food, herbs, or items, as well as burglary and treasure hunting. Each of them yielded different items, many of them highly valued, which allowed the players to make money off them. They were like production jobs in any sort of RPG.

"Didn't expect most things from the Arena to come to life in this world, too. I don't know what exactly is going on here, but..."

"It'll become apparent soon enough. The more features I regain, the more complete we become."

They continued to talk about what to do moving forward, but only briefly. Tahara thought that any ideas he had were already taken into account by the Demon Lord, and the Demon Lord didn't ask many questions for fear of losing his facade. Some quiet time passed, as each of them sipped on sake and nibbled on the snacks. This alone was quite the sight, though. The Demon Lord (at least on the outside) looked picturesque just holding a sake cup, and Tahara exuded the sensuality of a seasoned warrior.

"...It'll be a lot more noisy around here when everyone's together."

"Of course, I intend to summon them all."

Tahara mumbled quietly, but the Demon Lord's answer was grounded. He

even added, to surpass Tahara's expectations: "Eventually, I intend to summon your sister, too."

"...What?"

Tahara froze for a moment, and almost said something when the Demon Lord displayed his right hand to him. On it, there was a malicious ring that wasn't there before.

"W-What about that ring...?"

"Something like a magic ring that grants my wish upon meeting certain conditions."

"Give me a break... I read that in a comic, once."

"Do you think I would speak of such things in jest?"

Hearing this, Tahara couldn't help but swallow nervously. To him, the Demon Lord was not the type to ever crack a joke like that. Becoming of his title as the Empire's Demon Lord, he was a man who turned each and every one of his words into action, good or evil.

"Manami's going to... Wait a minute! What if something happens to her here...?"

Tahara's expression flip-flopped to and fro, his mind racing. Ever since the day he had decided to work at the Sleepless Castle, he had not seen his sister once, restraining himself from any form of communication with her. Tahara, as well as the other members of the department, had a massive bounty, hated by the entire world. According to their backstories, they were also the carrot dangled in front of the players as a ticket to turn it all around. That's why Tahara had kept his distance in all manners from his powerless sister, and erased every evidence of their time spent together in order to protect her. Naturally, living together in the Sleepless Castle was out of the question. That was the very place that everyone in that world directed their hatred towards. It was a place much too dangerous for a young girl to inhabit.

"Settle down, Tahara. We don't have bounties on our heads in this world. I can't be certain of the future, but I don't expect anyone to hold a grudge against us except for a few petty money-grabbers offended by our success."

“Mm...”

“Do we think any of those fools would ever get a leg up on us?”

“...Not a chance.”

“You just solved your own conundrum. That will be my reward for your loyalty.”

With that, the Demon Lord tossed his cup back. This was both a reward and the Demon Lord’s scheme to use miracles ahead of Kunai to prevent his malicious plot from coming to fruition. Of course, none of that mattered to Tahara. What was important to him were the days he could spend with his little sister. He wasn’t going to question any reason for making that happen.

“Then we bump up the defenses around here. Piano wires, bear traps, pitfalls, landmines... Oh, and mounted machine guns, too.”

“...Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself?”

“Before that, I need to build Manami a castle... or just a house. I could have the Secretary build a large-scale base to start with...”

After mumbling some questionable things, Tahara stood up with a loud splash. He had a smile on his face that of a young boy.

“Whoo, I didn’t know you had such a big heart in there! I better re-do all of my plans!”

Tahara excitedly smiled as he placed both hands on the Demon Lord’s shoulders. A touching moment between a boss and his advisor. Now that Tahara was standing, though, Tahara’s much too impressive package was now dangling in front of the Demon Lord’s face.

“A-Ahem... Calm down for a bit and sit back down.”

“How can I be calm!? I’m through the roof! I haven’t seen Manami in over a decade!”

Each time Tahara shouted in excitement, his package violently jiggled. Sometimes side-to-side, and other times back-and-forth... in violent, free-spirited lashings. Never had the Demon Lord felt more in danger than this moment.

“A-All right... Just sit...!”

“What am I doing here!? I gotta go fix my plans!”

Tahara jumped out of the tub, and the Demon Lord sighed, as if he was relieved from some giant pressure. To improve his mood, he tilted back the sake pitcher, dumping the liquid down into his stomach.

“Didn’t think I’d get a tight close-up of his junk... Which circle of Hell was that?”

After enjoying some more snacks and sake with a frown on his face, the Demon Lord left the star-gazing bath. All that was left for the night was to go to bed, but he sent Yukikaze a Communication, just to be sure that she hadn’t snuck into his room again. The Demon Lord never imagined that this very instance of Communication would commence a war that would engulf the entire continent.

Yukikaze, can you hear me?

...Fox...

Hm? What’s wrong? What’s happening?

The Demon Lord’s expression changed at the break-up in their Communication. He realized that Yukikaze was in combat.

...Mister Fox, there are Aggressors in the dungeon.

Aggressor? Is that a monster?

...Yes. An anomaly that comes out of the dungeon to invade us.

I see. I’ll be right there.

Ending the Communication with Yukikaze, he called Tahara and Yu through Team Communication, which created a line between everyone in a particular group.

Yu, meet me in front of the resort. A little situation’s starting up north. Tahara, you’re in charge of the village.

Roger that, don’t worry a thing about the village.

I’ll be right there, Sir.

A few minutes later, after meeting up with Yu, the Demon Lord took her and immediately flew to the town of Rookie.

Meanwhile, a shadow was looming in the deepest part of the Bastille Dungeon. The shadow shifted its form from liquid to mist to a human silhouette. In front of the shadow were countless monitors, products of modern technology incongruous with this world ruled by sword and magic.

“Let’s play...” The shadow spoke.

With an entire town as a stage, a long, long day was about to begin...

The Battle on the Ground

Weeb was the first one to notice that something was afoot in the town of Rookie by looking from the outside. He jumped out of his tent to find bright red flames roaring in it. The Trinary leaned out of their own tents to glare towards the flames.

“There must be Aggressors, Sir Weeb.”

“Indeed, there must.”

This group was skilled enough to recognize this wasn’t an accidental fire. Still, the Trinary looked at Weeb wishfully, hoping for him not to jump into that mess. They weren’t worried for Weeb in combat, but for his status that worsened every time he intervened in foreign affairs.

“Sir Weeb, we shall head to the town. Please, get some more rest.”

“No need to worry about me, gentlemen. We’ve come this far.”

Weeb responded with an uncharacteristically teasing smile. His reputation in his homeland had completely plummeted. It couldn’t get any worse. Still, the trio couldn’t help but be concerned, even though Weeb was not the kind of man who would compromise on his beliefs to protect even himself.

“Sir Kaiya. Lucky for us, the two S-rank adventures are staying in the nearby Doyle.”

“Those bit— er, those two...” Kaiya groaned.

Not that this needed to be clarified, but the Trinary had an aversion to women. They had no need for them, as they only had eyes for Weeb. Still, Kaiya swiftly decided to use the famous star players as a sort of political buffer.

“I’ll notify them of this immediately.”

Feeling torn at having to leave Weeb, Kaiya immediately left for Doyle, whipping his horse. Doyle was close enough that he assumed the people there had already spotted the flames scorching the night sky.

“Shall we?”

Weeb drew two weapons from the white box on his back. In his right hand, he held a sword of light that beamed with a glorious white glow. In his left hand, he held a morning star that also emanated light. As fast as the wind, Weeb sprinted towards the city, and the two members of the trio followed his gleaming back without a word.

When the party of white arrived in the town, battles had erupted in various areas. Even though the party had witnessed an invasion out of the dungeon several times, they couldn’t help but fall speechless at this sight. A cloud of monsters were pouring out of the entrance to the dungeon.

“What’s going on...? Look at those Tin Men. And those Fire-breathing Birds!”

“Headhunting Boars, too.”

An Ultima and Mushroom each bumbled out. These creatures had no place in a dungeon for rookies.

“I wish this was some kind of joke... That looks like a Hydra sitting back there.”

Weeb, too, internally groaned. Occasionally, outliers were born in the dungeon that commanded an invasion from the dungeon out into town. Still, as they understood it, the monsters that came out of the dungeon would only be as strong as those within. The monsters scattered throughout the city, wreaking havoc without order, breathing fire everywhere they went, and trampling any human they came across. Upon accessing the town, Weeb made a snap decision.

“It’s too dangerous to split up. You two, protect each other’s backs.”

With that quick order, Weeb sprinted forward. Neither of his men objected, but rather followed suit. They knew very well that, on the battlefield, a moment's hesitation could cost them their lives, as well as the lives they could have saved otherwise. Ultima and Mushroom ran, each with a white sword in hand. Every time they swung their swords, a monster was torn in three. The horde of monsters was being rapidly cut down.

It was a Chain. In the game, a player had a Skill Level for each category of weapons. With a Skill Level of over 100 in the weapon they were using, players could Chain, which dealt 10 additional damage after their normal attack. In short, it was a double attack in this world. The seasoned trio had finally learned to use Chains to their full potential.

Meanwhile, Weeb was tearing through the horde of monsters in every direction around him with his sword of light and morning star. As a paladin, he could Chain both Sword and Club attacks. With one motion, he performed (ridiculously enough) a quadruple attack. Staring down the monsters before him, he shouted: "You wouldn't have died if you stayed in!"

Everywhere Weeb went, he looked like a beam of white light tearing through the monsters, becoming of his title of paladin. No matter how much monster blood and guts rained down on him, the white light that enveloped him purified it all in an instant.

"S-Someone... Help...!"

They must have fallen behind. Weeb spotted a mother holding her young child, about to be blasted with the roaring breath of a Fire-breathing Bird. Before the bird got the chance, though, its head exploded into pieces. The spiked metal ball of Weeb's morning star had smashed through it. A Headhunting Boar that charged soon after was torn in half by his sword of light. The boar's strong hide and muscle were like tofu or butter against Weeb's sword.

"It's dangerous here. You must get out of the city."

"W-We will...!"

His spectacular moves even inspired the fleeing adventurers to stand up in arms. A paladin was a title not given to Weeb only for his strength, but for his

courage that electrified those around him.

“Sir Weeeeeeb!”

“The paladin is here!”

“And the Trinary!”

“We can win! We can win this!”

“Sir Weeb! It’s me! Marry me!”

“Agggghhhh! Take me into your sheets, Sir Weeb!” (A bass voice, booming) “If you can move, build a barricade!”

Mikan and Yukikaze were among the crowd. As B-ranks, they were a head above the rest, and the rookies naturally gathered around them. Who could have blamed them? In an emergency like this, who wouldn’t want to be close to someone powerful?

“Where’d all these monsters come from!?”

“...We’ll hold down the fort until Mister Fox comes.”

Wielding their usual combo of longsword and spells, the pair had been slaying the monsters around them, but they noticed that the town guards were barely contributing. In fact, there were almost no town guards to be found.

“What are those guards doing now!?”

“...Probably running away.”

Yukikaze was right. The guards were sort of government workers, and none of them were willing to risk their lives in this commotion. In fact, the adventurers were the ones standing their ground in order to protect their job site. That being said, the guards could not have been blamed. Even during the long-lasting war of the Northern Nations, this country had been at peace, as they neighbored Animanía. Who could have expected them to suddenly give their lives? Their jobs were to keep an eye on and drain the adventurers, not to fight.

“Hey, Yukikaze! Isn’t that a Fire-breathing Bird!?”

“...And a Hydra, too.”

“You gotta be kidding me! Since when are we in the Six Dungeon

Waterfalls!?”

“...You are my shield, Snow’s Kiss.”

Yukikaze blew a kiss and cast a protective spell on Mikan. She tried to enhance her with protection against fire upon seeing the Fire-breathing Birds.

“Your shield!? You go burn out there!”

“...Love is eternal. I am the snow that never melts. Flame on, Mikan.”

“Shut up!”

As they stuck to their usual bantering, the pair managed to hold back part of the monster invasion, while the other adventurers built barricade after barricade. Not all parts of the town were as successful in their efforts, though. Most areas of the town were in a miserable state, with buildings burnt or burning from the Fire-breathing Birds.

As time passed, black smoke rose from every corner of the town, starting to engulf it entirely.

——The central area of Rookie.

Tearing through monsters, Weeb was curious. He had experienced a few counter-invasions before, but this time was exceptional.

“There are too many of them...”

A counter-invasion was when hordes of monsters came out of the depths of a dungeon, one at a time. In waves, if you will. In between waves, the defenders of the town would usually build barricades, move the injured, and have those on the frontlines rest. But with this many monsters, there was no time to stop.

“Once the Hydra’s on the move...”

The worst monster there by far, considered by the people here to be the leader. For now, it was only sitting at the entrance of the dungeon, but Weeb would be the only one who could take it on. If Weeb had to devote his attention to a single monster, casualties would skyrocket in the meantime. Even as he fought the horde now, he could hear screams from all over town, and could smell the stench of burning flesh in the air.

“Could it be...?”

Weeb had a bad feeling about this situation, and it was perfectly accurate. A necromancer had appeared among the horde. When the necromancer waved its wand, the blood-soaked adventures rose up as Zombies. Even the burned victims of the town were turned into Haunts, now attacking the people around them.

“It can’t be...!”

Weeb fell speechless at the horrifying sight. A counter-invasion of this scale should not and could not have come out of the Bastille Dungeon. This disaster would have warranted the deployment of the powerful knights’ order from his home country, the Tzardom of Light. No matter how swiftly and valiantly the paladin fought, it was no use when the weaker adventurers and powerless residents were turning into Zombies and Haunts.

“I must evacuate the residents first...!”

Even if he tried, the town guards that should have been the ones leading the evacuation had fled long ago, leaving no soldiers for Weeb to command. The only possible outcome of this situation was a chain reaction of death until the entire town was destroyed. In history, many towns and cities had become ghost towns following similar atrocities.

“Having trouble, little paladin...?”

Weeb turned towards an upbeat voice to find the S-rank adventurer Mynk, an old acquaintance. There was Olgan beside her too, biting on a head of lettuce, uninterested.

“It’s... as bad as it looks.”

“Heh heh heh. A world of darkness perfectly suited for me...!”

Weeb chuckled at Mynk’s reaction, but he could not have hoped for better reinforcements. Mynk, her ramblings aside, was the best Holy element user there was.

“Leave darkness to darkness: me. You take care of the other monsters and evacuate the people.”

“Thanks for your help,” Weeb shortly replied, and left like a gust of wind. At the same time, Mynk began an incantation. Olgan floated herself up, and uninterestedly lay down on a roof. In contrast to her lack of enthusiasm, her partner Mynk continued her spell, getting way into it.

“The dark night without sight, the blade with the black shadow, light my way... Holy Rain!”

As she concluded her incantation, a downpour of rain filled with the Holy element fell on her surroundings. In an instant, the Zombies and Haunts wailed in agony as they collapsed to the ground. While her incantation was the polar opposite to the nature of her spell, the spell’s power was irrefutable. Seeing the overwhelming power of the spell, the dejected adventurers stood back up and cried out.

“Hey, look! It’s Mynk th-the star player!”

“Yeaaaah!”

“First the paladin, and now the star players!”

Amidst the hellish counter-invasion, their presence must have been truly inspiring. Watching her partner fire off spells in full darkness mode, Olgan produced a head of broccoli and bit into it without a word.

“How stupid...”

As a firebrand, she had always been cold towards humans. She wanted no part in this sort of rescue mission that didn’t gain her anything. Her mantra was that, if anyone wanted to live, they had to survive on their own.

“But a Hydra, huh...?”

Even Olgan couldn’t help but wonder how that monster, which should have never appeared in the Bastille Dungeon, was here. Many of the monsters in the horde were species that didn’t belong here, either.

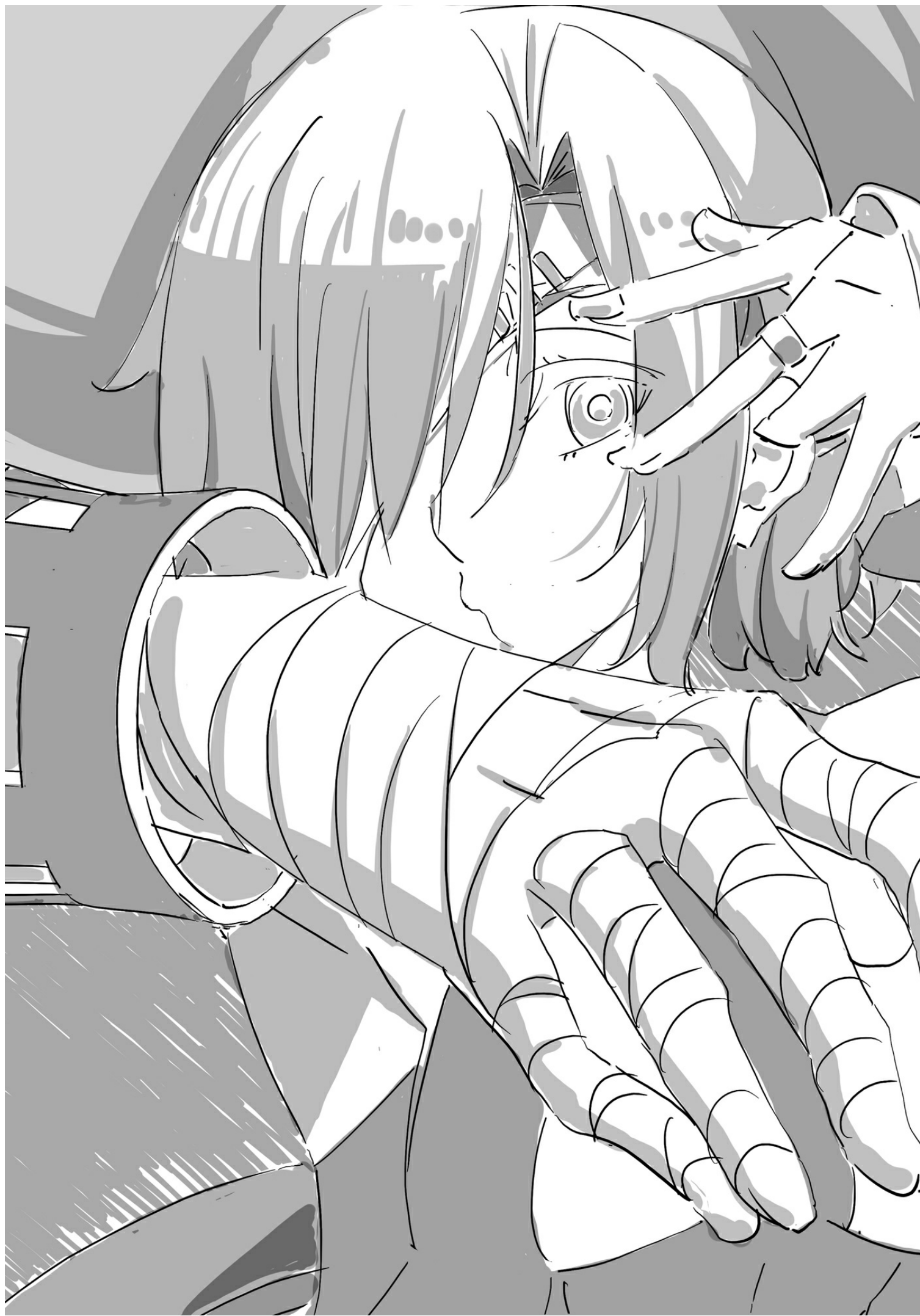
“Hey, Mynk...”

She tried to warn her partner to be careful, but Mynk was deep into the throes of combat, where her voice couldn’t reach her.

“That idiot... Doesn’t she remember what happened just the other day?”

Olgan recalled the attack they had found themselves in in Holylight. Considering that a high-ranking devil appearing by the Holy Castle was also something that never should have happened, she wanted her partner to stay vigilant.

“The dark salamander that slumbers in my right hand... Lend me your strength, just once, here and now!”



Oblivious to Olgan's concerns, Mynk kept up the merriment. When one of the continent's best adventurers said stuff like that, it was never disregarded as cringe. To those listening, it sounded like she was going to bring all of those things to life.

"D-Dark salamander!?"

"What the hell is that!?"

"It's sealed in her right hand!"

"Damn! I don't know what that is, but damn!"

Hearing the uproar below her, Olgan let out a long sigh, gazing up at the moon floating in the night sky. She couldn't deal with it anymore. But even she couldn't remain uninterested at what appeared next.

Suddenly, as if from out of thin air, a couple was standing on the top of the clocktower, the tallest structure in town. Backlit by the moon, they appeared nothing less than supernatural. While Olgan felt a strong sense of death from the woman, the man exuded the same many times more. The air about him was that of an emperor; one that ruled the underworld, if such a place existed.

"What is that...?" Just as Olgan growled, the man pulled the woman close by her waist and leapt high into the air. In an instant, a thunderous explosion went off... resulting in the ground shaking below them, and the town being covered in a dust cloud. By the time the wind had blown the dust away, the nebulous horde of monsters was no more. Every single one of them had been blown to bits.

The Battle in the Air

"Seems it's worse than I thought."

"They're great in numbers, at least."

Standing atop the highest structure in town, the pitch-black Demon Lord and his witch observed the city below them. From various sources, black smoke and painful screams filled the air. While Yu was completely composed, the scene seemed especially disastrous to the Demon Lord, who had walked these streets

in peace just the day before. Not only were monsters ransacking the city, some humans had turned to rioting and looting. Some broke into stores to steal products and cash, and some carried off arms full of herbs and plants. It reminded the Demon Lord of riots he had seen on TV that took place in the slums of foreign nations. Directly below them, there was a man about to rape a woman, holding a sword up to her neck.

(Scum...)

“A display of raw humanity, isn’t it, Mister Secretary?”

“...Disgusting.”

“What?”

The Demon Lord threw Sodom’s Fire without another word, sniping off the head of the man below him. The man’s body stood still for a moment, as if it had to process what had just happened. Then, apparently noticing the lack of a head on its shoulders, the corpse fell to the ground. The Demon Lord lit a cigarette as he savored the sight. Noticing Yu staring at him, he gave her a little grin.

“We must always be the ones to shape this world. Let us put these ignorant fools back in their place.”

Yu’s eyes shone bright as she snuck her arms forward, as if to say: ‘Ooooh, Mister Secretary! That line was electrifying!’ The Demon Lord was on course to be ensnared in Yu’s embrace, but the monster invasion didn’t give them the time. Countless Fire-Breathing Birds and Tin Men were marching towards the central plaza.

“Hm. We’re a little out of range from here.”

“Ah...!”

Pulling Yu close to him by her waist, the Demon Lord leapt. Now, the plaza was directly below them. The monsters were gathering there, and seemed ready to disperse back out into all corners of the town. The Demon Lord gestured towards them with his chin.

“Blow ’em up, Yu.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Yu’s expression escaped her trance and a maliciously large grenade appeared in her hand. With the help of her Equipped Skills, the attack would become devastating. Her First Skill, Explosive Expertise, triggered as she threw the grenade into the air, boosting its damage output by 15 to 25. Then her Second Skill, To Pieces, split the grenade into dozens. Then came her Third Skill, Chain Explosions, to pile on an additional 30 to 40 damage. The thunderous sound of the hail of grenades caused the fighting adventurers and the fleeing residents from all around the town to turn towards its source. There, they could see the Demon Lord enjoying a smoke, and a striking beauty in a white coat backlit by the moon.

(Hm... My advisors’ Equipped Skills trigger without a problem either.)

Satisfied, the Demon Lord pulled Yu’s head close to his. He was happy that his advisor, whose every detail he had designed to a tee, was able to unleash her full potential. Not to mention the excitement from seeing a skill of his own creation demonstrate such incredible power.

“A-Are you satisfied... Mister Secretary...?”

“Mm. Wonderful job, Yu. That was a work of art. You can’t beat the feeling of chaining off all of your Equipped Skills.”

Seeing the witch cackle, the crowd muttered. Who else but the Demon Lord could have a stunning beauty by his side as he gazed down upon hundreds of corpses? The Trinary, who had been watching them from afar, immediately knew that the figure in the sky was the infamous Demon Lord. Given the catastrophic and inexplicable explosion along with his pitch-black silhouette, he could be none other than the polar opposite of the White Light.

“That’s the Demon Lord Sir Weeb has spoken of...?”

“That is what I would imagine the legendary rebel to look like.”

“Stand back. Await Sir Weeb’s decision.”

Mikan and Yukikaze, too, were staring at the pitch-black Demon Lord and the witch beside him. The moonlit silhouettes cackling on the roof was quite the sight to behold, and this scene evoked a variety of emotions in different people.

“What’s with him? Trying to look cool with a chick by his side.”

“...I don’t care how many lovers he has. As long as you’re not one of them.”

“I am not interested in him!”

“...Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

“Just drop it, already.”

While they carried on as usual, Mynk had just experienced the biggest shock of her life.

“It can’t be...”

Mynk could immediately tell that the silhouette indeed belonged to the infamous Demon Lord. Who else could it have been? As a high-ranking priestess, she felt like all of the world’s malice and hatred concentrated in that single form. His completely unbothered demeanor in the face of this disaster seemed to belong to none other than the one that opposed the Great Light and ruled the night in times of old.

“How could this...”

Mynk had habitually been spewing some cringe-worthy lines about darkness this and evil that, but now she was facing a true embodiment of darkness. One could have only imagined her shock. Having lost the strength in her legs, she crumpled to the ground.

Weeb, too, turned to the Demon Lord from the sea of monster corpses he was standing in. What had only been a sense of presence and voice was now complete, with a defined silhouette.

“So even your subordinates...”

Weeb shook at the disastrous sight of the plaza. He didn’t know what had happened, but all of the monsters were blown to bits in an instant. If that attack was something they could fire off repeatedly, Weeb was sure that even an army wouldn’t stand a chance against just the pair of them.

“Nice to see you again, Hero.”

With his hands still in his coat pockets, the Demon Lord jumped from the roof

and landed before Weeb. Now that he could see the Demon Lord up close, his presence seemed even more intimidating than before. The witch also jumped down, returning to the Demon Lord's side. Weeb felt like his very life force was being ground down from just being in the Demon Lord's proximity. He couldn't help his hands tightening around his weapons.

"No need to clench your shoulders like that. We'll take care of the big one back there. You tend to the monsters around here."

"...That's a boss-level monster that disables even Chain Attacks. Many lives are on the line. Do you have a plan?"

At Weeb's question, the witch squinted her eyes, but the Demon Lord plopped a hand on her head and she immediately calmed down.

"Disables Chains, huh...? Interesting."

"Aren't you the king of monsters? Why do you side with the people?"

"That's a strange assumption. Monsters are just what I feed off of."

This was the Demon Lord's unadulterated answer, but it came across laden with subtext to Weeb. Without leaving him enough time to decipher the meaning of it, the Demon Lord and the Witch walked right past him. They didn't even seem to be fazed by the ferocious Hydra they were walking right up to.

"Mister Secretary, what is that half-baked snake...?"

"Hm... That thing is much less intimidating than the variety of chimeras we unleashed into the arenas. While our JUG is filled up, let's clear out the dungeon, too."

The Hydra crooked its necks from the entrance of the dungeon to look at the pair of them. It was a giant, snake-like monster with nine heads. This boss-level monster normally appeared in the Six Dungeon Waterfalls, and had no right being anywhere near this low-level dungeon. Its hardened scales negated Chain Attacks, which made it a formidable foe, even against seasoned adventurers and knights.

"I'll show him my Chain..."

The Demon Lord threw Sodom's Fire. When it struck the body of the Hydra, it

screamed out in agony. Even without triggering any Combat skills, the Demon Lord's vanilla attack was nearly fatal. This is when a normal Chain Attack would have triggered, but since the Demon Lord's Skill Level was over 500, the attack elevated to an Expert Chain Attack, skyrocketing the attack to 25 damage. With the addition of 5 damage from his Combat Skill Mad Rush, the damage totaled 30, three times that of a normal Chain Attack. Thanks to Break Through, another Combat Skill of his, the attack pushed through any skill or technique that prevented Chain Attacks. In short, it was impossible for anyone to defend from this assault. A shockwave sparked from the blade that was piercing the Hydra, launching its gigantic body into the air; a successful Expert Chain Attack. To finish it off, the Burning effect of Sodom's Fire caused a roaring flame to engulf the Hydra in an instant. A seamless combo. In the game, the Demon Lord used to combo into Equipped Skills or element-less skills. Once he got his first attack in, it was extremely difficult to escape his grasp.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

The Demon Lord laughed, full of elation. Bright red mist emanated from his body, enveloping him. The red mist continuously shapeshifted, becoming a screaming face, a skeleton skull, and then a hellscape that seemed to taint one's soul just from looking at it.

—Combat Skill: Limit Breaker!

—Special Ability: Dictator of Law!

The Demon Lord's abilities electrified the hellish mist.

“You insect... Grovel on the ground where you belong! Final Judgment!”

The Demon Lord swung his right hand as if to declare an order, and the insidious red mist turned to thousands of skulls, tearing into the Hydra with nightmarish screams. In an instant, the Hydra evaporated into black dust, and the thousands of skulls proceeded to roll down into the Bastille Dungeon like a flood. The red skulls, hungering for prey, immediately permeated the dungeon all the way down to the lowest level, 20. The incredible momentum shook the entire town, everyone falling on their rear. It wasn't a group attack, but an AOE. The already powerful move was boosted by so much damage that every monster in the dungeon was massacred in one fell swoop. Even the main

aggressor of this counter-invasion, Big Eye, pathetically evaporated with the masses.

All that was left in the dungeon was deafening silence. Anyone who witnessed the hellish attack felt like their souls were blown away with it. But the pair in the eye of the storm had seen things like this many times before, so they thought nothing of it. This was just one of the attacks fired off in the arenas day and night, creating many dramatic upsets over the years.

“That should take care of any monsters in the back.”

“Incredible, Mister Secretary.”

Yu smiled with blushed cheeks, and the Demon Lord nodded, satisfied. Then, he immediately tightened his expression before sending a Communication to Yukikaze.

Yukikaze, do you copy?

...You were so hot, Mister Fox. My snow is melting all over.

Whatever. Something's not right. I'm going straight into the dungeon. Keep taking care of the leftovers on the streets.

...Okay.

Yukikaze's tone had a touch of disappointment in it, but she must have decided that she would have only gotten in the Demon Lord's way if she had joined him. Nonetheless, she complied.

I've learned a lot from you two during this trip. After things clean up here, you should visit the village of Rabbi. You'll always be welcome.

...I'll be there. No matter what.

The Demon Lord concluded the Communication, and turned to the dungeon. Weeb called to his back.

“Are you going to start a rebellion... again?”

The Demon Lord raised his brow at the word ‘again,’ but decided he couldn't act without reverence while Yu was there. After a short pause, he answered:

“I have always been on the side of system and order... Any rebellion is made

by those who oppose me.”

He answered this question as the Demon Lord of the Empire, so as to prevent Yu from suspecting anything, but Weeb was aghast. The rebel told in ancient legends did not consider himself a rebel at all. He considered everyone else, and perhaps even the Great Light, to be a rebel. This was more than seeing things from another perspective. Weeb felt like the ancient myths and theories were all crumbling down around him.

“Until we meet again, Hero.”

Weeb could only stand there and idly watch as the pair walked into the dungeon.

You Unlocked Some New Information!

Final Judgment

A massive AOE attack in the game, activated when the player's JUG (a value that increases or decreases with each bout of combat) reaches 100. Its base damage is 30, but its damage output is drastically boosted the higher the enemies' levels are relative to the user: a bonus of 8 damage for each level in difference. If the enemy is 10 levels higher than the user, it deals a whopping additional 80 damage. In the game, this move became more and more devastating to take the more a player power-leveled. A relatively weak player could take out powerful players in a single blow. Akira Ono had implemented numerous gimmicks like this one, preventing anyone from winning solely from power-leveling.

Combat Skill: Limit Breaker

Doubles the initial damage of Final Judgment from 30 to 60 damage.

Special Ability: Dictator of Law

A unique ability of the Demon Lord. An additional 40 damage to Final Judgment. His advisors have a similar ability called Defender of Law that provides 20 bonus damage instead.

Facing the Unknown

The Demon Lord and his witch continued down the long stairs of the dungeon. Of course, there wasn't another soul to be found, and no other sound to be heard, as if the Demon Lord's attack had silenced the entire dungeon.

"This is the dungeon you spoke of, Mister Secretary?"

"Mm. It's much quieter now."

Unlike before, the town was in much more of a ruckus. Still, there were not many monsters left out there, and it would be easy enough for Weeb and the Trinary to clean up. While the Demon Lord was unaware, the two S-rank adventurers were out there, too. Barring any more boss-level monsters like the Hydra, Yukikaze and Mikan would not have any problems taking care of themselves, either.

"Mister Secretary, it's dark and spooky in here..."

"I guess so."

Yu wrapped her arm around the Demon Lord's with an obvious 'I'm so scared' expression. Tahara would have pointed out that she was the scariest thing in the dungeon at this time.

"It's like a haunted maze, especially because of the lights."

"M-Mm..."

Yu subtly pressed her shapely breasts into the Demon Lord's arms, her cheeks blushing. Tahara would have called her hospital the real haunted maze. The Demon Lord cleared his throat and decided to jump down some levels via Quick Travel.

"Excuse me, Mister Secretary... Why don't we check one level at a time? We may find something. We should take our time and explore each floor together."

"N-Not that I don't want to, but we're in a bit of a hurry. Let's go."

"Oh, Mister Secretary...!"

Brushing aside Yu's pleading eyes, the Demon Lord grabbed her and forcibly

jumped to level 15, where he had seen the prison cells last time. Now, even Yu's interest was piqued by the bizarre sight. She inspected the space, left and right.

"It's a very old... well, primitive, jail."

"Yu, what do you think... was kept captive, here?"

"My first thought would be a human. Most likely an adult-sized specimen."

The Demon Lord reexamined the cells, and it seemed safe to assume that humans were kept in them in horrific conditions.

They climbed down another story to find more cells. Some were similar in structure to those from the level above, while others were made with metal bars that seemed a little more durable. The further down they went, they found larger floors with more cells. Yu didn't seem to be bothered, but it was a bizarre sight to the Demon Lord. Who made these things, and why? And why build them inside of a dungeon, of all places? He didn't understand any of it. On the other hand, Yu spoke with a tone as nonchalant as talking about the next day's weather: "Perhaps... They were pets."

"Ha!"

The Demon Lord laughed it off, but couldn't quite shake the idea. Who could have remained sane trapped in a prison cell in a dungeon crawling with monsters?

"In any case, I don't like it..."

"Of course, sir. The management of the people's happiness must be fully in your control."

"Mm..."

Even as he pretended to agree, the Demon Lord was screaming on the inside. He would have vehemently denied the need for such management if he could have.

When they reached the 20th level on the bottom of the dungeon, the air completely changed and the banter stopped. The Demon Lord's expression shifted. This floor hosted a modern factory. Unlike any of the floors above, the ground and walls were made out of concrete, showing bare steel support

beams above countless conveyor belts in operation. The industrial belts were carrying cut up monsters and charred human bodies to who-knew-where, along with clothes, weapons, and even the walls of houses. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the variety of things it was carrying.

“I see. It seems I’ve been shown to a different level.”

“...Mister Secretary?”

“It’s quite different from the level 20 I had heard about. Yu, does this level appear the same as the others to you?”

Level 20, as Yukikaze had described it to him, was nothing out of the ordinary. Definitely not this modern facility.

“Yes... Bare rock walls. Dimly lit.”

At this moment, the Demon Lord became sure of his suspicion.

“Apparently, I was invited.”

First, the gun he had found on level 15, and now the level 20 that was not as it should be. Someone was giving the Demon Lord a secret look behind the curtains and getting enjoyment out of it. Were they taunting the Demon Lord, or did they have a message to send? In any case, he was sure that this wasn’t good news.

“Yu, stay here. If something happens, grab me and Quick Travel.”

“Wait, sir. You’re going alone...?”

“If we both get attacked at once, we’re out of options. If something seems off with me, heal me immediately. Got it?”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

The Demon Lord continued through the countless conveyor belts that carried both monster and human corpses without discrimination. It was creepy to say the least, and anyone might have frozen in their tracks. But the Demon Lord didn’t.

(Something’s here. Something I want to know. Or something that someone wants to show me.) The door at the end of the factory opened automatically,

perhaps by electricity, or perhaps by magic. One question of his was answered as soon as he walked through the door.

“So it’s a recycling plant.”

Below him, he could see the monster and human bodies being dropped into a giant furnace, with new monsters being carried out from it. This was a sight quite in contrast to what most people imagined reincarnation to be.

In the room, the Demon Lord spotted countless monitors varying in size. With around a hundred monitors stacked on top of each other in a heap, it almost looked like a monument. Even the Demon Lord couldn’t help but shudder at the sight.

“Do you want me to grade your artwork?” the Demon Lord asked whoever it was that was waiting for him.

Whoever it was, they had unknown powers and technology. Just from what the Demon Lord had witnessed so far, the recycling of life below him and the solar-powered gun, they had technology that surpassed that of the modern world. As if to answer his question, a line of text appeared on the screens: *Let’s play, Demon Lord.*

After reading these words, the Demon Lord lit a cigarette without a word. Perhaps offended by this, a few of the screens cracked. A new line of text appeared: *Play with me, Demon Lord.*

A similar line, but with a different nature. The first was still an invitation, but this was more forceful. Reading this, the Demon Lord took the cigarette out of his mouth and flicked it at the screens. The still-lit cigarette hit a monitor and fell to the ground. The next instant, one screen after another shattered in a cacophony. The largest screen in the center, the only one left, displayed a line of red text: *I’ll toy with you, Demon Lord.*

Now he wore a dauntless grin.

“Finally, your true colors are showing.”

*I’LLTOYWITHTHOU I’LLKILLYOU I’LLTOYWITHTHOU I’LLKILLYOU
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I’LLTOYWITHTHOU I’LLKILLYOU I’LLTOYWITHTHOU I’LLKILLYOU*

I'LL TOY WITH YOU I'LL KILL YOU I'LL TOY WITH YOU I'LL KILL YOU
I'LL TOY WITH YOU I'LL KILL YOU I'LL TOY WITH YOU I'LL KILL YOU
I'LL TOY WITH YOU I'LL KILL YOU I'LL TOY WITH YOU I'LL KILL YOU

“Heh...”

The Demon Lord was secretly afraid of the message and the malice behind it. But his willpower pinned down even his creeping fear, and only grew stronger from it. The more he was put in a corner, the more he suppressed any negative emotions and powered through. No matter how poorly held together he might have appeared.

“Feel like some superior being in this crappy factory? Hilarious.”

Determined, the Demon Lord spat this out at the screen, straight-on. He had the weapons and confidence to win, thanks to the unparalleled world of his creation. The infinitely vast world created from his fifteen years of determination, filled to the brim with cheat codes.

A mess of rapidly-changing text ran on the screen until it finally displayed:
GAME OVER

The Demon Lord, without a word, threw Sodom’s Fire into the screen. As the shattered pieces of the monitor twinkled like snowfall in the air, the Demon Lord declared war against his hidden opponent.

“I have no idea who you are, but you should know this. To me, nor the Empire, nothing is impossible!”

The Demon Lord flourished his pitch-black coat and left the room.

This was the first battle of a raging war between the Demon Lord and whoever ruled this world.

Akane Fujisaki

The morning after the counter-invasion, the people of Rookie were up to their ears in trouble cleaning up the mess. There were countless things to take care of, like dealing with corpses, removing debris, transporting the injured, assessing the damage to houses and shops, and so on. Considering that there

was this much damage even with the paladin, the S-rank Mynk, and the Demon Lord and his witch protecting the town, it would have been completely destroyed without them.

After the incident, the Demon Lord ordered Yu to return to the village right away and remained in town. He had a million things to think about and wanted to be alone. He was staying at the cheap inn, gazing out the window.

(“Let’s play”...?)

He kept recalling the ominous message. Judging by what he saw, it was definitely sent by someone who ruled this world.

(Plenty of things to worry about in the village, too...)

Tahara planned to keep expanding the village of Rabbi to swallow up the settlements around it, and was even preparing to fight with that noble with a weird name. Of course, Tahara only considered all of these to be planned and already set forward by the Demon Lord. He was just loyally following orders.

(I’ll be stuck between Yu and Tahara as soon as I go back...)

Foreseeing his situation, the Demon Lord clasped his face in his hands. He had designed Tahara to be a genius himself, who was always a hundred steps ahead of Akira Ono. That genius was overthinking every word and move the Demon Lord made out of humility. Akira, an ordinary working Joe on the inside, got exhausted just from trying to keep up the ruse.

(Then there’s Yu...)

She had been more reserved lately, but her backstory was nothing short of catastrophic. In order to pursue the mystery of the human body, she was ready to dissect a million innocent people, laughing all the way. What made it worse was her intellect as sharp as Tahara’s. It was becoming really taxing to keep playing the role of the Demon Lord of the Empire; it felt like he was laying on a bed of nails, day after day.

(I should summon another advisor. To save my mind and my stomach...!) The first advisor that came to his mind was a more-or-less perfect girl, Ren Miyaoji, one of his most powerful advisors. The problem was, she was as smart as Tahara or Yu, and had a considerable history with Kunai. While he might have

been able to keep up the charade for a while, it was very likely that she would have her suspicions. Worse of all, the very moral Ren hated Yu, and vice versa. Without the Demon Lord of the Empire serving as the mediator between them, they were sure to start killing each other sooner or later. That wouldn't help with his stomach ache, and would more likely cause him a heart attack.

(I'll go all in and summon an idiot... well, the endlessly optimistic one. That's the one.) The Demon Lord thought of Akane Fujisaki. This girl was like the sun. Energetic, happy-go-lucky, and could get along with anyone in no time. She loved anime, light novels, and comics. She seemed like someone who could easily adapt to this fantasy world.

(Akane's not the cunning type. I won't have to pretend to be smart around her...) The Demon Lord wanted a little break from being considered the embodiment of scheming. To strike while the iron was hot, the Demon Lord rose to his feet.

(I'll summon Akane so I can have some non-scheming time... She's great at spying, too.) Even though it was an afterthought, the Demon Lord came up with more reasons to justify his decision. Akane's specialty was her speed, and she had various abilities well-suited for infiltration and espionage. Now that he had seen a clear new enemy, he deemed it important to gather information from countries other than Holylight. After a deep breath, the Demon Lord opened his Admin screen. Remaining SP — 3803.

(With this much, I could deal with anything that happened after summoning her.) When he reached the Summon Advisor section, the Demon Lord's expression tightened. He never got used to the nerves and excitement of this moment. A being that he had created with his sweat and tears was about to come to life. Ready himself, the Demon Lord selected Akane Fujisaki from the Admin screen.

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

With the Demon Lord's call, a pillar of light and a pillar of darkness appeared. When they overlapped, a girl appeared before him. With light brown hair, she wore a school uniform that included a blazer. Her wide-open eyes made it clear that she was a ball of curiosity. Seeing the girl he imagined, designed, and

created come to life, the Demon Lord couldn't help but smile.

"Welcome, Akane."

"Whoa, it's you, Hakuto. Where am I, anyway?"

After addressing the Demon Lord by his first name, Akane began looking around. She was surprised to see the Demon Lord of the Empire in such an old-fashioned building.

"It'd be faster to show you than explain it."

"Hmm? What's that supposed to mean?"

"This."

The Demon Lord grabbed Akane by the neck and prepared to Quick Travel.

"Whoa, hold on! I may be cute as a kitten, but I'm not really one!"

The Demon Lord chuckled at this. Akane had a very transient nature. Her interests and hobbies changed with the wind, and so did her mood. She was even more cat-like than she thought.

"Well, more like an annoying stray cat."

"Hey, can you really look into my cute eyes and— whoa!"

The Demon Lord Quick Traveled anyway, jumping them to Holylight. They were atop a clock tower near the Holy Castle where they could overlook the entirety of the Holy City.

"W-What's this... a new arena? You're spending too much money."

"Look over there. We don't have scorpions that big in the arena."

He pointed out the Sand Scorpions, which were crucial for transporting goods on this continent. The arena was flooded with Chimeras (as if for experimentation), but none of them looked like those Sand Scorpions. The Chimeras in the arena were more terrifying, forbidden creatures.

"Hey! Hey! Look at the big castle!"

"They call that the Holy Castle. This country is called Holylight, by the way."

"Holylight? Sorry, I'm stupid, so I don't know it."

“Of course you don’t know it. We are in a different world than our own.”

As he lit a cigarette and looked down below them, the Demon Lord explained their situation little by little. After having a few runs with his previous advisors, his explanation was smooth. He had learned and experienced much more now than the times he had summoned Yu or Tahara. With everything that had happened in mind, the Demon Lord continued as if to chew on every word.

“Um... Hakuto? Did you hit your head? Do you have a boo-boo?”

“Were you listening at all!?”

The Demon Lord flipped, seeing that Akane was seriously worried about him. He couldn’t imagine anything more frustrating. Grinding his fist into Akane’s head, the Demon Lord carried on his spiel.

“Ow! That hurts!”

“This’ll help the blood flow into your brain. I think it’s blocked.”

For a change of pace, the Demon Lord tried using fiction as a comparison. After he powered through explaining everything again, pulling examples from anime, video games, comics, etc., something finally clicked, and Akane finally clapped her hands together.

“...It’s Isekai! Well, except you’re the Demon Lord and not the hero!”

“P-Putting that second part aside, it’s something like that...”

A little dizzy from being called the Demon Lord, he continued to tell Akane about Holylight, and that they were based in the village of Rabbi, continuing to expand.

“Alright! I’ll take ‘things that sound like a load of fun’ for 1000, Alex!”

“Fun, huh...?”

Watching Akane talk to an invisible game show host, the Demon Lord exhaled a long puff of smoke.

(I was a lot more panicked when I first woke up here...)

Was it her nature? Or just her youth?

“We’re really in a fantasy world! Look, there’s someone pouring water out of

a rune circle!”

“Yes. There is a power in this world that they call magic.”

Which was something extremely dangerous to the Demon Lord, something he needed to defend against, ASAP. His advisors would need some sort of anti-magic armor, too.

“So if you’re the Demon Lord, Hakuto, should I be the hero?”

“Why should we be enemies? Besides, this world already has a hero.”

“What!? But don’t you think I’d be better at it? Think of how cute and strong I am!”

“I envy you for your thought process.”

Half-ignoring Akane’s comments, the Demon Lord continued. Once he told her that Yu and Tahara were already here, Akane’s eyes glimmered.

“Oh, oh, Hakuto! What about Ren?”

“Right. Pretty soon, I’ll...”

“Summon her, already. Summon her now. Noooooow!”

“Argh, knock it off! Get off of me!”

Akane curled up to the Demon Lord like a cat, and he picked her up by the back of the neck again.

“Hey! I always thought you treated me like I’m not super-cute, Hakuto!”

“Dream on.”

With Akane still in his grasp, the Demon Lord flew them back to the town of Rookie. This time, they arrived on a roof that overlooked the plaza. The same spot from where Yu had thrown her grenade(s) the night before. Below them, they could still see monster carcasses scattered about, and they could still smell burnt flesh in the air. Nearly everywhere in town, there was dried blood spattered on the ground and walls, and there were many people working to remove the debris of the destruction since early in the morning. The smoke from the pyre of victims filled the town, and they could see the mass burial taking place in the cemetery outside of the town.

“Where... are we...?”

“It’s not a world full of sunshine and rainbows.”

“Right... Of course...”

As she recalled her previous world ruled by the Empire, Akane’s expression became gloomy.

“There are countless nations that we don’t know about in this world. Some non-human species, too.”

Not to mention the various monsters in the dungeon and the devils. On top of that, there was the unknown enemy from the night before, and the mysterious figure who had restricted his Admin features. With those in mind, the Demon Lord spoke: “It’s the same as it was in the world with the Empire. Even in this world... we have countless enemies.”

“...Right. And if they’re our enemies, I’ll fight them. But...”

“Hm?”

“What do you want to do in this world, Hakuto?”

The Demon Lord couldn’t immediately answer that straightforward question. What was he doing in this world? What did he want to do? He wanted to regain all of his Admin features. Those, having put in fifteen years of blood and sweat to create them, were almost a testament to his own existence. This goal, this objective, would not waiver.

(But what then...?)

The Demon Lord remained silent for a long time, but Akane, uncharacteristically patient, awaited his response. Normally, she would be rushing or teasing him. This went to show how seriously she had asked the question.

(What do I want to do...?)

He realized that, although he didn’t know how long it would take to get there, he had no idea what he would do or wanted to do after regaining all of those features. Now that he had gotten his advisors and many others into the mix, he couldn’t very well ditch everyone and run away.

“Let’s see. After everything’s settled... when there’s peace...”

“When there’s peace...?”

“It might not be so bad to live with you guys in the Sleepless Castle.”

“...Alright. Okay. Okay.”

The Demon Lord didn’t exactly answer her question, but Akane seemed happy, nonetheless. She seemed very excited, for some reason.

“Oh, hey! Look at the weird bird, Hakuto!”

“Just when things were getting serious...”

Just like Akane and her interest in jumping around. She was excitedly pointing at a bird she had never seen, then at a carriage, and to many of the people walking in the streets.

“Look at all that luggage they’re carrying.”

“They’re porters. They do that for a living.”

“But isn’t he... Being pushed around and bullied?”

“He must not be a good porter,” said the man who didn’t carry anything as a porter on his first trip down in the dungeon.

Mikan would have called him out on the hypocrisy if she had been there.

“That kind of thing really grinds my gears. I’ll give them a little talking-to.”

“Hey...!”

Akane jumped off the roof, ignoring the Demon Lord. Her backstory dictated that she would never idly watch as someone was getting bullied. As fast as the wind, she went right up to the adventurers.

“Hey, you! No bullying on my watch!”

“Huh? Who the hell are you?”

The man who had been kicking the portly porter glared at Akane critically.

“Everyone around you is hard at work... What are you doing?”

“Shut up and buzz off.”

Of course, everyone around them was sweating from the hard restoration work. No one else had the time to bully the porter with an already-weak social standing.

“Yuck. Your face makes my stomach turn.”

“This fucking kid...!”

When the man moved to grab Akane, she disappeared from his field of view.

“Over here!”

“You little...!”

Before he knew it, Akane was behind him. With her outrageous Speed stat, she could easily dodge a storm of bullets. If she wanted to, her opponents would have already been knocked flat on the ground without getting so much of a glimpse of her.

“Stop that buzzing... Damnit!”

“Too slow, Admiral! But wow, how’d you survive this long being so slow?”

“You’re using some sort of Wind spe—elIII!?”

With a beautiful kick to the ankle, the man fell on his back. The crowd chuckled at the pathetic pose and the voice he let out. They must have been annoyed by the man jerking around while they needed every hand on deck.

“Come on, bro! If you got enough energy to talk crap, go haul off some debris!”

“Yeah, that’s right!”

“Take a look around! See anyone else goofing off!?”

“What a pathetic little man...”

The man looked left and right toward the voices around him, but soon seemed to realize that there was no one there on his side. He fled the scene, almost on all fours.

“All right, justice always prevails! And look how cute I am.”

As if making a declaration of victory, Akane puffed her flat chest and held out

two fingers: V for victory. The crowd gave plenty of cheers and applause to this happy-go-lucky girl that came flying in like a comet.

“That was something, little girl!”

“Man, was that fun to watch. I never liked that slimy bastard.”

Egged on by the cheers, Akane was now beaming with pride. Eventually the portly porter stood up, and approached Akane with a faint voice, apologizing: “I-I’m sorry... I’ve caused you so much trouble...”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. But you know what, old man?”

“Y-Yes, miss!?”

“See, you got to stop putting yourself down so much.”

“S-Sorry!”

“There you go again!”

The Demon Lord sighed as they played out their infinite loop. She was one of his creations, after all, but she seemed much too reckless. The Demon Lord sent a Communication, ready to return to the cheap inn before the situation complicated.

We’re heading back to the inn.

Whoa! We can still use Communication?

I’ll explain more at the inn.

Okie dokie!

Akane left the scene, waving at the townspeople along the way, and returned to the inn with the Demon Lord via Quick Travel. Since the restoration work had only just begun, the townspeople went back to their work.

After returning to the inn, the Demon Lord and Akane spoke of many things as they ate. At first, they were only served loaves of hardened bread by the stern-faced innkeeper, until the Demon Lord chucked a gold coin onto the table and had him bring them food from a restaurant. With a gold coin, they now had extravagant dishes filling the table. Many of them were meat dishes, like pork chop, turkey roast, and smoked lamb. There was also bean and turnip soup, but

no seafood.

“Hey, Hakuto. Do you think we can use magic too? What do you think?”

While Akane was freely enjoying all of the dishes, the Demon Lord was sipping on a soup, getting tired of the meat-heavy course.

“Don’t think so.”

The Demon Lord answered as he recalled his advisors’ stats. No slot for magic. The only thing he could think of was an evolved base he designed as a joke, called Slimy Metal House that cast a magic spell called Zizzle.

“Hey! Hey, Hakuto! I was thinking...!”

One moment, Akane was interested in magic, then she wanted to dungeon-crawl, then travel around the world as an adventurer... The Demon Lord brushed off her free-spirited rants as he popped pieces of smoked meat into his mouth.

“Hey hey hey! You’re not even listening!”

“Shut up and eat.”

The Demon Lord was unbothered. Still, Akane stared at the Demon Lord, quizzically.

“What now?”

“You’ve changed a bit, Hakuto...”

The Demon Lord’s heart skipped a beat. While Akane wasn’t book-smart, her intuition was as sharp as a wild animal’s. The Demon Lord decided to agree to her comment.

“I won’t deny it. Many months have passed since I’ve come to this world...”

He was implying that everyone would undergo some changes with a shift in their environment, especially with a shift as major as coming to a new world. Akane seemed to take that as an answer.

“Okay. I like you better now, though, Hakuto.”

“Is that so? Good to hear.”

“Can’t you be a little more excited about it? What’s with the cold shoulder!?”

“What’s to get excited about being liked by you?”

“That does it...! I’m going to finish all these steaks myself!”

“Who do you think paid for those...?”

As they carried on their ruckus of a meal, the Demon Lord kept hammering in knowledge of this world into Akane. Just as a teacher would do to a student.

That night, having completed Akane’s 101 crash course of this world, the Demon Lord was watching the town alone from atop the roof. Akane was already fast asleep, sprawling across the entire bed with a satisfied expression.

(Even restoration is mostly done by magic.)

The Demon Lord pondered some things as he lit a cigarette.

(The village is in constant construction, anyway...)

The major expansion of the village of Rabbi was still ongoing, and he felt that observing the restoration process here might benefit him in some way. While various heavy machinery made modern construction possible, magic spells were the heavy machinery of this world. Large debris made lighter by Wind spells, and some cumbersome stones and walls were even sunk into the ground with Earth spells.

(Magic...)

Recalling the Water spell he was hit with in the dungeon, he couldn’t help but wince. A higher-rank spell could have been lethal. He needed to work out a strategy against magic, and fast. Then, a bird came down right next to the Demon Lord deep in thought.

“Hm? Just so you know, I don’t have anything to feed you.”

There was no way that a bird should have understood him, but it remained still, as if it was resting. In fact, it even crooked its neck as if to read the Demon Lord’s expression.

“What...? You want me to find out if you’re finger-lickin’ good?”

He lazily shoed at it, but the bird remained. Surprisingly, the bird fluttered its

wings and hopped over to the Demon Lord, then onto his shoulder.

“Whoa, I’m not into birds that much...”

The Demon Lord chuckled, then the color drained from his face as he heard a woman’s voice, as if spoken directly into his eardrums.

Caught you with your guard down...

An eerie voice came out of the bird’s beak. The Demon Lord subtly looked around, but couldn’t find anyone else around them. The only explanation was that the voice was spoken from the bird on his shoulder.

“Practicing your ventriloquist act?”

The Demon Lord puffed out his cigarette smoke, concealing his shock.

You are an interesting one... Are you man or devil?

“Doesn’t matter. What do you want?”

He acted as undaunted as ever, but even the Demon Lord was taken aback by the next words out of the bird’s beak.

Even with all of your powers, you are completely defenseless against magic...

“Ah... Do you think so?”

Gazing up at the moon, the Demon Lord imagined who he could be speaking to.

This little bird is the prime proof of it. Most people would keep a lowly familiar like this one away with a rudimentary protective spell or barrier... but you didn’t — or couldn’t — bother.

“I see... that you find enjoyment in eavesdropping.”

Now, he remembered that the bird on his shoulder was the same one Akane had pointed out during the day. It seemed safe to assume that the bird was listening to at least a portion of their conversation.

Empire, Sleepless Castle... I don’t understand these words that you’ve used.

“No need to understand them. Before you know it, they’ll be a reality.”

The bird finally fell silent at the Demon Lord’s bold declaration. Soon, a

strange spiral appeared before the Demon Lord, and a girl adorning a black robe emerged from it. She was Olgan, the Star Player.

“One question... Are you truly the Demon Lord that appears in legends?”

“I’m not interested in fairy tales.”

The Demon Lord brushed the question off, but he really didn’t know or have interest in any legends. Only those around him kept (mistakenly) imagining the Demon Lord to be the figure in their myths.

“Then allow me to demonstrate a theory.”

“Oh? Please do.”

The Demon Lord agreed, a little nervous. Fiddling with the crystal ball in her hand, Olgan sharply glared at the Demon Lord.

“Long ago, you fought the Great Light and suffered grave injuries. You were nearly dead, or sealed. That’s my starting point.”

“Hm...”

“Now you have lost the majority of your powers, and are under some sort of heavy restraint.”

“I see.”

As he feigned nonchalance, the Demon Lord was shocked that part of her theory was true. He didn’t know if the girl thought of the fact by coincidence or perception, but it was true that many of his abilities were locked and heavily restrained.

“Now... I want to make a deal with you.”

“Deal, huh? What do you want from me?”

“There’s someone I want you to kill.”

“Now that doesn’t sound very peaceful.”

Exhaling the cigarette smoke with a sense of enjoyment, the Demon Lord was relieved for the time being. This girl didn’t seem to be the one who sent him the message in the Bastille Dungeon, nor the one who messed with his Admin features.

“It’s frustrating, but I can’t finish the kill on my own.”

“If I do kill whoever it is, what am I going to get out of it?”

A deal couldn’t stand unless it was a win-win.

“...His castle contains an abundance of gold and treasure, as well as countless historical magical items. Take them all for yourself.”

The Demon Lord held a long pause at this. Seeing his uninterested act, Olgan couldn’t help but grip her fists in anticipation of a refusal. It was do-or-die for her. After watching him in action at the counter-invasion the other day, she was sure that he really was the mythical Demon Lord, or at least someone with similar powers. This wasn’t a chance she could let slip by.

“The treasury contains seeds that boost the user’s magic abilities, crystals that temporarily boost the power of magic spells, and a magical item that will bounce off any lower-rank spell. I’m only interested in taking his head. Everything in the treasury is your reward.”

“...And who is it that you hold such a grudge against?”

Truth be told, the Demon Lord wanted to jump on the deal, but wasn’t careless enough to agree without knowing who he was dealing with.

“A grand devil said to be the next King of Devils... Belphegor.”

“The King of Devils, huh...”

With a subtle nod, the Demon Lord internally cheered in victory. The King of Devils was (what he thought to be) the weakling monster that attacked him out of the blue when he came to this world. They considered that wannabe gargoyle a king? Ridiculous. Still, the Demon Lord didn’t want to seem desperate by agreeing too easily. Just as the Demon Lord of the Empire would have, he refused to make a clear answer for a while...

“All the treasure in his castle isn’t enough for you...?”

The Demon Lord again only answered with silence. In situations like these, silence was golden. More often than not, the terms of the deal would only improve.

“Then, I’ll make sure you have whatever it is you want. You name it.”

“Oh...?”

The Demon Lord gave her a sharp glare. Finally, some music to his ears. His attitude showed it, too. Olgan was wary of what he could possibly ask for, but she needed him to say yes, above all else. Whether he knew Olgan’s thoughts or not, the Demon Lord solemnly spread his arms and declared: “Rejoice. Your wish is granted...”

Even Olgan was stunned at his absolute confidence. He already seemed sure of his victory.

“Quite the confidence... We’re infiltrating his land in Hellion territory.”

“No matter. Why do you want this devil dead, anyway?”

Olgan looked to her feet, and remained silent for a long while. It didn’t seem like something she wanted to say. Still, she must have decided that she couldn’t afford to upset the Demon Lord over it. Reluctantly, she answered.

“Because that devil... is my father.”

Now the Demon Lord was actually struck silent. He couldn’t imagine how a father and daughter could want to kill each other, but assumed that devils lived in a different world than humans.

(Her dad’s a devil, huh...?)

At the same time, he finally noticed that the girl before him was no ordinary human, but a Firebrand like Tron.

“Now, what should I call you? Demon Lord? Or do you prefer Fallen Angel...?”

“Demon Lord is fine.”

The Demon Lord contained his laughter at the mention of Fallen Angel. He recalled the cringey story about Lucifer he had read in the library with Aku and shrugged his shoulders.

“I see. Then I will address you as such, Demon Lord. When do we leave?”

“Now.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear me? We’re leaving now.”

“W-Wait a minute! We’ll need some time to prepare before attacking his castle...”

“No need at all. We have Akane with us, anyway.”

With that, the Demon Lord jumped right off of the roof and headed to the inn. Olgan could only watch him disappear into the town.

—Later in the night, when all were asleep...

The four-member party was gathered at the entrance of town: the Demon Lord, the still half-asleep Akane, Olgan the Firebrand, and S-rank adventurer Mynk. Ordinarily, these four would have never crossed paths, but now that they were together, it was quite the sight.

“Hey, Hakuto. Who are these people? I’m tired...” Akane said, wobbling as if she was about to fall asleep standing.

Mynk was surprised to see the Demon Lord, too.

“Why is the Demon Lord here...? My sworn nemesis!”

(Nemesis?) the Demon Lord thought, puzzled. Olgan, trying to assume the role of the leader, shortly explained to the party: “We will infiltrate Hellion territory. Our objective is to kill Belphegor.”

The Demon Lord nodded with reverence. Akane had already fallen asleep, still standing. Mynk alone reacted in surprise.

“Hellion territory...!? With just the four of us!?”

“With just the four of us. Any weaklings would only get in our way.” Olgan countered stoically to Mynk’s reasonable reaction. Olgan knew full well how insane this was, and even she was having a hard time keeping her composure.

“T-This is your plan, isn’t it, Demon Lord...!? You’re trying to usurp me as the superior agent of darkness...!”

Mynk glared at the Demon Lord with animosity, jabbing the air between them with her finger.

“What is she going on about?”

“Ignore her. It’s a sickness.”

“Are you out of your mind, Olgan!? If darkness meets darkness, the Dark Salamander sealed in my right hand may arise from its slumber!”

Mynk grasped her right hand, showing a pained expression. Seeing her, the Demon Lord seemed to understand that she had a bad case of goth or emo or something. At this rate, their departure was only going to delay.

“Olgan, was it? Lead the way to... Hellion territory, right?”

“All right. Mynk, knock off the nonsense.”

“Nonsense!? Once I set a single foot in that place, I won’t be able to contain my... Hey!”

Olgan grabbed her by the neck and sprinted. The Demon Lord carried Akane (still masterfully standing and sleeping) under one arm and followed. The mismatched quartet began their invasion of Hellion territory, uncharted by man. One might have shuddered to imagine what sort of commotion they would bring with them.

Epilogue: Another Departure

—Outside the village of Rabbi.

Wo Wungol was sitting on a comfortably-sized rock, listening to his men report. Through his years as a bandit, he had become well-versed in the undergrounds of most nations.

“A prisoner of war in the Island Legion, huh...? Sounds about right.”

Those who lost a war and were captured were turned into slaves to be sold off. It was common practice, and nothing particular in and of itself. A demi-human in the mix, though, was another story. Especially when the group was being transported to Hellion territory, this was no ordinary transaction.

“I’ve got a friend in Euri with sticky fingers. Seems legit, Boss.”

“And how many are in tow?”

“Don’t know the exact count, but apparently it’s over 300.”

“How are they going to take that many over?”

“It looks like they’re taking a ship, Boss.”

Wo Wungol chuckled in response. Once the ship sailed, no one could tell where they were headed. No one in the Northern Nations would expect the slave ship to chart its course to Hellion territory. Wo Wungol was curious what reason was behind all of it.

“I mean, I’ve always known those bastards were up to shady crap...”

“But, Boss. Why would the Tzardom want to bring slaves to Hellion territory...? How do they expect to survive the journey to begin with?”

“Hmph. They got some sort of deal, no doubt. This is why I don’t trust any god or ‘Light’ or angel,” the bandit leader spat out.

They, at least, took pride in their lives of crime.

“Whatever. We just gotta pass this on and get our reward.”

Wo Wungol, the leader of the Mole bandit gang, stood with somewhat of an eye roll. He had become tired of this gig by now, having been half-threatened into taking it by Tahara. He was promised an absolution from Luna once the job was done.

“Absolution... My ass.”

“B-But Boss... It’s a matter of time before they’ll catch us, or we’ll starve.”

“You want me to be a slave like ol’ Fuji?”

Irritated, the bandit produced a piece of jerky from his pocket and tore into it. While a Holy Maiden was granted the authority to judge and prosecute a criminal on the spot, they were also granted the right to absolve them of their crimes. Mount Fuji, who now served Queen, was a good example of someone who was absolved of their crimes. Imagining himself as a Holy Maiden’s pet, the bandit shuddered.

“B-But, he said he’d give us more work.”

“Work, huh...”

Wo Wungol had accepted this gig because he was drawn by the prospect of this upcoming work of digging wells throughout Holylight. The bandit had scoffed at the idea at first, but after watching the major construction project begin to transform the village of Rabbi, he could no longer do so. Maybe they really would dig all of those wells...

(The Mole...)

The bandit glanced at the ground, reminiscing about an old dream that he had, to dig a well in this dried land like a mole so they could drink as much water as they wanted. His hometown was too poor to even buy any Water Spell Stones. Terrible droughts dried out their farms, causing the people of his village to drop like flies, until the village became uninhabitable. Unable to let go of his dream, he had named his gang ‘the Mole’.

“What’s wrong, Boss?”

“Nothing...”

Wo Wungol stood from the rock he was sitting on and headed to the village of

Rabbi to make his report. It was no longer the desolate village he remembered, now bustling with a surprising amount of people working to transform it with a lot of sweat and hard work.

“I’ll meet you back at the base. I’ll go get our reward.”

“Yessir!”

After sending his henchman away, the bandit went to find Tahara, who was in charge of the construction. Tahara perceptively noticed Wo Wungol in no time.

“Hey, old man! How’d it go?”

“Tsk, you annoying freshman...”

The bandit winced at being called an old man. While they were bandits, he was the leader of an organization. He was relatively well known in Holylight, to the point where almost no one addressed him with such rudeness.

“Sorry I’m so young. Sure beats being a senior.”

“Young my ass... You’re not that young anymore.”

“Shut the hell up, I’m only thirty-one!”

“You’re passed thirty, you’re an old man too! Stop trying to fight it!”

The derailed, unsightly argument between the two old men ensued, until Tahara noticed the eyes of the crowd around them and urged the bandit to continue his report, annoyed.

“So, was she one of them?”

“No doubt about it. There’s a demi-human... A hawk hybrid.”

“Right on the money... It’s going to get messy.”

Tahara imagined the turbulence that was sure to follow this revelation. At the same time, he made his first move, right away.

“Here’s your pay, old man.”

“Good... Hey, this is...!”

The leather bag tossed his way was packed to the brim with silver coins, and was heavy enough to make the bandit falter. It seemed at least ten times more

than the reward he was promised.

“W-Wait a minute! What’s this supposed to...?”

“I gotta go talk to Miss Luna. I don’t know what it really means, but I gotta get you absolved, or whatever.”

Tahara had decided to continue using Wo Wungol. Once he did, he acted fast. If they remained wanted criminals, it would be difficult for him to employ the gang anywhere in Holylight. Worst case scenario, they could be arrested or killed by the authorities.

“What the hell...?” the bandit muttered.

He moved the leather bag up and down as if to really measure its weight, and held it up to the sun as if to savor the reflection of the silver coins. He tried to maintain his frown, but couldn’t help cracking a smile. With all of this money, he could buy plenty of Water Spell Stones and food. He looked around the area to find many of their workers sharing his expression.

(Do these guys get paid pretty well, too...?)

Once the Northern Nations entered war season, passing both people and goods across borders would become difficult. Naturally, that meant less work for the people. On the other hand, there were more jobs once the war season ended, but being able to work in the meantime was a luxury.

“And there’s a bunch of weird-looking buildings... What the hell is happening?”

As the bandit leader pondered this and that, Luna came sprinting his way, head-on. Wo Wungol nearly fled at her intense expression.

“H-Hey... I was supposed to be absolved... You’re not going to...”

“You! Is it true!?”

Faced with Luna’s golden magic bolting through her body, the bandit sweat bullets out of every pore. He knew that, if such magic was directed at him, he would not survive it.

“A-About the demi-human? Yeah, it’s true...! Mixed in, with the slaves, in the Island Region.”

“Okay...”

The bandit answered, barely able to breathe, but even Tahara behind him was in a similar state of mind. He could have taken down Luna before she could cast a spell, but he felt that he wouldn't get off scot-free from a direct hit of that level of magic.

“Miss Luna, I understand your eagerness here. But I can get you to do your absolution thing?”

“Right.”

Luna agreed with uncharacteristic ease. She knew that she had no time to argue. She produced a piece of paper and an elaborately decorated needle from her pocket, then turned to Wo Wungol.

“Give me your hand.”

“A-All right... Ow! Ow!”

Without hesitation, Luna stabbed the needle into Wo Wungol's palm. Even worse, she wiggled the needle to and fro until bright red blood came pouring out.

“Gaaaaaagh! What... the hell!?”

“A punishment for the sinful. Wise Angel, have mercy on this hopeless and ugly bearded ape...!”

“Graaaaaaagh!”

The bandit desperately tried to flee, but Luna's magic engulfed him, keeping him in place. The hellish agony seemed to continue forever when Wo Wungol finally fainted, his eyes rolling into his head.

“That about does it.”

Luna, as if she were on an assembly line, pressed the bandit's reddened hand onto the paper, leaving his handprint on it. Tahara watched the event unfold with his mouth agape.

“Uh... Is that some sort of ritual? Like, was it necessary?”

To Tahara, it seemed like some black magic. Tales of sketchy rituals using

human blood, hair, or nails were common in his world, too.

“What? Oh, not really.”

“Huh?” Tahara blurted out at Luna’s matter-of-fact response. Ordinarily, absolution was performed by pricking a finger and taking the criminal’s fingerprint in blood. This version was of Luna’s invention. Tahara gazed up to the sky.

“What’s wrong with the Holy Maidens of this country...?”

“Oh? I’m much more merciful than my sister, you know? I heard Fuji had his bloodied face pressed into the paper.”

“Is that so...?”

Tahara shook his head, having heard enough. After a deep breath, Luna jumped up.

“Alright, I’m off!”

“...Uh huh.”

As Luna ran off, Tahara shot out a Communication.

Soon, Yu appeared from behind him with a curious expression.

“Are you sure?”

“Didn’t think I could stop her.”

“Still...”

“Don’t worry about it. Mister Secretary said to let her be.”

“I see. Actually, I think it will be better for us to have her involved.”

As the two advisors schemed, Luna was on course to run right out of the village when someone called her to a halt from behind. Luna turned to find the Madame with a jubilant smile and rejuvenated skin.

“What is it? Even you can’t stop me this time, Madame.”

“I wouldn’t dare, Little Luna. Why don’t you take my carriage?”

“What?”

“There’s no way you’ll make it past the Northern Nations in yours.”

Luna froze in her tracks, the revelation hitting her. If a Holy Maiden’s carriage were to pass borders without a warning, it could start rumors of war.

“But not if you blend into my caravan. While you’re at it, there are a few things I’d like you to pick up for me!”

The Madame giggled. She really didn’t have anything she wanted, but this was her way of repaying Luna while keeping face. For once, Luna seemed to pick up on the Madame’s intentions.

“Thank you, Madame... I’ll owe you.”

“Wow. A thanks from Little Luna herself? It must be my lucky day.”

“I-I thank people sometimes!” Luna shouted, beet red.

Then, numerous carriages adorning the crest of House Butterfly appeared from seemingly nowhere, all ready to depart. They formed a giant caravan akin to a battalion. Anyone in the Northern Nations would jump in joy upon seeing this caravan... It was a big wave that only came once every few years: The Buy-Out Caravan.

“Lady Luna, if you would...” The elderly butler of House Butterfly courteously escorted Luna into one of the largest carriages. The moment Luna stepped inside, the Madame saw her determined expression, and the strong, gleaming eyes of a woman ready to fulfill her dream. She couldn’t help but call out: “Little Luna...!”

Luna stopped and turned around, curious.

“Won’t you tell me... Your dream?”

Luna looked dumbfounded for a moment before finding an answer, and shouting with a powerful voice: “I’m going to be the princess of this world and brag to my friend about it!”

This made a brimming smile appear on the Madame’s face and she wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. Let anyone laugh at them, she thought. Just like hers, Luna’s dream was grand.

“It’s a wonderful, wonderful dream, Little Luna. Take care...!”

With the Madame's farewell encouraging her, Luna stepped into the carriage as she cheerfully waved back at her. Soon, the enormous caravan started off, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

The Tzardom's troupe, ready to transport numerous slaves; the two Star Players; Luna and the Buy-Out Caravan; and the Demon Lord with his new advisor were all gathering in one location, all as if they were drawn by something. A hellish event that would wreak catastrophic havoc in Hellion territory was about to commence...

Epitaph: Tartarus Approaching

—Japan, 2004.

Numerous players gathered at the arena, hosted by Akira, day in and day out. It was a craze. Just by logging in, players could compete with opponents all around the country, and could showcase their skills to the fullest.

Things always happened in real-time in the arena, including the News File. A single action could earn a spotlight and the praise of other players. Players were revered for killing many others, and those who acquired a hard-to-obtain skill, for example, were also picked up in the News File. The survivor of the week, in particular, would garner the applause and respect of all of the players. It couldn't get any better — anyone could become a hero here. It is a primal human instinct to crave the attention and reassurance of others, and Akira's game definitely fulfilled that need. The harsh environment of the arenas made it only natural that players with noteworthy performances were praised. Players forgot to sleep and eat as they dove deep into the game.

Akira only watched all of this with satisfaction, unaware of the approaching pitfall: a Tartarus. Later, he would call it a black hole. At this time, something that would inhale and swallow everything in its path was about to be born.

An incredible social networking service that sucked in the entirety of Japan's online society... Mizi. The social network had a quiet start, but once the ignition was lit, it spread like wildfire. Friends recruited friends who recruited their friends... an endless chain. After its first year, the service hosted 200,000 then 2 million after its second year. 6 million after the third year, and 14 million after the fourth. This was truly a phenomenon. There, users could interact with all of their friends, as well as meet new people. No need to go through the hassle of creating a blog site. Everything was made easy for the user. Before this, if any individual wanted to publish any information online, they had to create a website. Now, by registering to Mizi, it was all done for them. First, the less tech-savvy women jumped on the service, and the men followed that in

swarms. In the blink of an eye, individual websites decayed, blogs disappeared, and all the text-based sites could no longer be found, all swallowed up by the black hole that was Mizi.

Initially, Akira wasn't threatened at all by it, simply ignoring it. Just a blog site, he thought. But, once the user base exploded, and Mizi began gathering numerous video games and publishing applications, Akira felt a sense of fear. The social network with such an overwhelming population reached into the realm of video games. Setting trends was a numbers game. It was clear to see that anything popularized on the site would become mainstream.

"Whoa whoa whoa..."

The popular games on there were all cuddly games, like farming, cooking in a restaurant, etc., that involved sending friends stars and hearts and such. These were casual co-op games, the polar opposite of Akira's game.

"This isn't good..."

That was an understatement. He could see his player base plummeting, and less and less people showing up to the arenas. Everyone was blogging, interacting with friends, and playing on cute applications on Mizi. Everyone in Japan was there, so it was only natural that people spent more and more time on it. If they were playing Akira's game, they couldn't be on Mizi.

"Dammit! What am I supposed to do now...!?"

Akira could not have been the only one troubled by Mizi. Those who had been making a living from independent web sites or blogs were prime examples.

After two years, the entire online society of Japan was swallowed up by the Mizi monster, leaving most everything else a wasteland.

Akira's instant messenger blinked to signal a notification. He opened it, without much emotion. As expected, it was from XX.

"See? Told you this would happen."

"...Whatever," Akira answered, but even his typed response seemed weak.

"What are you gonna do? Want to put your game on Mizi?"

"As if! What the hell am I supposed to do on that cuddle-fest of a platform!?"

In fact, even if Akira had ported his game, no one would have given it a second look. The SNS was a place to get along with other people. Not compete with them, let alone kill them.

“But your world’s dying out, Akira.”

“Not going to happen.”

The next day, Akira introduced a new structure. He allowed the players to form a team of up to five members and fight together. Now, there would be a surviving team of the week, rather than a single player. This was a smart move. Something that went with the times and the trends. While he gained a moderate amount of newcomers, he naturally received some harsh backlash, too. For the OG players, it only looked like he had gotten soft. The forums were in turmoil through the announcement and the implementation.

“Co-op? Who the f asked for this?”

“Who is this for?”

“Co-op sounds kind of fun, actually.”

“There’s new stuff you can do.”

“Go back to Mizi, you POS.”

“Ono’s gone soft...”

“It’s been good, but bye.”

With support and backlash clashing everywhere, the entire game was filled with tension. Eventually, the more casual players dropped out, having had enough of the continuous bickering. They were there to have fun playing a game, not fight. With Mizi’s creation, and now the civil conflict in his game, he was losing players faster than ever. Akira’s world was crumbling like a breached dam.

—New Year’s Day, 2006.

The chatroom that had always been filled with players ready to celebrate the New Year was now empty. Every demographic was logged into Mizi, where they celebrated the occasion with their friends. Akira had logged onto the chatroom to mitigate the vacant loneliness of it, but he only felt hollower by doing so.

“How fast you can fall...”

Not that anyone had heard him mutter that, but a change occurred in the chatroom.

—*Sho joined the chat*

Akira smiled a little upon seeing this. He was one of the players who had always caused a big commotion in the arena, calling himself the Sailor Skirt Warrior. Now, he had created a team of players with similar preferences, claiming that sailor girl uniforms would save the planet and take down the Empire. In his own way, he had tried to reignite the game.

“So, when’s the next event?”

Akira didn’t expect this question from him. Akira smirked.

“Event? There’s no one to play the game.”

“Just get some more people in, then.”

How!? Akira wanted to shout into the screen, but held back. How was he supposed to gather more players in this wasteland?

“There’s not even a hundred players left. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Do it for those hundred people, then.”

“A hundred... Where there were thousands...”

This was more of a painful revelation for Akira than anything. Now that there were so few players, the game balance was completely out of whack. But Sho was suggesting this in earnest.

“If need be, I’ll talk to some people.”

“It’s okay.”

“...What’s okay?” Sho asked, but at the same time, didn’t seem like he wanted to hear the answer.

After hesitating for a moment, Akira continued: “I think I’ll shut it down...”

Sho replied with a flood of text.

“Hey, Ono... Remember New Year’s Day back then? Remember how cocky

you were!? Where's your ever-evolving world now!?"

"I'm just one guy... How am I supposed to take on that phenomenon?"

In fact, any and all personal websites and games were disappearing from the World Wide Web. With time, the model of people concentrating to the epicenter of trends would never change. In several years, various more networks would be established, along with video-posting sites and tools where people comment with 140 characters or less... Through the various changes and evolutions of online society, the only thing that remained true was the concentrated population graph of it. Just as people gathered at metropolises, people attracted more people.

"Come off it... Where's your signature cocky attitude!?"

"Heh. I'd love to be cocky right now..."

"If you give up, it's really all over...! Why don't you...?"

"Thanks for loving this game like you did. For loving my world."

"...I don't want to read that kind of bull! I'm done with you!"

Sho stormed out of the chatroom, and Akira left without another word. Then, he logged in as the Demon Lord of the Empire and entered a room where one of his advisors sat. A girl named Ren Miyaoji. The prima donna of the game, who was more popular than any other character.

"Thanks for your hard work, Ren."

Akira spoke to her, but of course, she didn't respond, Ren was only a lifeless video game character. As if to reminisce, Akira muttered: "A lot has happened these past few years. All those players attacking the Sleepless Castle, going to your place, having this weird raid party. You getting bombarded with love-letter messages..."

There were battles over the Sleepless Castle here and there, but most of them were treated as a party or an event, rather than a full-blown siege. Some attacked the Castle with all intentions of taking it down, but were usually demolished within an hour. After that, battles over the Sleepless Castle were excuses for big parties. Players ran to their favorite advisors, some massacred

the raiding players from behind, and some used their fireworks to show off.

“It was the best... Like a roaring flame. It was fun.”

Akira’s whisper wasn’t meant for anybody in particular, but rather he was telling the world itself how he felt.

“You must be tired, huh? Take a break. I think I’ll... do the same.”

Ren’s expression was unchanged; she just sat there quietly. Seeing her like this, a tear fell down Akira’s cheek for his frustration against himself.

“But Ren. I will come back. To you. So... Wait for me.”

With that, Akira left his familiar arena.

And so, Akira Ono’s world came to an end. It would take him a few more years to get back up and reconstruct another world. The trends of the online world changed day-to-day, ever-shifting. Even Mizi, the unstoppable juggernaut, would not escape the shifts of time. As everyone was tossed to the roiling current of time, Akira, too, was like a single leaf floating on its surface.

Years later, when that leaf soared again... it landed on the ground, rooted, sprouted, and eventually triggered a world-wide phenomenon. Something Akira had no idea about just yet.

Postscript

Thank you for picking up volume 3 of Demon Lord, Retry! Kurone Kanzaki, the author, here. Finally, the new edition has caught up to the number of volumes of the original publication! It took a while to get this far, but I think the contents are much more robust now! This was only made possible by your support. Thank you so much.

...And I'm writing this formal greeting in April, while this volume should go on shelves come May. We saw another advisor appear, how do you like her? She's going to make the world of Demon Lord, Retry! a lot more chaotic. I have fun writing her, more than anything. She doesn't have a trajectory or any order about her. She's free, and in a sense, she's already out of my hands. I expect her to tear things up with unexpected actions come volume 4. The Demon Lord is in for more headaches.

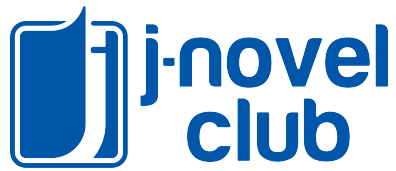
By the time this volume is published, I'm sure the second round of announcements have been made for the anime. And what a line-up of voice talent...! I'm starting to worry if the anime team really stayed in their budget. Let me rip open my Velcro wallet here...

In any case, the anime will premiere this summer. With all of the other anime coming out in summer, it's going to be a lot of fun. Meanwhile, I'm sure I will be writing away in my little room. When I do go outside, I go on walks, eat at Osho (a chain ramen restaurant), or go to the supermarket... I'm living the life of a stay-at-home husband. Well, it looks like another peaceful year of writing about this Demon Lord for me.

The chapters in volume 4 have never been published before. I shudder to imagine what trouble our usual suspects will bring to Animanía and the Hellion territory.

I look forward to seeing you all in the next volume, or maybe in the anime.





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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 3

by Kurone Kanzaki

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2020