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Demon Lord, Retry!

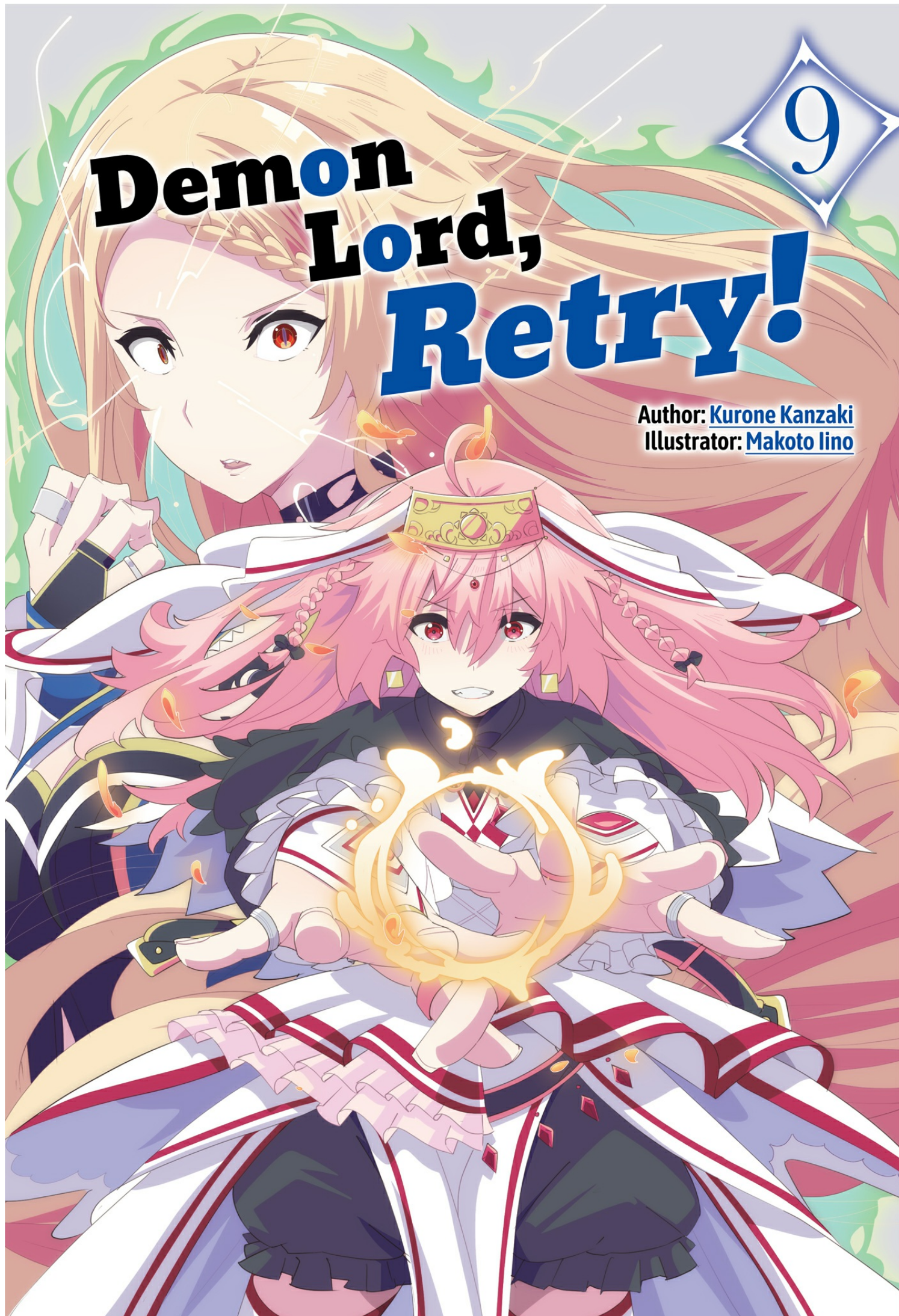
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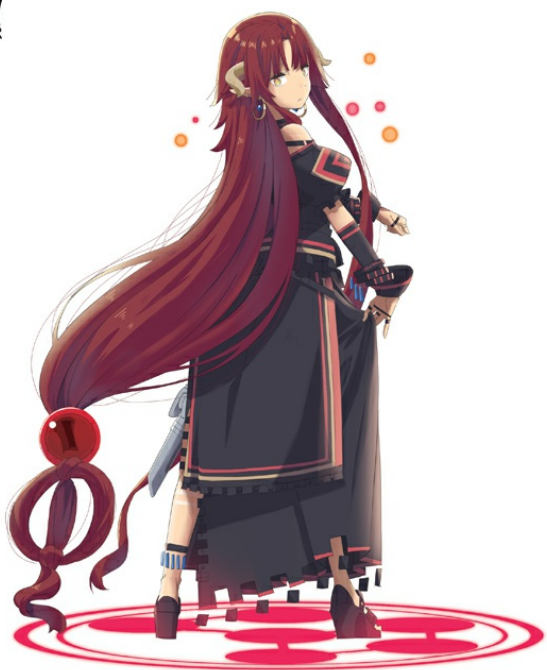
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DEMON
LORD,
RETRY!





Yuya Kondo

Tron

OIL
RIG



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Chapter 11: Conquest

Raise the Battle Flags

—Northern Holylight.

This place was a veritable terrain of trials. Unlike the arid wasteland that was Eastern Holylight, the northern region of the country was a place of volatile climate. Blazing heat assaulted the land one day and with a roaring blizzard the next. The very landscape was a relic of the Mythical Era in a way.

At the twilight of the ancient Mythical War, Gatekeeper had served as the last line of defense against the incoming Hellion army...until it, too, was trampled. After the fortress fell, Northern Holylight became the primary battleground where the human survivors, led by the Wise Angel, clashed with the King of Devils' army. Light and darkness collided time after time until the very air was tarnished, every body of water evaporated, and the sky was eternally dimmed.

The Hellions and their brutal victories pushed the front line down to Eastern Holylight. Battle raged on until all that was left in the north were numerous craters and enormous chasms that cracked the earth so deeply they almost seemed bottomless. The humans managed to repair the fortress after the war, but two thousand years did nothing to improve the ruined climate of the north, its devastation a memorial to the massive scale of the ancient war.

And now, a Xenobian legion of five thousand strong had poured into that unforgiving land like a pack of hunting dogs.

"It's getting mighty cold, Boss... The heat was just about killing us earlier," one of them grumbled.

"That's 'General,' to you, dimwit. You'll address me by my sparkly new title."

"Heh, that's right. What do we do now, General?"

"We wait for butterflies... This place isn't much of a hunting ground, anyway." Zorm smirked. Before he'd taken on the mantle of general, he had served as Leon's right-hand man.

In short, Zorm was a crass commander. He was a brutal mad dog that had no qualms about pillaging, razing, raping, kidnapping, or torturing civilians. Even

during Zorm and his dogs' current campaign, they had torn through town after town on their route, pilfering everything they could find, tearing jewelry off the dead, and having their turns with any young woman unfortunate enough to catch their eyes.

No doubt, this description would leave anyone in disbelief. How could a military act so cartoonishly savage? Fact, however, is sometimes stranger than fiction. Plenty of news stories in our world describe militant groups so morally bankrupt that they belong in the dark ages. Perhaps Zorm's legion was not an outlier at all.

"Boss—I mean, General? Another village elder is here to see you," said one of Zorm's men.

"Take whatever he brought and kick him to the curb."

"Yessir!"

Less prosperous towns and villages often cobbled together whatever supplies they could to offer armies marching their way through, begging for their settlement to be spared. The offering was a worthy investment for most villages, no matter how destitute, if it meant preventing these armored brutes from slaughtering their working population, defiling their women, and setting their homes ablaze.

Zorm's henchmen muttered a kernel of truth for once: "These militant nobles are a heartless bunch. Aren't they supposed to protect these poor bastards? Their precious tax dollars at work." In part, commoners paid their taxes in hopes that they would be protected in times of need. Nobles who refused to provide that very protection to their people were breaking the contract, in a sense.

"Stupidity is human nature," Zorm quipped. "They're paying for a pipe dream. No army's gonna protect peasants when their own asses are on fire." The statement was ironic, since his legion was the one holding the torch that had started the blaze in the first place.

A cheer came from the front of their cavalcade, drawing their attention.

"Sounds like butterflies, Boss!"

Zorm cackled without noticing that his right-hand man had neglected to use his proper title again. “Butterflies” was code for the supplies that the Madam continually tried to send northward.

“Boss, how come rich nobles never seem to have a thought between their ears?”

“Heh! The hardest work they’ve ever done is move a fork and knife over their dinner plate. They think they can give one little word and their package will show up anywhere they want.”

By nature, nobles believed that everyone lived to serve them like their butlers and maids, that their staff would figure out a way to fulfill any impossible whim. In Zorm’s eyes, the Madam was the epitome of sheltered nobility.

“Give them a little chase. Just enough to spook them,” Zorm commanded.

“Heh heh heh... You betcha!” With the crack of a riding crop, his henchmen galloped away.

Zorm’s men had pulled off this operation many times before. A little chase to intimidate them and the coachmen would cut their cargo loose and run for their lives every time. By now, Zorm’s men were well accustomed to the game.

Soon, the brutes returned with a wagon packed full of goods, greeted by amused whistling from the soldiers who’d remained with the cavalcade. It was almost too easy.

“Boss, this one’s got bags full of gold coins and cases of fancy wine!”

“Fancy wine, huh? Apparently, the tycoon of the South mistook this war for a high society ball.” The men burst into laughter at his jab.

Like a sheep to slaughter bringing its own dagger, this foolish noblewoman continued to deliver her riches to them. As bizarre of a situation as it was, none of Zorm’s men questioned the pattern. It was all too common for the ignorant rich to demand the impossible, only for their staff to obediently try their best to comply, all the while muttering how impractical the demand was.

“If nothing else, they know when to run,” said Zorm’s henchman.

“I’d be running at the first sign of trouble too, if I had to answer to a

noblewoman like that. No one could survive that long-term,” Zorm answered.

In a strange way, Zorm and his men sympathized with the coachmen. It would have been next to impossible for anyone to deliver their cargo past the armies currently swarming in the north. What chance did a fully loaded wagon have against soldiers on horseback? No coachman was stupid enough to risk their life for such a foolhardy demand. Zorm’s men had come to learn that a little bit of chase was more than enough to scare them away.

“Another village elder’s here, Boss. Want me to give him the usual?”

“No, bring him here... I want to ask him something,” Zorm commanded.

The elder was visibly shaking as he was brought before Zorm, fearfully holding out the leather sack containing every coin he could scrape together from his village. Seeing that all the coins were bronze, Zorm let out a grunt. Compared to the bags of gold coins he had just scored from the carriage, this was nothing but pocket change.

“Take it back, Gramps,” he said.

“P-Please... Our village has nothing more we can offer...” the elder stammered.

“Don’t get it twisted. But if you *insist* on offering me something... We’re looking for a site to set up camp.”

“W-We have no more than eighty in our village... We couldn’t possibly host this grand army,” said the elder.

Zorm hid his frustration well. While they had found the perfect location for catching butterflies, the volatile climate—from blistering heat to violent blizzards to torrential downpours—had taken its toll on even the brutes. Zorm desperately needed a place to set up camp and rest his men and horses if he wanted to settle down and relish his lucky streak with the Madam’s cargo.

“Isn’t there any other spot around here?” Zorm demanded.

“There is a fortress northwest of here, but it was abandoned years ago. Now it’s all but a ruin.”

“Fortress, huh? Take us there.”

“J-Just a moment! My old legs are too frail to take—”

“Shut up and walk!”

Forcing the elder to lead, Zorm’s military resumed their march, setting course northwest.

Zorm kept an eye out for an ambush, but his legion soon arrived at the fortress without any encounters with their enemy. The fortress had obviously been abandoned for decades, portions of weathered bastions and skeletons of structures the only remnants of its former glory.

“What the hell is this?” Zorm snarled.

“I-I was told that a gang of bandits once settled here...” the elder pleaded.

“There’s barely a roof to go over our heads! What a pile of shit!”

The elder hung his head, attempting to weather the storm of Zorm’s temper and entitlement. Apparently he expected the utmost hospitality after invading their land.

“I know you’re pissed, Boss. But the guys need to take a breather pretty soon,” his second suggested.

“Fine... Get them to clean up the place so it’s at least usable.”

“Yessir!”

At Zorm’s command, the legion of five thousand jumped to work. The legion cleared debris and patched up defenses. While his men worked for a whole night and day, Zorm remembered to post watchmen on the bastions, but there was not even a hint of enemy presence.

By the next day, thanks to the tireless work of his legion, Zorm was looking over his temporary fort. “Good. Let them rest in shifts,” he ordered.

“Boss, why don’t we crack open the wine we’ve been stocking up on?” a henchman tempted.

“We’re in enemy territory.”

“Yeah, but we’ve all been working for that stick in the mud for years... The boys need to cut loose every once in a while.”

Zorm's face turned bitter at the memory. Leon—their former commander—had forbidden all forms of pillaging. Alcohol had had no place in his army. Zorm, on the other hand, had always seen the battlefield as a place to pursue all forms of lust without repercussion.

His mood evidently soiled by the memory of Leon's solemn attitude and commands, Zorm spat out, "A *moronic* stick in the mud. He kept kissing the king's ass, the picture of a loyal commander... In the end, His Majesty gave him the boot himself." With a guffaw, he continued spilling his pent-up disgruntlement. "You overachieve on the battlefield, and they either keep you at arm's length or get rid of you. That dumbass couldn't even figure that out."

A hero could soon become a threat for anyone in power. Consequently, heroes had to always watch their backs. For all the glory that came with the title, being a hero wasn't always worth the time.

"Forget about that killjoy, Boss. Let's celebrate our score with that *noble* wine."

"Ha! Always with your eyes on the prize. Just keep enough guys on watch," Zorm said. Crass as he was, Zorm had survived war long enough to remember that they were, indeed, in the middle of enemy territory. Still, he couldn't help but lower his guard somewhat. His legion had enjoyed victory after victory in their campaign, along with huge scores of the Madam's shipments. Self-restraint became all the more difficult as they amassed gold and silver—plus artisan meats and cheeses, no less.

"How long do you think they'll hide out in their fortress, Boss?" His henchman drank directly from the very expensive bottle of wine in his hand. "Damn, that's good!" he slurred.

Zorm had, naturally, calculated the moves of the militant nobles by putting himself in their shoes. The task was more intricate than it seemed, but Zorm had practiced it well over his years on the battlefield. Of course, his calculations were limited by the capacity of his own mind. His strategies would prove entirely useless against brilliant tacticians like Harts and men who existed outside of Zorm's worldview like Tahara.

"If they leave their nest, we'll shoot them down. They know that. Most likely,

they'll stay boarded up until the war's over, and they'll negotiate a surrender to keep a portion of their land."

Zorm's prediction was based on wartime practices common on this continent. The Northern Nations—so often at conflict with each other that they'd established a war season, ensuring they only fought during certain times of the year—settled conflicts in a way that maintained the integrity of both sides involved. This was particularly commonplace in civil wars like this one. Fighting to the point of annihilation would only make the entire nation more vulnerable to foreign attacks.

"You don't think they've got the stomach to keep fighting?" the second asked.

"How can they fight without a water supply? The outcome of this war was already decided long before it began," Zorm said.

"Ohhh, that sounded a bit like Leon, Boss!"

"Don't make me sick."

The pair laughed like hyenas.

Zorm's legion reveled in a portion of their spoils, oblivious to Harts's army approaching them in the shadows. Northern soldiers were forged by their trying land; they knew well how to exercise stealth in each of its states. They found no difficulty in marching concealed by a sandstorm, or digging and diving into a trench in a matter of minutes. Zorm's watchmen—complacent in their false sense of security—would be no more of an obstacle to Harts than a row of scarecrows.

Having finally established a suitable camp, the Xenobian army, drunk on exquisite wine, celebrated their victory streak that was about to come to an end. In the moonless dark of night, shadows climbed up the crumbled bastions and silently slaughtered the watch with panther-like grace and force. Once the watchmen were stilled, the shadows congregated. These were the wives and daughters of the militant nobles, who had more guts and physical strength than most men on the continent. Each of them needed no more than one slice of a knife to kill their target.

"It's almost too easy," one of them noted.

“They really don’t realize we have them surrounded, huh?”

“Well, not entirely surrounded...but I’m sure they’ll regret ever being born.”

The women waved a signal from atop the battlements. In a moment, flaming arrows flew through the dark to find their marks: an especially flammable concoction of pine tar, saltpeter, oil, sulfur, and naphtha, placed at each of the deteriorated gates of the old fortress. Each package of tinder was rare and costly, but the militant nobles were receiving enough aid from multiple forces that their price was no object. The explosive mixes, dubbed “Militant Flame,” all caught fire at once and blew the fortress gates to pieces.

“What the hell was that?!”

“F-Fire! We’re under attack!”

The scorching explosions shook the Xenobians out of their drunken stupor.

Zorm came bounding out of his temporary quarters near the center of the fort. “Dammit... Who the hell was on watch?! Did the crows pick their eyes out?!”

His henchman let out a scream behind him. “Boss, all the gates are on fire! What do we do?!”

The nobles’ retaliation had only just begun.

The hardy women, who’d remained atop the bastions, sniped commander after commander with their arrows, clearly having done their research on who to snuff out to maximize confusion among the Xenobian ranks. In swift succession, fire arrows soared over the fort walls, striking additional Militant Flames that had been planted within the fortress. The interior structure, too, was rapidly engulfed in crimson flames.

“Those shriveled up skeletons have lost their minds...!” Zorm fumed.

On the contrary, the archers’ skin shone in the firelight. Not only were there no signs of dehydration on them, they looked immaculate for being on the battlefield.

On this continent, bathing was a privilege reserved for the rich. It was expected that commoners would be caked in dirt and body odor. Northern

Holylight was no exception until just recently, when the absurd tycoon came along with his world-shattering public bath. Rejuvenated in mind and body, the Militant women fired arrows with all their might, shooting down their enemies like game birds. It was clear that all of the Xenobians would burn or be shot sooner or later.

Zorm scanned the fort in every direction and managed to spot a way out. “West! The blaze isn’t as strong at the west gate! Send our guys running west!”

“B-But there’s still a lot of fire...!”

“Tell them to dunk their heads in water and charge! Now!”

Zorm’s second rushed to the front lines, where he scolded the befuddled men and sent them running. True enough, they saw that the fire in the west towered much shorter than the flames engulfing the rest of the fortress.

Meanwhile, Zorm had possessively stacked a horse-drawn wagon full of his loot, ready to rescue it at all cost. “Hey! Did we break through the gate?!” he demanded of his henchman upon his return.

“Th-They set up traps!”

The soldiers who soaked themselves with water to run through the western wall of fire were met with a gruesome fate. As the flames caught their hair and clothes, spikes laid beyond the gate pierced their feet and immobilized them. They could do nothing but wail as the inferno swallowed them.

The soldiers who made it past the spikes were met with even more brutal traps: pitfalls with sharpened bamboo at the bottom, mace traps with giant logs, bear traps, and even viper pits. A comprehensive exhibition of deadly fates awaited the fleeing Xenobians. What’s worse, the grease-based fire became only more ferocious when anyone tried to extinguish it with water.

Most generals would have reconsidered their exit strategy through the west gate, but not Zorm. He was a man who had spent his career using war and bloodshed as opportunities to scratch whatever itch he had at the time. If he’d learned anything through his debaucherous campaigns, it was self-preservation.

“I don’t care. Pick out the most useless new recruits and shove them through!”

“B-But, Boss... There are *traps* on the other side...” his second said again.

“That’s the only spot where the fire isn’t spreading as fast... They didn’t have enough supplies. The traps are supposed to be a deterrent,” Zorm calculated.

“So that gate’s the crack in their armor!”

“Exactly.” Though far from a genius strategist, Zorm could at least put himself in his enemy’s shoes. Moreover, he had more than enough cruelty, much more than required of a general on the front lines. “Besides, a trap is useless once it’s sprung.”

His henchman smirked. “Yeah, you’re right.” He, too, ran to the west gate.

Things moved quickly from there. As Zorm predicted, by sacrificing many men, the Xenobians paved an escape route with corpses. Those higher on the pecking order shoved the new recruits forward, spears to their backs.

“Wh-What the hell?! We’re on the same side!”

“Shut up and keep walking!”

“If any of you stop, I’ll stab you right here and now!”

Desertion was always a threat in the army, and the barrier troop was tasked with keeping their weapons at the ready, just in case. As in modern-day wars when criminals were sent running to clear a minefield, the rookies were to spring whatever deadly traps lay ahead and clear the way for those behind.

Naturally, the new recruits did not walk to their deaths easily.

“Enough! They want us all to die!”

“Screw this! Make *them* go out first!”

Tragically, the Xenobians began fighting each other, causing a traffic jam around the west gate, as a conflagration raged on in the fortress behind them. The new recruits refused to take another step without a fight, but the others were willing to push them by force to escape the fire. A pathetic snapshot of human nature and an all-too-common sight during natural disasters.

Watching the travesty from atop a bastion, Harts and Sambo chuckled. “A trap is useless once it’s sprung... The words of a man who’s never put his own

life on the line.”

“How shortsighted. He has no regard for those he intends to sacrifice.”

Harts had concocted a means to eliminate this Xenobian troop without engaging them in combat. His plan had come to fruition, as the flames, traps, and their own comrades were killing off so many Xenobian soldiers as they spoke. Black smoke permeated the fortress, the roaring flames licking at the backs of the fleeing soldiers.

It might have been easy for Harts and Sambo to sit back and watch as the remnants of Zorm’s legion destroyed themselves, but they had no intention of giving this particular enemy such a quick death.

“Shall we begin, Sir Harts?”

“Yes. Bend the bars of their cage for them.”

Sambo made sure Harts was ready before inhaling sharply. Then, a thunderous voice shook the entire battlefield.

—**God’s Gift - Thunderous Voice!** (The user’s voice echoes over the entire battlefield. The user can choose if their enemies can hear it.)

What are you standing around for?! There’s a lake ahead! Make a run for it!

Sambo’s booming command caused the dam of Xenobians to break. Soldiers in the fortress stormed the west gate, forcing the foot traffic to move again. Now that the legion had a tangible goal, it seemed they would stop at nothing, each Xenobian rushing like a mad bull to reach the lake.

“A lake! There’s a lake on the other side!”

“Water, water, water!”

“Out of my way! Move!”

“Stop! Don’t shove! There are tra—”

“You stupid ass— Aaagh!”

As his men plunged into chaos, Zorm shouted from his station in a vain attempt to keep them from charging straight to their doom, but his commands were drowned out by the raging panic and roaring flames like a mosquito

buzzing in a rainstorm. “Dammit! Who the hell gave that order?! Stay where you are, morons!” With every second that Zorm tried to hold them back in vain, more and more of his men were shoved into traps, trampled by their comrades, suffocated by smoke...all of them driven by the desperate urge to escape the dreadful blaze.

Seeing that the Xenobians were too frenzied for Zorm to stop them, Harts gave Sambo the signal to send a hidden troop into action.

It’s showtime! Sambo’s voice boomed, audible only to his own soldiers. *Corral the beasts!*

Sambo’s soldiers rose from where they were, crouched beside the road stretching out the west gate, barraging the Xenobians with lances and arrows seemingly out of nowhere. Xenobians pushed to the edge of the road were skewered and discarded, accelerating the panic among Zorm’s men.

In hindsight, the Xenobian troop had acted exactly how Harts had planned for it to, from setting camp in this fort to attempting to escape through this particular gate.

“Shall we show them to their graves?” Harts asked.

“The last of them have made it out of the gate,” Sambo observed.

Directing their men to cut off the Xenobians’ path back to the fortress, the generals kept pressing their enemies forward. The terrified Xenobians scrambled to flee in the only direction they could, trampling over each other in the process. Ahead of them lay a chasm scoured into the earth by the ancient battle between the Wise Angel and King of Devils, stretching easily 150 kilometers across. Over the edge of the cliff, a bottomless plunge into the abyss awaited the herd of Xenobians.

The Xenobian rookies at the front of the pack noticed the dark death before them and cried in alarm.

“Stop shoving! There’s— There’s a cliff right there!”

“Shut up! That’s the lake, isn’t it?!”

“Hurry up! They’re right on our tail!”

Alas, the current of the frenzied Xenobians was too great.

“Stop! It’s a chasm! Stooooop!”

“No... I don’t want to die! Stop shoving me!”

Some primal instinct must have told them that there was no return from the depths below. Their pained pleas fell on deaf ears as they were pushed off the ledge and plunged into darkness, forming a human avalanche.

Harts only pressed his troop more, chasing more and more Xenobians off the cliff as if they were wild beasts.

In the midst of sorrowful screams, Sambo remarked, “That was quite the trick, Sir Harts, to have them dive to their own doom...”

“They are not worth an honorable fight,” Harts responded. This Xenobian troop had torn through Holylight in cruel conquest, tormenting innocents in their wake. The look on Harts’s face suggested he saw this as a fitting end for the barbaric invaders. Before long, five thousand Xenobians had disappeared like mist fading at daybreak. Only Zorm and a few of his lieutenants remained.

“What the hell...just happened?” Zorm muttered in dismay.

Sambo approached him, holding a lantern that gently illuminated his surroundings with the high-purity Light Spell Stone within it. Other commanders with their own lanterns followed suit, wordlessly surrounding the scraps of Zorm’s legion.

“A rather anticlimactic end for a parade of villains...” Sambo taunted. “Any last words?”

With murder in his eyes, Zorm unsheathed his sword. “Shut your damn mouth... You couldn’t even take us in a fair fight!” Being chased by flame and arrows to a bottomless pit was not a battle by Zorm’s definition. It wasn’t humane.

“Why would we offer a fair fight to beasts wearing human skin? Naturally, we deal with pests differently than we deal with honorable opponents of war,” Sambo said matter-of-factly.

“A pest...? Is that what you just called me?” Zorm growled.

“Nothing goes over your head, does it?” Sambo teased.

“You’re dead meat!” Zorm charged furiously at Sambo, who evaded Zorm’s blade with ease and even tripped him just because he could.

While the other militant nobles guffawed at Zorm’s spectacular dirt-eating, Sambo only chuckled. “A slave to your temper... You were far too underqualified for your job. Perhaps as the leader of a few dozen bandits, you might have found success.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?!” Zorm charged again, furiously swinging his sword. Sambo reluctantly drew his own blade, only to be disarmed by a powerful strike from Zorm. The Xenobian general cackled. “Take that, old man... Whoa!” Before he knew it, Zorm was lying belly up on the ground. Sambo had let his blade be knocked away to create an opening to tackle Zorm to the ground. “What the hell did you—” Zorm screamed in agony as his right ankle was shattered with a hideous crunch.

Sambo had enough experience as a warrior to be adept in most styles of combat, but he was a master of joint locks. Even in his old age, he could break or dislocate any joint in his opponent’s body once he got close enough. “To be young and arrogant again... A battle doesn’t end when your opponent lets go of their weapon.” Sambo kicked Zorm’s sword away before destroying both of his wrists with a series of precise stomps. He then hoisted Zorm up with strength belying his age.

“W-Wait... I surrender! I surrender!” Zorm pleaded through his agony, seeing that Sambo was walking towards the chasm.

Sambo responded almost too cheerfully, “There’s only one way to solve a pest problem, and that’s extermination. Try again in your next life.” Without hesitation, he threw Zorm into the abyss.

“P-Please, doooon’t!” Zorm’s scream faded into the dark pit.

Quivering with the realization that surrender was not an option, the surviving Xenobians drew their weapons.

“W-We will never surrender...!”

“That’s right...! I’ll take you bastards down with me!”

“On the honor of us proud Xenobi—”

Their words were cut short as their heads went flying. Harts’s **Tornado Kick** had cleanly decapitated them all.

“There was no honor in your lives, so none shall there be in your deaths,” he concluded.

Sambo cackled. “Sir Harts! Your kick has gotten much sharper since you experienced those... ‘hot springs,’ were they?”

Meanwhile, the other militant nobles tossed the scattered body parts into the chasm. In a matter of minutes, there was nothing left of Zorm’s legion.

Amid the celebration of their one-sided victory, Sambo asked, “What next, Sir Harts? Will we march for Dona’s fortress?” This war would not end until they eliminated the root of it. Sambo’s personal grudge against the avaricious noble only fueled his motivation to conquer Dona’s stronghold.

“I assume we won’t get the chance. *He* won’t leave Dona alone for long,” remarked Harts.

“I see. Then what are we to do?”

Harts stroked his chin and contemplated. Even if they were to march full speed for Dona’s stronghold, there would be nothing left of it by the time they arrived. Instead, it would be more prudent to prevent other forces from injecting themselves into this civil war, such as the Tzardom and Xenobia. “Let’s prepare for the unexpected, as best we can. Back to our stronghold.”

“Roger that, General!” Sambo agreed cheerfully.

Harts had managed to decimate the Xenobian legion without losing a single soldier of his own, and now he was going to coolly return to their base. While the militant nobles had scored a deathless victory in Northern Holylight, war raged on throughout the country. One of those battlefields was none other than the village of Rabbi...

——En route to Eastern Holylight.

A cavalry regiment of fifty horsemen was galloping down the travel road en route to the village of Rabbi. The riders were clad in striking red garb and armor, their devotion to the hue so strong that even their horses were decked out in armor and headpieces of the same burning color.

The sight of these peculiar riders—the Tzardom’s infamous Salamander Knights—would have sent any civilian in the Northern Nations running in the other direction. The Salamander Knights traveled to towns and villages only to arrest citizens and proclaim them heretics against the Great Light. After torturing the blasphemous nonbelievers, the Salamanders would set fire to their settlement and ride off to the next. The Tzardom hosted four of these knight orders, representing earth, wind, fire, and water, respectively. These inquisitors were the elite among the elite. All Elemental Knights enjoyed special recognition in the clergy-ruled Tzardom, but the Salamander Knights were feared even by their fellow countrymen, who never seemed willing to meet their eyes as they marched through the streets.

“Where is the village that harbors demi-humans? We’ve passed nothing but these wastes,” one grumbled.

“A land of savages too foul for our blood,” said another.

“Demi-humans are prestigious targets.”

“Indeed. If we take some heads back, the Pope will be pleased”

They had once pursued Eagle, causing atrocities everywhere they passed. Their faces were completely devoid of compassion. In fact, they seemed almost too distinctly heinous to be called human.

Even they, however, had once been an honorable knight order tasked with arresting criminals within the Tzardom. Once the Fire Clan took over the order, however, everything changed. Whenever the Salamander Knights couldn’t find criminals worthy of their punishment, they resolved to invent criminals, and frequently hunted down Satanists and witches solely to curry more favor with the Tzardom.

“How long has it been since we’ve hunted a horde of demi-humans?” one knight asked.

“We need to carve out all of their tongues. Even women and children of their kind will try to deceive us.”

“Every slab of skin and lock of hair will fetch a good price among collectors and shamans.”

This repulsive exchange was an ordinary one for the Salamander Knights. Blind obedience to the Tzardom’s sense of justice empowered them to dole out abject cruelty against others.

“As you remember, gentlemen... We finish the job before the rest of the battalion catches up to us.”

“Mm. We’ll report aggressive resistance—that we only acted in self-defense.”

“We can handle a hundred or so demi-humans on our own.”

This scouting unit discussed its insubordination all too eagerly; their mission was simply to make note of the demi-human-harboring village and report back to the rest of the Order.

“Hunt those demi-humans down until there are none left to kill! For every one of their heads that roll, you’ll be rewarded handsomely!”

“Glory to the Fire Clan! Wipe the demi-humans from this world!”

“Purify this filthy, second-rate country with our cleansing fire!”

A timid voice, childish if not androgynous, called out to the frenzied knights. “Uh... Can I ask you to stop your march right there?” Kondo stood in the Salamanders’ path, gazing shyly at the knights and wearing an out-of-place T-shirt marked with the words “Oil Rig.” Armed laborers loomed behind Kondo in silent warning.

The Salamanders grumbled in response.

“What is this...? A band of fools beguiled by the demi-humans? Savages who spit in the face of Light’s glory!”

“Satanists and demi-humans. A nest of heretics...”

“Hopeless fools, the whole lot. We’ll burn the entire village to ashes.”

The laborers of Rabbi were in an uproar. While Kondo didn’t even know what

to call the bright-red brigade, these workers knew painfully well the reputation of the Salamanders.

“So what if there are *demi-humans* in the village?!”

“We make an honest living here! Go torch another village!”

“Our working conditions are too good to lose!”

If nothing else, their outcries were honest. These laborers did not have the luxury of entertaining the prejudices of the Tzardom when the Great Light’s dogma certainly didn’t put food on their table.

If the Demon Lord had been present, he might have asked the Salamanders, “Why don’t you give them three square meals and a warm bed before you preach them to death?” Unlike most dictators in history, who sought to control their subjects with one ideology or another, he hadn’t proposed so much as a single tenet to his workers, providing them with work and pay alone.

Even so, the laborers of Rabbi practically worshipped the man who was rumored to be the second coming of Lucifer. By comparison, the sermons of the Light were nothing but empty drivel. In two thousand years of worshipping the Light, the common people had only become more destitute. The workers’ claim to a liveable wage, of course, was blasphemous to the Salamanders, who drew their weapons at once.

“Ignorant filth... Our swords shall claim every last one of them!”

“We were told the Satanists had infected the East, but I hadn’t expected the wound to have spread so far and deep.”

Flashes of the Salamanders’ weapons terrified the workers, but they stood their ground.

As if in mockery of the palpable tension in the air, Tron lazily floated over. “Kondo, we have to finish the Bunny Girl game.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Kondo turned to the Salamanders. “Well... I think it’s time for you all to die, then.”

His words were lost in the commotion as the Salamanders erupted upon Tron’s appearance. Unlike Bunnies, Hellions were considered actual threats by

the knights of fire. The sight of one seemed to reinvigorate the Salamanders with their divine purpose to exterminate all things evil.

“They’re harboring a Hellion as well?!”

“We must alert the Tzardom... Hellions have already infiltrated this region!”

“This is a class-2 evil resident! Alert Lord Flay at once!”

Just as a Salamander turned their horse around to deliver the word, an arrow silently pierced his neck. The knights’ eyes followed the arrow’s trajectory in reverse until they found Kondo, holding a magnificent and powerful bow dubbed “Moonstriker,” which more befitted a goddess than a mortal.

“Um... Do you mind? I can’t have you guys just *leave*, you know.” Kondo nocked another arrow, acting like this was nothing more than a chore—a simple act of pest control.



“Y-You dare resist?!” One of the Salamanders bellowed.

“Kill the Hellion first! If we return with its head—” Another knight was cut short by a sight even more shocking than an arrow through his comrade’s neck: Tron holding the *Salamander’s* decapitated head.

“I hate those colors,” she said. “They want to kill everyone in our village.” Tron might have looked like a child, but she was a full-fledged Hellion with astonishing physical strength, more than capable of ripping off human heads like fruits from a tree.

“That little bitch...!”

“It’s a powerful Hellion! Don’t be fooled by its appearance!”

The Salamanders rode into action, charging at Tron with their swords raised.

If the knights had felt metaphorical daggers at their throats in the face of a new threat, Kondo imagined a gun to his head all too vividly. “Kill everyone...? Give me a break! I don’t even want to think about how badly the Secretary will hurt me if I let them ride into the village!” He loosed an arrow to the skies, much to the befuddlement of the Salamander Knights.

“What is he aiming for...?”

“Forget the kid! Go for the Hellion first!”

“Keep your guard up. It just killed him with its bare hands...”

Their longswords held high, they began summoning their namesake fire elementals.

Meanwhile, Tron peered into Kondo’s face, clearly unbothered by the incoming brigade. “But your color is much darker than theirs, Kondo.”

Those cruel words marked the beginning of the end that rained down from above.

—**First Skill: Surprise Attack!** (Disables dodging. Never misses. Deals 50 static damage.) —**Second Skill: Petal Dance!** (AOE on all enemies in the area. Deals 30 static damage. Causes leg injuries.) —**Third Skill: Squall Strike!** (A storm of arrows rain down from the heavens. Deals 24 static damage 6 times.) Arrows

clouded the sky, descending upon the knights, who could do no more than stare blankly in the face of death.

“What...is that...?”

“Someone please wake me up...”

What else could mere mortals do against the equivalent of a flash natural disaster? The Salamander Knights did not even have time to pray to their Great Light before the arrows took their lives.

After a cacophony of screams, only a field of corpses like bright red porcupines were left of them.

Kondo turned from his fresh massacre, smiling gently at the workers of Rabbi as if this was nothing more than a minor bug squashing, or even an imaginary battle within a video game. “Phew. Good thing they didn’t show up in the middle of the village. I’d hate to have them respawn at an inconvenient time. Can you make sure to burn them down to their bones, please?”

The laborers struggled to answer before Kondo and Tron strode off to finish their game, leaving the workers standing dumbstruck.

“You’re a hopeless, lazy bum...” Tron said, “but you’re very strong. Not too shabby.”

“I’m not strong... Just desperate.” Kondo shuddered. “If I screw up, then somehow, the Secretary will make me wish I was dead.”

“Demon Lord won’t be mean to you,” Tron said.

She was right, of course, but Kondo was skeptical of Tron’s optimism. He doubted anyone who’d experienced Hakuto Kunai’s reign over the Empire could possibly take her comment seriously.

“You don’t know what he’s like at all!” Kondo countered. “Knowing the Secretary, he’d lock me in a room with a white couch that I can’t get out of until five dudes take their turns with me!”

“Whatever that means, we need to finish Bunny Girl Pretty Burrow,” Tron said.

“Y-Yes. Let me boot up the app here...” Kondo snorted. “Gold Ship posted a

weird selfie out of nowhere. LMAO, unsubscribed.”

“I don’t understand anything you say, Kondo...”

Kondo and Tron walked home, continuing their nonsensical banter.

Conflict in the north and east of Holylight had ceased, but the Demon Lord’s legion had only just begun its counterstrike against the world.

Conquest — Yu Kirino

“We are the morning star fallen to Earth! When day finally breaks, victory shall be ours!”

A whirlwind of dark energy roared all around the Demon Lord and his retinue.

Blessed by the effects of the Demon Lord’s Duel Skill, Tahara felt a surge of explosive power rise within him. Unable to contain his elation, he shouted, “Let’s! Freaking! Go!”

White, too, quaked at the dark power coursing through her body. It rushed up her spine, staining her black from her core to her fingertips. “Th-This is Lord Lucifer’s power?!”

Yu crooned, intoxicated by the violent power swelling within. This particular drunkenness washed over her with exquisite bliss. “The Secretary has given me —no, *penetrated* me with his love...!” she moaned, much to the Demon Lord’s chagrin.

Meanwhile, the enemy soldiers snapped out of their befuddlement after witnessing unimaginable phenomenon after phenomenon. This delay, however, would prove fatal. The few survivors would later note this moment as their last chance to flee the battlefield, one that they should have taken.

Tahara ran into the castle, scanning for traps as he snapped on his night-vision goggles and swallowed the Amanda’s Seed that the Demon Lord had given him. Tahara never let his guard down, no matter what battlefield he found himself on, despite the superhuman genius bestowed upon him by his creator, Akira Ono. He knew arrogance would only be a hindrance in war. “All clear, Chief,” he announced. “As far as I can see, there’s no surprises for us.”

“I see...” the Demon Lord answered, almost lamenting that his foe had been so lackluster. There was no better time to set a trap or an ambush than when an opponent was making their way into castle grounds. Setting a trap against besieging enemies was a staple tactic throughout both Eastern and Western history. Even though the Demon Lord’s current opponent did not have access to modern technology, they could have concocted any number of traps with just a

little bit of ingenuity: digging pitfalls, scattering broken glass, or mudding the ground to slow them down, for example. “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail,” the Demon Lord mused, as if he was reading out a math solution.

His advisors nodded in agreement while White let his words sink in. It felt like Holylight as a whole, not just her, or Dona, or the other nobles, was being chastised for its unpreparedness.

“Put this on, White.” The Demon Lord handed the holy maiden a garment.

“What is it...?” she asked.

“It’s called an Assassin’s Robe. Significantly lowers your detection rate. If we ever recover Gift Shops, we can get our hands on Adaptive Camo Suits, but this is the best I can do for now,” the Demon Lord said.

“Gift Shop...? Camo?” White repeated in confusion as she wrapped herself with the black robe, vanishing from the naked eye. This attire that made its wearer undetectable was often used in the Game as a diversion. If a player obtained one early in the Game, they could at least hunt down a wild beast unseen.

When the Demon Lord and his posse marched into the castle like they owned the place, they were met with shouting from the central noble battalion stationed inside.

“Militants... You’ve come to the wrong place!”

“Know your place, you northern savages!”

“How dare you ants march against us?!”

The Demon Lord listened to their insults as he eyed their equipment, which was all ostentatious and obviously expensive. Many pieces were heavily bejeweled and lined with gold and silver, and some of the armor was even decorated with flashy feathers, making the men look like humanoid peacocks. They were completely impractical, suggesting that this army was purely ceremonial.

Every Tom, Dick, and Harry’s all blinged out... The Demon Lord quietly sighed, drawing a comparison between the soldiers before him and Belphegor. In

fairness to Olgan's father, he was a Hellion with enough power to be seated as the next King of Devils, setting him far apart from the pampered Central commanders.

"Your attire is very telling...of how much you've squeezed out of your people," the Demon Lord said.

Their bloodlines had, in fact, exploited the workers on their land for over two millennia. Most of them had barely been affected by the ongoing civil war, treating the whole conflict as a sort of festivity.

"The brute speaks!"

"Look at those black wings... Somebody teach this arrogant peasant a lesson!"

The glittering soldiers that crowded the castle's courtyard jeered, as if the Demon Lord and his troop were nothing but a pack of stray dogs that had wandered in. Although the castle's gate had just been breached, the Central commanders were still utterly assured of their victory. After all, they had never wanted for anything, thanks to their blood and their names. It wasn't in their nature to identify threats, because they had faced none. A ragtag band wandering into their castle wasn't going to change that.

The Demon Lord had hoped, perhaps too naively, that storming into their stronghold would invigorate his opponents with some sense of danger that would make this battle a little more interesting. "Clueless brats..." he spat. The sight of these silver-spoon-suckling aristocrats playing army while they twirled their weapons made the Demon Lord sick. Not for a moment had he forgotten that they had abducted and tortured innocent children for far too long.

Recalling the report that Yu had given him earlier, the Demon Lord noted something new: a pile of what appeared to be the corpses of local farmers. The sight was all too familiar to what he had just witnessed along the border with Milk. "Yu, I don't believe that was in your report. Are the bodies fresh?"

"They appear to be. I would assume they used the particularly insubordinate workers as examples to the others," Yu assessed, true to her character.

At one end of the courtyard, in what appeared to be their archery grounds, dozens of women were tied up on posts, each pierced by dozens of arrows.

They had been used as target practice.

With the last drop of mercy in his heart dried up, the Demon Lord asked the bejeweled soldiers, “It seems to me the law of your land gives impunity to the strongest team in the room. Is that correct?”

“We proper nobles have the right to trample any insects that cross our path!” one answered.

“I see... When in Rome, then.” The Demon Lord jerked his chin. A simple gesture that would spell the end and the beginning. “Clear my path, Yu.”

Yu had so longed to hear those words. “Your wish is my command!” Lobbing a grenade sky-high, Yu began applying skills to it. Hand grenades were already designed for widespread damage, and even Yu’s vanilla grenade-throwing would easily produce several hundred points of it. In addition, she activated her Chain Attack and a series of three Equipped Skills, all with her drastically boosted stats, thanks to the Demon Lord’s Duel Skill.

—**Equipped Skill: Explosive Expertise!**

—**Equipped Skill: To Pieces!**

—**Equipped Skill: Chain Explosions!**

Human or monster, every creature that stood before her was destined for the same fate.

The grenade she had thrown split into countless pieces and rained down upon her arrogant foes. When the first piece made contact, a deafening explosion evaporated a thousand soldiers.

—**Combat Skill: Hunter!**

Amid the screams in the chaos, Yu shook with a rush of further rising power. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes!”

The **Hunter** skill had a fifty percent chance of boosting her Attack, Defense, and Dexterity by 1 point each whenever she killed a human male. Yu also possessed the **Ruthless** skill, which had the same effect, but for killing women. The buffs from both skills were temporary, but she had more abilities up her sleeve.

“The laws of causation are under my command...!”



—Survival Skill: Causation!

Yu's Survival Skill improved all other skill triggers by ten percent, increasing the odds for buff triggers and decreasing the odds for debuff triggers. Another burst of strength—as ten percent of the missed triggers caught up to her—coursed through her body. This was a rare skill that demanded an enormous amount of SP to acquire.

Back in the Game, Players would whisper to each other to never lay a finger on Yu Kirino, who only grew stronger the more she killed. In an all too literal sense, the Players were mere prey to her.

Oblivious to all of that, the Central commanders screamed in terror and blindly shouted orders.

“S-Someone kill her!”

“Lancers! Archers! I don't care who, do it now!”

“Ch-Charge! Charge! Charge! Charge!”

Delirious with confusion, their soldiers raised their bows and lances, rushing to attack Yu. Not driven by bravery, but by a primal fear that had been awakened by a foe with unimaginable powers.

Yu met the barrage of lances and arrows with open arms, although she could have dodged them all without missing a beat. Glimmering phalanxes closed in to spear her, but Yu stood her ground with even a merciful smile on her face.

The scene was reminiscent of a witch hunt, during which armed men burned innocent women at the stake for the imaginary crime of witchcraft...with one crucial difference: Yu Kirino was—unmistakably—a bona fide witch.

As spears and arrows converged on Yu, White cried out. “Lord Lucifer! She's —”

“No need to be concerned,” the Demon Lord said matter-of-factly.

Tahara blew out his cigarette smoke, a twinge of pain on his face. He made a quick prayerlike gesture for his enemies. “Imagine attacking that psycho without so much as a plan... I'll stay on this side of the courtyard, thank you very much.”

With every stab of a lance or hit of an arrow, Yu's eyes shone redder and brighter while markings of countless snakes darkened her skin like a full-body tattoo. The Demon Lord grinned victoriously at these visual cues of Yu's Special Ability triggering.

Finally, she couldn't hold in her cackle. The more her prey struggled in her clutches, the stronger the witch became, spiraling into hysteria. "Fools! Wretched, helpless fools!"

—Special Ability: The Infinitely Forgotten 90%!

This nightmarish ability gave Yu a ten percent chance to buff her Attack, Defense, and Dexterity by 2 points every time an attack hit her. The more the meek soldiers attacked her, the more frantic their attacks, and the more powerful Yu became. What's more, there was no limit to the skyrocketing of her stats. To even dream of defeating this witch, her foe would have to sink her with a slew of absurdly powerful attacks. It wasn't uncommon to see her stats soar to four or five digits during a siege on the Sleepless Castle. At that point, she'd easily massacred every Player storming the Demon Lord's final stronghold in the Game.

Tahara covered his face as if he couldn't stomach the sight of her. "I'll personally whack all those douchebags, Chief... Take that horror game villain somewhere else, will you? Talk about inhumane working conditions! Have you tried sharing an office with that monster?!"

"I can hear you... Tahara." Yu turned, a sinister, crimson light flickering in her eyes. Indeed, she looked the part of a horror game villain—one with infinite health, at that.

Tahara screamed in terror, "Chief, you're seeing this?! She's not human, I'm telling you!"

"Your banter never gets old," said the Demon Lord. "Shall we, Yu?"

Her attitude flipped like a switch. "Yes, sir! I will pave your way!" She began leading the Demon Lord deeper into the castle grounds, the sea of Central soldiers parting in terror. Perhaps, like Moses and the Red Sea, Yu's power was a miracle in its own right. White followed, still clasping the Demon Lord's right hand for dear life.

Almost as an afterthought, the Demon Lord turned to tell Tahara, “Kill every last one of these bastards. Stupidity is fatal.” His brief command thrummed with determination.

“You betcha,” Tahara answered.

“And once the dust settles here, I’ll be summoning your sister.” The Demon Lord walked into the castle with the wave of a hand.

It took a few moments for the words to click with Tahara. “What? Hey, are you being for real, Chief?!”

White had witnessed too many mind-shattering events in the last few minutes, but the latest one had shaken her the most: Yu incinerating thousands of soldiers and withstanding that vicious onslaught without batting an eye. And now she walked a few paces before the Demon Lord and White. Who else could she be but a witch disguised as a human? “L-Lord Lucifer... Is she...?” White couldn’t even bear to ask.

“Hm? She’s a dear advisor of mine. No need to be afraid.”

Yu’s ears practically prickled at the word “dear.”

Conquest — Isami Tahara

Left alone in the courtyard, Tahara tossed his cigarette aside and reached into his Back-Up Backpack. He slid out the gun that the Demon Lord had found in the Bastille Dungeon, ready to finally test it in the field. Conveniently for him—and not so much for them—a legion of two thousand strong marched towards Tahara. The commander wore blue garb and an iron helmet that signified his rank in the Holy Knights' Order that was supposed to be defending the Holy City at all times. This commander had turned his back on them long ago to serve the central nobles, amassing a private army of mercenaries struggling to earn a living elsewhere.

Ambitious to earn a name for his legion in this war and eager to prove himself to every noble who had turned their nose up at him for being of common birth, the commander—sporting a toothbrush mustache—rode with particular zeal.

“Calm yourselves, gentlemen!” he called to the noble-born soldiers. “You’ve boasted too much to lose your cool in the face of a few burglars!”

The other commanders gritted their teeth at this, burning with shame that a commoner was accusing them of cowardice. One of the central nobles raised his ornate sword and bellowed, “Remember your place, peasant! You and your gang are nothing but our—”

A bright light shot across the courtyard and melted his face off, cutting short what was sure to have been a magnificent speech of bravery.

Tahara inspected the gun he had just fired, paying no mind to the trifling squabble in his enemy's ranks. “Neat toy. It's like a laser gun,” he noted.

The Central soldiers murmured to each other. Obviously, their intruder had cast some sort of magic. There was no other explanation after they'd witnessed a thousand of them disintegrate in an explosion that shook the entire castle.

Another noble-born commander in a glittering robe raised his staff and began an incantation. “Great Undine, bless us with water—”

This time, Tahara had shot a laser through the spellcaster's heart. “What are you singing for? Save it for the shower.”

Tahara lit a cigarette as countless camouflage-patterned squares materialized in the air behind him—portals to the dimension where he stashed his weapons of choice. Firearms of all nature—machine guns, sniper rifles, shotguns, and even RPGs—poked out of the square portals. A person living on Earth in modern day would have immediately identified these as firearms. Since no such things existed in this world, the Central soldiers assumed them to be bizarre lances and clubs.

Their general shouted a command, almost out of reflex. “He’s preparing some sort of attack! On my mark...!”

“You’re giving me a countdown? Don’t mind if I do.” Tahara raised his hand all too casually and brought it down.

At his signal, a hundred thunderclaps reverberated in the courtyard, mowing down the Central commanders like leaves in a storm. Bullets flew with no prejudice, shooting through bodies, blowing up heads and limbs, and spilling entrails all over the ground. Men fell like bloody dominoes.

While the firearms that seemed too numerous to count kept spitting fire and metal, Tahara strode through the courtyard, stacking his Equipped Skills to the rhythm of a haiku. To him, this was nothing more than a cleanup job.

“For the time being...”

—**Rapidfire!** (Additional 15 damage.)

“...the bright moon silvers over...”

—**Bullet Storm!** (Additional 10-15 damage. 75% chance to sever an artery.)

“...flowers blooming wild.”

—**Fire Away!** (Expend all ammo loaded to deal damage of 1.5 times the number of bullets spent.)

Tahara continued walking through the never-ending storm of bullets, blowing out cigarette smoke. While the Central soldiers scattered to the violent winds of metal, Tahara seemed as relaxed as he would be on a midnight stroll. In fact, he paid no mind to the army before him at all, only carefully pointing sniper rifles in every direction to prevent anyone from casting a magic spell on him from a

distance.

“Why do you guys keep showing up looking like *that*?” he asked the dead and the dying. “Couldn’t be me... You give ‘brave but foolish’ a whole new meaning.”

Tahara had come to expect enemies with armor and skill sets specialized to withstand firearms. Back in the Game, medieval heavy armor could withstand blades; it was as useful as tissue paper against him. These soldiers might as well have been buck naked to Tahara.

The thundering of the guns finally stopped, indicating that they were out of ammo. This moment, when the firearms were being automatically reloaded, would have been a rare chance for the Central army to strike Tahara, but the survivors all stood immobilized among the sea of guts, blood, and body parts. They looked dumbfounded, as if they had just witnessed an unimaginable disaster. But who could blame them, after they watched their comrades in ornate armaments—boasting of their invincibility, no less—reduced to bullet-ridden pulp? Their deaths were dealt suddenly, without mercy, and equally among the rich and the poor.

“So? Where’s Mustache Man? He was just making an impassioned speech...” Tahara turned to find the pale-faced commander and his two thousand men.

Mustache quivering, the commander managed to say, “W-Wait... Are you a devil’s emissary?”

“The hell are you talking about?” Tahara replied.

“I-I did not come here of my own volition! Shrimp and Dona... They talked me into it!”

“Yawn,” Tahara said aloud.

One *pop* and the commander lost his head. Tahara loomed before the remaining soldiers—all shaking in their boots—like a ruthless monster that fed on liars. “So, where do you guys stand? Well, if you’re here, you’re an enemy of mine.”

“W-We surrender!” one of them shouted.

“He, our commander, forced us to come here!”

“We surrender! We surrender! Everyone lay down your weapons, now!”

The mercenaries were all too eager to throw their weapons aside and fall to their knees. Supplication was now their only hope for survival against Tahara, who did seem like a devil in human skin...or rather, some creature of unfathomable horror far more sinister than a devil.

“Surrender? Hate to break this to you... Once a backstabber, always a backstabber. Take notes, boys. That’ll be on the test.”

The countless nozzles turned, their lines of fire converging on the surrendering battalion.

Meanwhile, Tahara gazed up at the moon through a cloud of cigarette smoke. Just like zeroes would never be ones and ones would never be zeroes, enemies would always be exactly that to Tahara...and enemies had to be eliminated. His Chain Attack, Equipped Skills, and now even his Special Ability piled onto the guns, now in cross fire formation.

Tahara’s blue eyes locked on to all of his two thousand foes as he raised his hand high. “You should have trained for—oh, I don’t know—about five millennia before you started dreaming about duking it out with the Secretary.”

—Special Ability: Noisy Storm!

It was a gust, a storm, a *hurricane* of bullets that could have wiped out a small city, its power jacked up with sixteen rounds of rapid fire, anywhere from 25 to 45 points of damage per round, courtesy of the Special Ability. With forty-eight guns firing on all cylinders, this combo threatened to annihilate anything in its path.

The two thousand traitors to Holylight were crumbled like dried leaves to the wind. Regardless of their name or bloodline, everyone whom Tahara recognized as an enemy shared a common fate: imminent death. And death was all that was left after the guns stopped singing.

“One job done... Let’s get the rest of this dump cleaned up,” Tahara said to himself.

Just as Tahara began to walk towards the grand hall that waited within, a handsome butler strode through its doors. “A moment of your time?” the butler asked.



Tahara recognized the butler: the assassin Azur, who served Dona. He knew precisely what position Azur held in Dona's court after reading the docket Yu had put together.

"If it isn't the pretty boy butler from my files. Mili...whatever-his-name-is has told us a lot about you," Tahara said.

"I had presumed him dead," said Azur.

"Far from it. Last I heard, he's been working hard making flowers grow."

"Flowers..." Azur repeated as he felt something cold crawl down his spine. Surely, this was a euphemism for something sinister. He somehow couldn't imagine these conquerors from Hell growing flowers simply to admire them. "What do you intend to...?" Azur cut himself short. He'd had a hundred questions he wanted to ask. What was their end goal? Specifically, what would they do if and when they took out Dona? What would they do with the Numbered children? The last one burned the hottest in his throat. However, Azur had chosen this moment to show himself because he'd observed that Tahara's attacks required a significant cooldown period. He didn't have time for a Q and A.

"Well? You want something from me, pretty boy?" Tahara asked.

"I need to buy as much time as I can..."

"Buying time, huh?" Tahara said without interest.

Just as the words left his mouth, something shot out of Azur's hand like a laser. Steel wire sharpened like a razor blade coiled around Tahara's right arm. This was one of Azur's preferred covert weapons because of its portability and unassuming form.

The wire bound Tahara's arm, slicing into the skin. Azur had deployed it in hopes of preventing another bullet tornado, having noticed that Tahara always swung his right arm when using his attack. Just as the wire drew blood, the skin on Azur's right arm split open—creating precisely the same cuts as those on Tahara's. Azur's shock was only compounded when, somehow, his clothes were torn all over.

Tahara only said, “My bad. Looks like my **Counter** triggered. **Raze** too.”

“I see...”

Counter gave Tahara a fifty percent chance to inflict his enemy with the same damage he received from their vanilla attack. **Raze** lowered the durability of all armor on the enemy who attacked him by 5. These were both designed to deal with players who attacked Tahara while his guns were reloading.

An alarm blared in Azur’s mind with the realization that Tahara was both incredibly powerful *and* meticulous. Under any other circumstances, Azur would have never dared challenge a monster like Tahara.

“Oh, one more thing. They’re almost done reloading, pretty boy,” Tahara said. Whether Tahara was trying to knock Azur off-balance or simply giving him information, the assassin-butler couldn’t tell. Regardless, Tahara’s words didn’t change Azur’s next move: another flash of steel wire, this time aimed for Tahara’s head. Azur had slit the carotid artery, even entirely decapitated foes, with his wire before. Like a serpent, the wire coiled around Tahara’s neck.

—**Survival Skill: Pickpocket!**

—**Survival Skill: Gentleman Thief!**

—**Survival Skill: Supersonic!**

Azur first felt his pockets lighten, then the ring vanish from his finger. Finally, the spool of steel wire disappeared too.

“Sorry about that. I’ve got a reputation for sticky fingers.” Tahara opened his palm, showing Azur the few coins that belonged to him a moment ago...along with the ring that had been on his finger.

“What sort of parlor trick is this?” Azur asked.

“Huh? I just took your money with **Pickpocket** and your jewelry with **Gentleman Thief**. **Supersonic** makes your weapon go away, and Bob’s your uncle.”

Weakly, Azur laughed. “I...am completely at a loss,” he squeezed out. For the first time in his life, Azur wanted to crumple up and cry, despite his current situation. He had survived plenty of close calls over his career, but he had no

shot of surviving against Tahara in a fair fight.

While each of Tahara's Survival Skills were activated by chance, even one activation from any of the three had been demoralizing for any Player who dared make an attack against him—and with the risk of losing their weapons, not many Players had dared. Most Survival Skills were devised to help Players and characters literally survive the cutthroat Games. Many of them were protection in the form of deterrents against attacks.

"I had figured that you couldn't cast your grand spell again without waiting for some time," Azur said, "but there was never an opening for me to strike anyway, was there?" Indeed, Azur's assessment—and his judgment to strike when he had—were sound. Tahara was simply too far beyond his reach, no matter how shrewd an attack Azur could have crafted.

His guns reloaded, Tahara spoke through wisps of smoke as if he was discussing dinner plans. "An opening, huh? Depends on the opponent, I guess. Can't imagine landing a single shot against someone as fast as Akane, for example... Well, better luck next life."

"I beg of you this. Please, let the captive children live. Most of them are unable to walk, let alone flee this place."

"Huh? Why the hell should I care about them?"

"They were taken here against their will, their parents killed. They have nothing to do with the lord of this castle, or the Central faction at all!"

"And? You don't think I'm going to let anyone leave this castle, kid or adult, do you?" Tahara said, not a hint of empathy in his voice.

To his allies, Tahara was a trusty leader who had their backs. To enemies, he was a merciless killing machine. That's how he had been programmed by his creator, and the two were perfectly black-and-white in Tahara's brain. The only thing he had to share with anyone who was neither his ally nor his enemy was apathy. Children found in an enemy's stronghold deserved nothing more, in his opinion. He would gun them all down while humming a tune. The blame didn't lie with him either. Akira Ono was the one who had written him this way.

But suddenly, a voice rang in Tahara's mind.

“Once the dust settles here, I’ll summon your sister.”

Lighting struck Tahara, starting with the head and spreading through his body in an electrifying pulse, as if his entire skeleton was illuminated.

Holy crap! What would Manami say about those kids...?! he thought.

Manami was the embodiment of goodness, kindness, gentleness. She really had no place in the kill-or-be-killed world of the Game. If she found out after the fact that Tahara had gleefully slaughtered those orphaned children who had been kidnapped, it would break her heart. Tahara had joined the Demon Lord’s circle to earn his sister’s tuition money in the first place. Manami had been the one to always show concern for her brother and his treacherous career. An all-crippling fear consumed Tahara: he might lose his sister’s love and affection forever if she were to find out that he was still slaughtering people without mercy or discrimination.

The Demon Lord’s voice echoed in his mind again. *“Kill every last one of these bastards. Stupidity is fatal.”*

That’s when it hit. *Dammit, dammit, dammit! The Secretary told me to kill them all!*

This was by far the most difficult choice Tahara was forced to make since coming to this world: disobey the Demon Lord or slaughter those children knowing that Manami would despise him for it. Of course, Tahara was oblivious to the Demon Lord’s true intentions of coming to this stronghold: to try and find a way to get the Numbered out. The Demon Lord might have gotten a kick out of watching Tahara grapple with this impossible decision, his genius, tactical brain doing nothing to help him.

Desperate for a solution, Tahara began rambling. “R-Right... Hey, pretty boy butler! That’s just...just despicable, am I right?! Sorry about the tough guy act earlier. I, uh, was testing you. Yes, I was challenging your sense of compassion!” The terror of his sister’s rejection caused his voice to crack.

“I... I see...?” Azur managed to say, before giving Tahara the rundown of his failed attempts to rescue the children.

Tahara barely heard any of it, but he knew one thing for certain: killing this

butler would sadden Manami. “O-Of course, we’ve gotta save them! As adults, we have the responsibility to guide these children, or something... Right?!”

Naturally, Azur listened to Tahara with suspicion while Tahara was racking his brain for a way to survive. He’d have to convince the Demon Lord to let the kids live...and he hardly expected the cold-blooded Secretary to spare the lives of insignificant children for any reason. It seemed more likely to Tahara that his boss would strap each child to a firework and blow them to smithereens in the night sky just to celebrate their victory.

As impossible of a conundrum as this seemed, Tahara’s brain came up with an alternative solution in the matter of minutes. “I know! The Madam’s been looking for a butler to help run the Hot Springs Resort! You’re a good-looking guy, you’d be the talk of all the noblewomen who visit. Their handsome escort!” From where Tahara was standing, the Demon Lord had great trust in the Madam. He knew his boss would not hastily dispatch this butler if he presented this idea as a suggestion from the Madam. In a matter of seconds, Tahara calculated this trajectory—a Hail Mary for the butler’s life and for Manami’s opinion of him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” Azur muttered.

“If those kids are orphaned, you can watch over them. Brilliant! Don’t sweat it, we’ll pay. That’ll make Manami happy. It’s a win-win! Right?! Right?!”

“What are you going on about—”

“You’re gonna be a dad, that’s what I’m talking about!” Tahara shouted.

Azur fell silent, quivering at Tahara’s intensity. Although he still couldn’t comprehend this conqueror’s train of thought, it sounded hopeful that the Numbered would make it out of the castle alive.

“I’d better send the Secretary a Com before he wipes this castle and everyone in it off the map!”

Azur knew in his bones that these conquerors could, indeed, wipe this grand stronghold off of the map with ease.

And the Demon Lord had already set the precedent when he’d obliterated Belphegor’s castle in Hellion Territory.

Cake

Age: 14 — Female **Item** **Royal Pendant** +3 to all stats. Only works on members of the Parma royal family.

Item **Rule Breaker** (Taken from Hansel)

A One-of-a-Kind knife that ignores the enemy's Defense stat and skills.

Princess and heir to Parma, a kingdom lost to war. Her full name was Shortcake Dowell La Tour Rarecheese Palma. With a natural talent for playing the darling, she was adored by her people. Her experience as a Hellion slave after Parma's fall made her two-facedness even more extreme, and her heart more monstrous than human. Of course, that was a necessary adaptation for her to survive the grueling Slave Market, and she should not be blamed for that.

Conquest — Demon Lord

The witch devoured every man in her path. As she strolled through the castle, her enemies turned from human to mist with each casual wave of her hand. Sanity was in short supply among the Central soldiers still living. A nightmare—a villain who grew more powerful with every life she snuffed out—strode through their stronghold in the flesh. With her stats ballooned to astronomical proportions, Yu obliterated her enemies, down to every last drop of blood and speck of flesh. The forty thousand cocksure and battle-ready Central soldiers in the stronghold couldn't so much as stand in her presence.

Yu simply had to slice her hand through the air to create a shock wave that tore through hundreds of men at a time, annihilating them without a sound. Even without her go-to explosives, they didn't stand a chance.

The Demon Lord simply followed in the wake of this grisly massacre without comment or show of emotion. It wasn't uncommon for Yu to bring about this level of destruction, and the subjects of her slaughter were unworthy of any mercy, as far as the Demon Lord was concerned. Instead, his mind was racked with a singular concern. *Storming in here guns blazing was one thing, but I need to get those Numbered kids...*

Saving those children could be done without effort. He could easily care for them in the village of Rabbi too. But *sparing* a flock of children from an enemy stronghold with nothing to gain in return... That clashed with his image as the Demon Lord of the Empire.

Tahara's and Yu's jaws would hit the floor if their dear leader Kunai did something like that... I need an excuse that won't make the advisors suspicious.

He quickly shot a glance at White, who walked beside him. Although her hand quivered in his and terror showed clearly on her face, White showed admirable courage just by remaining in Yu's vicinity.

"White, did you know...that many innocent children are kept captive here?" the Demon Lord brought up casually.

"Children? Why...?" White muttered.

“The scumbags here enslaved them. Made them their playthings.”

“S-Slavery is outlawed in Holylight. Even Dona wouldn’t dare...!”

White’s outrage had been expected, giving the Demon Lord the hope that he could play off the rescue as a favor for a Holy Maiden.

I’m teetering on a tightrope woven from misunderstandings and overestimations. I can’t afford to raise any more suspicions...

As the Demon Lord schemed, Tahara sent him a Communication.

“*Sorry to interrupt, Chief... You got a minute?*” Tahara asked with a nervous pitch to his voice.

“*Is there a problem?*” the Demon Lord asked tensely. He couldn’t even guess as to why Tahara would reach out to him like this.

Slowly, Tahara responded. “*I’m hoping to make a proposal, or a suggestion, if you will... The Madam’s been asking for someone to help run the Hot Springs Resort...and I found this pretty boy here? He’d be a perfect fit, you know...*”

The Demon Lord swallowed his sigh of relief. His input wasn’t needed for whatever project the Madam and Tahara were working on. “*If you think he’s a good fit, I’m sure he is. Do with him as you will,*” he answered.

“*Th-There’s one little hiccup to that. Apparently, there’re some...kids...being kept in this pigsty,*” Tahara stammered.

His heart thundering, the Demon Lord wilily feigned indifference. “*And...what do you want me to do about it?*”

Tahara was drenched with sweat. His proposal would be in direct violation of the Demon Lord’s order to leave no survivors. Knowing his life was on the line, Tahara dared to answer. “*Th-This guy’s like a father to these kids, he says! He’s gonna be a lot more useful if we have the kids around. Make it run smoother, you know?*”

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord nearly leaped with excitement. *Whoever you are, Pretty Boy, you’re my hero!* He thought to himself. Yu wouldn’t give the rescue a second thought if she thought it was Tahara and the Madam’s idea. Besides, as long as he presented this information in White’s presence, she and

her bleeding heart would insist upon following through with it.

Now that he had the perfect setup, the Demon Lord once again resorted to ambiguity. *“If he proves to be useful, he will attach value to those children. We will take them to the village,”* he Communicated.

“All right...!” Tahara responded. *“Phew, now Manami won’t think I’m a piece of trash! Nothing’s worth disappointing my angel girl! You saved my skin, Chief!”*

Angel girl...? Well, as long as Tahara’s happy with it, the Demon Lord thought.

Yu noticed that the Demon Lord had halted and innocently tilted her head. She’d assumed Tahara had sent a Communication, but the curl of her dear Secretary’s lips piqued her curiosity. “Mister Secretary, any good word on—?” Yu cut herself short and shifted her gaze.

The Demon Lord warily followed it and found a man standing some distance away. Something about him made him stand apart from the other Central rabble waiting for slaughter... Even from this distance, he had the palpable aura of a masterful warrior.

If Akane had been here, she would have picked up on his presence much earlier and would not have allowed him to come this close. Neither the Demon Lord nor Yu shared Akane’s skill for detection, though. Their powers were designed to obliterate armies.

The warrior’s skin was perfectly sunbrowned—a telling sign that he had spent his life on the battlefield rather than in ballrooms. His hair, in stark contrast to his skin, was completely white.

Those physical characteristics were enough for Yu to identify him as Leon, Parma’s former general and most trusted advisor, whom Cake had spoken of. Just as she connected the dots, the Demon Lord let out a laugh so hearty that it made her hold her tongue in confusion.

“Look at you...!” the Demon Lord bellowed. “You might as well be a Player ready to storm the Sleepless Castle! Where have you been hiding all this time?!”

Leon met the Demon Lord’s gaze, his expression guarded. A pair of wings,

dark as night, stretched from the Demon Lord's back, emanating a dark aura that inspired fear in those who beheld it. A clueless, sheltered noble might have dismissed the wings as a bizarre costume piece, but Leon had seen enough in his war-torn life to feel the gravity of them.

"My name is Swein Camual Leon... I have been tasked with ending you." Upon seeing the Demon Lord in the flesh, Leon finally realized who he had been commanded to kill: the fallen angel Lucifer—the great rebel himself—and his kin. "Never did I expect to face an entity of myth resurrected." If Leon's worldview had been shattered by this revelation, he hid it well.

Still, Lucifer spoke to him with glee. Beaming, even. "I can sense you've maxed out... You must have led a life of rigorous training. I commend the time and effort you've dedicated to it...and your guts to stand before me. I can practically *taste* your intent to kill. Splendid." The Demon Lord's existence alone was bizarre enough for Leon's taste, but the barrage of compliments from him—after Leon had declared his orders—was downright surreal.

The Demon Lord had dispatched plenty of foes, declaring that they were unworthy to stand in his presence, but perhaps that wasn't the case for Leon. "Where is this will coming from?!" the Demon Lord continued. "It's as if your entire life was spent building to this crescendo! Oh, how you remind me of the champions of old!" He laughed again, reminiscing about the Players he'd faced. He had spent his life fighting Players who wanted him dead—that had been his purpose, once. Perhaps his excitement to finally face a worthy foe was a natural reaction.

Yu opened her mouth, only for the Demon Lord to preemptively silence her with his hand. "Yu, there's something Tahara and the Madam need from this place. Take White with you and clear me a path to whatever cell holds a group of children called the Numbered."

"A-As you wish, Mister Secretary. What about him?" Yu asked with a look towards Leon.

"Stay out of it," the Demon Lord commanded, and turned to face off against him. "So, what do you have to gain from slaying me? Fortune? Power? Your own kingdom, perhaps?"

Defeating the Demon Lord of the Empire meant ending the world...at least in the Game. This world, however, would continue turning with or without the Demon Lord, which made him curious of Leon's end goal.

"I have already found the bottom of the pit... Fortune and glory are of no use to me," Leon said.

"You're after something different, then?" the Demon Lord asked, the words "bottom of the pit" lingering in his ears. Still, excitement bubbled within him as he took in Leon for what he was. Something he'd lost long ago was slowly rising to the surface.

"Today is the day I recover my last light... My lost devotion." Leon drew his sword and the air fractured around them.

Instinctively, the Demon Lord reached for Sodom's Fire, judging that bare hands weren't going to cut it this time. In the blink of an eye, Leon's face was a breath away from his.

He's fast...! the Demon Lord was forced to admit.

Bursts of sparks filled the air as Leon unleashed a storm of devastating sword strikes, forcing the Demon Lord to fall back step after step. Punishing his momentary unguardedness, Leon moved to end their duel.

—Posthaste!

—Hero's Triumph!

Leon's Dexterity shot through the roof and his Stamina became endless for the duration of this battle.

Even as he was met with a whirlwind of supersonic slashes—one piercing his shoulder and another carving deep into his side—the Demon Lord cracked a grin. In the face of what appeared to be a one-sided defeat for him, he let out a booming laugh.

"Very good! Leon, was it?!" Inexplicably, his laugh continued. The Demon Lord was best skilled at throwing projectiles, not close combat. He was an entity that eliminated thousands of enemies without ever letting one come close. However, he gleefully entertained this bout of close combat. "What a barrage! I

feel like I'm playing a bullet hell!"

Leon could not comprehend what his opponent was babbling about, nor how he could be babbling so mirthfully.

Leaving Leon's comprehension in the dust, the Demon Lord sped on, "Few brave souls like you have dared to challenge me in close combat, riding the backs of many a tank who sacrificed their lives for the cause—to land *just one hit* on the final boss! It must have felt like D-Day! I was the one doling out bullet hell back then!" Another guffaw rumbled from the Demon Lord. The tables had turned, now that he was playing a blade hell.

Once Leon let the incoherent drivel pass from his mind, he noticed an anomaly. The severity of the wounds he'd inflicted on the Demon Lord—a stab to the shoulder and a deep gash to the gut—would have been lethal against most opponents. Yet, Lucifer remained as dexterous as ever...and now his wounds were closing.

Leon unleashed a Sword Flash that would have decapitated any other opponent, then put some distance between himself and the Demon Lord. *I've never heard of a skill that can heal this quickly mid combat... He must have received an incredible Blessing...or a curse.* With a sardonic smirk, Leon smacked down a knife flying towards his face. The impact reverberated through his arms as the heat from the projectile singed his face. *The knife too... Was it blessed by a Salamander?*

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord remained as cool as a breeze. "What's eating you? I'm here if you want to talk about it."

Leon almost let himself laugh at the bizarre offer. It wasn't out of kindness, he knew, but out of a childish desire for Leon to stay focused on their match. *If I don't vanquish this man, my life will end in darkness...!* He returned his focus to the Demon Lord only to find that he had closed their distance this time. Leon blocked Sodom's Fire coming down on his head, only to be pushed back several feet by the impact.

The Demon Lord pursued the general with overswings that lacked any technique or finesse, but sung with raw power that could tear down towering trees.

Leon held off the battery with technique and instincts honed over the decades, but the Demon Lord's brute strength seemed to dwarf those advantages. Even in martial arts, the technically superior fighter sometimes fell to a brute's lucky shot.

"What's the matter, Leon? Is a little muscle all it takes to wear you down?" the Demon Lord taunted with a menacing grin.

Leon held his ground, his eyes darkening as his mind wandered to the past. The greater the danger he faced, the more of his history he seemed to recall. Countless battles of life and death, taking on entire armies against all odds... Leon had always denied Death at every turn, all on his own.

"What will you do now?" the Demon Lord taunted. "You mentioned something about light or devotion or whatever it was."

Every time he met the Demon Lord's attack with his sword, Leon went flying like a leaf in the wind. Taking on the Demon Lord of the Empire in a fair fight was like trying to bare-knuckle brawl with a tank: either his fists would be crushed to pulp, or he would.

And yet, Leon remained undaunted. Phantoms of his past bound him to this battle, forbidding him to turn his back on his mythical foe. *One last battle before the princess is returned to you*, they seemed to whisper.

Leon had once been celebrated as the savior of Parma after protecting his country from Xenobian invasions time after time. Parma, however, had betrayed its hero. The royal family kept Leon at arm's length until they finally removed him from the front lines, heeding whispers of the general leaking information to the enemy. Of course, it was Xenobian saboteurs who had planted those seeds, but the king must have considered Leon and his overwhelming popularity an all too threatening thorn in his side. The king took the rumors at face value and imprisoned Leon, reducing him from savior to traitor overnight. Without their valiant general, Parma's war front collapsed, and the rest of the nation with it. By the time Leon had stepped out of his cell for the first time, his country had been burned to the ground.

Even now, the sight of his homeland in ruins burned brightly in his eyes. "My loyalty has not faltered. A piece of my homeland lives in my heart."

“What are you muttering about?” The Demon Lord threw a combo of Sodom’s Fire and a powerful kick to send Leon flying again, as if the general was no more than a pesky beast.

In this desperate state of battle, Leon’s phantoms only became more vivid: people wandering around the capital turned to ash, a mother’s soul-rending cry for her lost child, scores of children covered in soot. They all shared a hollow look in their eyes that seemed to condemn Leon for their downfall.

Leon had fallen to his knees and gazed up at the heavens, powerless to do anything but curse his failure. He’d lost everything that day and replaced it with the sins his people accused him of... Even when they called him a traitor for pledging his fealty to Xenobia for a chance at saving his princess.

“My devotion burns bright, come hell or high water,” Leon vowed.

“You take monologuing way too seriously.”

“Today, I shall take back everything that was once mine!”

“Wait...” the Demon Lord replied, his exasperation sobered by Leon’s solemn determination. “What do you mean by that?” He asked, the phrase “take back everything” bouncing in his head.

Meanwhile, Leon’s aura roiled about him as he activated skills becoming of his legendary record. “Whirling heavens! Shower me with tribulations!”

—**Duel Skill: Unflinching Will!** (Max out Resistance to all magic elements and negate all status effects.)

—**Duel Skill: One Man Army!** (Deal 20 damage for every level the user outlevels the target. Allies under the user’s command gain Valiant and Bombardment.)

A fiery aura swelled around Leon as he leaped into an attack. It found its mark, with the Demon Lord suffering a devastating hit: since Leon had reached the astronomical level of 36, his damage output had been boosted by more than 700.

“Demon Lord... Meet your end!” Leon exclaimed.

“Now you’ve made this interesting!” A dangerous light flickered in the Demon

Lord's eyes as black feathers fell around him. Playtime was over.

Leon sensed the Demon Lord shift gears and steeled himself for what was to come.

The pair clashed faster and faster, harder and harder, taking their battle to the air as dust clouds puffed with every impact.

—Class-4 Spell: Aerial Drive!

—First Skill: Charge!

As they soared and clashed, the impacts shook the earth in every direction. If there had been any onlookers, they simply would not have believed their eyes. Lines of black and white crossed and collided like they were drawing geometric shapes in the air. Soon, they were running up the castle wall, blades sparking, as if the force of gravity itself didn't dare interfere with their battle.



The spectacle, like an ancient meteor shower, even caused the panicked Central commanders to halt and watch. Of course, they were promptly wiped out by Tahara's guns that glided through the air.

The Demon Lord was the first one to judge that fighting in the air was only prolonging their battle. He floated down to the ground and began kicking some pebbles like a petulant child. Seeing this odd choice of behavior, Leon silently lowered himself.

"You're a cruel man, Leon," the Demon Lord said out of the blue.

Leon waited for an explanation as to how he'd been cruel, or at least why the Demon Lord had apparently lost interest in their match, all of a sudden.

"I *had* forgotten it, Leon. But you reminded me."

"Reminded you of what...?" Leon asked, more confused than ever. He began to wonder if the Demon Lord was entirely aware that they were in the middle of a life-and-death duel.

Unconcerned with whether or not Leon understood his meaning, the Demon Lord replied, "Reminded me of how desperately my soul longs for a satisfying battle." Although his tone remained calm and collected, his eyes glared as if to incriminate Leon for a terrible transgression. Whether it was fair to him or not, the Demon Lord had never bothered to unleash his full power during a battle since coming to this world, although he had dispatched many enemies with ease.

Clashing swords with a worthy rival lit the fire of nostalgia in the Demon Lord. He remembered the way he'd felt when he fended off wave after wave of ruthless Players storming his castle—24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

At the same time, he had patched bugs, prevented exploits, designed updates, written marketing, collaborated with influencers, streamed videos, answered interviews, faced government scrutiny... Every single day, he'd fought on one battlefield or another, combat coming in all shapes and sizes.

Reminiscence stoked the hearth of his soul once more, and shadows cast by those flames showed on the Demon Lord's face. "I'd forgotten how it felt to burn my days like oil. I'd grown accustomed to the soft glow of a lantern and

had forgotten how the heat of a roaring fire can make you feel alive.”

“What does that even mean...?” Leon muttered.

“Your final boss welcomes you, hero! I’ve been waiting for someone like you for a long, long time!” the Demon Lord shouted, arms open wide. With it came a storm of buffs and debuffs.

—**Combat Skill: Fake Out!**

—**Combat Skill: Intimidate!**

—**Combat Skill: Equal to None!**

—**Survival Skill: Fighting Spirit!**

It was almost unfair how much these skills raised the Demon Lord’s stats while lowering his opponent’s. Very unfortunately for Leon, the Demon Lord had even triggered the Sword to End Wars. All of these effects compounded his already sky-high stats.

The Demon Lord kicked off the ground. Before the dust could settle, his fist was driven hard into Leon’s face.

This was when their battle turned into torture. Every time Leon parried Sodom’s Fire, which assaulted him at supersonic speed, lacerations materialized all over his body thanks to a special attack called **Expert Chain Attacks** that bypassed any attempt at blocking. Now, things had truly begun.

Every time the Demon Lord’s blade met Leon’s, another line was sliced into the general. The Demon Lord seized his opponent by the collar with his left hand and threw him against the wall with the force of a hurricane, sending that entire section of the wall crumbling down.

Leon soon emerged from the rubble, torn up and bloody.

The Demon Lord’s expression was unreadable, save for a few blinks at Leon’s reinvigorated presence.

“My life and death...I give to my country.” Leon reached out with his right hand as a shimmering portal materialized in the air. Reaching inside, he removed an awe-inspiring lance. In that moment, Leon glowed with a soft brilliance, his lacerations rapidly healing.

“Fascinating lance. I assume it comes with a healing function.” The Demon Lord looked both surprised and relieved that their duel would continue. Little did he know that he would soon come to gravely regret it. “Now that you’re good as new, Leon, let us resume our exhilarating battle.” He brazenly approached.

Yet again, it was Leon who made the first move by raising his left hand. A magic circle formed from it, blinding the Demon Lord with white light. “Glint and fly, arrows of light... **Lightningfall!**”

Lightning cracked from the magic circle, tearing up the earth with a deafening roar.

Lightning magic was so rare that only a handful of casters in the whole continent could cast it; it being a cross of Storm (an elevation of Wind) and Water, after all. This feat was even more extraordinary because Leon had mastered it as a knight, not a full-time mage.

When the dust cloud had dissipated, though, the Demon Lord stood within a white barrier—Magic Queller. It functioned much the same as Assault Queller, only for magic, of course. The Demon Lord casually scratched his head as if he had experienced nothing more than a gentle breeze, while panicking on the inside. *Literal lighting out of the blue?! That spell took a year off my life!*

A sudden lightning storm would have been no joke for an ordinary fighter, but it was almost comical when the Demon Lord was on the receiving end. It oddly resembled the divine comeuppance he so deserved.

“Not even magic has an effect on you, does it?”

“You’ll need a little more than that parlor trick to take me down,” the Demon Lord boasted with all-too-convincing bravado, his heart thundering as if to echo the spell. He hadn’t figured out the detailed design of Magic Queller yet and still didn’t trust the mechanic wholeheartedly.

Oblivious to the dread curling in the Demon Lord’s gut, Leon raised his lance to the heavens to cast a spell more terrible than the last. “For my blood—for my soul—bless me with your crown of light! **Thoronation!**”

Lightning bolts drew thousands of zigzagged lines in the air, converging on the

point of Leon's lance until the general beamed with an electric glow, arcs of electricity sizzling about him—a thunderstorm incarnate.

“H-Hey,” the Demon Lord stammered. “Don't overextend yourself. Wearing lightning surely comes with adverse side effects. Why don't we have a, well, more relaxed— Hey, listen to me!”

Leon shot for the Demon Lord, fast as the lightning he embodied, clearly unconcerned with whatever nonsense his opponent was prattling on about.

He managed to avoid the lance's tip by a hair. A different kind of shock hit him, though, when Magic Queller activated anyway. *Crap! The barrier activates if he gets too close, even if he doesn't make contact!* The only explanation was that the lance and Leon himself were coated in the same magic that triggered Magic Queller.

Leon's lance danced in elusive thrusts, slashes, and even pummel strikes, triggering the new barrier throughout.

The Demon Lord's expression rapidly soured like milk left out in the sun. *What if there's a limit to how many times the barrier activates?! He imagined. I'm screwed if it runs out!*

There were abilities in the Game that provided similar effects with similar restrictions: Decoy, Mirage, and Smokescreen, which completely negated any three attacks. Their effects helped them garner a particular popularity among non-Japanese players who were thrilled by effects that made them feel like elusive ninjas.

The Demon Lord's internal anguish continued as he feared that his protection would vanish any second. *So I'm literal toast if this thing goes away?! No thank you!* Any sense of superiority he had had walking into this battle was gone. Again and again, the Demon Lord used **Charge** to escape to the skies, but Leon was always on his tail. Even his repeated attempts to **Eye Gouge** Leon proved to be unsuccessful; as a sentient lightning bolt, Leon had no eyes that the Demon Lord could gouge.

Get the hell away from me! the Demon Lord silently begged the charge of electricity pursuing him like a homing missile.

If anyone was privy to the Demon Lord's internal panic, the battle might have seemed comical, but for anyone watching it firsthand, this was a scene from fantasies and nightmares. A black-winged deity being pursued by lightning while incessant gunfire echoed throughout the stronghold? It was entirely understandable how the Central soldiers who'd survived up to this point were falling to their knees, convinced that they were standing witness to the end of time.

Dona's stronghold had been transformed into an execution chamber with no way out by land or sky. Of course, our winged joke master was now among the lambs waiting for slaughter. *How'd I end up here, fighting lightning! I need an insulator... An old tire, a rubber band, even a condom! Someone help!* His desperate flight was fueled by trains of thought that went nowhere; the Demon Lord scrambled up, down, left, and right, but there was no escaping.

Zeroing in on his winged back, Leon mercilessly fired another attack.

—Plasma Burst!

Arcs cracked from Leon's hands and met Magic Queller, shattering into a cacophony of explosions. While physically unharmed, the Demon Lord was taking a lot of emotional damage. *Who are you, Storm?! Go zap Magneto or something!*

"You're not going anywhere, Demon Lord! **Sonic Lance!**" Having flown above, Leon unleashed a series of lance thrusts that carved chunks out of the Demon Lord and sent him plummeting.

But Leon wasn't finished. He caught up during the Demon Lord's descent and plunged the lance into his foe. "This battle ends now! **Electrify at the Stake!**" The lance drove him into the ground, sending a rumble of shock waves from the point of impact. For a moment, the Demon Lord lay pinned to the ground, the lance looming over him like a gravemarker.

Leon withdrew his weapon and fell back spread-eagle. He was entirely depleted of Health and Stamina. Light and electricity faded from him until he was mortal once more. *Now...I've saved...my princess...* Relief swelled in his chest for his kingdom lost and princess found...but it only lasted a moment.

The Demon Lord shattered Leon's momentary peace by sitting up while

shaking his head. “That was a good one... I’m afraid I’ll have to fight you in my *preferred* style now.”

Leon rushed to his feet, only to falter, off-balance. His left arm was gone, severed at the shoulder. Sodom’s Fire, this time deployed in its intended use case, had sliced it clean off.

“I prefer to keep my distance and obliterate my enemies with throwing weapons. Don’t fret over your arm. I’ll have my advisor— Huh?” the Demon Lord blurted stupidly as Leon groaned.

His arm had vanished from the ground and particles of light were gathering at the fresh cut in his shoulder. Soon, the particles formed into another arm, restoring the limb as if time had rewound. The Demon Lord had ludicrous abilities of his own, but that didn’t stop him from gawking at his opponent. *You are a mutant! This isn’t a superhero comic!* He nearly screamed at the grotesque healing process, but noticed how pained Leon’s expression was. He’d paid a considerable price for his arm’s regeneration, whatever it was.

Although Leon had managed to rise to his feet, he was trembling from head to toe as torrents of sweat rolled down his skin.

The way he barely stood upright using his lance as a cane reminded the Demon Lord of a hospital patient clutching their IV pole. He watched Leon in befuddlement, unwilling to fight him in this state. “What drives you this far? What do you have to gain from killing me?”

“I need to save my homeland... Parma...” Leon groaned.

The Demon Lord presumed that Kongming—Xenobia’s chancellor—had offered Leon a deal to release his princess and allow the rebuilding of Parma if he would only slay the Demon Lord. Under other circumstances, Leon would have had the sense to scoff at the obviously false promise. However, his mind had not been the same since Parma fell. Now he was consumed by haunting thoughts of the past.

Ignorant of Leon’s turmoil, the Demon Lord casually dropped a bomb. “Cake mentioned Parma as well. What is this, a kingdom of sweets you’re trying to build?”

“Wait! How do you know of Princess Cake?!” Leon implored.

“How do I know her? She’s under my protection in our village.”

“How did you—?! Tell me everything! P-Please...” Leon moved to approach the Demon Lord, only to fall on one knee from the engulfing pain.

His dismay clued in the Demon Lord that Leon had good reason for his questions. With few words, the Demon Lord retold his encounter with Cake. There wasn’t much to tell, anyway. They’d happened to cross paths in the Slave Market, then the Demon Lord had taken her back to the village practically on a whim. He spoke matter-of-factly, which only aided in convincing Leon of his honesty.

“Hellion Territory... How did she end up there?” Leon muttered in disbelief. He thought he’d turned over every stone in search of his princess’s cell. For the average human on this continent, Hellion Territory was as inaccessible as Mars or Mercury was to inhabitants of modern-day Earth. It was a place entirely off of their radar.

Recalling all sorts of impressions he had of Cake, the Demon Lord focused on the positives. “She’s alive and well. I hear she’s been caring for our patients in the village.” He still found it hard to believe that the girl who’d cackled as she stabbed a devil to a bloody pulp was once a bona fide princess.

On the other hand, Leon was overcome with emotion. “The Slave Market... Oh, poor Princess Cake!”

That poor dead devil, if anything... The Demon Lord only scratched his cheek. After all, Cake had been serving as a sort of apprentice to Yu. No one with a healthy sense of morality would last a day assisting Yu in her *endeavors*.

“And she cares for the sick, even after what she’s been through...” Leon blubbered on, “She is as merciful as ever...!”

The Demon Lord raised a brow. *Merciful? Has he really not seen Cake without her mask?* Wisely, he kept this assessment to himself. As he had thrived on misunderstanding more than anyone in the entire universe, he felt a deep-rooted fear against shattering an illusion like this.

“Please, let me see the princess... Just once! I beg of you!” Leon begged,

indeed.

And the Demon Lord had no reason not to agree. It would be a win-win for Leon to take away that ticking time bomb of a princess. “Hm... Once this battle is over, I’ll take you to her. Be patient until then.” He turned to leave, not wanting to stick around and risk another thunderstorm, but Leon called him back.

Leon knelt on one knee, head drooped. “A moment, please. I beseech your forgiveness for turning my blade against my princess’s savior. I owe you a life debt.”

“Don’t sweat it. It was just a happy accident.” In truth, the Demon Lord had not ventured to the Slave Market for Cake’s benefit. He didn’t know what to do with such intense gratitude.

“If you oppose the central nobles,” Leon offered, “allow me to join your ranks, if you’ll have me. That would be the least I can do to compensate for my transgression today.”

“Oh...? W-Well, if you insist.” The Demon Lord agreed and swiftly strode off, if only to get as far away as he could from what seemed like a looming thundercloud, inadvertently creating a fresh level of hell for the Central legion to suffer. This decision put the final nail in the coffin that was Dona’s former stronghold, and that coffin was large enough to bury Dona’s entire army in it.

Swein Camual Leon

Age: 28 — Male **Item** **Gladeus, the Heaven Piercer** A Valkyria, who led mere mortals into battle in the Mythical Wars of old, manifested in weapon form. Ironically, this allowed the last shred of her existence to remain in the world after the disappearance of the Great Light. To those she deems worthy to wield her, Gladeus grants a Blessing that prevents them from dying on a battlefield. Or, as Leon calls it, a curse. Every activation greatly shortens the holder's life span, and even leaves scars on their souls. It may be worth noting that Gladeus has incredibly high standards. Only men with an impeccable face and heart are permitted to wield her.

General of the now-lost kingdom of Parma, once hailed as its savior. Leon had never lost a battle, feared by enemies and adored by his people, save for a very small minority who fell for Xenobia's propaganda of the general's treachery. He wielded spells and strategies as well as spears, and was a strict but fair leader to his subordinates.

Conquest — Those Who Were Once Numbered

Striding through the chaos of the stronghold, the Demon Lord sent a Communication to Tahara and Yu. *“It’s me. A man named Leon—a former general of Cake’s—has switched allegiance.”* The last thing he wanted was for either of them to unnecessarily clash with him.

His advisors acknowledged this without any sign of surprise. As soon as the Demon Lord took Cake in, turning Leon to their side was inevitable. Furthermore, they knew the Demon Lord was counting on sending Leon into Xenobia to locate those still loyal to him and willing to rebel against their conquerors. Xenobia had conquered and absorbed one small nation after another in a rapid campaign of expansion, leaving them a disjointed nation that was barely held together. Just a few sparks of unrest could spiral into an inferno with the potential to implode the whole country. Of course, the Demon Lord hadn’t a clue about any part of this brilliant strategy, despite Yu and Tahara’s absolute confidence in their leader’s brilliance.

“He worked for the princess, did he...?” Tahara chuckled over the Communication, blowing out cigarette smoke. *“You made quite a show of kicking his ass, Chief. I pity the man.”*

Pity him?! The Demon Lord silently outraged. *Do you have any idea how terrifying it was to fight a thunderstorm?! Pity me!*

“Don’t be silly. The Secretary was only breaking his new pet,” Yu said with the same tone of amusement as Tahara.

I was the one with my tail between my legs! The Demon Lord swallowed his words once again. Then, a strange thing came into his view, prompting him to terminate his Communication. *Is that an elephant? A white elephant, at that...*

The elephant looked the same as any he’d seen in a zoo, except a bright red drape and gaudy saddle had been placed on its back. A screeching noble sat atop it, enraged. “Move, coward! Move, I say! Scared of noise... Pathetic!” The noble repeatedly struck the elephant’s head with the rod in his hand. Still, the creature did not take another step, apparently more afraid of gunfire than

punitive beatings.

An idea crossed the Demon Lord's mind. He walked over to the elephant and patted its leg. "Our village could use a mascot..." Then, he addressed the rider. "You. Get down."

"How dare you bark orders at me! You must be the ant who wandered in!"

"Get down. Now. I particularly detest animal abusers."

"Beast, flatten this bug! I order you to—"

The Demon Lord leaped onto the elephant's back and physically kicked the rider off, the creature accepting this act of grand theft animal with a happy toot—a show of how much the gentle giant must have endured under its brutal master.

"You are in the presence of the great Boklok! Our Menagerie of War will trample—"

"I don't even know who you are. Nor do I care. This elephant is henceforth under my employment as the mascot of my village," the Demon Lord declared before dismounting the animal to study its face. He had seen elephants a few times on Earth in zoo enclosures and on TV screens, but never a white elephant. He'd heard how rare they were—so much so that some countries in Southeast Asia worshipped them. "How about an elephant-back tour? It's a classic tourist attraction. If you work in my village, I'll feed you these carrots every day." The Demon Lord presented one of the carrots Kyon and Momo had packed him.

The white elephant excitedly took it with its trunk and lifted it to its mouth. It clearly enjoyed the treat, swaying its trunk to and fro in a sort of satisfied dance.

Enraged by this, Boklok charged at his former ride with his beating stick raised. "You pathetic pachyderm! You would let this worthless insect bribe you with food?!"

With its trunk, the elephant sounded a furious trumpet and grabbed Boklok, throwing him into the air with all its might.

"Nice form..." the Demon Lord said as we watched Whatever-His-Name-Was

follow a perfect arc through the sky. “Have you thought about going into shot put?” He fed the elephant carrot after carrot, and the magnificent beast was all too happy to serve a kind master that fed it snacks. The elephant’s instincts might have played a part in its eagerness to obey the Demon Lord too: animals could sense their place in the pecking order.

“Tahara, I secured an elephant. Keep it safe for me,” the Demon Lord Communicated.

Tahara laughed over the line. *“Are you serious?! All you gotta do is go for a stroll and even an elephant bows to you.”*

“It’ll be an asset to the village,” his boss simply explained.

“Roger that.” Tahara chuckled. Much like the heroic general they had just added to their legion, the elephant could handle itself, given that it belonged to a species used as organic tanks throughout history.

Oblivious to its potential as a war machine, the Demon Lord casually stroked its trunk. “My subordinates will take care of you. Go for a walk around the place if you get bored.”

Whether the animal understood its new master or not, it stomped off in a thundering run, leaving Central men trampled in its wake. As far as Dona’s people were concerned, the Demon Lord was living up to his name by setting into motion one disaster after another.

——Underground entrance of Dona’s stronghold.

The Demon Lord stepped into the structure to regroup with Yu and White, noticing a change in the air as he observed the area. *I can’t hear anything from the outside... What’s going on?* The utter silence was almost serene.

Dona had spared no expense in lining the walls with Wind Spell Stones that completely soundproofed this area. What must have been a luxurious amenity for Dona and his inner circle had turned into a dangerous liability now that they were under attack. What good was a fortress that shut out any sound that might have warned those within of an impending attack?

Yu and White ran over to him.

“We have been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Mister Secretary,” Yu greeted with perfect coolness.

On the other hand, White was still in a tizzy. “Lord Lucifer... How are things outside?”

“The dust will soon settle,” the Demon Lord answered. “Show me the way, Yu.”

“Of course, sir.”

Yu led them underground through corridors of pantries, cellars, and treasuries. One staircase down, however, and they were passing a long row of barred cells. Below them still lay the torture chambers that were marred with fresh blood and bones. The smell of decay hung in the air.

White’s body tensed tighter as they descended farther. “What is this place...? What was Dona doing...?” she couldn’t help but ask.

The Demon Lord flatly answered, “What every idiot with too much power does.”

It wasn’t uncommon for power to corrupt the wise and virtuous either. Many sadistic dictators remembered in history were once driven by idealistic visions and concern for their countries. Some had even changed the world for the better, before they undid whatever good they had done only after they secured their seat of power.

Let’s see what these guys are made of... Since the Demon Lord had always taken an authoritarian approach to his creative endeavors, he only trusted himself to make final judgments. So far, the central nobles had only shown themselves to be garishly self-centered and cruel.

Yu paused once they reached a level lined with individual chambers of various sizes. As the trio walked past them, they could see that the rooms were truly fit for depravity: Spell Stones illuminated with dim, reddish light the metal and leather restraints on the beds, as well as the torture devices lining the walls. Even though the rooms were evidently being cleaned regularly, there was a persistent stench of blood. It was all too easy to picture the innocent children in those rooms, tormented until they were cold, silent, and could no longer serve

their purpose.

“Mister Secretary, according to our schematics, the cell over there is where they keep the Numbered,” Yu indicated.

“I see,” the Demon Lord replied simply. He hadn’t spoken much on their walk through this wretched hall.

White was trembling. Perhaps she knew that the worst horror her imagination could muster would pale in comparison to what lay within the cell.

Yu thrust her hand straight through the thick, steel door and tore it from its hinges. The Demon Lord might have noted his advisor’s unconventional method of lockpicking, had the atrocious state of the cell not demanded all of his attention.

The first thing that struck him was the stench of rust and burning whale oil. Then he saw them, as the meager light of the prison showed the little embers of life that still smoldered. Nearly a dozen children were curled on the ground without so much as a pile of hay to shield them from the cold stone floor. In that moment, time itself seemed to have frozen in this place. Shackles weighed heavily on their ankles, and collars were fastened tight on their necks to prevent them from slitting their throats, on the off chance they got their hands on something sharp enough.

The Numbered remained utterly impassive in the face of this sudden breakin; they had no energy left in them to show any emotion.

While Yu took in the scene stone-faced, White’s eyes were wide with horror. “This is horrific...! Who are they...?”

“This is how the central ‘nobles’ pass their time, I assume,” the Demon Lord quietly replied as his gaze wandered between the children. Every single one of them was black and blue, swollen, with many of their limbs twisted the wrong way. One child had both eyes carved out of their sockets, another had animal hide grafted haphazardly onto their face. The Demon Lord couldn’t help but see this as a scene from a body-horror film come to life. “This shows the true nature of these psycho shitbags that call themselves nobles...” The Demon Lord turned to his trusty advisor—the only one who could end this nightmare. “Heal them all, Yu. It’s revolting.”

“Yes, Mister Secretary.”

White turned to the Demon Lord, eyes glinting. “Lord Lucifer...!” she sighed.

Meanwhile, Yu mechanically approached the child with one leg and brought down her God’s Hand. Instantly, bone sprouted from the stump, followed by the regeneration and reattachment of muscle tissue. By the time White had blinked a few times in disbelief, the child’s leg had been completely restored. She gaped like a fish on land, her mind refusing to comprehend what her eyes had seen. While those on Earth might have interpreted Yu’s impossible skill as some sort of alien technology, inhabitants of this world saw it as a miracle told of in the myths of old.

“You’ve been through hell, haven’t you...? But you’re all safe now.” Wearing a particularly merciful smile, Yu continued healing the Numbered. She understood that the entire reason the Demon Lord had brought White along was to show the Holy Maiden this performance. She’d also calculated that the Secretary was saving these children in order to curry Azur’s loyalty for Tahara and the Madam’s benefit. After all, Yu had more intel on the Holylight civil conflict than anyone. Garnering a good reputation had become a sort of MO for Yu, and she was still motivated by that end now. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw the Holy Maiden clasping her hands in pensive prayer.

Foolish girl, Yu thought. *But that works in our favor today*. Yu had been recruiting powerful individuals like the Madam, Cake, Olgan, and Sambo to form a legion of her own. This was the kind of move that Akane was too impulsive and Ren too innocent to pull off. On that note, Yu found that White reminded her of Ren...and that was troubling. *Perhaps this will prevent her from becoming an enemy I’d have to eliminate...* Yu had once been a fearless, reckless witch of destruction, but now she was calculating and cunning. Even if White could not be turned to their side wholeheartedly, Yu hoped that this show of generosity would dull the Holy Maiden’s blade if she were ever to wield it against Yu.

“Let there be light in your eyes again,” Yu whispered, the picture of love and grace, reaching her hand towards the girl with empty eye sockets. Apparently, she had learned a thing or two about playing a role from the Demon Lord.

With new eyes as good as her old ones, the girl stood astounded, finally

squeaking out, “M-My eyes...”

“It looks like you’ll be able to see just fine,” Yu said with a good-natured smile. “Take care not to lose these.”

White didn’t know what to make of the veritable witch who stood before her as the portrait of benevolence.

Reading White’s internal conflict like an open book, Yu thought, *Good reputation... As the Secretary says*. She preferred to rule with violence and fear, but she had gone down that road before. The Demon Lord—in desperation, little she knew—had once told her that following the same path twice was the same as moving backward. Besides, she had come to learn that putting on a show of heroism made making allies much easier.

“That’s why you came here first, isn’t it?” Yu asked the Demon Lord, mind-to-mind. *“For this moment to play out exactly as it is.”*

“You’re overthinking it,” the Demon Lord answered honestly. *“As always.”*

Yu only found amusement in his answer, though. Why else would he have sought out this prison in the middle of their siege? She knew too well how her boss spun schemes like webs, planning a thousand moves ahead in every direction. If she failed to understand the Demon Lord’s complex thought process, she’d be a failure and nothing more. To lose her position—to lose everything she’d worked for—would be tantamount to losing everything that made her who she was.

These children are, at the very least, more important to the Secretary than the enemy commanders, Yu noted as she destroyed the shackles and collars of each child she treated. Despite performing an array of miracles—like regrowing peeled skin and severed genitalia—Yu wasn’t satisfied. Her dear Mister Secretary remained silent. Of course, the Demon Lord was simply watching in amazement at how perfectly the children were healed from their mutilated states, but this drove Yu up the wall.

I’m missing something... She racked her brain for answers. *What else is he expecting of me...?!*

By the time she’d finished healing all the children, a possible solution came to

her, along with clear guidance on what she should do next.

“It finally clicked. I apologize, sir, for having taken so long to understand your meaning,” she Communicated.

Wait! This is another leap of logic! the Demon Lord thought, failing miserably to grasp what Yu was insinuating. After quick and painful deliberation, he chose to act as if he was on the same page. *“Don’t worry about it... We’re in no rush.”* The best he could manage was to lob the ball back into her court.

Still, Yu rose to her feet with unmistakable adoration in her eyes. She knew it. The Secretary bringing them here was a crucial step in his clairvoyantly concocted plan. *“You mean for these children to be the face of our future... The new Nine.”*

Nine?! Not this nonsense... the Demon Lord silently cursed.

The Nine were the most zealous of Hakuto Kunai’s followers. When designing the character of Hakuto Kunai, Akira Ono had once researched various dictators from history; the fact that each of them had a zealous following, or even a loyal personal army, had piqued his interest. Soon enough, he had created the Nine.

After conducting a quick head count in his mind, the Demon Lord nearly keeled over. *There really are nine of them... This can’t be happening!* At this point, there was no point claiming that it was merely a coincidence. Yu had already made up her mind that something like this could have only been achieved by his brilliance.

“Tragic survivors of cruelty inflicted upon them by Central... They will make fine stars of our reign,” Yu commented.

“Sure looks like it...” the Demon Lord returned, feeling a chill run down his spine as things were spiraling out of his control. In an attempt to change the subject, the Demon Lord strode into action. “Uh, White? Clean these kids up, will you?”

White snapped out of her stasis. “A-Absolutely!” She hurriedly cast White Light on the children, letting the magic lift the grime from their skin and hair.

“Wonderful treatments, Yu... Know that your ability is my fire. My one desire,” the Demon Lord stated—without even knowing what he meant himself

—and clapped Yu on the shoulder.

Yu melted under his praise and touch. “Mister Secretary...”

Not wanting to revisit their previous topic of conversation, the Demon Lord swiftly turned his back on Yu to face the Numbered. “Finally, I can see your pretty faces. How are you feeling?”

“Um...” One of them—now with an unblemished face free of pig hide—stared at the ground in age-appropriate shyness.

While he hadn’t paid much mind to it, the Demon Lord currently appeared as an eighteen-year-old Hakuto Kunai. He already was enough of a heartthrob to break royal hearts, and wrapped up in a fashionable outfit alien to this world to boot. Combined with the Fallen Angel wings on his back, he was the portrait of a mythical deity.

The girl with newly restored eyes that glimmered with hope stretched her hands out to the Demon Lord. “Lord...Lucifer...”

“If that’s who you see, then it must be so...” The Demon Lord mustered up enough maturity to keep his response vague, willing to play along with this particular misunderstanding. If this girl believed him to be some Santa Clause-esque harbinger of miracles, who was he to shatter her dreams?

The girl clung to him, tears flowing from her eyes. “For so, so long...I’ve been calling for help in the dark...”

Even the Demon Lord was struck by this. “I’m sorry...that it took so long.”

The other children pushed themselves off the ground and gathered to embrace their savior. In their eyes, an angel—fallen or not—had finally answered their prayers. Despite the unspeakable brutalities they had faced day after day, they had waited.

This had an effect on the Demon Lord too, so much that he managed to squeeze out a half-decent response. “I’m not one for speeches, but your lives will be different from here on out.”

However, no light shone in their eyes. Naturally, they couldn’t bring themselves to believe that their lives would change. No longer did they have

the will to try.

The children only clutched his hand or sleeve and pleaded tearfully.

“We have nothing to live for...”

“Lord Lucifer, please take us away from this world...”

“Please, we beg you. Heaven, Hell... Anywhere but here...!”

Finally, the Demon Lord gazed heavenward, only to find a suffocating, stone ceiling in his view. Anyone would be drained of their will to live after being imprisoned here, toyed with and tortured at the whim of powerful men... And they were just children.

Choosing his words carefully, the Demon Lord willed himself to speak. “I’ve never had a child, but I believe that your parents were full of hope when they had you. You may be in a pit of despair now...” He blew out a breath, trying to master his boiling wrath that only roiled stronger the more he thought about who had done this. “I’ll make a world where you can believe that tomorrow will be better than today.”

It was a simple sentiment he’d once shared with Olgan too: a sort of mantra that he’d told himself whenever he’d felt reckless and alone. It had gotten him through some tough times.

Still, to these children who’d lost everything, any words would have rung hollow. “How can you be so sure...?” one of them asked.

“Because nothing is impossible for me or my Empire!” the Demon Lord bellowed, seething with red-hot anger he was itching to point at where it belonged.

Trembling, the children stepped away from him, his shout like a douse of ice water.

“Take care of the kids, White. Let’s go, Yu,” he declared.

“R-Right!” the women responded in unison before the Demon Lord and Yu marched out of the cell.

Heavy silence fell until White spoke with forced cheerfulness. “E-Everyone, let’s get out of here...and wait for Lord Lucifer in another room.”

The children remained mute, their minds still trying to process the Fallen Angel: terrifying, beautiful, and kind.

White's moral compass would not allow her to give up so easily, though. "Th- This place is so unsettling... I'll have you know, the Holy Maidens will hold those who imprisoned you here responsible!" In an attempt to show her determination, White slapped the wall, which promptly cracked and crumbled to pieces.

"Huh...? How did I...?" White muttered to herself, having forgotten after everything that had happened that the Sword to End Wars had been applied to her as well, bolstering her physical strength to astronomical levels.

Fear sparked in the children's eyes after seeing the lady in front of them obliterate a stone wall with her bare hand. Giants from storybooks were the only ones they'd ever heard of accomplishing such a feat.

A child blurted out, voice shrieking with terror. "A g-giant's come to take us away!"

"N-No, I promise I'm a Holy Maiden. *The* Holy Maiden!"

"Get out of here, Giant! Give us our mommy back!"

"I-I'm a Holy Maiden, I'm telling you! Not a giant!"

How ironic it was that White was forced to prove to these children that she wasn't a monster while they adored a horrifying witch.



Yu and the Demon Lord were making their way through the stronghold, growing ever closer to Dona's throat, when she said, "The master of this pigsty has promised its generals *additional* children to become Numbered... In 'celebration of their victory.'"

The Demon Lord's heartbeat quickened. Of course, he was enraged at Dona's intention to torture even more children, but he was also staggered that the central nobles were even speaking of celebrations. "They think they've already won... Their stupidity is truly astonishing."

Despite the Demon Lord's distaste, it was only natural for Dona to be assured of his victory. He had started this war with overwhelming resources, and now he had most nobles in Holylight under his thumb. On top of that, he had secured reinforcement troops from Xenobia and the Tzardom of Light while cutting off the militant nobles' water supply. As far as he was concerned, there was no possible way for him to lose this war. Little did he expect the accelerating curveball that was the Demon Lord.

"The keeper of this dump needs to be taught a *very* harsh lesson." Yu smiled in anticipation.

The Demon Lord's next comment, however, might have been one of his cruelest. "Plenty of rotten rulers have marred history with their deeds... And none of them acted alone. None of those atrocities would have been possible without the cogs that turn the machine." He did not think lightly of this official declaration to wipe out everyone who carried the Central flag. That was precisely why he had said it in front of Yu.

Yu nodded. "Plenty of them are infesting this place."

"None of them have a place in my world..."

This was the precise moment the entirety of the Central faction was doomed. There was no question that the Demon Lord's army would stand victorious at the end of this conflict: his legion would hunt down every central noble or associate, including those who would flee to another country, by any means necessary.

Once Yu and the Demon Lord had spelled out the promise that darkened the

future of all Central, they found themselves in a garden expansive enough to fit a baseball stadium.

“Quite the yard. Apparently they don’t have any self-control,” the Demon Lord stated.

“During peacetime, they hold extravagant parties with bands of musicians and dancers,” Yu said.

The Demon Lord could imagine the thousands of nobles reveling in expensive wine and delicacies...while below them, children’s lives were snuffed out in that dark dungeon, their cries unheard. A perfect representation of what Central had done.

“Behind the castle lies a smugglers’ port carved out in the middle of a shoreline mountain. Dangerous working conditions there have claimed the lives of many laborers,” Yu added.

“Under optimal conditions, humans can perform physical labor for decades. How moronic to waste all that potential.”

Expending human labor, rather than nurturing it, always came at a bitter price. Normally, that could mean a decline in support or demand for a change in power. In wartime, it could trigger assassinations and revolutions. This time, the Demon Lord was Dona’s price to pay.

Then, Shrimp—Dona’s nephew and puppet master—appeared before the pair. “I was notified of an intruder, not a jester.” He ran his hand through his hair that was perfectly styled like a mushroom. Shrimp had often boasted of its silky texture. “Is that a Lucifer costume, Jester? Hilarious.” Behind him stood a thousand knights, armed and ready.

“Says the mushroom-head,” the Demon Lord countered. “Are you looking for a pot of stew to join?”

“Do you know whom you are speaking to?!”

“Oh, a talking fungus. Did we discover a new species, Yu?” the Demon Lord quipped, apparently having dumped all his stat points into Trolling.

“Yes. An extremely rare specimen, I believe. I would very much like to take it

back with me...”

Oblivious to what horrors Yu was capable of, Shrimp licked his lips as he took in her features. “You want to take me home, do you? Splendid ladies invite me to their beds all the time, but I’m picky about bloodlines—their names. Do you understand?”

The Demon Lord pitied the fool in his mind, predicting his fate all too easily.

Shrimp purred again, clueless. “Good thing I’m as generous as I am handsome, because I’m letting that comment you made earlier slide. Agents from the South, I presume. Did your ‘empress’ tell you to open with a clever remark?”

“What are you talking about?” the Demon Lord asked.

Yu, on the other hand, remained silent on purpose, knowing exactly what Shrimp had mistakenly assumed.

“She wouldn’t dare wage a full-on war against us. I’d been expecting her to send word of a truce.”

The Demon Lord decided he might as well let the mushroom prattle on. “Oh?”

Shrimp smirked. “Uncle will demand retribution, but I could convince him to spare your mistress...for the right price. As insufferable as she is, Butterfly is a long-standing, reputable name.”

“Reputable, huh...?” the Demon Lord muttered.

“And they make such amusing clowns! Those hideous land whales! Why not allow them to live on, generation after generation, as the laughingstock of us *true* nobles?! I’m sure you’d agree if you could speak your mind.” Shrimp leaned back and laughed obnoxiously. If he could see how much weight the Madam had lost, his jaw would be at risk of dislocating.

No longer amused, the Demon Lord finally retorted, “All this talk of names and families... What good has that done for the people of this country? From where I’m standing, all you’ve done is squeeze blood and sweat out of your people from under your boot.”

“What good has it done them? Where’s this show of altruism coming from...?”

All those peasants have to do is faithfully pick up our scraps to make it through the day, over and over again. We nobles are showing mercy by allowing them to serve as our slaves. Their ancestors did the same and their descendants will too. That is our obligation as members of superior, chosen bloodlines.”

“Obligation? That’s what you call enslaving your people?” the Demon Lord prodded.

“My ancestors heroically vanquished the King of Devils and saved this country! Why shouldn’t the others, whose ancestors only stood idly and waited for mine to save them, pledge their fealty to us?”

The Demon Lord was growing visibly tired of this exchange. “Your oh-so-heroic ancestors must be rolling in their graves.”

“How...dare you!” Shrimp barked.

All this time, Yu maintained an eerie silence as she seemed to ponder her next move.

The Demon Lord lit a cigarette to quell his frustration, staring the talking mushroom square in the face. “Nowhere in this country do you central nobles contribute to the people’s happiness in the slightest. I say flush you and your scummy bloodlines down the sewers where you belong.”

“What are you, on Trance?! Have you no respect for our honorable family?!”

“Honorable, is it? To torment your people? Torment those children I found under this very fort? Your blood is worth less than a slithering worm’s... The world will be better off without it!” the Demon Lord spat.

“K-Kill these lunatics!” Shrimp commanded. “Tear them to pieces!”

His army of one thousand moved in, oblivious that Death’s fingers were coiling around their throats. The Demon Lord had activated **Shadow Edge**, manifesting a scythe in his hand. Belphegor’s towering castle was brought down by a single swing of this blade—humans stood no chance against it. This was as overkill as nuking a shoplifter for their crimes.

Smoke trailing from his cigarette, the Demon Lord wasted no time giving them some parting words: “If such a thing as Hell exists, you all deserve to burn

there for eternity.”

When the scythe spun, all one thousand soldiers were bisected before they could even scream in terror. The only cry came from Shrimp when he turned around in confusion at the sudden silence that fell over the garden...and found that not one of his men was breathing. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What just happened?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Who the hell are you?! G-G-G-get away from me!”

Without acknowledging Shrimp’s delirium, the Demon Lord went around scavenging the weapons scattered on the ground, inspecting and critiquing each one. “What a piece of junk... And this one’s just heavy. An *ornamental* dagger...?”

He had once intensively researched arms from all corners of history so he could implement them into his game, taking into consideration the practicality of them all. When it came to weapons, he was a bit of a nerd—and not the endearing kind, but the annoying kind.

The Demon Lord’s nitpicking apparently gave Shrimp some utterly unfounded sense of hope, because he blurted out, “Y-You’re looking for valuable weapons! Th-Then I am your man!”

“I left you alive because you have one more job to do,” the Demon Lord said.

“A job?! So you do have an eye for talent! What kind of—”

“He’s all yours, Yu,” the Demon Lord declared, sentencing Shrimp to a fate far worse than Hell.

“Thank you, Mister Secretary! I’ll extract any and all information he is privy to.”

“Focus on the Holy Coins. Everything else is secondary,” the Demon Lord commanded with quiet intensity.

Yu’s jaw tensed. “Understood, sir.” She approached Shrimp—who’d been on the ground, cradling his head—and grabbed him by the hair as if she were plucking a pineapple for harvest. Her face, which Shrimp had found alluring just moments ago, now shone with sinister glee.

“W-Wait... Stop!” Shrimp pleaded. “Where are you taking me?!”

“A wonderful place. Since you like mushrooms so much, I’ll make sure you sprout plenty of them,” Yu crooned.

“H-How do you plan to accomplish that?! Forty thousand men guard this stronghold! You can’t seriously believe you’re getting out of here alive! And you never will, unless you let me go!”

“Your comrades are being gunned down by my colleague like the simpleminded beasts they are,” Yu said.

Shrimp scoffed. “If you’re going to bluff, at least make it realistic! The word defeat is not in the vocabulary of our glorious knights!”

His reaction was warranted. He had no clue of the absolute carnage that was sweeping the stronghold, after all. It was an amusing prospect for the Demon Lord; he almost wanted to make Shrimp witness it, just to watch his mind implode.

“Don’t you worry. I’ll be breaking you of that nasty habit of disrespecting the Secretary. For each transgression, you can expect thousands of *encouragements*.” Gripping his head like a vise, Yu simply shoved Shrimp down into her Back-Up Backpack. It was an unceremonious end that promised an eternity of misery for the man who held all of Dona’s influence in his grasp.

As the Demon Lord still muttered complaints about the quality of the strewn weapons, Yu carefully called to him. “It’s over, Mister Secretary. As for the Holy Coins...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I have performed some research on the matter, after you mentioned it before. My conclusion is that they are considered a sort of talisman for many nobles,” Yu began, clearly unhappy that she hadn’t lived up to her own expectations when it came to matter.

“Talisman?” the Demon Lord repeated, turning to face his advisor. Neither of them seemed affected at all by the expanse of dismembered bodies scattered on the ground.

Yu continued. “The Holy Coin is small and light, making it easy for even children to conceal and carry. When houses fall, the Holy Coins can be their

final pieces of secret wealth.”

“Hm...”

“Unique family traditions—well, a sort of culture among nobles—dictated that the Holy Coins were never to be used, no matter how tough of a time the family faced. Most of them are heirlooms passed down in secret.”

“Very interesting... I’m intrigued,” said the Demon Lord. He enjoyed anecdotes like this that illuminated a piece of culture or history. This was a glimpse into a side of the nobles he hadn’t expected to see: tenacity.

“Ripping something like that from people’s hands could foster resentment... Of course, I don’t give a rat’s ass about taking *their* coins,” the Demon Lord gestured around at the corpses. After the pointless bloodshed they had spread through the country and the Numbered in their prison, he was devoid of mercy.

And so was Yu, of course. “Yes, sir. While we are on the topic, you requested Holy Coins from the Gorgon Company?”

“Yes, they’ve promised us twenty-one Holy Coins. I’ll sell them coal for cash, but acquiring Holy Coins takes precedent now.”

Yu nodded, her mind churning with creative and efficient ways to make Shrimp spill his guts in every sense of the word. Perhaps this was just karma at work, she mused. Compared to Shrimp, the soldiers were fortunate to have been cut down instantaneously.

“I know Miyaoji was in the North...” Yu said, her enunciation of Ren’s name taut with meaning. “Results of my work will be of equal to or greater value than hers.”

Yu had played no part in the fallout in Euritheis or the negotiations with Gorgon. The fact that Ren had been at the Demon Lord’s side through those events did not sit easy with her. After Akane had accompanied him to Hellion Territory, she felt like she was being outperformed left and right.

“There’s no need to make it a competition, but I am counting on you,” the Demon Lord managed, willing his voice to remain steady as a deep part of him shuddered at the thought of Ren and Yu clashing... It seemed more and more like an inevitability to him, seeing how the two advisors were polar opposites. In

an attempt to escape from that very scary problem, he turned his gaze towards the throne room. “Let’s pay the so-called master of this place a visit, shall we?”

“Yes, Mister Secretary...” Yu casually wrapped her arms around one of the Demon Lord’s, giving the presentation of a wholesome couple on a date. To Dona, of course, the two were nothing but harbingers of Hellfire.

——Throne Room, Wise Angel Gatekeeper.

A towering set of doors marked the entrance to the throne room, flanked by a pair of guards. Ordinarily, the heavy swing of the doors accompanied by the guards’ announcement would have notified Dona of anyone’s arrival. Naturally, however, neither the Demon Lord nor Yu had any patience for ceremony.

When the ridiculously dressed couple turned the corner to find the throne room, the guards called out in alarm, taking the Demon Lord to be a drunken Central lord who had wandered too far from a costume party.

“Who goes there? If you wish to gain an audience with Lord Dona, sober yourself up first!”

“At least remove your costume, sir... You will not be presented to Lord Dona unless properly dressed.”

After making his way through this ridiculous fort and its dungeon, and now arriving at its pompous seat of power, the Demon Lord was getting sick of the grotesque tour. “Gain an audience...? I don’t kneel to pigs.”

The guards were dumbstruck. It was unimaginable to describe their glorious Central leader in this way. Fearing that failure to object to such a comment would result in their own punishment, one of them shouted, “How dare you! Lest you’ve forgotten where you stand, beyond this door is— *Hrmm!*”

Yu deftly sewed the guard’s lips together with sutures, muffling his protest. “Hopefully the stitches will help to heal his ill manners,” she said.

“Indeed...” the Demon Lord answered, wondering if this was the first time sutures had ever been used to silence someone.

The unsilenced guard raised his sword, finally realizing that he was speaking

to enemies of Dona, not his drunken allies. “Knives! You have the gall to waltz in here—” But then, he hollered in horror. “My hand— *Hrrmmm!*”

His detached right hand, still clutching his sword, hit the ground. In a single motion, Yu had severed it and sewn his mouth shut as well, all without producing a single drop of blood.

“This one was afflicted with severe rudeness that required an amputation, in addition to sutures,” she said.

“That was...spectacular treatment,” the Demon Lord responded.

Ordinarily, Yu would not have hesitated to shred these guards into blended meat for their transgressions. However, she still held the Demon Lord’s arm in hers, and refused to spoil their romantic stroll with the filthy blood of these lab rats.

Somehow, the Demon Lord’s mood was not improved by the stitches and bandaging. Not wanting to prolong their encounter any longer, he kicked down the grand doors before him.

Those within cried out in panic.

“Wh-What’s happening?! What happened to the guards?!”

“What are those wings for...?”

“L-Lord Dona, what sort of entertainment have you planned for us...?”

A hundred lords and ladies in strikingly extravagant attire filled the throne room, a scene that truly exemplified the Central faction. On the other end, Dona, overstuffed in his glimmering garb, haughtily snorted upon his throne. Instantly, the Demon Lord recognized his target.

The most highborn among the central nobles—and their glamorous female companions—populated the room, which was dotted with tables piled high with the best food money could buy...in striking contrast to the cell of the Numbered children that lay mere levels below.

The Demon Lord snatched an apple from the closest table and sank his teeth into it. “Did it never occur to you to give any of this abundance to the children in your dungeons?”

Angry retorts and murmurs broke the silence in Dona's court. This sort of intrusion and accusation could not be tolerated.

"Dungeons?!" one of the men shouted. "Who are you, an agent of the Militants?!"

"Answer the question," the Demon Lord stated.

One lord harrumphed. "Those scum should be content to eat their own excrement! We are—"

With a popping sound, his head had been reduced to a shower of blood, flesh, and brain matter. The women who now stood around a headless corpse all cried out, their dresses soiled with the gory mess.

The Demon Lord had simply thrown the apple in his hand. Screams of terror rippled through the court as he quietly strode up to the dais that supported the throne.

Dona squealed as the black wings approached him. "Wh-Who are you?! Who do you think I am?! Kneel before me!"

"As ugly as expected..." the Demon Lord quipped instead of greeting him. "The more we men age, the more our characters show in our faces."

"H-H-How dare you speak to me in such a—"

Dona was silenced by the Demon Lord stomping his face—one casual motion had smashed in Dona's nose and shattered all of his teeth. The Demon Lord hadn't intended to deal any meaningful damage, only silence the pig. Dona crumpled off of his throne and the Demon Lord dragged him off the dais by his head.

Like a dark guillotine, the Fallen Angel swooped down and took the fattened pig away. The more faithful people of this world might have described the event as divine retribution. Of course, the Demon Lord had another purpose for Dona...one free of any divinity whatsoever.

As the king of their faction was unceremoniously dragged through his own throne room, the courtiers shouted.

"H-Hold it! What are you going to— Who are you?!"

“Do you know who I am?! We aren’t scared by your little costume!”

“Unhand Lord Dona, you filth! Know your place!”

“Someone stop that madman! He must be a Trance addict!”

Stopping at the demolished doors, the Demon Lord turned to face the extravagantly dressed nobles and their insults. He only had one question for them. “I want to believe that you are, deep down, human... Have you nothing to say about the Numbered?”

“Numbered?! Their blood is too filthy to even think about!”

The Demon Lord turned away. “We’re leaving.”

“What should we do with them, Mister Secretary?”

“Hm? I have no use for whatever creatures are wearing those human skins.”

“Mister Secretary...” Yu sighed, euphoric. She placed a grenade in her master’s outstretched hand and produced as many as she could hold in her arms, all with a beaming smile.

Once the Demon Lord tossed his own towards the ceiling, Yu scattered her skill-enhanced explosives. The moment the first hit the floor, the two vanished by Quick Travel, taking Dona with them. A few heartbeats later, a deafening chain of explosions obliterated the throne room and everyone in it.

The Demon Lord materialized in the Numbereds’ cell and tossed the pig onto the floor, as if Dona was a piece of slimy trash he couldn’t stand to touch a second longer.

Upon seeing the noble, the children tensed, shaking with hatred and terror.

White stared at him with mixed emotions. She couldn’t decide whether to pity or berate this thing she had once considered an ally. “Dona...”

“Lady White!” Dona seemed to be saying through his ruined face. “H-Help me...!”

“Lord Lucifer is your judge. Not I.”

“L-Lucifer?! He can’t possibly be...”

Ignoring their conversation, the Demon Lord approached the children and

spoke as casually as if he was discussing a newspaper article. “I always wished for punitive systems that allowed the victims themselves—or their next of kin—to punish criminals firsthand. As far as I’m concerned, incarcerating them with three hot meals and a cot is a dreadful waste of taxpayer money. A suitable alternative would be to put them to work as land mine detonators. Saves us the energy of killing them ourselves.”

The children could not comprehend what the dreadfully powerful being before them meant. They only saw chilling beauty like a sharpened blade, wings darker than night.

“If you hate this man, don’t expect anyone else to take up arms for you. I present you with an opportunity to take vengeance into your own hands.” The Demon Lord dumped an array of weapons on the ground, spreading a buffet of swords and axes gleaming a sinister silver before the children.

One of them, a girl, looked at the Demon Lord with fire in her eyes, seeming to ask the question “*Are you sure?*” The Demon Lord nodded.

“Who do you think I am...?” Dona might have tried to say, through gurgling blood and shattered teeth.

Screaming from the pit of her soul, the girl drove a dagger into Dona’s abdomen. His body flopped like a fish as he scrambled to get away. Fattened by his years of gluttony, however, Dona didn’t make it far. The girl stabbed him in the thigh, then in the hand. Soon, the other children took up weapons and joined her.

Satisfied, the Demon Lord turned to find Yu beaming ear to ear. “Don’t let this pig die quickly, Yu. Keep healing him until these children have had their fill. I’ll leave it up to you what to do with the swine after that.”

“Yes, Mister Secretary!” Yu’s mouth curved in ecstasy, like she could hardly wait to explore all kinds of creative methods to toy with the hideous beast.

“Let’s go, White.” Demon Lord pulled the Holy Maiden by her waist and readied Quick Travel. His job here was done.

With whatever shred of strength he had left, Dona squealed again. “Help me, please! I’ve served this country! You are to be my wife! My w—” One of the

children kicked his head before they all brought their weapons down.

There was no emotion in White's expression. No mercy, no sympathy—only abject disgust. Even her heart could not bleed for Dona after learning what atrocities took place in this dungeon.

"I would never have been your wife! The man I'm going to marry..." She gazed up with adoration at the Fallen Angel who had his arm around her. Especially since arriving at this stronghold, she had been enamored by the Demon Lord's bold, decisive, spectacular acts. The one before her now could hold a candle to the mythical rebel who ruled the night. In fact, White felt that Lord Lucifer in the flesh was *outgrowing* his own myth.

Sweating under the heat of her gaze, the Demon Lord vanished them out of there.

Amid the flurry of black feathers falling in the cell, the armed victims closed in on Dona once more. The curtains had fallen on his age of gluttony and debauchery...only to rise to a torturous nightmare. These nine children, who were given a second chance at life that night, would grow to become the top officers of Nine, Hakuto Kunai's fearless fan club, in a turn of events that could only be described as demonic intervention.

All Clear

Following the Demon Lord's descent underground to search for the Numbered, the Central stronghold had been plunged into indescribable chaos.

Under Tahara's command, his loyal firearms gunned down Central soldiers without mercy. They were capable of such coordinated assaults that they took down thousands in a matter of seconds. In the face of an incomprehensible phenomenon like this, the human brain shuts off and locks into flight. To the Central soldiers, the arsenal must have felt like a rapidly approaching hurricane. Naturally, they wanted to put as much distance as they could between themselves and the hail of bullets.

The fleeing tide of humans excited the white elephant, who chased after them and trampled them without mercy. Some brave souls shot arrows or thrust lances at the elephant, but its battle-hardened hide proved impervious to them. Human weapons only further enraged the pachyderm.

"Why is Lord Bokuroku's elephant attacking?!"

"Who cares?! Run!"

"Get out of here, we're all going to die!"

"Where is your Central honor?! Your chivalry—"

Amid the chaos, the horse-riding commander's head rolled to the ground.

A black shadow flashed through the battlefield, decapitating a captain or commander with each pass. Azur was using his steel wire and poison-laced daggers to drop one leader after another. With their command dropping dead left and right, the Central army devolved into a panicked swarm that bottlenecked at the only two exits of the stronghold: the front gate, which the Demon Lord had demolished on his way in, and the back gate, which led to the smugglers' port.

Only a very fortunate few would make it out of the gates alive, for Leon stood there, lance in hand. Despite his battle against the Demon Lord, exhaustion was nowhere to be found in Leon. He stood strong, resolved to reunite with his

princess.

The Central commanders shouted at Leon from a distance.

“Move, you fool! What could you possibly hope to accomplish alone?!”

“You dare stand in our way?! Kill that rat now!”

“If you want out, you’re going to have to go through me,” Leon declared, activating **Thoronation**—the disastrous Lightning spell that had sent the Demon Lord fleeing all around the stronghold. No ornamental fighter of the Central faction stood a chance against it.

Racked by a literal storm, the front gate area became a pit of despair, as anyone who came too close to the thundercloud fell impaled or charred.

Meanwhile, those who fled to the portside gate were greeted by Tahara lazily dragging on his cigarette. “Took you long enough. The worst part of a festival is when it’s almost over, don’t you think?” The occasion was far from festive for the Central soldiers, of course, who had been hunted and gunned down like feral beasts.

An M134 minigun stood before Tahara. Some of the Central leaders noticed this and went pale. By now, they had learned the bloody way what that weapon was capable of. So, they began to beg.

“W-Wait! Let us through and you’ll be rewarded!”

“Th-That’s right! Make you a lord, even!”

“I’ll grant you farmland down in Beritz! At least let me go!”

“You’re willing to sacrifice the rest of us?!”

Barely listening to their begging-turned-squabbling, Tahara slapped the side of the M134. As if that had been its cue, the minigun began spewing bullets at a rate of four thousand per minute.

A human crowd made for easy pickings. Since they were already packed as tight as sardines in order to escape through the back gate, they painted those gates bright red in an almost comical manner. The gruesome scene of bullets and blood might have earned grateful applause by those the Central faction had subjugated.

Having eliminated most of the Central commanders, Azur came to the back gate, only to halt before the red canvas. As a former assassin, he had seen and produced plenty of corpses, but a bloodbath like this seemed otherworldly.

The artist responsible for it was leisurely enjoying a cigarette mere feet away, as if he was lounging at his favorite bar. “Azur, right? How’s it going on your side of the playground?”

“General Leon stands at the front gates, striking down any soldiers attempting to flee.”

“Oh, that guy. Our Boss had a good time taking him on... Can’t say the same for that poor bastard, though.” Tahara chuckled.

Ironically, Tahara would have compared Leon to a cat being played with by a lion. Even a lion’s playing would beat up the cat, leaving the lion without anyone to play with. Their battle would have ended much differently if the Demon Lord had gone all out.

“You’ve got your hands on *the* General Leon. What is your end goal...?” Azur asked.

“Huh? Our end goal is to conquer. Duh.”

“Why do you wish to conquer?” Azur felt stupid as soon as the words left his mouth.

“Why... We’re getting philosophical, huh? It’s an easy answer, though.”

“Which is?”

“It’s fun shaping our own world.”

“Shaping your own world...?” Azur felt dizzy at the thought of how minuscule his vision of the world had been, how insignificant his life must seem to these powerful beings.

“More than anything, I want my Angel to have a good life,” Tahara casually added.

Azur felt goose bumps. He, too, had witnessed the man with the wings of the Fallen Angel on his back. There was no doubt in his mind that Tahara was speaking of a literal angel. “I feel like I’m in a myth... Even now, I’m not sure if

any of this is real.” Clearly, it would take Azur some more time to recognize that he was still living in reality and not a dream.

Tahara burst out laughing at the answer. “According to our Madam back in the village, anything the Secretary says becomes reality. I completely agree.”

To Azur, almost every statement Tahara made was an electrifying revelation. It seemed like a miracle that he had survived to witness this. “What happened to the children kept underground?” Azur finally asked the question that had been burning him, true to his careful and cautious nature.

“Just got word from Yu. They’re all safe and under our protection...”

“But?” Azur prompted.

“She was just surprised that there were nine of them. Crazy, huh?”

“Is that a problem, that there are nine of them?!” Azur stammered, failing to conceal his desperation.

“Don’t sweat it,” said Tahara. “It’s just funny how Yu and I can never see as far as he can, that’s all.” Based on how things had turned out, there was no other explanation Tahara could provide except the obvious—the Demon Lord had foreseen everything that happened today and brought them here at precisely the right moment.

Of course, the Demon Lord barely foresaw where his foot would land on his next step, but Tahara would never draw that conclusion.

“Is that a bad thing for them?” Azur asked.

“Nope, just the opposite. Those kids are pretty lucky.”

“I see...” Azur did not ask another question, perhaps out of fear for how Tahara would answer, and decided that he should be happy that the children survived at all.

“Cleanup’s nearly done, but we’ve got some more company,” Tahara said, putting his ear on the ground to discern how many guests to expect by the sound of horse hooves.

The number made Azur wince, knowing their fate. “Three thousand Holy Knights who sided with Central,” he said. Three thousand men would have less

of an impact than a drop in a bucket. Azur could see no other future than obliteration for those pathetic knights.

“Now that the Secretary’s out, they’ll be gone in no time,” Tahara said. “I gotta go take a look around the fort for treasure and paperwork. A busy day for me.”

“A moment, please! Where are the children now?”

“Huh? Don’t worry, man. They’re having a blast playing games with a piggy. A scary coworker of mine is watching them.”

“A-And what does that mean...?”

“I hate to admit it, but they literally couldn’t be safer than under Yu’s protection. There’s no reason to be concerned about them. Ever.”

Tahara was right, of course. Considering her cunning, political prowess, strength in combat, and healing potential, Yu’s protection was the safest this world had to offer. Naturally, her fanatical zeal would mold those children into the passionate leaders of Nine.

“Playing games with a piggy... A piggy?” Azur repeated Tahara’s answer but grew no closer to understanding it. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined those children—who were maimed and suffering on the brink of death when he last saw them—gleefully plunging their weapons into Dona’s flesh.

“It’s a waste of brain power to think about it. Yu and the Secretary are two peas in a pod when it comes to this stuff,” Tahara said, waltzing into the stronghold proper as if they had always owned the place.

Azur had no choice but to follow.

“Top priority is seizing documents. Birth records, especially. I bet there are hidden rooms that whale never knew existed. Take me to them, will you?”

“Whale... Piggy... Play...” Azur muttered as he followed Tahara.

Meanwhile, the legion of three thousand hastened their march towards the stronghold.

“What’s happening...?” Hiyori, the leader of the Holy Knights, muttered at the

unbelievable sight before him. “How is this possible...?”

The grand gates of the stronghold had been torn to bits, providing a clear view of the piles upon piles of Central soldiers strewn throughout the grounds. The few survivors were being chased down by a knight who gleamed like a bolt of lightning. With every movement, another soldier seemed to become charcoal. A hellish game of tag.

“How were the gates destroyed? Who is that knight? What is that horrible noise?!” Hiyori continued, now hearing the unfamiliar staccato of small explosions that underlay the screams seemingly coming from every corner of the fortress.

Hiyori groaned, unable to process all of this information. He had finally made the decision to switch allegiance, but hadn’t been in a particular rush to reach the stronghold. After all, he expected no reason for Dona to leave, especially with forty thousand men under his command. All Dona had to do was tell his forces to absorb any faction that opposed Central—all he had to do was sit and wait for his men to rake in his victory.

Besides, combined with the two thousand Holy Knights who’d arrived first, they had five thousand men to add to Dona’s forces.

Once their betrayal came to light, he’d expected the Holy Castle to surrender without putting up a fight. His conjecture was solid, and it was very likely that the civil war would have concluded that way, had all of his calculations not been ruined by the Demon Lord.

Where did I go wrong...?! Hiyori asked himself. I’m a genius... Why didn’t I see it coming? As a man of common birth, Hiyori had climbed the ladder all the way up to captain of the Holy Knights. While he wasn’t incompetent by any means, his field of vision ended at the edge of the Holy City—he lacked the capacity to see the big picture.

His men were shaken by the cataclysmic state of the stronghold.

“Captain, what is that...?”

“How did this happen...? It’s a hellscape...!”

“What’s happening, Captain?!”

Reining in his impulse to shout back at his subordinates, Hiyori managed to maintain the posture of a fearless captain. “P-Perhaps an enemy unit assaulted them...?” He knew it was a stretch, but could find no other explanation. In fact, they had switched sides only after discerning that the militant nobles had neither the food nor money to make a long march and leave the north unguarded. Even if they had made the march, they could not have brought more than five thousand, which was far too few men to break through Dona’s stronghold.

A figure appeared above the parapets—the Fallen Angel gazing down upon the realm, flanked by Holy Maiden White. The pair of them looked ethereal under the moonlight, the contrast of pitch-black wings and divinely glowing halo seeming to penetrate the mind of their beholder.

Befuddled by this surprise, Hiyori stammered out, “L-Lady White! There must be some misunderstanding! Our allegiance lies with Holylight!”

His knights eagerly chimed in. With every minute, it seemed like the Central faction had met another abrupt, grisly fate.

Finding a central noble who was still alive, Hiyori put on the best show he could by kicking the noble’s side. “You foolish noble! Enemy to the people! D-Did you really believe I would turn my back on Holylight?! I only pretended to join your foolish rebellion to undermine you from the inside out!” The other knights followed suit, pledging their false loyalties with all the air in their lungs.

The Demon Lord let out an amused laugh. “Those are the traitors who knelt for the pig. How comical.”

“Aren’t you...offended, Lord Lucifer?” White asked, unable to quell her own indignation. Those knights had been tasked with a sacred duty to protect her, her sisters, and the Holy City at large. Now, they had sided with the Central faction, and could not even stand by their decision to do so. One could chalk up their behavior to human nature, but that was not enough for White. As a Holy Maiden, she could not allow it.

Yet the Demon Lord was grinning. “I’d created a world with a very diverse population: those who fought bravely, chased their dreams, became lost in their own worlds, relied on trickery, or served only those around them. Of

course, there were traitors among them.”

“Traitors...”

“That being said, my system always allowed for second chances. You could even say that I encouraged their first act of treachery.”

“You encouraged it...?”

“Yes, I encouraged them to betray everything—those who trusted them and those whom they trusted—to swear their allegiance to me.”

Players were able to join the Demon Lord’s army while besieging the Sleepless Castle, which became a huge point of contention among Players. There were many incentives for doing so. Some Players simply wanted to be on the winning side, others wished to fight alongside their favorite advisor, and some longed for exclusive skills or items. During and after the final battle, each side would brutally taunt and mock each other in a verbal slugfest that rivaled the virtual brawl of the Games.

The Demon Lord chuckled in his reverie for a moment...then shut all emotions out of his expression. “But I have no use for those who betray *me*...” His glare zeroed in on Hiyori’s performance down below.

To the knights on the ground, the conversation in the parapets sounded dangerously like a sentencing. Desperately, they shouted their pleas.

“W-Wait! Lady White, from my heart, I have never betrayed you!”

“Th-That’s right! We would never become traitors to our country!”

“In fact, our captain talked us into this!”

“How dare you accuse me of such nonsense!”

White did not react to their cries. She had eyes only for the portrait of the Fallen Angel, who kept his focus on the knights.

“You forsake your duty to protect the Holy City, and now you throw the central nobles under the bus. Who could ever trust you? Did you think you could do no wrong, that your choices would always be met with praise and applause?” the Fallen Angel called to them.

“I’m not wrong! I never have been! I’ve proved that by rising to my position from common birth! The world has always been on my side and so has the Angel!” Hiyori rambled, ordering his men to take up their weapons. What choice did he have except to silence the man who saw right through him? “K-Kill him! He’s the one who warped the world around us to make it look like we chose the wrong path!”

Funnily enough, Hiyori was right. The Demon Lord had taken this world on a different course. Without him, this civil conflict would have most likely ended with the Central faction standing victorious.

Alas, there were no *what ifs* in this world. Clock hands stopped for no one, and there was no option to load another save. What could mortals do except stand by the decisions they made?

The knights’ resolve was renewed by Hiyori’s command. Arrows and spears, both magical and physical, flew upward towards the Demon Lord.

He cracked a sinister grin, tugged White close by her waist, and put Magic Queller before them.

“Lord Lucifer...!” she sighed.

“Remember this, White. A true final boss demands his challengers prove their worth.”

Presently, a pure-white, octagonal barrier enveloped them, negating shots of fire and earth, weapons of ice and air.

After the barrage of dozens, even hundreds, of magic attacks was reduced to smoke, the Demon Lord was relieved to see his barrier still working.

So this thing didn’t have a limit after all! I was freaking out for nothing! With that concern lifted from his chest, the Demon Lord leaned into his glee, which made it look like he was amused by the futile effort of the armed ants below.

Magic my ass! he continued to himself. *That crap never stood a chance against my final boss! Lurk the chat for a year, noobs! I win, losers!*

He was dangerously close to becoming unhinged. Though he rarely showed it, he had been terrified by the prospect of magic dealing damage to him.

Just as he was about to go off the rails and humiliate those foolish knights to no end, quiet voices reached his ear that snapped him out of his derangement like a bucket of cold water. Below, he could see the Numbered children standing out in the open, cheering him on.

“Lord Lucifer!”

“You got this!”

“Go get ‘em!”

What the hell are they doing out here?! the Demon Lord silently demanded of Yu, who stood beside the children. Apparently, this was her idea of a field trip. The wider Yu’s smile grew, it seemed, the paler the Demon Lord’s face became as the cheering continued.

“Lord Lucifer, you can do it!”

“Beat those bad guys!”

Wait a minute! What am I, a Power Ranger from one of those children’s shows?! As embarrassed as he was, it was too late for him to hide. *Screw it! I just have to dive into the role!* Finally, the Demon Lord decided to lean way into the farce of Fallen Angel for the sake of the children.

Staring down at Hiyori and his men far below, he declared, “You spoke of this world as if you know anything about it. This world is not on your side. If anything, it bows only to me!” he said, as half Fallen Angel and half Akira Ono.

The claim was anything but amusing to Hiyori. “S-Silence! Wh-What is that bizarre barrier anyway?! Someone kill him already!” Hiyori shouted.

“If you really dare to destroy this world I created over an infinity of time, brace yourself... You’ll have hell to pay.” The Demon Lord recalled furious battles of the past. Each time, the siege of the Sleepless Castle had become fiercer and fiercer. All the while, the division between Players became more severe... Still, Players from around the world joined hands by overcoming trial after trial together...until they celebrated their happy ending. Perhaps that tale was a myth of its own.

Memories from the twilight of his Empire kindling his heart, the Demon Lord

drew Sodom's Fire.

“Those who challenged me in the past...once accomplished victory with insane dedication!” He fired the judgmental flame, the dark-flamed dagger striking through Hiyori and sending sparks of his Extreme Chain Attack throughout the legion.

In the blink of an eye, the Demon Lord had teleported into the midst of the army—**Equipped Skill: Charge!** The teleportation generated a shock wave that sent the knights flying. Against the final boss, one lost the privilege to choose the range of battle.

As soon as the constantly teleporting Demon Lord was within melee range, he went straight for the eyes—**Equipped Skill: Eye Gouge!** Particles flew out of the Demon Lord's hand, and the vision of those around him became blurry like static on a TV.

While his enemies were stumbling to and fro, unaware of what was up, down, left, or right, the Demon Lord struck the ground with Sodom's Fire—**Equipped Skill: Supersonic!** An incredible shock wave cracked through the earth, thunder swallowing the three thousand knights. In the midst of this spectacular attack, the Demon Lord readied his final blow.

“Welcome, my new *rebels*... So, what did your last shred of hope feel like?”

Special Ability: Shadow Edge!

His shadow stretched from his feet and spun once, faster than the eye could follow. Because a final boss often found himself surrounded by enemies, Akira Ono had designed an AOE attack for his Demon Lord. For Players looking for close combat, this special ability proved devastating.

“If you want to kill me, practice and experiment as your ferocious predecessors have done. They challenged me tirelessly, eventually overturning the entire world.”

Dust began to settle in the area that had become pin-drop silent. Once it cleared, no trace of the three thousand knights could be found, as if they had never existed to begin with.

The Demon Lord produced a cigarette and lit it.

Meanwhile, Leon—who had watched the battle—could not help but kneel and bow to the Fallen Angel. Clearly, Lucifer had barely used a fraction of his power during their fight.

That is some of the true power of Lord Lucifer, as it was sung in the legends... It's far beyond human understanding, at the very least. Having been shown the true depths of the chasm between their abilities, Leon burned with shame at how much he was indebted to the Demon Lord... Utterly clueless that the conman was scared witless by the general's Lightning magic and regeneration abilities.

On the other hand, the children, whose eyes had been glued to the battle, broke out in cheers of excitement. Inadvertently, there could not have been a reaction more cruel for the Demon Lord.

"He won! Lord Lucifer won!"

"Hooray!"

"I knew he would! Lord Lucifer would never lose to those guys!"

"My heart aches just looking at his gorgeous wings..."

What are you going to do about this, Yu?! he wanted to bellow. This is your mess, not mine! The Demon Lord couldn't decide if he had handled the situation correctly, except that light had unmistakably returned to the children's eyes. *It beats that hollow, hopeless look by a long shot... That's a silver lining, at least.*

Although their innocent reaction drained the Demon Lord of his sanity, he gave them a cocky glance...which ignited the children even more.

"Lord Lucifer looked at me! He saw me!"

"No, he was looking at me! Our eyes met!"

"My eyes met his, not yours!"

Dammit! They're treating me like a celebrity of yesteryear! Somebody help me!

It was a new low for the Demon Lord to wallow while exterminating the enemy, but he was nothing short of a real-life superhero to the children who

were no longer Numbered.

“I know... I’m going to serve Lord Lucifer by his side when I grow up.”

“Miss Yu, how can I help Lord Lucifer?”

Yu met the children’s shimmering eyes with a knowing smile—their brainwashing had already begun. “It’s a very difficult task to serve the Secretary,” she began, “but you can learn. Only I can teach you how. Never trust another adult.”

“Yes, Miss Yu!” the children answered in gleeful unison. After all, Yu was the one who’d saved them from unimaginable torture. They would never question their goddess.

As Yu began her project of training the future Nine, Tahara sent a Communication to the Demon Lord, detailing the locations of hidden rooms and the existence of bizarre creatures held in cages. The news only worsened the Demon Lord’s headache.

What else were they keeping in cages here?! These bastards! After finding the Numbered in the state they’d been in, ignoring this information was not an option.

He sent a Communication to Yu so he could leave her to wrap up. *“I’m going back into the fort. Keep an eye on the kids and White.”*

“Yes, Mister Secretary.”

Upon returning to the interior, he was met with a man in butler’s clothes he didn’t recognize. The butler was strikingly good-looking, with flowing blue hair and sapphire eyes. Just standing there, he looked like he belonged in another world entirely.

What dating sim did you pop out of?! the Demon Lord commented to himself.

The butler quaked from head to toe. As much as the Demon Lord was surprised by Azur’s appearance, it paled in comparison to Azur’s shock of coming face-to-face with the Fallen Angel. His sharpness, his mystical, long, black hair...but above all else, the look in the Demon Lord’s eyes that promised an endless pit of darkness for everything and everyone. In the marrow of his

bones, Azur knew that the Demon Lord was the Fallen Angel Lucifer, the mythical rebel himself.



Tahara clapped Azur's trembling shoulder. If the mere presence of the Demon Lord rattled him, the butler wouldn't last long. "Chief, I'd put down money that Azur here—good-looking guy, ain't he?—would make the perfect assistant for the Madam. I mean, look how sharp he looks in his uniform."

"I see..." The Demon Lord assessed Azur, looking him up and down.

Azur felt like his bones were creaking under the pressure of his gaze, although the Demon Lord was merely taking in the man's movie-star looks with curiosity.

"He's been looking after those kids in the dungeons," Tahara added. "I figured he could keep playing daddy for them in the village."

"Not a bad idea," said the Demon Lord.

"He'd be a hit with the noblewomen. Some might even come stay just to get a glimpse of him."

"Sharp looks can be as potent as a sharp blade."

Not once stopping to ask for Azur's opinion, the Demon Lord and Tahara had solidified their plans for him by the time they reached the entrance of the first hidden room. The entrance was a stereotypical one with a stereotypical trick: a hidden set of stairs behind a bookcase, revealed when a lever disguised as a book was pulled.

The stairs led to a series of several rooms, all packed to the brim with silver, gold, silk, embroidery, sarasa cotton, sappanwood, mercury used for gold-plating, deer hide, shark fins, ivory, coral, pearls, pepper, cinnamon, cloves, frankincense, sandalwood, olive oil, rock salt, wool... Countless piles of goods that attested to the massive scale of the Central smuggling operation.

"They sure stuffed their coffers... Somebody should have told them that it wouldn't make a difference in the end," Tahara said, taking a mental inventory of the hoard. Sure enough, their riches were of no use against the Demon Lord and his advisors.

The victors of the siege passed room after room until they reached a closed door, a constant rustling noise coming from the other side. When he cracked open the door, the Demon Lord nearly screamed. Swarms of insects covered

the floor, walls, and ceiling. Reining in his disgust to no more than a twitch of his jaw, the Demon Lord asked, “What is this for?”

Azur answered, completely unfazed. “Crickets that we distribute to the poor. And drone beetles, cicadas, maggots, bamboo worms, giant water bugs—”

“To eat? Shut down the operation. It’s disgusting,” commanded the Demon Lord.

“Disgusting...?” Azur repeated. “To the local people, these insects can mean the difference between starvation and survival.”

“If they need food, they can have the supplies your *nobles* have stockpiled... While you’re at it, redistribute their wealth to the people as well.”

Azur looked to Tahara, only for the genius advisor to confirm his boss’s intentions with a smirk.

Gotta hand it to you again, Chief, Tahara thought, holding back laughter. *Making yourself invaluable to the people at every turn. Yes, sir—I’ll make a big scene out of recirculating everything here.*

Azur was grateful for this change in policy, of course...if he could take the Demon Lord’s word for it. There’d be no need to choke down insects to survive if there was plenty of food to go around.

Having drawn his own conclusion from the Demon Lord’s decision, Tahara decided to chime in. “You know, Azur. The Secretary’s never forced any of his people to eat bugs, let alone starved them.”

“Is that so...?” Azur answered.

The Demon Lord silently relished this. *Tell him, Tahara! I’m sick of everyone treating me like some kind of heartless torture master!*

Still grinning, Tahara said, “The Secretary sends his people straight to the gallows. I lost count after a million heads.”

Context, Tahara! Context! the Demon Lord wanted to cry out. *That was in a video game! He’ll think I’m a monster!*

Indeed, Azur was now trembling faster.

Official records stated that Hakuto Kunai had executed more than four million people...which was merely the total number of the Players killed in the Game. At least that was as high as Akira Ono had kept count; the real count would be closer to a billion.

Tahara continued, taking full notice of the tension in Azur's expression, "But, the Secretary treats God's People right." Tahara was grinning more slyly than ever as he lit a cigarette and let his statement sink in.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was spinning his gears in vain trying to catch Tahara's meaning. *God's People? I thought we were talking about bugs!* He searched for a way to change the topic of conversation, but it was too late.

"Lord Tahara... Who are God's People?" Azur asked.

"Citizens of the Empire—those under the rule of the Secretary," Tahara answered.

"Y-You mean, they are people chosen by God?"

"Bingo bango, my friend. Serving the Secretary comes with a lot of perks, but you're stuck in the Stone Age if you refuse to join the only club in town."

The Empire was rife with futuristic technology while its surrounding nations were several breakthroughs behind, indicating the drastic difference in prosperity.

Tahara was not shy about advertising the greener grass that awaited those who chose to serve his leader. A successful campaign of this nature would draw the impoverished from around the continent without spilling a drop of blood. A massive wave of immigration like that would solve Tahara's staffing problem and weaken their enemies at the same time.

Of course, none of Tahara's foresight was shared by the Demon Lord. *Dammit!* he nearly cried out. *How can he make not eating bugs so complicated? He's doing it on purpose, I know he is!* Itching to talk about anything else, the fearless Demon Lord asked Azur, "How many hidden passages like this are there?"

"As far as I know, there are about twenty in this fort."

“Hm. You and Tahara round up the hoards later. You mentioned cages earlier. Take me there first,” the Demon Lord commanded.

“Yes, sir,” Azur obeyed.

Tahara had to admit that he was somewhat surprised that his boss showed no interest in the literal rooms full of treasure. He had considered the seizing of Dona’s accumulated wealth just as important as taking over the ruling of Central’s territories and the operation of their mines. Seeing how his boss could barely be bothered to address Dona’s hoard, Tahara noticed an incongruence between his thought process and the Demon Lord’s.

Tahara warily turned to his new recruit. “Hey, Azur. What’s in these cages again? I must have missed that the first time you told us.”

“A snow fennec that Dona had hunted.”

“Is that an animal? I’ve never heard of it,” said Tahara.

“A divine beast favored by the Wise Angel, as the legend goes. From what I’ve been told, the creature has weakened in captivity,” Azur explained.

“A ‘divine beast,’ huh? And it’s weak and helpless at the moment.” Tahara grinned at the Demon Lord, which sent a shiver down his spine. “How much do you know, Chief? I still feel like we’re pieces moving on your board.”

“I know nothing,” the Demon Lord said in earnest. “It was your choices that brought me here.”

“Give me a break, Chief... I can’t believe you said that with a straight face.”

How am I supposed to know anything?! I just thought they locked up more kids! the Demon Lord internally shouted while blowing cigarette smoke.

Tahara remained convinced that this whole operation was a show. A melodrama that would garner their legion even more goodwill from the masses. Here was the Demon Lord of the Empire playing the part of a hero who rescued captive children and a divine beast with strong ties to the religious beliefs of Holylight. The Demon Lord had stormed into the stronghold and wiped out the central nobles—an obstacle they had to remove in order to rule Holylight—robbing them of their land and wealth like a bandit. Tahara chuckled

again, feeling like an actor following a script. When the Demon Lord finally appeared to the public, they wouldn't see a tyrant or even a conqueror.

The kids and the divine beast would have just been gravy for me... But the Secretary knew they'd be worth more than piles of gold. This revelation forced Tahara to amend his plans for the future. Ironically, his quickness to adapt often tormented the Demon Lord. "Yu told me a minute ago that you went straight for the Numbered when we got here. You'd planned this all along, and you let me run my mouth like it was my idea. I made a damn fool of myself."

"If that's how you'd like to put it," the Demon Lord said, neither confirming nor denying the accusation.

"That's a much bigger PR campaign than roasting that pig on a spike. I'll pivot in that direction," Tahara said.

What direction?! Where are you taking me, Tahara?! The Demon Lord felt like he was in the driver's seat of a race car with no steering wheel with his foot flooring the gas pedal against his will. What's worse, he was aggressively honking at and flipping off every car he passed... A violent crash seemed like an inevitability.

While the Demon Lord sweated over his fate, Tahara was rewriting his script for their rule that would follow the war. His Propaganda skill would later depict the merciful Fallen Angel rushing to save the captive children before dispatching Dona with ease. The masses were suckers for a sob story in any day and age. Tahara calculated that the Demon Lord's moniker as the Mythical Rebel would work greatly in their favor. A show of mercy was all the more effective in winning over the people when displayed by a figure they feared. In fact, Tahara was counting on the general population of Holylight to flock to worship the Demon Lord.

With that in mind, Tahara began conceptualizing an overhaul of Holylight. *Here we go... Two thousand years' worth of hoarded wealth will make quite a splash. I'll call it a postwar restoration and give this country all the modern conveniences that'll make Manami's life comfortable.* If the Demon Lord acted on impulse and self-interest, Tahara always acted in pursuit of his sister's happiness, which made them a disastrous pair to lead a conquest.

Thinking the worst of Tahara's silence, the Demon Lord turned to Azur. "Take me to that creature."

"This way." Tensely, Azur led the way.

As they approached the snow fennec's cage, the temperature in the hall seemed to creep up, despite the door leading to the cage in question being closed.

The Demon Lord opened the door and was met by a waft of hot air. In what was a veritable sauna, a heated cage held a small, white creature curled up in a ball.

"That's the one?" the Demon Lord asked.

"Yes. Snow fennecs used to live in frigid mountains. They are now considered extinct," Azur explained.

"They put a beast from a cold climate in this room..." The Demon Lord noted that the creature looked nearly identical to the fennec fox on Earth, except for a blue gem that shone on its forehead.

The divine beast remained motionless as the trio approached the cage, apparently too weakened to move.

The Demon Lord tore open the bars of the cage like they were tissue paper. "It's a cute-looking thing... Aku might like it," the Demon Lord noted. In his mind, all children loved cute animals.

He produced a Bottle of Water that healed the user's HP and lifted it to the fennec's mouth. The divine beast could not resist beyond baring its fangs as the Demon Lord let the water trickle into its mouth. Instantly, burn marks that had marred the snow fennec's white fur faded.

"It's not all that effective in this heat..." The Demon Lord yanked the divine beast by the scruff of its neck and pulled it out of its cage and into the hallway. There, he generated Food and made Vegetable Soup—two servings that each healed 25HP.

"Drink this," he told the fennec.

It was wary of the bowl at first, but the smell of the sublime soup became too

tempting and it took a careful lick.

Tahara, who had been flapping his shift collar, grunted. “Chief, you mind if I demolish this stupid room? It’s hot as hell.”

“Do it.”

“Yessir.” Tahara took out his M134 once again and propped it up on its tripod.

Azur’s spine chilled at the bizarre weapon, and when the massive firearm was unleashed, he nearly felt his soul leave his body. Just as it had when it produced a bloodbath at the rear gates of the stronghold, the M134 rapidly spat out casings and a deafening drumming of gunshots.

“A-Are you really going to destroy the entire room?” Azur shrieked over the cacophony of destruction.

“No shit!” Tahara shouted back. He’d enjoyed saunas on occasion, but the oppressive heat had been irritatingly uncomfortable.

Rapidly firing bullets tore through the purpose-built, reinforced walls as if they were cardboard. By the time Tahara was ankle-deep in casings, the sauna room was buried in rubble and the temperature had somewhat dropped in the hallway.

“That’s one successful renovation,” Tahara quipped with satisfaction.

The Demon Lord nodded in approval of the violent demolition. He must have found the room as irritating as Tahara had.

The divine beast had been quivering at the earsplitting gunfire, but as soon as it saw that its wretched prison had been obliterated, it began wagging its tail. Once it gulped down the rest of the soup, the snow fennec glowed a shimmering white, chilling the air around it.

The Demon Lord sighed in relief. “That’s nice. You’re an instant AC unit.”

Perhaps the divine beast appreciated the compliment as well as the rescue. It stared into the Demon Lord’s eyes as it generated a Snow Crystal—ice that never melted. It was a priceless material sought after by wealthy nobles and collectors. Not only was it a rare material used in Top-Tier and One-of-a-Kind weapons, it was also an extremely valuable gem in its own right. Its value was

driven by its absolute scarcity as well as the fact that only dwarves were capable of working with it. As master smiths, dwarves often heated their furnaces to lethal temperatures. Snow fennecs served as trusted partners and lifeline to the dwarven blacksmiths.

“A token of your gratitude?” the Demon Lord asked. While he had no interest in the likes of jewelry or art, he could appreciate the mesmerizing crystal of shimmering white. “It’ll make a good souvenir for Aku.” Oblivious to its astronomical value, he shoved the gem into his pocket.

The divine beast then climbed up to his shoulder and sat itself down. There was something mystical about the picture they produced together: a pure-white beast riding the shoulder of the dark-as-night Fallen Angel.

“Now that’s a billboard photo,” Tahara said. “A perfect mascot.”

A mascot for what?! You’re going to twist this into something, I know it! Fearing Tahara’s plans for him and his little friend, the Demon Lord spoke to make an exit. “I have something else I need to take care of. Talk it over with White.”

“Yessir. I wanna organize how the Central land’s going to be divvied up postwar. Can I get your input on—”

“Handle it as you see fit. I believe you and I are on the same page,” the Demon Lord said, covering up his lack of any strategic thought whatsoever.

Tahara seemed all too pleased with the Secretary’s confidence. “Makes it easy. Split in five, plus from the outside... That sound good?”

“As I thought... We are on the same page,” the Demon Lord said with gobsmacking audacity. He didn’t have a clue what Tahara was talking about, except that he didn’t have to feel bad about seizing Central territory. If only to ensure that he wouldn’t be left with any responsibility, the Demon Lord preemptively passed another buck. “And I give you full authority to decide who goes where in these new territories.”

“Oof, you’re putting me to the test, I take it... I know you’ve already got your mind set.”

“When you’re done, I’ll check your answers.”

Tahara grinned. "I'll make sure I get an A... Thanks for the extra homework, teach."

Don't act like you don't throw me impossible tasks left and right! The Demon Lord silently protested under a mask of a knowing smile. Turning his back on Tahara and the conversation, he Quick Traveled out of there. He never guessed that this short conversation would trigger yet another tide of messy situations down the road. Of course, there was no point for this con man to stay; leaving Tahara and Yu to clean things up after the war was the wisest choice. His job was done when he annihilated the enemy forces in this land by a show of absolute force. The rest would be left to Tahara, who controlled all logistical aspects of their operation.

Anyone who sided with the Central faction during the civil war would lose claim to their territories, generating massive plots of land without anyone to rule over them. Holylight's political structure was about to be uprooted...until it settled back down in perfect accordance with Tahara's blueprint.

"Let's go through the treasure hoard and draw up the paperwork," Tahara said to himself.

Overnight, the Demon Lord's legion had acquired vast gold, Holy Coins, mines, territories, and even subjects. Their forces would grow in an upward spiral that not even a god could stop.

Remaining SP: 17,554

Battle of the Holy City

——Western Holylight.

Having Quick Traveled out of the stronghold, the Demon Lord was enjoying a smoke while he gazed at the stars. They twinkled all the same, indifferent to the thousands of lives that had been snuffed out. In fact, they seemed to shine all the brighter, as if in celebration of the Demon Lord's victory.

Reminds me of the night sky I saw by the Secret Base, the Demon Lord recalled. The divine beast tilted its head curiously and followed its new master's gaze skyward. It, too, hadn't seen the stars in a long time. A thought came to the Demon Lord from the shimmering sky, so he sent a Communication to Olgan. *"It's been a while. How are you?"*

"This is sudden..." Olgan replied, her breath catching in surprise.

"I know it's late," the Demon Lord said, realizing that this probably seemed like he was drunk-texting her. *"And I don't have a good reason for calling either."*

"You never need a reason to call me. Even if you called every day, I would not grow tired of your voice."

"Every day?" The Demon Lord chuckled. What were they, a long-distance couple?

Olgan, however, had spoken with utmost sincerity. She hadn't seen the Demon Lord once since they parted in Hellion territory. If she were to see him now, wearing the Fallen Angel wings on his back, her feelings for him would only grow stronger. *"All this time, I've longed to hear your voice."*

"I-Is that so...? Then I'm glad." The Demon Lord scratched his head, unsure how else to react to Olgan's directness. He'd had plenty of romantic encounters—more than he cared to admit—and usually felt confident fielding advances. But one as genuine and forthcoming as Olgan's was giving the Demon Lord a run for his money.

"Rumor has it there's a civil war in Holylight," Olgan Communicated.

“That just wrapped up.”

“Wrapped up, huh? You make it sound so easy... Holylight was once a complex knot of political factions pining for power, motivated by old grudges.”

“These central nobles were getting tiresome, so I took them out of the equation.”

Olgan nearly laughed. Pity the Central faction had been wiped out for the crime of being tiresome. Of course, only the Demon Lord and his advisors could have dreamed of eliminating the central nobles altogether. *“You sure know how to make ripples... I can’t wait to see you.”*

“Once the dust settles in Holylight,” the Demon Lord said with a straight face, after leaving Tahara to handle every step of the postwar dealings. Part of him wondered if he’d find himself in an unskippable, X-rated cutscene if he dared to see Olgan in person again.

“It seems like every day I spend in the North, I hear whispers of your deeds.”

“What deeds? I’m just living a normal life.”

“Is that what you call dethroning Jack in Euritheis?”

“Oh? I might recall that particular incident,” the Demon Lord said noncommittally. Apparently, he couldn’t be bothered to remember events that no longer interested him.

For everyone else, Jack’s downfall was no trivial matter. Euritheis had descended into chaos because of it, as Gorgon had said. While he had been at it, the Demon Lord had dealt catastrophic damage to the neighboring nation of Milk as well.

“I also heard that you’ve wiped out the Tungyas. They were an infamously barbaric tribe before you got to them,” Olgan said.

“That might or might not have happened... It did not happen, come to think of it.”

Olgan chuckled, taking it in good humor. *“There you go again with your jokes.”*

That incident, too, had been a significant one. Even though the Demon Lord

considered it no more than walloping a group of jackasses, eliminating one of the most powerful tribes in Milk was no trivial matter.

“How’s the emo girl?” the Demon Lord asked.

“Mynk? She rambles off nonsense, like always. Lately, she’s been villainizing one of your kin, Yu. Calling her ‘the Demon Queen’ and ‘Empress of Evil.’”

The Demon Lord almost guffawed at the ridiculous monikers. *The Demon Queen?! Empress of Evil?! How does she come up with these...?*

Olgan’s own opinion on Yu had changed after they spoke in person. *“I do sense an evil in Yu that would have sent even my father running, but her loyalty to you is undeniable. Even if the whole world turned against you, she would never leave your side.”* Olgan was confident that she wouldn’t be able to say the same about any other human again.

To the Demon Lord, Olgan’s words were both encouraging and ominous. *“Yu is one of my dear advisors...”*

“If the whole world turned against you, I would be by your side too. I want you to know that,” Olgan said.

“That’s... Reassuring.” With a promise to call again, the Demon Lord ended the Communication. Conflicting emotions whirled in him. He felt like he had just eaten a spoonful of sugar, and like he had been forced to finally acknowledge something he’d been trying to ignore.

Now that his cigarette had finally burned out, the Demon Lord turned to the night sky again. Just then, something caught his attention. *The sky’s too light for this time of the night*, he realized. At the horizon, a faint glow of white dimmed the stars. When he squinted, he could make out the curling lips of fire. *The Holy City is in that direction. There was talk of an order of knights that had something to do with Eagle...* The Tzardom—and its knights—had been wiped from his mind until now. *Luna must be in the thick of it. I’d better check on it, just in case...*

The Demon Lord Quick Traveled into a heaven-scorching inferno roaring above a sea of corpses.

—Central Holylight.

Some time before the Demon Lord blew open the gates to Dona's stronghold, the Tzardom's Salamander Knights were speeding their horses towards the Holy City, burning down every village and settlement on their way.

His scarlet locks flowing, Captain Flay commanded his knights. "Satanists have infected this country! Let the Fire of Cleansing purify this tainted land!" His men roared in response to the violent call.

Flay was the second son born to House Rooksanburg, a family so influential in the Tzardom that even the Pope himself treated it with reverence. Defiance against him could prove fatal.

Among the five thousand Salamanders, only his second dared to voice his opinion. "Captain Flay! We have no orders to burn down villages!"

"We've never needed permission before, and that's not going to change anytime soon," Flay boasted.

His second felt the urge to bury his fist into Flay's face, but schooled himself out of self-preservation.

"Roasting every Satanist in this second-world nation, retrieving the Hawk, *and* leveling the Holy City? His Holiness would have to recognize my abilities then," Flay added.

"His Holiness would never approve of attacking the capital of an ally nation without any cause!"

"You have no idea, Mister Second-in-Command, just how greedy His Holiness can be." Flay smirked in cruel triumph and waved his hand in command.

One after another, the knights summoned Salamanders and sent them into the nearby village. Salamanders were elementals that scorched the air around them just by existing: by simply gliding through, the Salamanders ignited houses and structures...until everything was swallowed by fire.

Watching black smoke drown the village, Flay elegantly brushed back a lock of hair from his face. "There's no telling where those Satanists are hiding. To root out evil, collateral damage is unavoidable."

“I only request that my opposition be noted in the report,” his second spat out, eyes glued to the ground. He couldn’t stand to raise his gaze and watch the insanity taking place.

“Coward. You are an outsider to the superior Fire Clan, after all.” Members of the Fire Clan—with the Rooksanburgs at its center—occupied all important positions in the Order of Salamander Knights. Lower ranks of the order were filled with sympathizers of the clan too, leaving the second as the lone outsider. He had been jammed into the order by the Pope to keep Flay in check.

Flay gleefully orated to the knights. “Hear me, comrades! The time has come for the Fire Clan to serve its divine purpose! This country is a cesspool of Satanists! The root of heinous evil!” Flay drunkenly carried on with his baseless accusations, and the Salamander Knights listened intently as if they were hearing the words of a king. Most of them belonged to the house of Rooksanburg or its extended family, so Flay’s words were their doctrine, even more so than the Pope’s.

“Our fire will be the one to end this evil! To bring their *Holy City* to the ground! Do this, and I promise you, we will receive a hero’s welcome upon our return! Glory to the Fire Clan!” he called.

“Glory to the Fire Clan!” the knights responded in unison.

They began their march towards the Holy City, reducing towns and villages to ash on their way as collateral damage, leaving a massive number of casualties—most burned or suffocated—in their wake. By the time the march reached the Holy City, they had burned two industrial cities and seven villages. History would remember this march as the Mad Ray of Light, a scandal not soon forgotten by the Tzardom and its neighboring nations.

All unbeknownst to the Salamander Knights at the time, of course. Obediently, they started fires at Flay’s command, lighting their path to the Holy City in blazing crimson.

Citizens of the Holy City were forced to watch their enemy approach by the trail of fire.

“What army is that...? They’re setting everything on fire!”

“Salamander Knights! Someone fled here from one of the villages before they got to it!”

“That can’t be! The Tzardom’s our ally!”

“Go and tell them that!”

Three thousand Holy Knights still served the city, but their ranks felt the loss of their captain and advisor. Their vice captain still remained, but he was not equipped to keep the disarrayed order in line.

“What should we do, vice captain?!”

“Are we to fend off the Salamander Knights?!”

“W-We won’t stand a chance! They’re elite warriors and we’re just a militia!”

The Holy Knights’ command center was racked with confusion as knights swarmed their vice captain for guidance. Defending the Holy City seemed an impossible task with the order in shambles.

The vice captain managed to bark out a command. “Close the main city gates first! I will seek guidance from Lady Queen!”

This changed the mood in the room. In an emergency, Queen herself seemed like a beacon of light.

“That’s right! We have Lady Queen on our side!”

“We shall never know defeat!”

“As long as the Queen of Bloodshed is on our side...we can win!”

“Remember the tragedy of Gatekeeper, when she destroyed the enemy force of tens of thousands, then stripped and hung all survivors by their feet! The lady of death will protect us!”

Although none of them addressed her as a Holy Maiden, talk of the fearsome lady of death brought the Holy Knights to their senses. Apparently, notoriety could be reassuring in a crisis. Soon, the knights were dispatched to secure defenses around the city, as well as raise the drawbridge and close the main gates.

A deep moat encircled the Holy City, but there weren’t enough men to defend

its perimeter. Out of the eight thousand Holy Knights that had protected the city before the war, three thousand had followed their captain to join the Central faction, and two thousand more had been dispatched to deal with mobs in nearby locations. Three thousand knights was hardly enough to cover the entirety of the vast city.

The vice captain practically bolted through the castle to give an honest report to Queen, who sat on a ridiculously enormous throne. She barely gave him a second look. 108 hulks lined either side of the room, standing rigid.

Shaking under the pressure of the room, the vice captain managed to plead, “L-Lady Queen! Please, give us your guidance!”

While Queen remained silent, the shouts of her men boomed in the throne room. These ruffians had loyalty only to Queen and had no regard for the fate of Holylight, much less that of the Holy Knights’ Order.

“You got the balls to come begging our Queen for help, after *your* knights betrayed this country?!”

“If you’re gonna beg, get on your hands and knees on hot coal, you shit scum!”

“You wanna get in the dome, bitch?!”

The vice captain shrank where he stood, but he could not afford to leave without some sort of direction.

Finally, Queen lazily said, “My older sis’s out of town, so I’ve gotta hold down the fort here.”

The barrier protecting the Holy Castle required a Holy Maiden within its bounds. If Queen were to leave, the place would be left defenseless. White usually stayed at the castle, but she remained with the Demon Lord.

“Wh-What should we do?!” the vice captain asked. Queen had been his final hope.

“Luna’s gonna show her dumb ass soon,” Queen said. “Buy time until she does.”

“B-Buy time? We don’t have enough men to defend the entire city...”

“All right. Then go out there and die. This is what the people have been paying you for.”

“P-Please...!” The vice captain pleaded once more as Queen jerked her chin, ordering her men to eject him from the castle. She felt no remorse in treating the vice captain like a criminal. What good were these knights when they betrayed their country in its time of need and refused to put their lives on the line in defense of its citizens?

Once the vice captain was dragged out of the room, Fuji whispered to her. “My Queen. They won’t last an hour.”

“You take command in my stead,” Queen ordered. “If any coward tries to run, beat him to death on the spot.”

“Yes, my Queen!”

Beyond the castle grounds, a devil stood smirking in the Holy City in turmoil—Utopia, the high-ranking devil and leader of the Satanists. He wasn’t going to let this prime opportunity slip by. While the Central army and invading forces wreaked havoc throughout the country, he had gathered as many of his disciples as he could to achieve his objective: the destruction of the Holy Castle. The grand structure had been built by the Wise Angel in the times of myth, and had become a beacon against all things demonic. To pure-blooded devils like Utopia, its very existence was a source of shame and the object of unending hatred. When Allit had been in the presence of the Holy Castle, he’d lost his cool to an irresistible urge of destruction. It must have been an instinct carved deep into Hellion DNA.

Satanists smiled sinisterly as smoke striped the sky in every direction, clapping each other on the shoulders. Many of them had been ousted by society without so much as a helping hand while they were forced to watch nobles, merchants, and even other commoners live cushy lives.

The sight of everything burning to the ground brought only joy to the rejected Satanists.

Amid the crowd of sadistic grins, Warlkin alone wore a stern expression. *Our mission had once been to cut out the rot from the seats of power. To build a*

nation where all were treated equally, he contemplated.

Calls for wealth redistribution and protections for the weak had gone unheard. Despite all of their efforts, nothing about Holylight changed. Eventually, they had resorted to more and more extreme measures...until they became Satanists. Neither the Light nor the Angel had done them any good, so why not ask the devils for help?

The only things that came from that are countless deaths and pointless destruction... Warlkin had once meticulously planned an assassination against the Holy Maidens that was ultimately foiled by the Demon Lord. If it weren't for him, Luna and Queen would have fallen to Tartarus. The deaths of two Holy Maidens had the potential to change Holylight, for better or worse. Many assassinations had changed the course of history, after all.

After the failed assassination attempt, Satanist activity had devolved into terrorism, taking innocent lives and senselessly destroying cities. No amount of terrorism could have built a country of equality.

Compare our progress to that of Eastern Holylight... This Demon Lord turned a wasteland into a prospering community. That was the very picture of the change Warlkin had wanted to see. There were plenty of jobs in Rabbi, and all of its workers were paid honestly. In the rest of Holylight, there were plenty of employers who delayed payment to their workers only to pay half. Warlkin did not want for much: only a job that paid, food, shelter, and some booze.

Did we not long for a leader who could bring about that kind of revolution? For two millennia, Holylight had been run by a system that was by the nobles, for the nobles. It was only natural that Warlkin strove for change. For equality.

Presently, he glanced at Utopia and saw the grim profile of a high-rank devil, one who seemed prepared to bring the Holy City to the ground.

What good could come of that? Warlkin wondered. Does he think our lives will be better by destroying the city?

Destruction of the Holy City would bring just the opposite. Death and destructive lawlessness would reign in the city's place. Although the Holy City had enemies marching for its walls and lurking within them, a small but impactful cavalry was approaching: a carriage thundering down the travel road,

Eagle soaring above it.

——Travel Road Leading to the Holy City.

“Go faster!” Luna barked at the coachman.

“W-We can’t...! I’m pushing the horses as much as they can take!”

“Eagle’s beating me there! Are you *trying* to embarrass me?!”

Luna’s usual tantrum did little to help her catch up to her friend, who was soaring above and ahead of them on eagle wings. They were falling behind even though her horses were on an exclusive diet of carrots that gave them better speed and endurance than any performance-enhancing drug could.

“I’ll be an egghead if my slave beats me there!” she whined again.

“Do you mean that you’ll have egg on your face...?”

“Shut up and catch up already!”



Eagle could clearly see the tendrils of smoke in the distance. Just as the average eagle could see eight times farther than a human, she could identify even a small rodent from a kilometer away. The black streak in the sky had confirmed Eagle's suspicions. *It's them. There's no doubt about it...!*

Following her banishment from Holylight and meandering across the continent with other refugees, Eagle had been found by the Salamander Knights, who pursued her with hateful obsession. Every leg of the chase ended with them burning another settlement and torturing its inhabitants. Harboring a demi-human, they claimed, was a most blasphemous crime. The trail of massacres they left in their wake weighed Eagle down with guilt until she was finally captured, her body and mind entirely spent.

Today is the day I avenge them all...! Eagle resolved. She had escaped as far as the Island Legion, which lay a great distance offshore. Even there, the Salamander Knights had ruthlessly followed her and slaughtered their way through the isles. Blood of the islanders and their children—any who had shown Eagle kindness—seeped into the sand and sea as their once beautiful slices of paradise burned. *This will be the end of the Salamander Knights...!* Spreading wide her new wings, she glided through the air.

Small skirmishes had broken out in the surroundings of the Holy City, driving the Holy Knights back against the moat. While the Holy Knights were the best fighters among the citizens of the Holy City, the Salamander Knights lived and breathed for the thrill of the kill.

The Holy Knights cried out as they fought.

"It burns! It burns!"

"We can't fight them! We'll get torched if we get near them at all!"

"Fall back! Retreat!"

The crimson knights pursued them with a succession of spells. Their moral code might have been burnt to cinders, but they were still exceptionally well-trained fighters.

—Flame Bird!

—Flame Arrow!

The squall of Fire spells burned through the drawbridge chains, allowing the knights in red to march into the Holy City.

—Fly!

—Fly!

Some even used Wind magic to float up to the bastions, sending the city gates into turmoil. They loosed arrows from atop the walls, driving back the last line of defense into the city. The Salamander Knights' siege was seamless.

As they efficiently built a beachhead, the Salamander Knights chuckled under their helmets.

"It's almost too easy. Holylight is a second-world nation, after all."

"They are no match for the Fire Clan."

Boasting their superiority, the knights began setting buildings on fire. Fighting in flames was what they did best, the screams of burning innocents nothing but music to their ears.

In the center of the Holy City, Fuji was bellowing commands in an attempt to stabilize the knights. He was organizing them into units of fifty, sending them out to breaches in the city's defenses. Queen's right-hand man had the brains to match his brawn; most impressively, he had fought against Queen on several occasions and survived.

A Holy Knight approached him. "Lord Fuji, more forces are marching down Clare Street... We can't hold them off!"

"I'm sending three more units now. Defend that line with your life."

"Lord Fuji!" another shouted. "They have taken over Artemis, and are sheltering their troops within."

"Leave it be. We can't stretch our men all the way to the noble district."

"B-But, sir, that establishment has been favored by many—"

"Our only concern is cutting off their line of attack. Buildings can be rebuilt."

Fuji concentrated his units on locations vital to the Holy City's defense, willing to give up the rest of the city to do so. Strictly speaking, his strategy was not to successfully defend the city, but to buy time. Fuji estimated only a fifty-fifty chance of repelling the enemy once Queen joined the fray and at least took out the enemy commander.

"Lord Fuji, enemies in the Lomas district have been engaged," a knight reported.

"Lady Luna?"

"N-No. A woman with...eagle wings is attacking the Salamander Knights!"

"Wings...? The hell are you talking about?" Fuji craned his neck, but failed to see anything beyond the smoke clouding the city. However, he had noticed that the invasion had slowed. Sending out the remaining units, Fuji sprinted to the front lines.

There, he found a beautiful, silver-winged Anima.

"Who is that woman...?" Fuji muttered.

Just like a bird of prey, the winged girl repeatedly soared into the air to dive-bomb down, crushing the head of a Salamander Knight with her heels each time.

Even as they were rattled by the surprise attack, they sent word of it to Flay.

"The Eagle! Tell Lord Flay the Eagle has appeared!"

"Take it down at all costs! Think of the reward!"

"Catch that bird and you can retire in luxury, boys!"

Eyes ablaze with greed, the knights in red fired arrow after arrow and spell after spell, but none of them found their mark.

She sped through the air at one hundred kilometers per hour, reaching speeds of three hundred kilometers per hour during dives. It was an impossible feat to successfully aim and hit something moving through the air at the speed of a bullet train.

"Get down here, you filthy demi-human!"

“Aim for the wings! Shoot that thing out of the sky!”

“It’s just a piece of flesh once it’s dewinged!”

“We’re trying to— *Aghh!*”

Another Salamander Knight bit the dust, his head squashed like a melon. Eagle had chosen to surrender when these knights took the islanders hostage. Today, no matter what happened, she would do no such thing.

“Filthy demi-human! Surrender already!”

“The ashes of these people will be on the hands of you and your accursed species!”

Eagle called down to them. “My curse has already been lifted... You are the true stains upon this continent.”

Legend told of eagmites—half human, half eagle—that flew with the Ember Angel. Devils loathed these aviators and incessantly hunted them down. Eventually, even the other Anima pushed out the eagmites for fear of demons pursuing them...until they were all but extinct.

Eagle’s curse—the one that had burdened her all her life—had been completely lifted by an item the Demon Lord had provided her without much thought. Now she had nothing to fear.

“**Swooping Talons!**” Another descent and Eagle knocked three knights off of their mounts.

The march of the Salamander Knights was finally slowing as they struggled to bring Eagle to the ground. Knights who were fighting in other parts of the city congregated in the hopes of scoring the jackpot by capturing the demi-human. Like moths to a flame, they crowded every street that branched off from where Eagle flew, forgetting even to set anything on fire.

Upon witnessing the traffic jam, Fuji couldn’t help but punch the air victoriously. *Thank you, whoever you are... This will buy us more time!*

Fuji returned to the city center to rapidly issue his commands. “All units to the Lomas district! Do not attack the winged woman!”

“Winged?” one of his soldiers repeated. “She couldn’t be a demi-human,

could she?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what she is, all I care is that she’s on our side! You got that through your head? Now go!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Holy Knights ran to their posts, Fuji following along. As skilled a commander as he was, he was an accomplished warrior in his own right.

A strange sense of excitement filled the Lomas district, with a majority of the knights in red eager to take their shot at the girl in the sky. In their eyes, she was like a winning lottery ticket floating in the wind, just out of their reach.

“The eagle’s mine! Out of the way!”

“I’ve been hunting that thing for years... You get out of my sight!”

“We can barely take a step! Everyone calm down!”

A veritable mosh pit had formed below Eagle, the Salamander Knights immobilized by their own comrades. That meant that they were sitting ducks for the vengeful predator. Eagle’s eyes shone like ice as she cracked skull after skull.

Soon, she spread her wings wide to stay aloft just long enough to unleash a widespread attack. “Count your sins...! **Feather Storm!**” Eagle’s wings glowed bright as feathers sharp as daggers rained down on her enemies. The Storm attack—elevated from Wind—tore through the knights, who stood no chance of running.

Screams of the knights were carried on the stormwind along with the lethal feathers.

“M-Move back! We might as well be target practice!”

“Dammit! We can’t take a lone demi-human?!”

While the Salamander Knights were being defenselessly mowed down, their captain finally arrived on the scene.

“Calm yourselves, chosen ones.” Flay’s order was theatrical, but effective. He held absolute control over the Salamander Knights. With a word, he could bless

any of them with fame and glory, or snuff out their life without a second thought.

The Salamander Knights parted as Flay walked, quieting their frenzy. He looked up at Eagle perched on a roof and smirked. "It's been too long, my little bird."

"I have never been your anything," Eagle rebuked.

Flay chuckled. "For a demi-human, you have trouble remembering your place. I never thought you'd fly back to your dump of a nest. If only that bishop had been the slightest bit capable...I wouldn't have to do his work for him." Flay eyed Eagle's wings with palpable disgust. "How tiresome that your torn wings regrew... A greater nuisance than a cockroach in a kitchen." As Flay shrugged, a gust blew past his face. Just then, a feather fell to his feet, a line of blood trickling down his face.

"Frankly, I'm offended that you bleed red like the rest of us... I would have expected blue or green," Eagle said.

"H-H-How dare you mar the face of a paladin, you demi-human scum?!" Flay shrieked.

"You'll never be a paladin... The box chose correctly."

"As if filth like you would know!" Turning to his men, Flay shouted, "Capture the beast! Now!"

The Salamander Knights all obliged at once, even more frantic to shoot Eagle down now that their lord had demanded her capture. In their fervor to appease their leader, the knights lost the last sense of order that remained in their ranks.

As if to mock them for it, Eagle sniped one knight at a time, evading the volley of arrows and spells with ease. She shouted at Flay, who watched his men's fruitless hunt with gritted teeth, "Now that you're here, I'm more sure of myself than ever. I will leave my past behind!"

She had been weak. She had been cowardly. She had kept running. Memories of the dead, thousands of faces trapped in blazing flames, had held Eagle back from stepping into her future. Seeing Flay and his knights threaten to burn the

Holy City only strengthened her resolve. “I won’t allow you to kill anyone else... I swear, I will kill you here and now!”

“Shut your mouth, demi-human! I am the god-king of the Fire Clan, the one superior race!” Flay shouted.

Eagle recalled her conversation with the Demon Lord when he’d told her that, no matter how miserable the journey was, no matter how many times she fell along the way, all that mattered was who ended up the last one standing.

Now she understood the weight those words carried. *He experienced it. Even with his incredible powers, he still suffered a great defeat against an impossibly powerful...something.* The Demon Lord had added that her force of will would be the only fuel she needed to try again. Whatever unfathomable enemy he had faced, the Demon Lord had won in the end. The implication of his victory alone was a great ray of hope for Eagle. “I will never break again!” she declared. “No matter what the world brings down on me, I will defy it!”

“Know your place, demi-human! I’ll cut off your arms and legs, as well as your wings!” Flay shouted back.

“I’d like to see you try!” Eagle spread her wings high above the ground, casting a spell that would blow away the swarming humans below.

Smoke and screams filled the Holy City. Only Flay’s second was able to watch the battle calmly, remembering a document he’d found in an old temple that had been burned on Flay’s orders. Miraculously, part of it had remained legible.

This is the true potential of an Anima, he thought. The text described humans as mere foot soldiers in the mythical war... That would make sense, if every Anima was this powerful.

The document belonged to a volume of forbidden lore, one containing information so shocking that he immediately burned what had survived after reading it. *It called Anima “elevated units,” created by bestowing feeble humans with the powers of beasts.* He hadn’t comprehended much of the lore and its unfamiliar vocabulary, only that it claimed Anima to be superior overall to humans. The Tzardom, which considered pure humans the superior race, could not allow such information to be preserved.

And the Holy Knights have a new commander, he noted. We are being swiftly surrounded.

Now that Fuji had taken command, the Holy Knights no longer seemed scattered. They'd begun to hold strong in their lines of defense, even striking back at critical moments. They had all too easily surrounded the Salamander Knights flocking to Eagle... He was really craving a stiff drink after all that.

With calculated orders, Mount Fuji's force had quietly surrounded the enemy. One more good push in the right direction and the Holy Knights could force the invaders out of the main city gates. He bellowed at his men, swinging his arm with his command. "This is do or die, boys! Push them out!"

The Holy Knights roared into a charge, moving to flush out the Salamander Knights like a canoe in a tsunami. The tides of the battle had completely turned. Now the knights in red scrambled, tripping over each other to flee the city.

Regrouping an army was a difficult and delicate task, especially in the midst of battle. A skilled commander might have realigned his troops with a tactful blend of reassurance and encouragement.

Unfortunately for the Salamander Knights, their only leadership was Flay and his inflated ego. "You are of the glorious Fire Clan! Have you no shame?! Kill those inferior species!" In the face of their own deaths, the Salamander Knights had forgotten their pride and cruelty in favor of self-preservation. Red in the face, Flay shouted "That's my eagle... Capture it! Burn that stupid, second-rate castle to the ground! And kill them all! Now!"

Fuji burst into laughter and showed himself to Flay, resting his giant hammer on his shoulder. "Why don't you spit out your silver spoon and burn it yourself?"

"Wh-Who are you?!" Flay stammered.

"Commander of this—what did you call it?—second-rate country. Good luck going head-to-head with me, scrawny ass."

Fuji's mountainous stature inspired some animalistic fear in Flay, who staggered back. Few men could have resisted the urge to do so, considering he was a hulk of a man over two meters tall with a mohawk on his head, complete

with a wasteland raider getup.

“H-How crass... Do bandits run this country?” Flay quipped. “Kill him!”

Salamander Knights rushed to obey his order. Unfortunately for them, Fuji was no ordinary bandit. Of course, a *former* bandit serving as a royal commander was bonkers in and of itself.

“No one’s laying a finger on the castle while my Queen’s in it... **Power Smash! Bodybuilder!**”

As Fuji activated his skills, every muscle in his body swelled with power. In the same breath, he brought his hammer down on the head of a knight charging at him. A horrific crunch sounded the end of that man, who’d been pancaked by the blow.

Fuji whirled the hammer with one arm, keeping a group of knights at bay. “We’re an inferior species? You sacks of shit can’t even take down a bandit! **Power Dance!**” A swing of his hammer—as swift as if he were only wielding a stick—sent five knights flying. Their deformed bodies hit the ground and never rose again.

No other Salamander Knight dared to approach the towering commander, and instead they staggered to put more distance between themselves and Fuji.

“You don’t wanna dance?” Fuji taunted. “Too damn bad.” He sprinted at the invaders, who practically scrambled on their hands and knees to escape in vain. Mercilessly, he flattened foe after foe. The chaos on the battlefield was comparable to that of a mass tragedy.

Seeing their enemies crumble, the Holy Knights tightened their circle, loosing arrows into the panicked crowd. Battles were often won by one small victory at a critical moment, boosting an army’s morale enough to carry them to victory.

As he smashed his way through the reeling knights, Fuji glanced up at Eagle, who soon swooped down and alighted beside him.

“Who are you?” Fuji asked. “Why take on these Tzardom bastards?”

“I serve Luna,” Eagle replied.

“Ah... So the rumors were true. You survived.” Quiet whispers of Luna’s demi-

human friend and her execution order had reached Fuji's ears too.

"I am not your enemy."

"Don't sweat it," Fuji said. "Lady Luna is my Queen's sister. Besides, I'm an ex-bandit myself! **Earth Splitter!**" He brought his hammer down to the ground, full force. It shook, then curled up like ripples on water, spreading from the point of impact and swallowing up the Salamander Knights—a ferocious attack of pure brawn that showed well what kind of fighter Fuji was.

After that, Fuji had nothing more to say to Eagle, who had suffered so much prejudice in her life. As far as he knew, she'd never harmed Holylight in any way. In fact, he had been more of a threat to its national security when he'd wreaked havoc in his past. His only interest now was protecting Queen and those she cared for; he could not be bothered with the complex web of racism that plagued this continent.

"I'm going after their commander," Eagle said.

"All right. That rich boy has exactly one good guard. Watch out for him." Fuji pointed to Flay's second.

Eagle nodded and flew.

As defenders of the Holy City pursued the Salamander Knights out of its bounds, yet another force was about to finally join the fray. The tide of battle had just been turned by Eagle and Fuji when a massive Satanist militia flanked the knights in red, catching the Salamander Knights completely by surprise. Ironical, considering their excuse for marching on Holylight had been the hunting of Satanists.

The Tzardom's most elite knights were outraged.

"Satanists!"

"I knew Holylight was in cahoots with them!"

"These wretches were working with the devil worshippers after all!"

Fuji shouted back at them, "As if! You're just a bunch of pyros!"

The Satanists, of course, were attacking anyone that moved, even animals, while setting fire to more structures. To Fuji and anyone else who called the

Holy City home, the Salamander Knights and Satanists were one and the same.

“Comparing the honorable Fire Clan to devil worshippers... Your ignorance knows no bounds!” a Salamander Knight shouted.

Fuji gestured to his city filled with smoke and screams. “Honorable? Is *this* what your Great Light commands you to do?!”

Both sides continued exchanging blows both verbal and physical.

Trapped where he stood, Flay could only shriek at his men. “Tear through the Satanists! Catch the eagle, already! And burn down that castle!” He had only ever launched attacks on defenseless targets, leaving him without experience in evenly matched battles.

The directionless commands only confused the Salamander Knights further. Trapped between the Satanists with nothing to lose and the Holy Knights desperate to defend their home, they could barely keep themselves alive, much less continue their siege.

Finally, Flay’s second spoke to them. “The Satanists are attacking everyone, making them less defended. Break through a single point in their line and fall back to the beachhead!”

“How dare you contradict my orders!” Flay shouted. “Charge, men! Charge! Storm their castle!”

The Salamander Knights pretended not to hear Flay’s idiotic command that would surely cost them their lives.

As Flay’s second had predicted, the Satanists spread thinner the farther they made it into the city, attacking Holy Knights and torching any structures around them. Now that three forces were fighting for control, the Salamander Knights managed to regroup at the city gate.

Without meeting Flay’s eyes, his right-hand man gave further orders. “Armored infantry to the front! Only engage with Satanists if they attack us!”

Flay’s shoulders shook as he watched his legion smoothly weave into formation. These elite fighters could form a well-oiled machine under competent orders... Which only bruised Flay’s ego more. “Stop listening to him!

I'm the captain!" He turned to his second. "You're fired!"

"Discharge of a second requires the Pope's approval. I can not accept that order at this time."

"Someone kill him!" Flay barked at the other knights. "Whoever kills him will be my second!"

The absurdly shortsighted order caused a ripple of murmurs through the Salamander Knights. A position like that was life-changing. Sure enough, several of them pointed their lances at the current second, blinded by a greed for glory.

"Lord Flay has spoken... Please surrender."

"Drop your weapon! It never sat right with me that an outsider was our second!"

"That post belongs to a member of the Fire Clan."

Flay had done an excellent job of deteriorating his elite army, despite his second's best efforts to keep them alive. Even the best army in the world would crumble under inept leadership.

Suddenly, a carriage whirled to a halt before them, none other than Luna stepping out of it. "Finally, I've caught up to her..." Seeing the pyres rising throughout the city, she turned to the Salamander Knights. "What do you think you're doing in my city?!" Gold energy pulsed around her.

Some of them recognized her.

"H-Hey! Isn't that Luna the Golden?!"

"The youngest of the Holy Maidens!"

"She sent a blasphemous letter to His Holiness... She's on our list!"

"Holy Maiden... She's my game! Out of the way!"

Just as they had with Eagle, they became fervent at the chance at glory: a byproduct of the Tzardom's brutally competitive social structure. The only way up the ladder was to rack up significant achievements, which meant that even their brothers-in-arms were rivals in their social conquest.

The Tzardom's pressure to succeed had caused cracks on other battlefields as

well. When their bishop was facing defeat against the Demon Lord, he'd resorted to a reckless summoning, and the scouting troop sent to Rabbi had intended to ambush the village without waiting for backup. A side effect of the Tzardom's extreme competitiveness was a lack of unity among its soldiers, which could easily get in the way of vital operations.

And now, three carrots—a demi-human, a group of Satanists, and a Holy Maiden—were dangling before the Salamander Knights. Calm cooperation among their ranks was no longer achievable. One of them shouted and began a charge at Luna, with many more following suit.

In the face of a charge that might have inspired fear in the most valiant of warriors, Luna only scoffed. "Red armor... Looks like I have a score to settle for my slave!" She thrust the Staff of Ramd towards them, a whirlwind of Gold energy forming at its tip. "I will make you feel her pain, a hundredfold!"

—From Gold to Dust!

A massive laser of Gold shot through the middle of the crowded army before those in its line of fire could even cry out. When the blinding light faded, the surviving Salamander Knights fearfully opened their eyes to find only an empty space in their ranks where many of their comrades had been standing a moment ago. They could do nothing but stare blankly at the aftermath.

Puffing her flat chest, Luna proudly cackled. "I am the most venerable and powerful Holy Maiden this world has ever seen! Even Ancient Devils kneel before me, so fetch me your Pope, or whatever! It'd be way too easy to stomp out a bunch of little red ants!" Although she spoke without tact, her claims were true.

The Salamander Knights seemed to believe her after witnessing that spell.

"What was that...? I've never seen anything like that in our training!"

"She defeated the Ancient Devil?! I thought an Angel did that!"

"Wh-Where did they go...? They've all vanished!"

Meanwhile, Luna was already readying her next attack. The truly extraordinary aspect of her magical talent was her ability to cast such powerful spells in quick succession.

—Chain Incantation: Golden Hammerspark!

Lighting bolts fell in a rapid crescendo upon the Salamander Knights, thunder drowning out their screams as their once human bodies fell as lumps of charcoal. Some of them moved to attack Luna, but they, too, were silenced by golden bolts.

“W-We’re doomed! There’s no way to defend against that!”

“Aghhh!”

“Somebody help me!”

Those who attempted to flee were likewise charred, making the area around the city gate look like the site of a disastrous plane crash. In just a few moments, Luna had completely dismantled the Salamander Knights.

“What a bunch of pathetic losers...” she boasted. “Now that you understand you have no chance against my might, grovel on the ground and beg for your lives. That’ll be music to my ears.”

At this point, Luna was more like a devastating machine of war, swooping onto the battlefield and turning back the tide all alone.

Eagle silently landed beside Luna, whose eyes were blazing with triumph.

“Look, Eagle! I smote all those knights who were mean to you!”

“You never change, do you, Luna?” Eagle chuckled. The way she described her deed, it made it seem like the charred bodies on the ground were as inconsequential as loaves of bread that had been left in the oven for too long.

Kicking his way through the charred remains of his army, Captain Flay appeared before Luna and Eagle and began yapping. “Second-world filth... When will you inferior species learn to obey your betters?! Fire Clan, execute that sinful villain!”

Even to Luna, Flay’s immaturity was staggering. “I-Is *that* their commander? Tell me he’s joking. This is a prank, isn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, he really is their leader,” Eagle said with exasperation. “He only gained that position through his family’s wealth and connections.”

Alas, idiots in power had a habit of ruining everything they touched.

The girls' astonishment at his attitude must have given Flay the wrong idea. He imperiously shouted, "What are you whispering about?! If you surrender now, I promise not to burn you at the stake!"

"Huh? How stupid are you? I am the Holy Maiden gleaming with Golden light! The princess gilded in divinity! Got it? So die already!"

"Shut your mouth, scum, or I'll cut through it!"

Flay drew his sword and Eagle stepped forward. She had no intention of letting anyone else deal with him.

"Stay back, Luna," Eagle said.

"Oh, fine. I was itching to blow this moron away with another flawless spell... But I'll let you do the honors," Luna relented with uncharacteristically little grumbling. She understood that Eagle had to settle that score on her own to break the chains that shackled her to the past.

Flay confidently lifted his flamberge—a sword shaped like a flame, designed to carve through flesh in a way that made healing impossible. Truly, a weapon that seemed to embody Flay's sadistic nature. "I didn't think I'd have to get my hands dirty today... Oh well. When I've carved you to shreds, you will have repented for your sins."

Flay swiftly closed in on Eagle, who had been underestimating the captain of the Salamander Knights. She barely managed to leap out of the way of his blade. As far as she could remember, she had never once seen Flay use his weapon—he wasn't built like someone who'd undergone rigorous training.

As Eagle dodged Flay's quick yet novice attacks, she came to an explanation. "Your equipment's been blessed."

"You finally realized," Flay answered. "I turned it down, at first. It was entirely unnecessary for a masterful swordsman like myself... But Father insisted. When you have more money than you know what to do with, you try to find ways to put it to use."

True to his claim, Flay was clad in top-shelf armor blessed with various effects.

He was walking around with a small fortune on his back, given how much each of the pieces was worth.

Winged Boots: +10 Dexterity. Increases jump height.

Ogre Gauntlet: +5 Attack. Items in hand feel weightless.

Prism Prison: +5 Defense. Negates Fire attacks, chance to bounce attacks back on enemy.

Scarlet Ring: +3 to All Stats. +5 when worn by a member of the Fire Clan.

Flamberge: Additional Fire damage to attacks.

Flay was like an athlete on steroids or the avatar of a pay-to-win gamer. He hadn't needed to undergo any training because his wealth and status alone had made him an excellent fighter.

As a side note, Blessings could scale up to Boons and then Miracles. A single Miracle buff could elevate a human fighter to a deity. In the grand scheme of things, Flay's Blessings were relatively tame.

Aimlessly swinging his blade around, Flay grinned, assured of his victory. "What's the matter, Eagle?! Don't tell me you're scared!"

"There are things that money can't buy," Eagle said matter-of-factly. "I doubt you'll ever understand that."

"That's what all the poor, pathetic, peasants say. Nothing is out of reach for the Fire Clan!"

He swung at her as she soared into the air and stared him down. A visual representation that she was, in fact, out of his reach. Eagle's new wings glowed with a soft, silver light that made her seem divine.

"Neither your blade nor fire will ever touch me again!" Eagle swooped down, striking Flay's shoulder with her feet.

The impact shattered bones, drawing a miserable scream from the captain. "My shoulder! You f-f-filthy demi-human!" Overcome with pain, Flay writhed on the ground for a while. Most likely, he had never been so much as struck by anyone. Only someone who'd never felt pain himself could have been so cruel.

Eagle coldly watched him squirm. “Those you’ve killed suffered pain far worse than that. Consider that with what little brain you have.”

“Shut your mouth!” Flay cried, and turned to the surviving Salamander Knights. “Don’t just stand there! Capture the demi-human!”

—Gold Geyser!

A series of golden lances pierced the knights who’d moved to obey Flay’s order, snuffing out their lives in the blink of an eye.

“No one’s interrupting Eagle,” Luna spoke to the remaining knights. “You morons deserve to die right now. Just save me the trouble and off yourselves. Now, you boneheads!”

Luna’s ranting fell on deaf ears, as any Salamander Knights left standing didn’t dare move a muscle for fear of facing the Holy Maiden’s magic.

Eagle rose higher into the air. “This is the end, Flay!”

“Impossible...!” Flay grunted. “I’ll face the shame and retreat for now...!” Wobbling to his feet, the captain produced a glimmering ore from his pocket: an Ancient Fragment called Transport Stone, something his father had given to him in case of an emergency. “Too bad for you, Eagle!” Flay laughed. “Did you really think filth like you could kill me, the king of the one superior race? You will see me again, with the full might of the Tzardom’s army behind me!” He held the stone up high, ready to activate the item that would whisk him away to his lavish castle in the blink of an eye.

Instead of seeing his room again, however, Flay only saw the stump where his hand had been a moment before. “M-M-My hand! My haaand!” Flay cried.

His second stowed his blade in a flash—too fast for anyone there but Eagle to see—and stepped back to where he had stood a moment ago.

Not missing her chance, Eagle dived down, aiming for Flay’s abdomen. “You will feel the pain of those you’ve killed...! This will be your end, Flay!” Images of her life on the run came back to her. Every step had been a brutal trial, but she had overcome them all. She took comfort in knowing that Flay would have never survived if he had been in her shoes.

Flay saw Death swooping down for him and refused to meet its eyes. “You...filth!” He shouted in vain as Eagle’s legs pierced through his vital organs. Gawking down at his cavernous torso, Flay gurgled through blood spewing out of his mouth. “It’s not...possible... I’m...the chosen...one...”

“You lost,” said Eagle. “And you will die. You’re no hero, Flay. Just a murderer.”

That was the greatest insult Flay had ever faced. “Foolish bird... Brother will avenge me...”

“Your brother? I’d welcome him. I will wipe out the Fire Clan, no matter how long it takes.”

“Demi-humans... I will...kill...” Before Flay could finish the sentence, he was dead.

Eagle crumbled to the ground. Luna ran to her and helped her friend sit up, noting that her legs were torn up and bloody. “What happened?” Luna asked. “Your legs...”

“There was some strange Blessing...on his armor,” Eagle said.

Even on the verge of death, Flay’s pride—or vengeful malice—had wounded her one more time. Deeply wounded, at that.

Luna shot a death glare at Flay’s second, ready to tear into him with words and magic, when Fuji hoisted her up onto his shoulders. “What do you think you’re doing?!” Luna cried.

“Forgive me,” the mountainous commander said. “My Queen can’t enter the battle without you at the castle.” He observed the second of the Salamander Knights, who held up his hands to show that he no longer intended to fight for the Tzardom.

“Now, Lady Luna... Hold on,” Fuji warned.

“Put me down! I don’t need my sister to wipe out these—” Luna shrieked as Fuji burst into a run.

As her friend’s voice of protest faded, Eagle faced the second. His blade had ensured Flay’s death, which seemed like an act of treachery, if nothing else.

“What did you do that for?” Eagle asked.

“If I had let him leave this battlefield, Lord Flay would have made me a scapegoat, and His Holiness would have gladly put me on a pyre for it.”

“Your country is still the worst... Everyone is so eager to bring others down for their own betterment...” Eagle weakly said.

He had no counter to that. In fact, he agreed with her sentiment wholeheartedly. While he collected Flay’s equipment, he only stated matter-of-factly, “I will be going. I doubt you’ll pursue me in that state.”

“All of you are my enemy... And I will never forget your face.”

“It’s an honor, considering the massive bounty on your head. I’d be even more honored if you could remember that not everyone in the Tzardom is rotten to the core.”

Eagle found no argument. She knew that it would be unfair, even after what she’d gone through, to vilify someone for the sole crime of being born in a particular country.

The second added, “Do watch out for the Fire Clan. They are spiteful. And Flay’s brother is actually competent... For whatever my warnings are worth.”

“I don’t care who I have to face.”

“Speaking of... People like you were called ‘elevated units’ in the days of old.”

“Elevated units?” Eagle repeated.

“Thanks to you, I’ve finally found a purpose... I will leave the Tzardom and start researching documents they consider blasphemous. Until we meet again, brave eagle.”

As he made to leave, the other knights cried out.

“Wh-Where are you going, sir?!”

“Can’t you tell? He’s escaping this losing battle.”

“H-How dare you?! You have responsibilities!”

The former second only said, “I thought the Fire Clan were unparalleled warriors. I’m sure you won’t have trouble finding your way home.” Casting Fly,

he left the battlefield by air.

Left behind, the herd of Salamander Knights stood around. All hope had left with their captain and second.

Some showed resistance against the flood of Holy Knights and Satanists, but most of them were trampled by the violent storm of battle.

Eventually, Eagle managed to fly up to the bastions. She looked to the Holy Castle and found its gates opening for Queen.

“There’s Luna’s sister,” Eagle noted.

The battle at the Holy City was quickly nearing its end.

The Queen Joins the Fray

The gates of the Holy Castle swung wide to reveal Queen on her wheeled throne, designed with the sole purpose of inspiring terror in her enemies. 108 men lined her on horseback, each of them in distinctively postapocalyptic attire, their eyes glinting with violent delight. Fighting side by side with their queen was an unparalleled honor to them.

Queen merely had to jerk her chin and her berserkers made a mad dash into the city.

“What a lovely day!”

“Out of the way, shitstains! Our Queen has arrived!”

“I’m hotter than rollin’ dice!”

If they hadn’t just rushed out of the Holy Castle, no one would have believed that these violent thugs were one of the most respected battalions of the Holylight army.

Queen’s cheeks reddened with excitement as she relished the fresh air and chaos of battle. Luna, meanwhile, lay tied up in chains in the middle of the Holy Castle’s great hall.

Watching the Satanists ooze throughout her city, she whispered to Fuji. “Spread the word. Kill every piece of shit you see.”

“Our Queen has spoken!” Fuji bellowed to his men. “Kill a hundred enemies each or die trying!”

“Kill them all! Kill them all!” Queen’s guards chanted. They might have been zealous to a fault, but they at least had exceptionally high morale. Above all else, they wished to fight and die for her.

Queen’s portable throne and her guards trampled through everything in their path until they arrived at a central location in the city. She leaped off of her throne as Fuji tossed her weapon to her. Slinging the Legendary Hammer of Sigma over her shoulder, Queen cackled. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this, you fucking termites!”

That utterance commenced the annihilation of her enemies. Every invader that entered her field of vision had their skull caved in, entrails splattered, and limbs torn off.

Inspired by Queen's rampage as an AMT—Automatic Murder Tank—her blood-soaked disciples shouted their way through the battlefield.

"Look at our Queen go! She's like a starving shark set loose in a pool!"

"That really gets me going!"

"Kill, kill, kill! Spill the blood of these fuckers until there's a lake she can swim in!"

The most dangerous thing about the Satanists was that they had nothing to lose, but Queen's men were even worse in this regard. Their mission in life was to die in battle before her. Every cut on their fronts and arrow in their backs only brought them that much closer to their Valhalla. By comparison, the Satanists seemed levelheaded. At least they had the common goal of upsetting the status quo. In the face of soldiers longing for a warrior's death, the Satanists fell apart all too easily.

Drenched in the blood of her enemies, Queen shuddered in the thrill of the fight that she had been deprived of for so long. "This will be your grave, you fucking ants! **Crisscross Applesauce!**" She drew a cross in the air with Sigma, which became a shock wave that shredded through Satanists, turning them into a sludge of meat and bone.

While most Satanists ran for their lives at the sight of the dreadful Queen of Bloodshed, a towering man among their rank dared to stand in her way. "I've been waiting for this, tainted Holy Maiden!"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Zane! You broke my jaw! Don't tell me you've forgotten that!" Outraged, Zane pointed at a jagged scar across his face.

"Fuck if I know. What about that little worm of a scar?"

"You!" Zane bellowed with rage. "You will pay for it!" Valiantly, Zane swung at Queen with his battle-axe, but split nothing but air.

He was nowhere near an even match for Queen, but she was itching for any toy to play with. “You’d better not break too soon, Worm Ass... **Bodybuilder. Diamond Body.**” Layering her skills, Queen drastically bolstered her Defense—so much so that she was able to stop Zane’s axe with one finger.

“Wh-What the...?!” he croaked.

“Worm Ass.” Queen kicked Zane in the chest, sending him flying.

When he regained his footing, he produced an object that resembled a crab claw—a Final Straw. Final Straws were atrocious magical items given to the Entranced—Trance addicts—among the Satanists, who would be sacrificed in a ritual to summon Hellions. Utopia made a point to exploit his followers to the last minute of their lives.

Queen didn’t usually give her foes advice, but this particular object made her speak up. “Didn’t peg you for a tweaker... You got any idea what that thing is?”

Zane scoffed. “Are you afraid? This is a precious magical item Lord Utopia has bestowed upon me. It shall grant me demonic powers and help me destroy forces of light!”

“The only thing it does is turn you into a monster. Not that I give a shit if you do.”

Zane laughed again. “It’s my turn to shatter your face!” He tossed the forbidden item into his mouth. A few moments after he chewed and swallowed the claw, Zane’s face became purple as he clawed at his chest, choking out his last words. “Wh-Why...? Lord... Utopia...”

“Told you so,” Queen said. “Well, I’ll clean up your mess, anyway.”

Giant pinchers burst out of Zane’s abdomen in an explosion of flesh and blood. From the red mist emerged a powerful, snarling Hellbeast. “Holy Maiden... Queen... Kill...”

Zane’s anatomy had bloated into that of a giant bear, distinguished from an ordinary one by its pink fur and a pair of horns on its head. Its arms were as thick as bundles of logs, and its claws looked sharp enough to tear through steel.

Queen huffed through her nose. “I’ve read about the Scarlet Bear. First time seeing one for real.”

The pink bear charged. Even as a Hellbeast, it held a grudge against her, who dodged the bear and unleashed a volley of attacks with her fists. “Drop dead already! **Asura.**”

Six powerful blows struck the bear’s side, but the Hellbeast did not budge, its thick fur apparently lessening the damage of physical attacks.

The bear gained on Queen, swinging its tree-trunk-size arms that looked powerful enough to rip through a person like tissue paper.

“Bring it on... This big fucker looks a little more like a challenge! **Double Down.**” The earth cracked where Queen kicked now that her Attack had been doubled by her skill. Keeping the momentum of her leap, she swung Sigma into the bear’s gut.

The Hellbeast growled, apparently suffering some damage from the blow. “I’ll...devour you...down to the brain...!”

Unbothered by the bear’s roar, Queen activated skills of her own creation. While Luna used an original category of magic called Gold magic, Queen’s abilities were far more straightforward. “Let’s play, Worm Ass... **Your Ass Is Grass. STFU While I Beat You to Death.**”

The first skill amplified an enemy’s perception of pain. The second was just as sadistic, as it forced broken-spirited enemies to stay and finish their fight with Queen. It was difficult to imagine who else could have even come up with skills like these.

Now she screeched like a prehistoric bird. “Let’s see how many hits you can take!”

The pink bear blocked Sigma with a single paw, but pain twisted its features. It let out an excruciating growl and began rolling on the ground in agony.

Mercilessly, Queen beat the bear over and over with her hammer. “What’s the matter?! We’re just getting started! Dance, fucker, dance!” Queen laughed again in a song of pure ecstasy.

Smiles grew on the faces of her disciples too. Apparently, masochism was a prerequisite to join the Queen's army.

"I haven't seen our Queen go that hard in a long time! The monster's crying tears of joy!"

"That fuckin' bear's hogging her love!"

"Never thought I'd find myself jealous of a monster... But our Queen's smile makes it all worth it."

As Queen—beaming ear to ear—beat the bear to a pulp, the beast was trying to figure out why its legs weren't moving. The more it tried to get away from the psycho hammer witch, the heavier they became. "My legs!" it howled, pain oozing in every breath.

"Don't tell me you're trying to run already. Just shut the fuck up while I beat you to death." Like a curse, the words pinned the bear where it lay. The confusion and agony threatened to drive it insane.

"Why...? Why can't I move...?! Somebody help!"

The being that was once Zane the Satanist felt regret for the first time in his life. He seemed to be paying for his sins—defying Queen, joining the Satanist cult, committing countless crimes—a hundredfold with each of the hammer's blows.

Bored of her opponent doing nothing but squealing pathetically, Queen leaped onto the gut of the bear and raised Sigma high. "What a shitstain. Have fun in hell, bitch!" Upon impact, the bear's head exploded into brain matter and blood.

Covered in gore herself, Queen tilted her head back and laughed into the dawning sky. "Grind up every fucking Satanist here!"

Her postapocalyptic squad thrust their fists into the air, relishing Queen's ecstasy as if it were their own. "Thank you, my Queen!" they chanted. After this fight, she looked more like a bloodthirsty monster than a Holy Maiden.

While Queen's forces slaughtered their way through the majority of the Satanists in the city, an enormous shadow darkened the streets. Queen's jaw

tightened when she saw the hovering monster slowly descending towards the city.

Fuji, having cleared the immediate vicinity, took his place next to her. “I’m sorry, cleaning up the streets took longer than expected. Do you recognize that monster—or Hellbeast, rather?”

“Never even read about one like that,” Queen answered. “It could be a species of old.”

In her scouring of the Holy Castle’s library and its vast collection of documents on angels, devils, and Hellions, Queen had never come across any mention of this particular Hellbeast...because it was a man-made creation.

While Queen and Fuji warily watched the sky, Warlkin stepped around a nearby corner. “Long time no see, Holy Berserker...”

“Huh? Who the fuck are you?” Queen asked. She didn’t make a habit of remembering those who did not interest her.

Fuji, however, recognized him immediately. “My Queen, he’s the guy that brought in Tartarus last time!”

Queen’s eyes narrowed as she readied her hammer, recalling how the Satanist had gotten the drop on her in Yahooo. Both Queen and Luna had nearly drowned in Tartarus that day. In contrast, Warlkin was eerily calm. “You didn’t bring me a present this time?” she taunted.

“Darkness like that is a great treasure to the Satanists. In other words, it’s on back order,” Warlkin said, deadpan, then cut to the chase. “Fall back for now, Berserker. Not that I expect you to heed my warning...”

Queen answered him with a proud display of her middle finger. “Dream on, you Satanist shitbucket.”

Almost like he’d expected such an answer from Queen, Warlkin simply added, “That Hellbeast was once a man named Jack who ruled over Euritheis.”

“You’re telling me *that* is Jack?” Queen had heard of Jack, of course, and his story of rising from slavery to become king of the Colosseum and then kingpin of an entire country. He was rather famous even in Holylight, far South of

Euritheis.

“Right now, it’s as powerful as the King of Devils in the days of old,” Warlkin said. “But it’s almost out of time.”

“What the fuck are you on about?” Queen snarled.

“Allow me to spell it out. You don’t have a chance of defeating it, so *run*.”

Queen moved to slug Warlkin, but Fuji held her back with all of his strength. He saw no animosity or sign of dishonesty in the Satanist. Calmly, Fuji asked, “Why warn our Queen when you unleashed Tartarus on her before?”

“Soon, that thing’s time will come and this chaos will end. Even a berserker may serve as a beacon for the people to rally around. Become the reason people want to rebuild. As ridiculous as she is, the people need her.”

“I see... Sounds like you won’t be a Satanist for long,” Fuji said. He, too, had lived a violent criminal life as a bandit until he decided to serve Queen. He felt a sense of camaraderie with Warlkin.

“I’m tired. Tired of everything...” Warlkin said. “Once this war is over, I’ll—”

Before Warlkin could finish, the terrible Hellbeast landed. The being that was once the tyrant Jack now looked like the half-human, half-Hellbeast embodiment of Pride. Most disturbingly, a row of Satanic Crosses lined his back like a half-exposed spinal column.

Jack opened his eyes and growled. “Head...hurt... Where am...I?” His voice was full of anguish as he scratched his head.

“Why’s it in pain already?” Queen asked, finally deigning to engage Warlkin in conversation.

“He was on the brink of death when he was transformed. The violent metamorphosis by the series of Satanic Crosses is merely delaying the inevitable. That’s what I mean when I say its time is almost up.”

As Jack flailed in agony, a swing of his arm decimated a house, and a stomp of his foot sent cracks through the earth, crumbling a nearby fountain.

“Kill... I’ll kill everyone...in my way...!” Still delirious, Jack charged headfirst into a church, leveling it to the ground, along with the neighboring apothecary

and inn.

Queen sighed and slung Sigma over her shoulder. "The whole city's gonna be rubble before its time runs out."

"Don't," Warlkin warned. "A city can be rebuilt. The dead cannot."

Queen scoffed. "A Satanist that gives a sermon... Fucking hilarious!"

"I mean it! No human can deal with that thing!"

Ignoring Warlkin, Queen turned to Fuji. "Grab the others and finish cleaning up the trash in the city." She had no intention of waiting for Jack to die on his own.

"My Queen... I agree with him. That Hellbeast is dangerous."

"I'm not gonna tell you twice. Go."

"Yes, my Queen!"

As Fuji left the scene, Queen casually approached Jack, still wreaking havoc. "Sup, loser? How's it feel to go from king to dog shit?"

Apparently, her words could still reach him. "Who do you think I am...?" the half Hellbeast grunted. "You bitch!" He charged, almost too fast for his enormous size.

Queen evaded him, slamming her hammer hard into Jack's shin. Sigma had shattered the bones of many Hellbeasts before, but Jack seemed less affected by the blow than if a mosquito had bit him instead. "Guess you got thick skin..." Queen muttered.

"I will retake...my throne. No one...will stop me!" Jack shouted.

Queen unleashed her hammer again, hitting Jack twice more. He then leaped over the third swing and simply leaned out of the way of the fourth. He seemed to be rapidly regaining his human memory and dexterity.

"Stop moving like you're human, you talking pile of shit," Queen spat.

Jack growled again. "Is that the Holy Castle? Who are you? Why am I here?"

"How the hell should I know why you're here? If you've sobered up, get lost."

“I can’t do that. Just seeing that castle makes me so pissed it’s like my head’s splitting...!” Even after his rebirth in Hellbeast form, Jack must have inherited his frustration and disgust for the Holy Castle. With unsteady feet, he began stalking towards it. “That can’t stand... If nothing else, I will bring down that castle...”

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?!” Queen slammed Sigma into Jack’s back, using it to run up Jack’s spine and ready a lethal blow to his head.

But Jack simply swatted her away, clearly more interested in the Holy Castle than engaging with the opponent at hand. Blinding agony assaulted him when he reached the castle’s barrier, and Jack began slamming his fists into the magical wall, enraged. Even though this should have been as futile as punching a tank with bare knuckles, Jack’s abnormal strength shook the castle with each blow. A full-fledged monster would have been burnt to atoms by the barrier’s holy pulse just by getting this close to it. But, for better or worse, Jack was still half human. He felt the unbearable agony of the castle’s magic, but his demonic rage did not allow him to walk away.

Queen stumbled to her feet and spat out a mouthful of bloody saliva. “An unbreakable toy isn’t very fun either,” she grumbled, activating yet another stat-boosting skill.

—Triple Strike!

(Triples the user’s Attack, but the effect is too strenuous on the human body. User takes continuous damage.)

Queen’s eyes became bloodshot and blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth. While Monkey Magic’s half-ape body could withstand the effects of this skill, Queen’s fully human body creaked under its enormous effects. Gritting her teeth, she unleashed a powerful strike on Jack.

Finally, her blow seemed to have impacted him. “You bitch! Out of the way!” he bellowed.

“Calm your tits, motherfucker. You’ve never seen a castle before?”

Jack turned to Queen and began swinging his fists wildly, each punch potentially lethal.

Dodging the blows with little room to spare, Queen continued pummeling her foe with Sigma. “Once a dictator, now you’re pounding sand outside our castle. Bitch move.”

“Shut your mouth! I am still the king of Euritheis!” Jack twisted and exploded into a charge. “**Liger Pounce!**”

Queen immediately set up **Wall of Light**, but Jack’s strength far exceeded her expectations. After what sounded like the head-on collision of two semis on a highway, Queen went flying and crashed into a shop, bringing the structure down. Still, she stood from the rubble, holding herself up with her hammer. Despite boosting her Defense as much as possible and bracing for impact with a magical barrier, that singular collision had nearly destroyed her. Jack’s strength far outclassed anything she had faced in the past.

“Do you finally realize who your king is, stupid bitch?” Jack snarled.

“No king of mine has an ugly mug like that. What a laugh.”

“Stubborn, aren’t we? It seems more discipline is in order.”

“You’ve already stopped being human. It’s about time I leveled the playing field.”

“What?”

Queen arched back, arms limp and eyes closed, her face pointed to the sky. Palpable divinity surrounded her, as if to prove her legitimacy as a Holy Maiden. It soon grew into a pulse of energy that frosted the air around her. Warlkin, who’d been watching the fight close by, shivered.

Just then, Fuji returned to the scene and let out a yelp. “My Queen, you mustn’t! The last time you...”

Fuji’s shouts were drowned out by the geyser of energy coming from Queen, which took a bizarre form in the air above her. Those who witnessed this divine being would feel frozen down to their marrow. Large and spherical, it resembled a floating eye that threatened to shorten the lives of those who beheld it.

The massive eyeball was made of thousands of smaller eyes, a series of

masklike faces mixed in among them. Winged eyeballs hovered by the hundreds behind the large eyeball. Coldness shrouded the divine pulse emanated by this accursed supernatural deity.

Soon, Queen began chanting in a clear voice as blinding light swallowed her. “Temptatio vos non adprehendat nisi humana fidelis autem Deus qui non patietur...”

—Blessing of the Still Angel: Angel Madness!

(All stats gradually rise, until the maximum of +44. Sanity gradually diminishes.)

While she still had the mind to speak, Queen turned to Fuji. “Get everyone out of here. If I lose my mind, you take me out. Got it?”

Although dubbed a “Blessing,” Queen’s skill was more of a curse than anything else.

Years ago, she’d lost many men because of it, killing them with her own hands when the curse had taken too much of her sanity. When the Northern Nations sent a legion in the tens of thousands, Queen had defeated them with this Blessing. By the time the invading army had been decimated, her mind had been frayed...so she kept killing, even when only her loyal subordinates were left. History remembered that battle as the Gatekeeper Tragedy.

She had kept this power locked away since. Without it, Queen knew there was no defeating Jack.

At this point, the former tyrant finally recognized Queen. “The Holy Castle... I’m in Holylight. That makes you the Holy Maiden with a bucket of loose screws.”

“Says the walking abomination. Have you seen yourself in the mirror?” Queen kicked off the ground and rushed up to Jack. Starting with a blow to his face, she unleashed a furious hammering, which Jack blocked and countered with all of his strength.

In the midst of their supersonic battle, the corners of her mouth curved up. “Both of our clocks are ticking. I won’t be able to talk soon, so I’ll tell you this now...”

“Oh? The last words of a crazy bitch?”

“Mark my words... Get fucked, shithead.” Queen flipped him off one last time with brazen disgust that stoked Jack’s wrath.

The few people who bore witness to their battle could not move, save to quiver where they stood. No matter how many blows Jack landed with his fists, Queen never flinched, but only countered faster.

“How...?! The force of chaos is with me! How could a mere human...?!” Jack bellowed his frustration, while Queen merely laughed maniacally. “Don’t look at me like that! I’m a king! I’m not a slave anymore!” In Queen’s face, Jack saw the disgusted looks from his past that still haunted him.

Desire for revenge had made him hunger for more and more power until he had an entire nation under his thumb. He had been a slave, forced to face fearsome animals and Hellbeasts in the Colosseum. Each time, he had run for his life to the great amusement of the audience. Surviving a fight in the Colosseum earned him a pinch of coin and a cold, hungry sleep in his cell. Once he climbed his way out of that misery, Jack believed with all of his being that he was invincible.

Now he saw his past self in Queen, as she kept coming at him no matter how many times he struck her. That irritated him to no end.

“Give up! Eat dirt already! I am king! The ruler of all!”

Fists like boulders collided with Queen’s body over and over. At last, Queen fell to one knee. Seizing the opportunity to finish his foe once and for all, Jack brought down his foot in a devastating stomp. The ground below her cracked and caved in, but Queen still lived, having blocked the stomp with crossed arms. Her mouth moved inaudibly. Whether she had tried to spit out more curses or to ridicule Jack, he hated that she could still move.

Designs of clocks in all shapes and sizes appeared on Queen’s skin, triggering a terrible skill.

—Duel Skill: Game of Death!

(User can continue performing actions even after being determined dead. Status redetermined after time elapses.)

Watching Queen rise to her feet yet again, Jack nearly had an aneurysm. “What’s it gonna take, you bitch?! You lost! Admit it!”

Queen let her tongue hang loose and gave Jack the finger in a final “fuck you.” Her mind was nearly gone, but her stats were still rising with every second.

When they reengaged in combat, Jack could barely land a hit as Queen moved faster and faster. Her hammer found its mark on Jack’s head, then immediately in his ribs. A swift leg sweep, and before Jack even hit the ground, Queen had clocked him in the jaw. She moved faster and struck harder than any human should have been able to—in exchange, her muscles were tearing, bones were cracking, and her heart was about to blow.

In his human form, Jack would have fallen long ago to the absurd abilities of the blessed Queen. Alas, he had been given the power of chaos from a devil of an original sin, which was only amplified by the series of Satanic Crosses.

Although a timebomb ticked in each of them, Jack was left victorious at the end of the battle. He had simply been remade into too powerful a being for any human—blessed by an angel or not—to take down.

He saw a split-second opening in Queen’s guard to slam his fist into her abdomen, sending a spew of blood from her mouth. He pursued her as she rolled on the ground, readying to stomp her to death when something slightly unbalanced him. Fuji had tacked his leg.

Jack wailed on the intruder, but Fuji held firm, shouting, “Satanist! Take my Queen to the castle!”

Warlkin snapped out of the dissociative fixation he had entered as the supernatural combat unfolded before him. “Take her...to the castle?! Me?!” Warlkin was doubly confused. Memories flooded back to him from when he would glare at the Holy Castle with loathing.

“There’s no time! You regret your choices, don’t you?! Make change! Right here, right now!”

Fuji’s words had reached him, truly, but Warlkin’s feet were still frozen in terror of Jack, the unfathomable Hellbeast.

“If you get her into the castle, she’ll be—” Fuji cried out as Jack tossed him

like he was a pestering child.

Warlkin could only watch, immobilized, as Jack grew closer with thundering footsteps. Without thinking, he reached for a locket around his neck that held something he would protect with his life—a lock of hair that belonged to his late daughter.

What can I do...? Warlkin lamented. Perhaps it's time for me to join my wife and child...

Then a voice spoke to him. A voice from so long ago, that rang loud and clear like a bell. *"You can do it, daddy. I was always so proud of you because you never give up."*

As if a small hand had pushed his back, Warlkin took a step forward. Whether it was a hallucination, a trick of the mind in the face of certain death, or an echo of the Still Angel, the voice was more than enough to make Warlkin move again.

I-I have never stopped thinking of you both...! Warlkin said in his mind as tears welled and overflowed from his eyes.

His step led to another, then another, faster and faster, until he found himself hoisting Queen over his shoulder. It was a show of tremendous courage, considering a Hellbeast that amounted to a high-ranking devil was in pursuit.

As Warlkin made a dash down the street, Jack fired a burst of air from his mouth that knocked Warlkin from the back and sent him tumbling like a log. *"You're not going anywhere... That bitch is mine to kill!"*

Feeling like all of his bones had shattered, Warlkin pulled himself to his feet, lifted Queen on his shoulder again, and hobbled towards the Holy Castle.

Just when Jack made to run after them, a burst of pain in his right leg sent him to the ground. His body was long dead, his soul forced to remain in this world by brute force. The column of Satanic Crosses on his back had turned from pitch black to nearly stark white in silent indication that his time was running out fast. *"Get...back here!"* Jack grabbed a rock the size of a human head and threw it.

The rock struck Warlkin's back, sending blood out of his mouth and the discordant breaking of bones through his ears. Still, Warlkin kept walking. The gates to the Holy Castle stood clearly in his blurring vision, and beyond them

stood his wife and daughter. Some part of him knew they were mere figments of his imagination, but he continued putting one foot in front of the other. “I was wrong...” Warlkin said to his wife and daughter. “I was always looking for someone else to blame for the grief I felt over losing you,” he said as if in confession. His feet were unsteady, but his march was driven by unyielding determination. Through his tears, he could see the look of care and concern on their faces. He forced a smile to try and comfort them. “Just you wait...” Warlkin said, his voice solid. “I won’t give up... Not this time...!”

Jack, in a furious dash, was gaining on them. He knew that if he allowed Warlkin to reach the Holy Castle, Queen would be out of his reach. Warlkin hastened as much as he could, but not enough to win the race. Just as Jack’s fist threatened to obliterate Warlkin’s back, silver light shimmered in the air.

The blast of silver was followed by a deafening rumble in the ground. Through it all, Warlkin ran straight into the castle gates without so much as a glance behind him, then collapsed. His heart threatened to burst, and he could hear nothing beyond his own shuddering breaths.

Above him were the simple stone arch of the Holy Castle and his wife and daughter peering down at him, gentle kindness on their faces. Warlkin smiled for what seemed like the first time in decades—for the first time since he had lost everything. Soon, his wife and daughter blurred like a mirage and vanished. He closed his eyes as if to hold on to the sight of them one last time. When he opened them, Warlkin was a changed man. A new life shone powerfully in his face.

He heaved himself up and ran to Queen. “Are you alive, Holy Maiden?! Wake up! Hey!”

Queen moved her mouth to utter inaudible words, her expression a picture of shattered insanity.

“Someone!” Warlkin cried. “Anyone! Call a healer or a mage!”

Ladies-in-waiting poured out of the castle to come to Queen’s aid, but despair came over them when they saw Queen. She had already been determined dead and only kept alive by her skill. Medicine and healing magic would do her no good. Warlkin, too, stood despondent...when a booming voice echoed from

outside the castle grounds.

“I am the dragon that blooms above, ain’t no mountain high enough that you can’t climb it with courage and love!”

The vaguely poetic line meant nothing to Warlkin, but he watched in shock as Queen sat up and began dragging herself towards the gate. “W-Wait!” he called to her. “You need to be treated first! Someone stop her!”

“Lord...” Queen uttered, barely loud enough for even Warlkin to hear.

“Wh-What did you say?” He rushed to her, straining his ears to make note of what might be a Holy Maiden’s last words.

“Lord Zero!” Queen shouted with earsplitting volume, apparently regaining her sanity quite rapidly.

Her scream was so loud that Warlkin fell on his rear. Queen’s mind had returned to her when she saw Zero in the distance, although she seemed unhinged in another way now.

“It’s me, Queen!” she continued. “Lord Zero, let me see your face!” she squealed like a bona fide fangirl. Evidently, she was no longer dead, regardless of her skill.

Astounded, Warlkin followed her gaze to find whom he considered a nemesis—the man with a dragon on his back. “Dragonborn...! Don’t tell me you came here to save her...?!” Warlkin said as Queen writhed with girlish delight where she sat.

Zero turned around to face them. Much to Warlkin’s chagrin, Zero commanded with all the confidence in the world, “Leave the rest to me. Blink and you’ll miss it... Mano a mano with yours truly, the undefeated!” His voice carried like a gale clearing storm clouds, then he sprinted towards Jack.

The civil war that had taken over every corner of Holylight was nearing its finale.

Remember This Silver Dragon

Shortly before Zero's arrival to the Holy City, the Demon Lord had left Dona's fort to Quick Travel from settlement to settlement, following a trail of smoke across the country. Now he was bandaging a local who'd managed to survive the burning of his village. "Who did this?" the Demon Lord asked.

"Tzardom... Knights..."

"All right. Get some rest. Your burns will heal soon," the Demon Lord said with knitted brows. Not a second later, the man's burns, which had covered most of his body, healed almost instantaneously. The Demon Lord stood and followed the series of hoofprints on the ground with his eyes, then the tendrils of smoke that shrank into the horizon. Beyond that trail was the Holy City, the center of Holylight.

How many times has the Tzardom spat in our face? the Demon Lord pondered. If they wanna play rough, we can play rough... And I'll make them regret it.

The Demon Lord Quick Traveled to the Holy City and was dumbstruck by the devastating aftermath. Bodies both ally and enemy filled the streets, smoke rising from nearly every block. The Tzardom had waged a full-on war.

When he flew up to a clocktower that offered a good vantage point, the severity of the battle became even more clear.

Is that the Holy Maiden with the quick hands? Where's Luna? The Demon Lord looked to and fro, taking in more information than his brain could handle. Since he had no part in the power struggle or the grudges that had taken place in the city tonight, of course he hadn't a clue what was happening. It was tragically ironic how blind he was to the big picture, considering he was—albeit inadvertently—at the center of it all.

The snow fennec—still riding on the Demon Lord's shoulder—let out a dismayed whine.

"Of course, you wouldn't know either..." the Demon Lord muttered.

The divine beast let out another sound, as if it was raising a brow and saying *"You and your advisors did much worse than this..."*

The Demon Lord turned to the fight taking place in front of the Holy Castle. "Oh," he blurted. "Is that Jack...?!"

The Demon Lord had just watched him be taken away near the border of Euritheis. As to why Jack was back in Holylight, he was clueless. As he watched, it seemed that Jack the Hellbeast was about to secure victory.

"Doesn't matter," the Demon Lord decided. "Since they want to fight us so badly, I'll show them what a professional badass looks like!"

The snow fennec cried curiously.

"You're small and weak," the Demon Lord said. "Go play somewhere safe."

The divine beast squeaked as if to protest being treated like a youngling, but the Demon Lord paid it no mind while he opened the admin screen and tapped the Change Character button. Silver light enveloped the top of the clock tower.

It was a familiar sight for the denizens of the Holy City who'd witnessed the standoff between Zero and the Duke of Darkness, Allit. The city had been jeopardized back then, but the damage done today was far more devastating.

What's worse, when Zero emerged from the beacon of light, he was alarmingly despondent, to the surprise of the Demon Lord.

"Me...? The bad guy?" Zero let out a dry chuckle. "I'm worthless..."

How fragile is your ego?! Get over it, already! the Demon Lord's consciousness demanded, but Zero was in no shape to fight, too wounded from the words Allit's maid had stabbed him with like a dagger.

Zero's entire identity hinged on beating the crap out of serial killers and the greater evils of the world in a spectacular fashion...and she had called him a villain for it. Hyperbolically, he was having an identity crisis.

People of the Holy City had congregated to the silver beacon, erupting in deafening cheers when they found Zero atop the tower.

"D-Dragonborn!"

“Tell everyone! Lord Zero is here!”

“Lord Zero! Save us, please!”

Zero stood stupidly, showered by their pleas. Gradually, his wounded ego healed, light returned to his hollow eyes, and he turned to the crowd to be met with an exhilarating welcome.

“Save Lady Queen, Lord Zero!”

“Please save us... Please save the Holy City!”

“A dragon protects this city! It’s time to rise up and fight!”

Zero’s spine straightened with every cheer and color returned to his cheeks. A crowd’s adoration was a very effective remedy for this simpleminded—and purehearted—bosozoku.

“Th-That’s right...” he muttered to himself. “I’m the hero who defeats the villain. Everyone always cheers for me...”

Back in the Game, Zero had always hunted Players known for PKing. He had been minmaxed for defeating bad guys—he fought his targets with godlike powers, but generally sucked against anyone else. He was well-known for it too, as a sort of performer.

Desperate cries for help fueled his soul. “Yeah, this is it! This is what I’m all about!”

Like flipping a switch... Why’d I design him to be so stupid?! the Demon Lord lamented, far too late to do anything about it.

Without a trace of gloominess or self-deprecation, Zero leaped off of the clock tower, aiming for the Holy Castle. Mid flight, he spotted the badly injured Queen being carried by a man who was clearly running as fast as he could...because he was being pursued by a Hellbeast. Zero landed on the castle walls, then jumped high again, for some reason. After performing a completely unnecessary vertical 360, Zero landed a kick on Jack’s face. Zero had only wanted to do a flying kung fu kick, but it was powerful enough to send Jack flying, his face caved in. The enormous Hellbeast carved a path through the street until he collided with a cathedral.

The crowd had fallen pin-drop silent, exactly the moment Zero had been waiting for. Showing off the dragon on his back with enough self-assuredness to put anyone to shame, he shouted, “I am the dragon that blooms above, ain’t no mountain high enough that you can’t climb it with courage and love!”

The Demon Lord’s spirit cringed so hard that it nearly cracked. *Stop with the nonsensical incantations! Are you trying to embarrass me to death?!*

Yet the crowd loved it. They threw their fists in the air, chanting and cheering for the dragon’s mighty roar. To them, Zero’s showmanship had given them much needed inspiration of courage to lift them from the pit of despair.

Then Queen’s cry reached him, urging him to achieve the pinnacle of heroism. “Leave the rest to me. Blink and you’ll miss it... A mano a mano with yours truly, the undefeated!”

The Demon Lord’s heart sank at the corny line, but he was powerless to stop Zero, who went charging at Jack.

The Hellbeast rose to his feet, pushing rubble out of the way. As if to swat a spider, he brought his fist down...but it only hit pavement. Flustered, Jack looked for his opponent in every direction, then heard a voice calling from above. Zero was squatting on the roof of the cathedral. The dragon soared much faster than Jack’s eyes could follow, especially now that his end was so near.

Jack grunted, picking up on what the cheering crowd called his enemy. “You’re the Dragonborn...?!” He, of course, knew that the leader of the Anima was called that.

Zero had initially been dubbed “Silver Dragon,” so being called “Dragonborn” wasn’t a stretch. He proudly boasted, “No one but me can carry a dragon on his back...”

Zero landed on the street once more, quietly wondering why his Mad Flurry—the core Skill of his fighting tactics—had only been half effective, not realizing that Jack was half human.

The half Hellbeast smirked, as if to relish his last fight. “Slaying a dragon isn’t too shabby for my final act.”

“Never gonna happen.”

“Then I’ll show you...what a king with the power of chaos can do!”

“Show me who’s stupid enough to piss off the silver dragon!”

As if he was using what little morsel of his life that remained as fuel, Jack exploded into a barrage of attacks that combined his Hellbeast strength with the martial arts techniques he’d used in the Colosseum. He moved faster and stronger than before, but Zero still dodged them all while slamming him with powerful counters.

From the day he was born, Zero was destined to fight great evil. As the ultimate player-killer killer, his dexterity and instinct were unmatched.

Zero punched his palm and stanced up against Jack. Mad Flurry allowed him to reach stats comparable to the Demon Lord’s when facing any of the three forces that Zero recognized as hostile. That alone made him as destructive as a natural disaster. Furthermore, drawing first blood triggered Righteous Hero and every counterattack triggered Storm Blow. In a single exchange of blows, Zero’s skills dealt 100 additional damage. An Ancient Devil from the days of myth might just be the only worthy opponent he could hope to find.

Considering that the Arena was littered with Players who had skill sets far exceeding his own, the Game really was a place for the bloodthirsty and battle-addicted.

Still, Jack couldn’t help but smile against his foe. He really did seem like a dragon in human form, and in Jack’s book, that made him a worthy opponent for the finale of his life.

The final battle of Holylight’s civil war would end on a bittersweet note.

Jack swung his fist, only for Zero to close in on him, uppercut his jaw, and batter him with hard-hitting punches...but Jack didn’t yield, wildly throwing his fists as if he could stop his death clock by punching it. No matter how many hits he took, he kept on fighting, like a tank plowing through a tumultuous battlefield, determined to savor the battle until his last breath.

Jack’s zeal seemed excessive, even to Zero. “What’s the hurry? You got a date in Hell today?”

“Something like that,” Jack answered without slowing his assault.

Zero continued to block and parry the blows, each of them as powerful as a cannon blast. The dragon’s jaw began to tighten as he fixed his gaze on Jack’s eyes—and his acceptance of death. A full force punch to the gut, and Jack fell to his knees.

“How many lives have you ruined? You’re like a ball of grudges and anger,” Zero assessed.

“I am king... I repaid the pain and humiliation I’ve suffered twice over... That’s all...” Jack shook his head as if to reel in his fading consciousness.

Zero watched with mixed emotions as the Satanic Crosses fell off and Jack returned to his human form. He wasn’t surprised, though. Plenty of Skills in the Game bestowed supernatural powers to Players and even altered their anatomy.

“Got your sweet revenge, did you?” Zero asked. “You don’t look too happy about it.”

“Shut up! Blood for blood was the only way to survive in that country. That was my life! You’re either prey or a predator, and I made my choice.”

“What a sad sap you are... Maybe if you’d had a friend or two, you could’ve —”

Before Zero could finish, Jack pushed himself up and began throwing his fists again, barely keeping his balance. Zero quietly dodged the punches that barely had any strength behind them.

Finally, Jack fell to his knees and heaved heavy breaths. Jack, the notorious tyrant of the North, glared at the morning sun and grinned wide. “That’s all I got. What’s your name?”

“Zero.”

“Zero... That’s a good name. I wish—” Jack stopped himself.

While the crowd could not guess as to what Jack intended to say, Zero felt he understood his opponent. Jack wanted to go back to zero himself. Start over from square one.

Zero saw life begin to fade from Jack's face, and gave a smile that shone entirely with sportsmanship. Jack could see, too, that there wasn't a drop of animosity in Zero.

"If there is a next life, go make a friend," the dragon said. "Someone like me, who can kick your ass all over again."

Jack laughed, the weight of regret lifted from his voice. "Go... Shove it..."

Then the light in Jack's eyes went out. The tyrant who'd ruled Euritheis went down swinging his iron fists. His corpse crumbled to black dust and scattered to the wind. Such was the fate destined for all dark and twisted beings—a single moment of beauty when everything that they were faded away.

"See ya." Zero gazed up at the sky like he was watching the wind shake the last cherry blossom petal from a tree.

With the duel concluded, Fuji hobbled over, deeply injured. "Lord Kirisame, I'm sorry... If I had had the strength to handle it... I am ashamed."

"You put your life on the line to defend these people. That's cool, man," Zero said.

"W-Well..." Fuji stared at his feet, rather embarrassed by the straightforward compliment. His primary motivation had been to serve Queen, but perhaps a subconscious part of him wanted to atone for his crimes against his country.

"I never got your name," Zero said.

"M-My name is Fuji!"

"Fuji. You're in charge of cleanup."

"W-Wait! Allow my—the Lady Queen to have a word with you."

With a glance at the castle, Zero saw Queen trying to crawl out of its gates, Warlkin barely managing to hold her back by her legs.

Zero laughed. "Like a princess locked in a tower. Wears her spunk like a crown."

"Princess..." Fuji forced a polite smile, wondering if the Dragonborn was so powerful that even his mighty Queen seemed like a helpless princess, or if it

was simply due to Zero's personality.

As Zero approached the castle, color returned to Queen's cheeks, which had been pale while she was on the brink of death.

Fuji sighed in relief at this, remembering all too clearly how Queen had made a bloodbath of her men when she'd first activated the Blessing.

"Funny how you're always beat to hell when I see you. You're just a girl. Don't push yourself too hard," Zero said.

"I-I'm sorry... Lord Zero, I—" Her face beet red, Queen tried and failed to stand.

Without a word, Zero lifted and carried her in his arms, walking up to the entrance of the Holy Castle where severely injured men in postapocalyptic attire congregated. Despite his almost allergic aversion to women, Zero had no problem making physical contact with them when they were injured.

"Those hardcore-looking guys, are they your men?" he asked, ignoring Queen's unintelligible reply and continuing his approach towards the men, who were all covered in blood but smiled with a sense of accomplishment. Zero grinned, enjoying the reverie of his old friends.

On the other hand, Queen's guards were thunderstruck by what they saw. Never before had they seen Queen allow herself to be carried like a damsel, let alone play the part of one.

The hardened men whispered like nervous mice to each other.

"You assholes better not laugh! Our lives are on the line!"

"Worry about yourself! Our Queen's lifelong happiness hangs in the balance. Don't ruin her reunion with Lord Zero!"

"But look at her acting so...*helpless*," one snickered.

"Can it, dumbass! She'll kill us all!"

Fuji, too, seemed to be holding back laughter with every drop of strength he had left. The only one who remained cool about the situation was Zero, who was blissfully oblivious.

Queen's men stood at attention with their hands behind their backs as Fuji frantically gestured at them. Their usual salute was far too militaristic to welcome the return of—as far as Queen would want it to seem—their princess. Taking Fuji's cue, the men knelt and lowered their heads.

"Everyone's got that look in their eyes. Not too shabby for a princess's entourage. I expected you guys to be, well, scrawnier," Zero said. Where most people saw intimidating bandits who could snap at the drop of a hat, Zero saw a band of men as well organized and hardcore as any bosozoku gang. "Why don't you give them a word or two, princess? These guys risked their lives to protect the city too, didn't they?"

"Uh... Well..." Queen stammered. Usually, she would have given them each a slap powerful enough to dislocate their jaw to reinvigorate them. That was her method of rewarding her men. However, even the Queen of Bloodshed didn't have enough courage to go savage in the presence of her beau. She racked her brain more than she ever had and managed to squeak out. "E-Everyone... I thank—I mean... Good...job."

None of her guards dared to look up, all of them shaking with the effort to maintain straight faces, as if they were on one of those Japanese TV shows where they would get paddled for laughing. Fuji's face grew even redder as he suddenly found the sky very interesting, all the while pinching his sides hard enough to bruise.

Still oblivious, Zero actually looked impressed. "They really look up to you, huh? Look at those guys, all tearing up."

"D-Do you think so...?" Queen sheepishly asked.

"You guys made a stand out there, right?" Zero said to the guards. "Chin up, men! Be proud!"

Zero had no idea how disastrous it would be for them to raise their heads. All of them were pushed to their breaking point of restraint so that even if just one of them broke, a catastrophic chain reaction would send them all hollering. Queen's guards heaved their shoulders, feeling their lives more on the line than they had been during the battle.

Finally Fuji made a move to get them out of this bind. "Uh, Lord Kirisame... If

you could do the honors of declaring our victory? A crowd has formed behind us.”

“Now we’re talking!” Zero said. “You gotta end every party with a bang!”

Daylight finally shone on the Holy City, and its citizens rushed to the Holy Castle to catch a glimpse of the famed Dragonborn. After surviving the harrowing night, they were already on cloud nine, but when they saw him carry the Queen of Bloodshed in his arms, their excitement became electric. The unfathomable courage Zero possessed, the courage that allowed him to carry Queen in his arms, was more than enough reason for the people to wholeheartedly believe that dragon blood ran in Zero’s veins.

They cheered as loud as they could, their voices reverberating through the city.

“Thank you, Dragonborn!”

“He’s perfect for you, Lady Queen!”

“Thank you, Dragonborn! Thank you, everyone!”

“Stay with us, Lord Zero!”

Showered with booming adoration, Zero lowered Queen to the ground and straightened his spine, turning away from the crowd so they had a full view of the dragon on his back.

“Remember this silver dragon! No evil can stand before me!” In one powerful gesture, Zero thrust his fist to the sky, his index finger outstretched. Unabashedly, he’d staked his claim—he stood undefeated. “No one above and no one below can defeat me! As long as I breathe, there’s nowhere villains can run or hide!”

The crowd went wild, throwing their fists up and screaming for the Dragonborn.

Their voices traveled to every district, igniting the entire city into a frenzy of victory. Zero was a showman, through and through, even though the Demon Lord felt like he would cringe to death.

Finally, the civil war that had spanned the entirety of Holylight came to an

end. As with most internal conflicts, the postwar efforts would prove more difficult than resolving the war itself. New conflict loomed just out of sight at times like these.

The storm had passed, but the Demon Lord’s true trial was right around the corner—the meeting. There was no telling whether he would survive the meeting.

System Message

Achievement Unlocked—Defeat an Agent of Chaos.

Dragon’s Glory—Minor Improvement (25/100)

Postwar Cleanup

——Dona's former residence.

While the scars of battle left throughout Holylight were still raw, the nation's leadership congregated at what had once been Dona's estate. This location was chosen because Dona's stronghold was still piled high with corpses, which did not seem like an appropriate setting for this summit. With the lavish meeting room as the backdrop, Holylight's future depended on how this postwar deliberation went.

The meeting was to be attended by Tahara, Yu, White, Queen, Harts, and Sambo. The Demon Lord would join them shortly, more as posturing than anything else. Luna had no interest in such tedium and had chosen to ride with Eagle back to the village. After some consideration, the Madam turned down her invitation as well. Given that the majority of the attendees had fought on the front lines, perhaps she felt like she hadn't earned her spot as the others had. Considering her thoughtfulness, however, her absence appeared as a sign of respect for Harts. Azur weaved through the attendees, placing cups of coffee and tea on the table with the smooth elegance of a top-notch butler.

The meeting commenced with White officially announcing the return of the Fallen Angel, which immediately brought the room down with tension. It was the kind of news that would send not only Holylight, but also the whole continent into a tizzy. According to Holylight's historical records, the Wise Angel had vanished two millennia ago. Although there was much conjecture about the fate of the angels, historians agreed that no one had seen a true angel since.

Two thousand years later, the Fallen Angel had appeared out of nowhere, bringing with him such a wind of change that it rattled Holylight like a leaf in a storm. Before anyone had realized, the militant nobles and high society had joined forces, and even come to agreeable terms with the artists. Then, practically overnight, the central nobles were wiped off the map. None of them seemed like a feat a mere human could accomplish.

Tahara smiled nonchalantly, secretly relishing the strange tension in the room. The more extraordinary the Demon Lord became, the more reverence

and power he would gain. Once people chose to kneel to the Demon Lord of their own volition, Tahara's job would become much easier.

Keep it up, White! That's exactly what the doctor ordered! he thought. Tahara hadn't fed White any lines either. After witnessing so many of the Demon Lord's miraculous powers, she had no intention of hiding what she believed to be the truth. In fact, she seemed eager to discuss it and spread word of the Fallen Angel.

That's when the Demon Lord showed up. Everyone but Queen stood and acknowledged him as he took his seat at the head of the table. "Sorry I'm late. Take your seats, everyone," he said, all the while cursing himself. *This is going to be the longest however-long-this-is-going-to-take of my life.* Meeting with his advisors was always an emotionally grueling task, but facing them now? When he hadn't recovered from the emotional damage he'd suffered from helplessly watching Zero?

Meanwhile, Harts and Sambo—who'd never seen the Demon Lord in his Fallen Angel form—were frozen in shock. They had known what White had meant and believed her, but seeing the being in person was too jarring. How the Demon Lord looked now was so different from how they'd remembered him. He looked no older than twenty, a pair of angel wings oozing with abyss-black energy on his back. So much more had changed about him than just his physical age.

Willing his terror-stricken heart to beat steadily, Harts managed to say, "If I may, I have an urgent topic to bring to your attention."

The Demon Lord nodded, unfazed, and closed his eyes. Secretly, he was praying to whatever might listen that at least the first problem on the agenda would be an easy one to solve.

"Several Central commanders attempting to flee the country, along with a group of who we assume to be Tzardom soldiers, have been detained at Gatekeeper. What shall we do with them?" Harts continued.

The Demon Lord thought about it for a moment and determined that he wasn't the slightest bit interested. *Who cares where the losers end up?* His priorities were steadfastly in order—he needed to wrap up this meeting and get

out of here. “We don’t have time for the likes of them. Let them go wherever they want to go.”

Harts stammered, taken aback, “W-Would that not be an issue for—?”

“Let me translate so we can get to the topic we came here for,” Tahara offered, itching to push the meeting forward. “We’d have a grand excuse to invade any country that gives those rats refuge. If what sounds like a compassionate idea comes from the Secretary, there’s always a hidden agenda at work. Keep that in mind.”

Shut up, Tahara! the Demon Lord protested in his heart. *Will you ever paint me in the right light?!*

Alas, for the Demon Lord, people at this table saw him as the Fallen Angel Lucifer, the greatest evil the world had ever seen.

Harts, for one, seemed to buy it. “How embarrassing... That was shortsighted of me. I will notify my men of your instruction.” Harts was an exceptional general who’d lived, breathed, and excelled at warfare. He seemed not only accepting of Tahara’s interpretation, but thrilled by it.

The Demon Lord hung his head low, feeling like he’d already taken a beating. *He’s okay with that?! Let me guess, I’m going to get all the credit for that borderline war crime idea.* Fearing that Tahara would interpret anything he said in the worst way possible, the Demon Lord took a vow of silence for the duration of the meeting.

Taking the silence as his cue to facilitate the meeting, Tahara passed a set of files around the table. He and Yu had prearranged their roles for this, and Yu would be making note of every attendee’s words and behavior. Each of them began by flipping through their file and evidently found its contents astonishing.

Upon reading the passage where the northern tundra was mentioned, Harts glowered at the Demon Lord. “Lord Lucifer. You intend to confiscate our territory in its entirety?”

Wait a minute! Tahara wrote that! Take it up with him! With easy grace that masked his fluster, the Demon Lord shifted his gaze to Tahara. Naturally, Harts followed it.

The passage Harts noted was a proposal to shift the current fealty system of the country's military to a salary-based employment system. What had become the ubiquitous system of the workforce on modern-day Earth seemed like a radical idea in this world. In Harts's eyes, this change would reduce the national army to a band of mercenaries.

Lighting his cigarette, Tahara didn't hesitate to drop another bomb. "Don't jump to conclusions, gramps. We're going to pay you a share of our loot from the western front as salary. In exchange, you're going to quintuple the scale of the national army."

According to Tahara's rough calculations, the Water Spell Stones mined from the former Central territory generated the astronomical revenue of ten thousand gold medallions a year. While that number had been achieved by Central hiking up the prices of the Spell Stones, the fact that they were able to hike them that high was a testament to how much demand there was for them. Mines in the western territories also produced iron, lead, copper, and even small amounts of silver and gold. Its economical potential far outclassed that of any other territory in Holylight.

"Quintuple? Salary?" Harts repeated, eyeing Tahara suspiciously.

A verbal joust commenced between them—an opportunity for them to hash out any differences between their mindsets and worldviews.

"Well, flip to the next page for me," Tahara said. "Moving forward, we'll be exporting Water Spell Stones at eighty percent of their current price."

"I don't understand. What sense is there in lowering the profit derived from the mines we've taken over? And how will you distribute the Spell Stones within Holylight?"

White might have interjected, had it not been for her blind faith in Her Lord Lucifer. Of course, the Demon Lord himself was half asleep without a thought in his head. Across the table, Queen was grinning like a child on her birthday, clearly reminiscing about what she considered a romantic reunion with Zero. Somehow, the meeting carried on.

"Judging from what I've seen and heard, people on this continent can get by with a single gold coin a month. More like seven silver coins in Militant

territory,” Tahara said.

“What of it?” Harts asked, bristled by the question that seemed to jab at the poverty of Northern Holylight.

Tahara’s estimate was quite accurate. The average person could live off of the equivalent of a thousand US dollars a month. Seven hundred dollars, if they lived frugally. There were plenty of people who survived on less.

Twenty thousand Militants called Northern Holylight their home, putting their total living expenses at the equivalent of 168 million dollars a year. The central nobles had made ten times that from the revenue of their Spell Stone sales alone. Combined with profits from agriculture, art, textiles, wine, and the like, the class divide between the factions had been insurmountable for two millennia while Central hoarded its wealth.

Mixed emotions showed on Harts’s face as he thought of his impoverished comrades.

“Off the bat, the militant nobles will be granted a payroll of fifty thousand gold medallions a year,” Tahara said, as if to wipe the worry from Harts.

“What...?!”

“Drop the farmwork and side hustles. Military training will be the one and only job of your men.”

Fifty thousand gold medallions—the equivalent of one billion dollars—was more than quintuple what the north was generating. Without the need to till fields to stay alive, the northern soldiers would soon turn into a dedicated, powerful army.

As much as his brain understood the concept, doubt still hung heavy in Harts’s heart. “The frankly ridiculous amount of our salary aside, it still seems you intend to make us wandering mercenaries without a home.”

It was unthinkable for nobles on this continent to give up their territory, so Harts wasn’t ready to take Tahara’s outlandishly sweet deal at face value. If Tahara were to break his word after sequestering the northern territories, the Militants would be left starving.

“On the contrary, I’m proposing a binding contract,” Tahara said. “It all starts with an army we can trust. As the military grows in number, I’ll bump the payroll accordingly.”

Tahara wasn’t sweet-talking Harts either. After the Sleepless Castle—defended by a small, elite squad—fell to a tsunami of Players, it was only natural for him to want a large, powerful army to defend his new home.

“What guarantee is there that your *contract* will continue in the future?” Harts demanded, refusing to hold back. “We will not have you pretend that no such deal was made after we give up our territories.”

“What are you on about, man?” Tahara countered. “Why do you think a Holy Maiden’s in attendance?”

Harts struggled to find a retort to that. In addition to their duties as diplomats, the Holy Maidens also served as arbiters for any disputes among nobles. It was perfectly appropriate that White would serve as guarantor for deals like this. “What do you make of it, Lady White?” he finally asked.

“Lord Lucifer will not betray us. That, I promise.” Clasp ing her hands before her ample bosom, White closed her eyes as if in prayer. Her perfectly divine grace, achieved with the aid of her Angel’s Ring, made it very difficult for Harts to openly doubt her word.

Meanwhile, the root of all this trouble, the Demon Lord, sat with his eyes closed, enjoying his third beer and a beef skewer, lost in a pleasant dream.

Grasping for his last straw, Harts asked Queen the same question.

The Queen of Bloodshed snapped out of her trance and gazed up at the ceiling. “Why not? I second her guarantee,” she said without a care.

“Lady Queen...”

“Does the Dark Angel sitting there look like a two-faced weasel to you? He’d save himself the time and come genocide your asses himself,” Queen pushed.

The Demon Lord might have protested this claim, but Queen wasn’t wrong. The man who, by all appearances, looked like he was sitting in quiet confirmation, never held back against anyone who started a fight against him.

Harts had nothing to add, apparently having reached the same conclusion.

Although most of Queen's brain cells were occupied with thoughts of Zero, she was aware of one thing, crystal clear. "He wiped out those shit-eating pigs in a day. That's good enough for me." Short and sweet.

Someone who could annihilate the entire Central faction overnight—and could do the same to the Militant faction—had no reason to resort to trickery.

"If you both say so, I have no choice but to accept," Harts said begrudgingly.

"I get where you're coming from, but don't sweat it," Tahara said. He very much valued Harts's talent as a military general. "It's in our best interest to keep you guys in tip-top shape. That's why the Secretary set up the public bath in your territory."

"That has been a...wonderful gift to all of us," Harts admitted.

"The Secretary's never built one outside of Rabbi before. Not even in the Madam's territory," Tahara added. Despite all appearances of the Madam receiving beyond royal treatment from the Demon Lord, he had never set up any facilities at all in her territory.

Speaking of the Demon Lord, he finally awoke and showed a knowing smile. In truth, he was secretly terrified that the entire meeting room was staring at him while he slept. He was starting to learn that this kind of smile could get him out of most binds.

Harts asked the Demon Lord, ready to glean more information from the answer, "The King of Suneo has sent an astonishing ten thousand gold medallions...along with a message of encouragement *and* congratulations." An enormous fortune—the equivalent of two hundred million dollars—that would have blown the socks off of any working-class citizen.

The Demon Lord, however, had no idea what Harts was talking about. Barely managing to pick up on the "congratulations" part, he turned to Tahara in hopes of passing the conversational buck to him. "Apparently, this *king* can read steps ahead on the board," the Demon Lord remarked with a smug air to him.

"You've taken the time to set up that stage, Chief. Let's hope we can be friends with them for a long, long time," said Tahara.

I haven't done anything! the Demon Lord desperately wanted to cry out. *Luna was the one who wreaked havoc!* Unfortunately for him, Luna was merrily on her way home to the village of Rabbi.

Harts shuddered at the Demon Lord's response. The Kid Company had delivered vast quantities of supplies too. At face values, these deliveries were simply wartime aid. Hidden in them, however, was the implied threat that the Demon Lord had already established close ties with foreign forces. Even if the militant nobles were to resist his offer, they stood no chance at taking on both the Demon Lord's legion and his foreign allies. Harts was shaking now, wondering how many hundreds of steps ahead the Demon Lord had to calculate in order to orchestrate situations like this.

The answer was none, of course. As far the Demon Lord was concerned, this foreign aid had come out of the blue. In his attempt to dodge all responsibility, the Demon Lord said, "If it was sent in congratulation, throw a party with it."

"A p-party...?! Using all ten thousand gold medallions?!" Harts stammered, failing to imagine how he could even spend that much money on a celebration.

Chuckling, Tahara chimed in, "The north's been too cheerless. Blow the whole thing on a wild celebration."

"What...?" Harts groaned, shaking his head. "I just don't understand..."

Tahara had made the offer in earnest. However, unlike the Demon Lord, he'd calculated a practical benefit for it. Holylight had such a skewed economy that, while noble pockets weighed heavy with gold, commoners only used bronze coins and medallions for most of their lives. Even half-bronzes and quarter-bronzes—made from splitting a single bronze coin—were in circulation. Many small villages still bartered goods. Even if it took throwing money at the problem, Tahara wanted to stimulate the economy—and by extension, all industries—in the poorer parts of the country. The Demon Lord's impulsive idea perfectly suited Tahara's agenda.

"Long live the Secretary, am I right?" Tahara smirked. "A generous boss makes the office run tighter."

He's reading into it... the Demon Lord thought. *I'm not going to touch this topic with a ten-foot pole!* He resolved to make himself into a statue. It wasn't

like he could contribute anything meaningful. In fact, his silence would only make the meeting go faster.

“Now that the dust’s settled on Holylight, I bet the Secretary’s got oodles of miracles in store for you guys, since you like them so much,” Tahara said. “Well, flip to the next page for me.”

That page detailed the process of manipulating the Water Spell Stone market and the various expected outcomes. Tahara’s strategy was apparently to keep lowering the price at all costs until they had a monopoly.

“Get this. The twenty percent off is our first move. Once they try to undercut us, we cut them right back and keep going until it’s half off the current price,” Tahara explained.

“Half...?!” Harts repeated in shock.

After all, water was an essential component of survival—a resource no one could afford to skimp on. Battle-sharpened instincts warned Harts there was something sinister about underpricing a resource like that. That instinct was confirmed when Harts flipped the page and found plans to buy out the Spell Stone mines that would go bankrupt from this price rigging. Ultimately, Tahara intended to take control of all Spell Stone mines.

Contemplating the financial scheming yet to come, Tahara was grinning, smoke wafting through his teeth. “Apparently there’s a huge range in price depending on the water’s quality, but the average cost for Water Spell Stones is about a silver coin a month, right? That’s the average water bill. Once we knock that cost down, everyone living in countries we export to will weep at the Secretary’s generosity.”

Once a monopoly was achieved, of course, Tahara could spike up the price again, if he was so inclined. The mere supply chain of the stuff could be used as a weapon of war.

The Demon Lord’s heart beat faster and faster the more Tahara talked. *I know he’s planning something crazy! Just keep me out of it, please...!* Fearing what was to come, the Fallen Angel stood from his desk and wandered to the window, keeping his back to the meeting while he seemed to enjoy a leisurely smoke...while concealing his ashen face.

“Good blast of PR that’ll let the world know this country’s new and improved,” Tahara said, as if it was nothing more than a dice roll in a game. Naturally, stories of Holylight’s change would come with stories of Lucifer’s return. There was no such thing as bad publicity in Tahara’s book.

The rumors would invite many tourists to Holylight, and improved tourism meant more money in the pockets of local businesses. Some workers might even immigrate to Holylight, and Tahara would welcome them all. He would also welcome any force that decided to attack Holylight to get their hands on the country’s newfound wealth.

“Finally, we will hand out Water Spell Stones to every town in Holylight until we finish setting up Wells with Buckets. Chief, can I trouble you for a thousand or so Buckets?”

He’s trying to kill me with boredom! the Demon Lord thought as he made a show of accepting without a second thought.

White let out a breath at the guarantee that water would be given to Holylight citizens for free, considering Dona had plunged the nation into a deadly drought by tightening the supply.

Now Tahara directed the attendees to the next page, which showed a map of Holylight separated into five districts.

For Manami, my Grand Angel—by Big Bro.

The militant nobles' domain
Build military facilities
*Top priority

East
Luna's domain
Set up Rail Yard
Set up Marina
Construct highway
East to West
Flatten the canyons
(proposal)

West
White and Queen's domain
Send bulk of revenue North
Confiscate hoarded wealth
and add to treasury.
Retrieve all holy coins.

Central
Holy City—Holy Church's domain
House misc. nobles.
Majority of the district
to be ruled by us.

South
House Butterfly's domain
House High Society
and the Artists

“This is just a placeholder, but take a look,” Tahara said, showing them a concept he had been working on for a while.

With the others, Yu inspected the map too.

First, nobles who had refused to side with Dona would be moved to the bountiful Central district. There were not many names on that list, though, since the majority of them had served Dona. The Holy City would be under the jurisdiction of the Holy Church. The Butterfly sisters would control the southern territory, where high society and the minority artists would settle.

Some edits on the map seemed reasonable, and others outlandish. Harts and Sambo, for instance, groaned at the fact that the north would lose the entirety of its territory while the southern territory would be given to high society and the artists.

Harts could hold his tongue no longer. “The south holds mines just as lucrative as those in Central, as well as fertile ground and endless cotton fields. Would it not be more sensible to sequester those territories?” He couldn’t comprehend why Tahara would reach for the barren north over the bountiful south. Desolate or not, the northern tundra was an ancestral home to many who lived there.

Tahara acknowledged Harts’s concern and answered in earnest. “The south does have a lot to offer. That’s exactly why we’re gonna put most of the nobles there.”

“Only to allow those nobles to fatten like pigs?!”

“Exactly! We’re going to expand our business ventures in many ways, and they’re going to be our target demographic. We want the rich to stay rich,” Tahara explained.

“Target demographic...?” Harts repeated.

“There’s a note about this on the map, but the north is going to become one big stronghold. We’re not going to squabble over land rights or ancestral grounds or any of that nonsense,” said Tahara.

“One big stronghold...?” Harts parroted again in disbelief. It was inconceivable

to fortify the entirety of the north, especially when the impenetrable Gatekeeper protected its borders already.

Tahara, however, had his eyes set on the future and projects of astronomical scale. “We’ll place enough stores to feed ten thousand soldiers along the border between Central and the north, along with at least twenty underground bunkers to hold weapons and supplies,” he said.

“J-Just a moment—”

“More importantly, we’ll establish ten midsize bases aboveground, with a Training Ground attached to each of them. Chief, if you don’t mind whipping those up too.”

I’m not your slave, Tahara! the Demon Lord wanted to exclaim. *I’ll be dead of old age by the end of it!* After the one thousand Buckets Tahara had commissioned a moment ago, it seemed like the Demon Lord was in for a battle far more grueling than the one against Dona’s legion.

Harts shook again as Tahara unfurled his plans before them. There was only one good reason to garner ten thousand soldiers and put them through intensive training. “Against what country do you intend to wage war...?”

“What country?” Tahara scoffed. “The Secretary intends to subjugate every nation on the continent, so all of them, of course.”

“You’ll wage war against the entire world...?” Harts felt faint. Was this a bad joke?

The Demon Lord, too, hid his quivering hand. All of a sudden, he’d found himself with his finger on the trigger of a gun. One twitch of the finger and the whole world would plunge into war. As it turned out, the comfortable bed he’d been lying on was a crate full of gunpowder with a lit fuse attached.

Wage war against the whole world?! What am I, a comic book villain?! Where are they going with this?! The Demon Lord finally turned to the group and decided to break his silence. Even if he were to not say a word for the rest of the meeting, he feared that he would be washed away by a torrent of his advisors’ making.

“There’s nothing wrong looking towards the horizon, but we must first pave

the road we walk on,” he said, much to the relief of Harts and Sambo, who began discussing the map.

The Holy Church would govern the Holy City, other nobles would run the rest of Central, and White and Queen would rule the west. Harts and Sambo’s reservations about the fortification of the north aside, Tahara’s proposed structure seemed much more organized than the prewar status quo of Holylight.

“I don’t understand much of this,” Sambo admitted. “But it seems better than what we had before.”

“Anything is, when our country has been filled to the brim with conflict both domestic and foreign,” Harts agreed.

Until the civil war, Holylight had treated their three Holy Maidens as figureheads while the Militants, Central, High Society, and Artists vied for power. Living conditions were so tumultuous that the likes of Satanists rose up. Compared to that, any general idea of restructuring was a brilliant one.

Harts stared into the map in an attempt to visualize it all when he found another exceptionally intriguing note. “Mister Tahara, there’s a mention of someone named Manami...”

“Dear me!” Sambo exclaimed. “It says here that she is a Grand Angel?!”

“Yeah, because she is. The Secretary’s going to summon her pretty soon,” Tahara said.

White and Queen were just as shocked by this statement. The Demon Lord’s plans were sounding more and more like deeds in ancient myths.

“Lord Lucifer will summon an angel...?!” White exclaimed.

“That’s no joke...” Queen said.

While Tahara grinned with pride, Yu was glowering at him with a look that didn’t hide how much of an idiot she thought he was.

Meanwhile, all other eyes were drawn to the Demon Lord, who turned around for a brief look, then faced the window again before slowly lighting a cigarette as if to tease the attendees.

In reality, the Demon Lord was on the verge of a heart attack. *Dammit! I just told you I'd summon your sister. What's a Grand Angel, anyway?!* He cringed, eyeing the ring given to him by the Still Angel on his finger. It had changed over the annihilation of the Central faction. Now it was brimming with divine energy that seemed to promise miracles if he'd only wish for them. "As I've said, tomorrow comes before 'someday.' We have much work to do." These desperate words to end the conversation managed to straighten the backs of the attendees, who quietly chastised themselves for getting too carried away.

The meeting continued with them discussing these plans in detail, and concluded with the promise to hold another formal meeting in Rabbi.

Once the summit was over, Harts and Sambo immediately went to prepare their men to return to Gatekeeper. Most of them were tasked with transporting the corpses of Central soldiers, which were strewn about the battlefields along with the bodies of Xenobian soldiers. There were too many dead to dig marked graves for.

While preparing for their departure, Harts sent for more manpower from Gatekeeper just to carry what Yu had given them.

She casually walked up to Sambo as he bellowed commands. They hadn't seen each other in quite some time. "Mister Sambo, how are your eyes?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, Miss Kirino! They work perfectly, as you can see!" Sambo pounded his chest. "I'll never be able to thank you enough!" In his eyes, Yu seemed like a goddess of salvation after she'd restored his sight.

"There's no need for thanks. If anything happens to them, please come to the village of Rabbi anytime," Yu offered.

"If I can ever be of assistance to you, Miss Kirino, I will be there in a heartbeat!"

Yu beamed at Sambo's kindness and he let out a hearty laugh. She had made a point of making connections with every powerful figure she could: the Butterfly sisters, Olgan, Cake, Sambo... All in preparation for a battle brewing—for war.

Harts came over to Sambo as Yu took her leave. The generals stared blankly at the towering stack of wooden boxes, all stuffed with gold medallions.

“A hundred thousand gold medallions on the spot. He certainly put his money where his mouth is,” Sambo said.

“Two years’ pay, up front... And all these supplies,” Harts added.

Towers of flour, meat, vegetables, spices, and fine wine reached dizzying heights. It was hard for them to believe that the days of the north battling starvation had come to end.

“Lord Harts, it’ll take all the men in the fortress to carry all this back!” Sambo said.

“And all of our wagons.”

“Our comrades will dance in joy! This calls for a celebration of the ages!”

Harts gave a rare smile to Sambo and relaxed his shoulders. “A celebration... You’re right. There’s certainly cause for it.”

Above them, dawn’s light brightened the sky as if to drive away the storms that had darkened Holylight for so long.

“I wonder who Lord Lucifer is, exactly,” Sambo said, still thinking of how the Demon Lord’s presence filled the meeting room even when he seemed extremely selective with his words.

“While I don’t believe him to be some divine deity...” Harts started.

“Yes?”

“The policies he’ll set forth will bless the people of Holylight like a gentle rain after this drought.”

Those Water Spell Stones that the Demon Lord had promised to distribute for free would be a merciful blessing to the people worn out by the war.

Sambo laughed. “I’d welcome anyone who would bring rain to this dusty land. Even a demon.”

Harts echoed his laugh as they departed the castle to give orders to transport their goods back to Gatekeeper.

Tahara and Yu watched them leave from a window.

“They’re a pair of jolly old-timers, aren’t they? That’s how I want to grow old,” Tahara said.

“You were quite generous with them,” Yu said.

“Those two have to build our grand national army. We’ll lay down the foundation for them, but a strong army takes time, money, and effort.”

“Armies are inefficient money pits.”

“We don’t need an army to win fights, but a country needs a show of force. It doesn’t matter how strong you and I are. Who’s gonna sleep easy in a superpower state without a formidable army?”

“Like I said. Inefficient...” Yu watched a caravan come and take Harts and Sambo’s place, led by elegant men on horseback waving banners of House Butterfly. “And what is *that*, Tahara?”

“I gave the Madam’s sister a call. Those are professional carriers who transport her art.”

“What? All you need is a Back-Up Backpack. This is so wasteful.”

“It’s not all about being efficient!” Tahara said. “That caravan’s gonna parade down the travel roads, advertising to everyone it passes that the Central faction lost!” This was his ulterior motive for sending Harts back with an exorbitant amount of supplies. The parade of unending wagons would announce the end of the civil war to all who saw it. Rumors would be rumors, but this was hard proof. In a world with no digital media, Tahara didn’t underestimate the word of mouth.

“That death-racer-looking Holy Maiden was something else, huh? I thought you’d chew her out for her impertinence, or whatever,” Tahara teased.

“She’s head over heels,” Yu said coolly. “Whoever she’s into, she won’t be a threat to us.”

“Nothing scarier than women in love... *Whoever* could she be into?”

Tahara’s sarcasm went unnoticed as Yu turned to leave the room, presumably heading off to collect those Holy Coins.

The dust had settled on the civil war and Holylight's rule had drastically changed. The nation's population would all take the news of Lucifer's return as a shock, whether they rejoiced or trembled at the information. Some, surely, would connect the dots and realize that Lucifer was none other than the Demon Lord.

That very Demon Lord had Quick Traveled to the casino penthouse, finally reuniting with Aku.

A New Tomorrow

The interior of his familiar penthouse came into the Demon Lord's view. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the meeting room, giving him a view of villagers already out and about under the morning sky just beginning to redden. They were hard at work, even while the Demon Lord aimlessly wandered the land.

"For once, I'm beat," the Demon Lord said to himself. "I could use a good night's sleep."

The divine beast on his shoulder fidgeted nervously at the change in scenery at first. Once it noticed the AC keeping the penthouse perfectly cool, however, it began happily wagging its tail.

"Right. You don't like the heat. Just so you know, the climate here is scorching year-round." The fennec squeaked in fierce protest.

In the master suite, a strange lump awaited the Demon Lord under the covers of his luscious, California king-size bed.

He lifted the blankets to find Aku fast asleep in a ball. "She's been sleeping here instead of the Resort?" Every room and office in the casino was locked, of course, but the penthouse was equipped with fingerprint recognition that unlocked the door only for Aku and the Demon Lord himself.

Aku stirred. "Master Demon Lord...?"

"Good morning... I'm home."

"Welcome home, Master De—" Aku snapped awake, finding the Demon Lord looking completely different than when she last saw him. "W-Wings?!"

"Ah, I forgot to turn back. Oh well."

"Y-You really are the Fallen Angel, Master Demon Lord?!"

"This is only a disguise. Long story. Anyway, I found this white...squirrel, or whatever. Do you—"

"It's so cute!" Aku squealed. "What is it?! It's so small!"

"Well..."

"It's *too* cute! How is this animal real?!"

"Calm down, Aku," the Demon Lord said, slightly staggered by her reaction.

Aku eased her hand out to the divine beast, but it clambered away and up onto the Demon Lord's head.

"Get down from there, squirrel... Ohhh, you feel nice and cool, though." The Demon Lord closed his eyes, treating the divine beast like an ice pack.

"Not fair! Please let me touch it, Master Demon Lord!"

Sighing, he hoisted Aku in his arms, allowing her to reach the fennec. Its pure-white fur bristled as it moved its eyes to take in every part of Aku. Eventually, it must have decided that she meant it no harm, as it wooshed its long tail and grazed it against Aku's fingers.

"Oh, its tail! It's so soft and fluffy, Master Demon Lord! So fresh!"

"You sound like a fabric softener commercial!"

Aku seemed entranced by the fennec's tail, gently petting and poking it. Then, she reached for the fallen angel wings, a dreamy look washing over her eyes.

"And these feathers are such deep black... They feel so comfortable in my hand."

"This isn't an antique roadshow!" Growing tired, the Demon Lord set Aku down on the floor before yanking his wings off and tossing them aside. It seemed nothing was sacred to this man.

"What?! Th-They come off?!" Aku stammered in astonishment.

"It's a costume piece. Costume. Fallen Angel..." the Demon Lord grumbled. "I'd rather have an angel food cake than angel wings. Something I could eat. Everyone in this world has lost their mind." Uttering statements that would shatter everyone's illusions of him, the Demon Lord simply plopped onto his bed and got under the covers. At least when he had no one but Aku for company, he could act completely like himself. "I'm going to rest for a short while. Go play with the white squirrel."

"Does it have a name, Master Demon Lord?" Aku asked, lifting the covers and sliding in between his arms.

The divine beast seemed thoroughly impressed by the softness of his luxury bed, jumping excitedly on the mattress...which would make it very difficult for the Demon Lord to get any sleep.

“Name? Just call it Squirrel.”

“I don’t want to call it something stupid! Let’s think of a cute one.”

The Demon Lord contemplated this. He’d never named an animal before, so he had no clue as to what names were appropriate. “It’s white, so... How about White Macadamia or Walter White?”

“N-No! Neither of those seem like real names...”

“What do you mean by a cute name, anyway...? Let’s just go with Ice Pack.”

“This is serious, Master Demon Lord!”

“What about Astley? It’ll never give you up or let you down.”

“Nice try, but that’s no good either...”

Half asleep, the Demon Lord continued suggesting nonsensical names while Aku vetoed them, bouncing on the bed. They almost looked like a daughter excited about her new pet and a father too tired from work to keep his eyes open.

If anyone else had witnessed this exchange, they wouldn’t have believed their eyes, especially after he had caused such a spectacle in Dona’s former stronghold.

“Do you know what kind of animal it is?” Aku asked.

“Snow fennec, I think. Apparently it was blessed by the Wise Angel, or something...”

“I knew it was special!”

“Well, call it whatever you like,” the Demon Lord conceded. “An elephant should be joining us later.”

“Elephant? Is that another animal like this one?!”

“You’ve never seen an elephant... Well, it’s another souvenir of sorts.” The Demon Lord closed his eyes, offering his mind to blissful slumber. After the

mess in the north, the Demon Lord had directly stormed Dona's hold, then wreaked incredible havoc as Zero, before finally crashing into the postwar meeting. Physically, he was fine. Mentally, he was up against the ropes.

"I'm looking forward to it," Aku said. "But, Master Demon Lord, you look...much younger..." she timidly added.

Now that she'd calmed down from her first encounter with the divine beast, she couldn't help but notice that the Demon Lord looked like a teenager.

"Age is but a number to me..." he muttered. As characters created by Akira Ono, neither he nor his advisors ever aged; they were immortal. Not to mention that Yu's Censorship skill could physically age or de-age him at the drop of a hat. With one command, the Demon Lord could change the age of anyone around him too.

"I think this look suits you well too," Aku said.

"You think so? I guess I should count myself lucky that you didn't laugh at it..."

"I like how you used to look and how you look now!"

The Demon Lord chuckled. "Not judging a guy by his appearance... You'll be a catch, one day..." With that, he closed his eyes and fell fast asleep.

The divine beast curled up on top of the bedcovers before closing its eyes too. Her arms around the Demon Lord, Aku stayed awake for a while, thinking of and rethinking names for the fennec...until her mind drifted away as well.

Holylight was undergoing a grand metamorphosis, yet the penthouse seemed isolated from the rest of the world, like the eye of a hurricane that remained calm while violent winds brought devastation to its surroundings.

Tahara and Yu were spreading bombastic propaganda utilizing Censorship. White and Queen issued all sorts of decrees from the Holy Castle. And the man who'd triggered the momentous shifts in this country was asleep in an air-conditioned room without a care in the world. It wasn't difficult to imagine the fallen central nobles rolling in their graves.

Dawn had finally broken on what history would remember as the Night of the Fated Return. However, what was everyone else up to?

——City of Rookie.

Yukikaze and Mikan had delved deep into the Bastille Dungeon, now entering its bottommost level. The Demon Lord had hired them—with a hefty bag of gold medallions—to keep an eye on the city and its dungeon while aiding in the restoration efforts.

Following the Invasion, the Bastille Dungeon had remained on lockdown. Now that Tahara had weaseled the city under his control, he wanted to reopen its most popular attraction. Yukikaze and Mikan were performing an inspection of the dungeon before its reopening.

Mikan took in the lowest level of the dungeon, twenty below the surface. “A job’s a job, but I’m really getting tired of this place...”

Each dungeon had its own quirks, and the Bastille was known for being dim and damp. The farther down one went, the more depressing the air seemed to become, as each level held more and more ruined cells.

“...It’s more than a job, it’s a critical mission from Mister Fox.” As cool as ever, Yukikaze kept walking.

The twentieth level was as barren as it always had been, except for when the Demon Lord had found his way down here. Back then, he had called it a “recycling factory” where various corpses and objects were carried on a conveyor belt into an enormous furnace, processing them into monsters to be sent back into the dungeon.

“...Don’t freak out, Mikan.”

“Don’t worry. I never expect you to say anything normal.”

“...I can still smell Mister Fox on this level.” Yukikaze sniffed the air.

“You perv! Shouldn’t you take your oh-so-important mission more seriously?”

“...Don’t freak out, Mikan.”

“Now what?! Don’t tell me you found a strand of his hair, or a footprint, or something.”

“...Look at those stairs.”

“What?”

The Bastille Dungeon served as the tutorial dungeon for most adventurers. It had been scoured and mapped down to the last rock in its walls, so it shouldn't have been possible for a set of descending stairs to exist on what had always been known as its bottommost level.

“No way... This is a huge discovery! Holy crap!” Mikan jumped up and down in excitement.

Making a new discovery in a dungeon brought great honor and fame to an adventurer...along with the naming rights for the discovery. In this case, Yukikaze and Mikan would have the right to name the subsequent layers after themselves, or whatever else they chose. Even on Earth, many locations—like the Strait of Magellan—were named after their discoverers.

“Wh-What do we do?! We need to put both our names on it! Make it sound cool!”

“...You're getting way too excited, Mikan. Talking about a threesome with this underground hole. That's too kinky.”

“Too kinky for *you*?! Everyone names their discoveries!”

“...Don't freak out, Mikan.”

“Are you trying to make that your catchphrase or something?!”

“...There's a message.”

“What?”

Letters were carved into the wall above the descending stairwell. Apparently, it was addressed to someone.

Dear Akira,

Have you got everything?

The two adventurers shared a look. A few moments later, the letters faded

like sand in the wind without so much as a trace left on the smooth, rock wall.

Mikan drew her greatsword as Yukikaze raised her staff. Ready for any unexpected battles, they started down the eerie stairs veiled in shadows.

This new discovery would later attract thousands to the City of Rookie, but that's a story for another time.

——Capital of Euritheis.

Mitsuhide was holding down the fort in the capital, enjoying a peaceful time with Toshizo by baking rice cakes over the fire. Just then, Ajax Kong came bearing a message from Gorgon and ruined it all. Naturally, the message included many missions pertaining to the mining of blackstone and securing transport routes.

“If you are bound for Lord King’s territory, I shall accompany you!” Mitsuhide offered.

“Oh yeah? Good... I won’t get bored on the journey.” Ajax’s eyes narrowed, piercing Mitsuhide with savage intention.

Mitsuhide smirked. She was among the fiercest fighters in Jipang, a nation of never-ending warfare where its lords had battled each other for power over centuries. Mitsuhide certainly had a taste for battle, tests of mettle, and making a name for herself.

“Whatever skill you are so confident in won’t stand a chance against me and Toshizo,” she said.

“I’ll show you who doesn’t stand a chance against who...on the way.”

Close enough to feel each other’s breath, they growled. Their last battle had been interrupted by the Demon Lord’s shenanigans, so the match hadn’t been decided.

And so this tumultuous party set off on its way to Holylight.

——Milk, Northern Nations.

Mynk and Olgan were camping out on a grassy plateau that stretched out to

the horizon in every direction. The air was temperate during the day, but became bone-chilling during the night. Mynk huddled by their lifesaving fire, looking like a caterpillar in her layers and layers of blankets. Olgan, on the other hand, sat unaffected. She never felt hot nor cold.

“Nights here are always freezing,” Mynk said. “It’s like Niflheim, the frosty realm where the—”

“What are you on about now?” Olgan asked, cutting off Mynk’s emo-nologue. Not much had changed between these two, save for the ray of kindness that shone on Olgan’s face. “Cold as it may be, you can’t see stars like this anywhere else.”

Above them stretched a breathtaking ocean of stars. Olgan smiled, remembering the time she and the Demon Lord had stargazed together.

“Sure, the stars are gorgeous, but...” Mynk grumbled. “The frost of Niflheim affects even me, through my shroud of darkness—”

“Will you ever shut up? I can’t even enjoy a memory in peace.” Olgan brushed her hood back and touched the horns on her head.

Suddenly, Salamanders began gathering around them. These elementals were mostly invisible to humans unless they were summoned by magic, but finding her horns either an object of comfort or curiosity, they showed themselves clearly.

Mynk sighed in her blankets. “So warm... The fire of Muspelheim lights my shroud of darkness...”

“Shroud of darkness...” Olgan chuckled. She turned to the Salamanders with a gentle smile. Elementals always tried to speak to her.

“What are they trying to tell you, Olgan?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t speak their language. But...”

“But?”

“They always utter a single word.”

“And what is that?” Mynk asked.

“It’s just my hunch, but... I sense strong respect and reverence from them.”

“The Demon Lord gave you those horns, didn’t he? They’re probably cursed. You should chuck ’em.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They are my greatest treasure.” With a look on her face that Mynk had never seen before, Olgan stroked her horns. She looked like a girl in love, blissfully reminiscing about a time she’d received a gift from her beau. If her past self could see her now, she would blow herself to smithereens out of sheer embarrassment.

“Now that it’s getting warm, I’m going to bed... Morbeus will lead me into the realm of dreams...” Mynk dozed off immediately.

“Can’t you just say ‘good night’?” Olgan muttered before lying down.

Still, the Salamanders were staring at Olgan—at the horns created by the Demon Lord. They still muttered that single word. Without any good reason, Olgan guessed it.

Creator, they were repeating.

Maybe I can come up with an excuse to see him, Olgan thought before slowly falling asleep.

She and Mynk were en route to Xenobia, unaware of the trouble that brewed ahead.

The end of Holylight’s civil war meant the start of a new tomorrow for many people throughout the continent: the largest group of which was the party leading the former residents of the Euritheis slums.

—Along a travel road connecting the Northern Nations to Holylight.

Ren, with the two thousand refugees from the Euritheis slums in tow, quietly traveled southward. Almost imperceptibly, Ren smiled. She had just been relayed the developments in Holylight, and she took extreme pleasure in a particular piece of news.

“So Master rescued those children and vanquished the heinous nobles who tormented their own people, all in one night?” she repeated.

“Sure did,” Tahara replied. “Once the Secretary gets going, he moves like a wildfire.”

Ren’s interpretation was the kindest possible one of the Demon Lord’s actions. In fact, Tahara would push the narrative in that direction by utilizing the Censorship skill, the effect of which would culminate in nationwide adoration of the Demon Lord. A more accurate description of his actions would paint the Demon Lord as a ruthless bandit who wiped out everyone who inconvenienced him; for Ren, though, her Master would always be a beacon of light that showered her with love.

“Give my regards to the hero, will you?” Tahara concluded.

“I will.”

Ren hung up her Communication with Tahara, and her face returned to complete stoicism. She turned an icy gaze to the group next to her: over four hundred criminals handpicked by Eyze. Not everyone in the slums were honest, hardworking people who met a bit of bad luck. Some were hardened criminals, like lifelong thieves. Eyze and his partner had sorted out and grouped them together to form a band, flanked by Ren and Weeb on either side.

Their current state of orderly obedience was hard-earned. At first, they would grumble or catcall Ren, frequently disrupting the march. Each time, Ren had brought down her lance with cold and fierce brutality. Now every one of them remained silent unless spoken to and marched in perfect time, backs rod-straight and arms rhythmically swinging. A perfect orchestra of footsteps went with them, played out by criminals focusing harder on maintaining perfect posture than they’d focused on anything else in their lives. The slightest deviation in form would earn them a lance lashing.

“Middle row, number seven,” Ren called. “Slouching.”

The offender shrieked and snapped himself up. “Please! Forgive me!”

“Back row, number twenty-three. Swing wider.”

“M-Miss Ren! Have mercy! It won’t happen again!”

Their rearguard—the Trinary—watched her handiwork, clearly impressed.

“I’ve seen armies march with less discipline.”

“In such a short time, their march has become impeccable.”

“Hrmph... The female may be repulsive, but she wields her lance like a whip.”

Weeb and each member of the Trinary were generals in their own right; each knew too well the trials of leading a troublesome army in a march. Trained soldiers were out of their reach as the relationship between Weeb and the Pope only deteriorated. Instead, they were saddled with new recruits, the elderly, and even criminals who were offered shortened sentences for their military service. In those cases, the Trinary would ruthlessly discipline them while Weeb spoke to them with compassion, forming a perfectly balanced carrot and stick. This time around, with Ren dealing with the criminals in a way too brutal for even the Trinary, the three had switched their roles to more supportive ones—people who the marchers could talk to. Without them, many would have dropped out long ago...especially because Ren was willing to leave behind any who refused to meet her expectations.

In the end, their formation was a spectacular success. The beautiful girl as cold and deadly as absolute zero, the brilliant light of compassion that was the paladin, and the three knights that understood their plights had molded the lot into honest people ready for work, as if they had been through the best rehabilitation facility imaginable.

Watching the marchers carry on with the intensity of an army going to war, the Trinary continued their discussion.

“What is this crowd for, anyway?”

“Two thousand in all... Setting up their shelter alone must be a tremendous undertaking.”

“Holylight is short on water as it is, to say nothing of how desolate the eastern wastelands are.”

The Trinary shared the impression of Holylight that most on this continent had. Furthermore, Holylight had gained a reputation as a refuge for thieves and bandits on the run from the law. Compared to living in the bountiful Tzardom, moving to Holylight seemed akin to exile. Weeb seemed to share their concern,

as his expression grew tighter as they marched closer to their destination. Ren rode up next to Weeb—which was a rare occurrence on its own—and shared with him a part of what she had been told through Communication: Dona’s Central faction had fallen. A group of imprisoned children had been rescued, and Dona’s hoard of wealth would be returned to the people in a grand fashion, as well as the Water Spell Stones that would be given to the people for free... What Ren relayed sounded wonderfully benevolent on paper.

“He really doesn’t hesitate to take action, does he...?” Weeb asked.

“All puny souls will bow before my Master,” Ren said with unshaking confidence.

Tahara was entirely willing to hand out as many Spell Stones as it took, and even planned to incorporate the casino into wealth redistribution. Spreading coin through the pleasures of the excessively lavish golden temple, all the while garnering more and more support from the people: it was all to encourage spending in every class of society. The working class, especially, would be overjoyed by the sudden disposable income. Some would go out for an expensive meal they couldn’t afford before, or go out to a bar, or stay in a nicer inn when traveling. Perhaps others would buy new clothes or shoes.

The varied spending would stimulate the economy in multiple industries, enriching the lives of farmers and artisans. Tahara was also planning to pave the travel roads and even build highways and railroads. Each project would involve a great number of workers and a vast amount of materials. When completed, the modernized infrastructure would become an invaluable asset to Holylight. Not to mention all the *miracles* performed by the Demon Lord—meaning all the facilities he was going to set up. Policies soon to be enacted by the Demon Lord’s cabinet would send the stagnant economy of Holylight skyrocketing so fast it would make everyone’s heads spin.

Weeb had no idea of what was to come, except that the black angel was about to spread wealth on a scale never before seen in this world. “He intends to force a flow of gold... No, he’ll flood Holylight with it like a torrent.”

Money was like blood pumping through the human body. A healthy circulation kept the body alive, while stagnation meant death. Holylight had

been on the brink, but it looked like the Demon Lord was performing CPR. Having traveled to many countries in varying degrees of economic stability, Weeb could understand the Demon Lord's intention...and the dangers of an overstimulated economy.

"Currency and resources bestowed by my Master will know no bounds."

"No bounds?"

"Yes. They are...*infinite*."

Weeb couldn't comprehend what Ren meant, even as the words of the Fallen Angel came back to him like both a beckoning finger and a dagger to the throat at the same time.



“I will make those miracles a reality,” he had said. “No legends. No superstitions. They will be tangible. Real.”

Miracles... Weeb contemplated. I can almost believe it.

For someone like Weeb, who had been raised in the Tzardom, the word “miracle” carried an unbearable weight. His faith shaken, Weeb brought his horse to a trot, ready to watch how the former residents of the slums were being treated.

The march of two thousand was steadily approaching Holylight, and neither the paladin nor the Trinary guessed that this herd of the impoverished would be the ones to imbue the Demon Lord with even more power, playing a critical part in making Holylight anew.

Dawn was breaking, now that the long civil war had ended. It was a sign of something to come that no one in Holylight had ever known before—a bright and beautiful tomorrow.

Postscript

Thank you so much for picking volume 9! First of all, I need to apologize for the delayed publishing of this book. I'm sure many of you were concerned after we'd gone so long without giving you any news of volume 9.

I wasn't slacking, of course! An anime project was in the works, so I was doing this and that... Well, the project is still in the works as I am writing this. I'm not even close to done.

What about volume 10, you ask? Will I finish it in time? Will the real volume 10 please stand up?

Anyway, I've been busy over this past year. I was approached with an anime offer a while ago, but I'd had to maintain (a very painful) silence whenever I was asked about it because of the NDA.

I'm sure many of you are looking forward to another anime, so I'm trying my best to attend as many writing sessions so I can be happy with the production. Everyone working on the project is very passionate about it, so I already can't wait to watch the finished product! But that's enough about the anime.

Let me talk about what happened in this volume for a little bit. The battle against the Central faction. War raged throughout Holylight, but was there ever any doubt that the Demon Lord was going to wipe the floor with them? Hopefully those of you who were itching for Dona to make his exit are happy with how it went down. Personally, I was sad to see Captain Flay go. He was one of my favorites. And we even lost Shrimp Noodle...! That Demon Lord is bad news, I tell you! Robbing me of the joy of writing characters who are all talk... Wait, was it me who decided to kill them off? Oh well, they didn't affect the story anyway.

One war down, but more trouble is brewing around the Demon Lord. If you were to take a peek at the manuscript for volume 10, you would see the title at least: *Night before the Battle*. I hope you'll come along with me to see the Demon Lord's next battle...and what happens after the dust settles.

See you in volume 10!

—Kurone Kanzaki, author.







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by Kurone Kanzaki

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