



MOON BLOSSOM

The Ruthless
Reincarnated
Mercenary
Forms the
Ultimate
Army

ASURA

story by
Sou Hazuki
illustrations by
Mizutametori

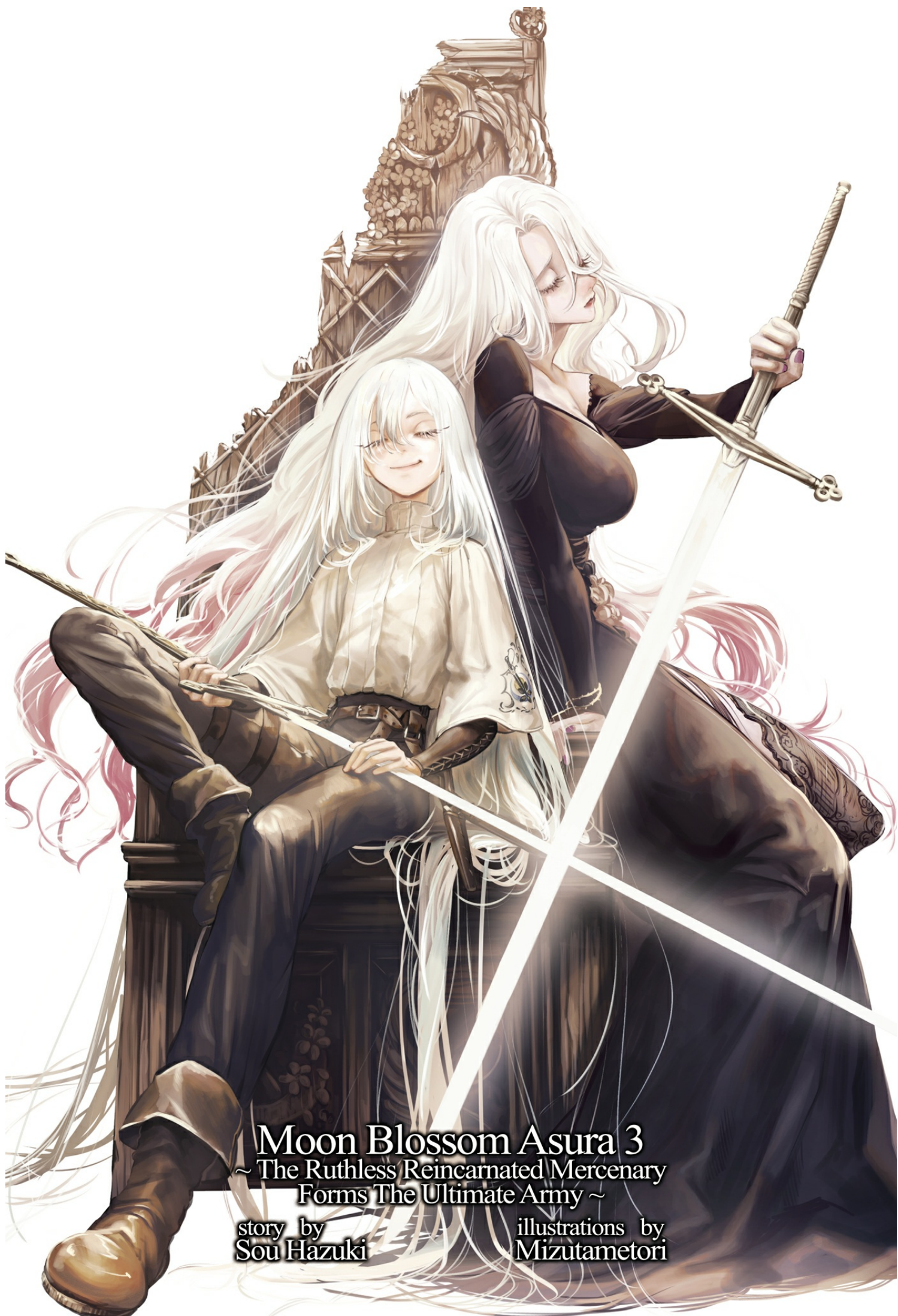


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Vice captain
of mercenary
group Moon
Blossom,
Marx
Redford

Leader of
mercenary
group Moon
Blossom,
Asura Lyona

Member of
mercenary
group Moon
Blossom,
Iina
Kuusela

Member of
mercenary
group Moon
Blossom,
Jyrki
Kuusela

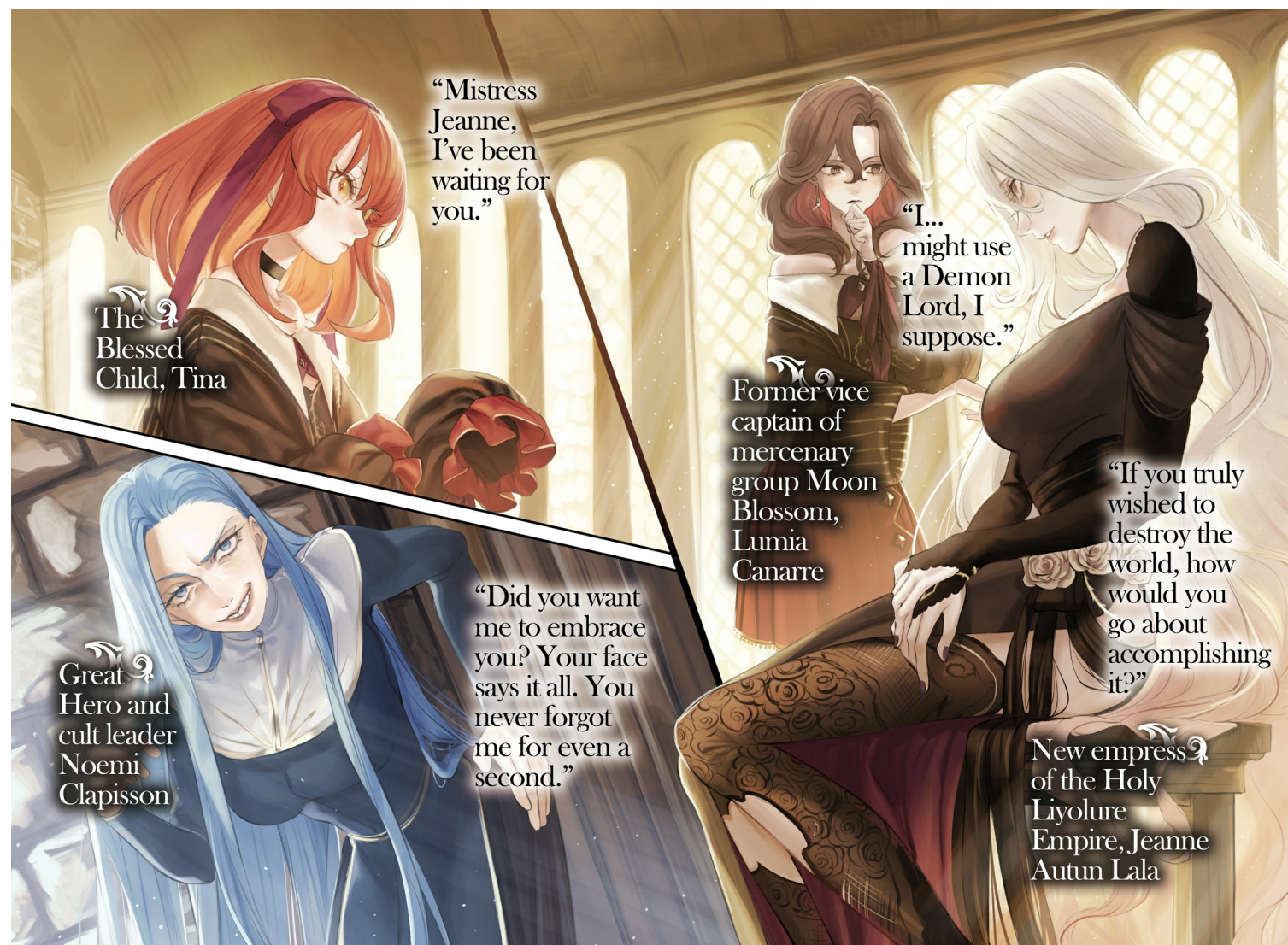
Member of
mercenary
group Moon
Blossom,
Reko

Member of
mercenary
group Moon
Blossom,
Salume Tikka

The youngest
hero, Iris
Craven Lily

A Great
Hero who
became a
hero in her
teens,
Elna
Heikkila

“I hereby announce
that I’ve come up with
a new type of magic.”



The Blessed Child, Tina

"Mistress Jeanne, I've been waiting for you."

Great Hero and cult leader Noemi Clapisson

"Did you want me to embrace you? Your face says it all. You never forgot me for even a second."

Former vice captain of mercenary group Moon Blossom, Lumia Canarre

"I... might use a Demon Lord, I suppose."

"If you truly wished to destroy the world, how would you go about accomplishing it?"

New empress of the Holy Liyolure Empire, Jeanne Autun Lala



“Go!
I’ll
bring
up the
rear!”

“Where
do you
think
you’re
going?”

Tracking Moon Blossom's Progress

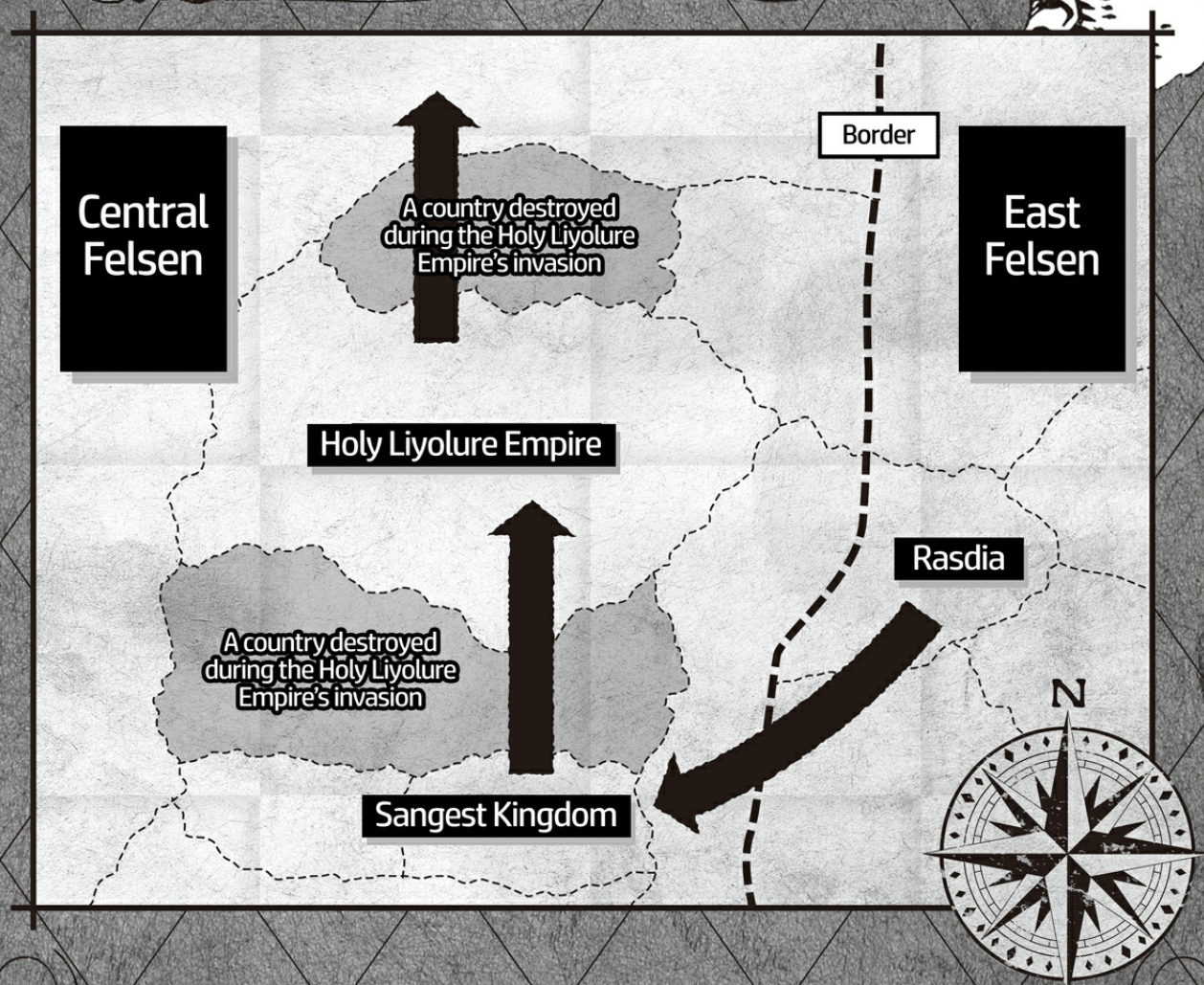


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Part Five, Chapter Six: I was trigger-happy back when I was a new soldier too. I was only four, after all.

Asura and Ilmari spent a night in the underground cell together, and when morning arrived, a nun came by with their breakfast. Being the one with her limbs free, Ilmari accepted the food for both of them. Both Asura and Ilmari wore white dresses, given to them the previous night after the nuns cleaned them up. Asura had been the only one tied up during the proceedings, and she remained bound even now.

“Feed me,” Asura said, showing her hands as a wordless explanation. A pair of wooden manacles was around her wrists, with a matching pair of shackles around her ankles. The nuns had even attached a chain from the shackles to the floor of the cell.

“All right. Open wide!” Ilmari replied as she ripped apart the bread. When Asura opened her mouth, Ilmari popped the pieces of bread inside.

“You’re such a sweet girl,” Asura said in a cheery voice. “I’ll show you some magic later.”

Over the course of their time together, she’d developed a soft spot for Ilmari, though without a particular reason for her affection. Ilmari was an innocent little girl who had no connection to the world of blood and violence Asura lived in. If they hadn’t been kidnapped by the same organization, their paths would have never crossed.

“Magic?!” Ilmari exclaimed, her face lighting up. “I wanna see!”

It was clear that she hadn’t the faintest inkling of what might happen to her here. But, in Asura’s opinion, that was for the best. She had no intention of letting anyone harm a hair on Ilmari’s head, someone who had been living a quiet life in a land far away from conflict. Asura was going to eliminate everyone responsible for dragging the girl into this hellhole. She’d done it once before, when she murdered the people who’d awakened her when Asura had

simply been trying to live peacefully.

Oh, I see. I'm seeing myself in her. This sentiment stemmed from the version of Asura who had been born in this world—the Asura who wasn't a psychotic freak. Unlike in her previous life, the current Asura could get emotional if something triggered her. That being said, it was a rare occurrence. So far, she only felt moved when it came to reminders of herself before she turned three years old.

After they finished eating, Asura used the manifestation magic, Wild Dance, to create countless flower petals and sent them flitting about in the air. Ilmari got so excited at the sight of them that she started chasing them around. It was obvious from this reaction that her parents had loved her dearly, and that she had lived a life of peace far away from any sort of fighting.

She was different from Iris in that sense, as Iris had taken up the sword of her own accord. If Iris truly wanted to continue her life as a hero, then she would have to do something about her happy-go-lucky way of thinking. In Ilmari's case though, she could remain as happy-go-lucky as she pleased.

"You know, I've been researching a new magical element I discovered," Asura said, in a good mood. "I've pretty much figured it out, but I've been sitting on it until I can find the right time to announce it."

Even while they were in the kidnappers' carriage, she'd manifested a single flower petal and practiced in secret. Practice makes perfect, after all, and this was no exception. Granted, it wasn't perfect yet. But it was usable.

"I don't really get it," Ilmari said as she tilted her head to the side.

"That's all right. In other words, I came up with a new spell. So I've been practicing until I can actually do it. Exploring new possibilities in magic is such fun."

To Asura, "fun" wasn't the right word to describe magic. It was more like a dream. She felt a strong sense of romanticism in magic, as it hadn't existed in her previous life. It was full of potential so long as you put in the time and effort, and that was precisely what made it so exciting.

"Can I use magic too?" Ilmari asked.

“Of course. Everyone can so long as they practice. Well, you’ll need a teacher, so why don’t you ask your father to look for one?”

Ilmari’s father was a merchant who sold a wide variety of goods. According to Ilmari, he was so busy with getting new stock and whatnot that he was often absent from home. Since Ilmari told Asura so much about herself, Asura returned the favor. Though it was hard to gauge how much Ilmari actually understood Asura’s life story, the girl knew that she was a soldier-mage.

“I’ll ask him when I get home then,” Ilmari said with a smile, but it didn’t last for very long. “I wonder if my mom and dad are worried about me,” she sniffed.

“Don’t worry. I promise that you’ll be able to get home. That’s a guarantee, and I never go back on my word. Isn’t that right, lina?”

“Yeah... Do you want me to let you out now?” asked lina, who stood in front of the cell in a nun’s habit.

Ilmari looked shocked to see lina; considering lina had concealed her presence and the sound of her footsteps, it wasn’t surprising that Ilmari, a mere civilian, hadn’t noticed her approach.

“No, we’ll be leaving tomorrow at the earliest,” Asura replied. “That’s when the cult founder will come back, apparently. We can escape after we meet them.”

“I see... Then...you don’t want me to unlock the door either?”

“Nope, it’ll be all right. I’m pretty impressed that you were able to find us here.”

“Well... That’s because I know...the name of the client... It’s Ada Kuula... Boss, have you met her yet?”

A woman named Ada Kuula, who belonged to a cult in the Rasdia Kingdom? With that much information, it wouldn’t be difficult at all to track her down, especially if one had no qualms about what methods they used.

“Yeah, I met her,” Asura replied. “She was the right-hand woman to the cult’s founder or something like that.”

“What...shall we do?”

“Do you seriously need to ask?” Asura chuckled low in her throat. “We kill them all, lina. We’ll massacre them. Got it?”

“Yes, Boss... Should we start now?”

“We’ll do it some time today.” Asura smiled. “I would like to put all the bodies on display for when the founder arrives tomorrow. I can’t wait to see the look on their face.”

“Um... Are you not going to join in, Boss?”

“We’ll take this opportunity to see how Vice Captain Marx does. My only order is that you all do it quietly. The military police in this country won’t act unless there’s a major incident, but better safe than sorry. Make sure no one notices what you’re doing. Oh, and keep just three people alive.”

“Does it matter which three?” lina asked, tilting her head.

“One is Ada Kuula, and the other two will be for interrogation.”

“Understood... I’ll tell Marx that.”

“Also, I’m guessing that the founder of this cult is a hero. If Iris—no, if Elna’s around, ask her to start considering stripping the founder of their title and privileges. I’m going to kill them tomorrow anyway, so it’s not like they’ll need it anymore.”

“They’ve been kidnapping...and probably killing...little girls. So I don’t think Elna will raise a fuss... But are they a hero from the east?”

Rasdia was located right on the border of East and Central Felsen, so there was no guarantee that the founder would be one of the heroes from the east.

“Who knows? Even if they’re a hero from Central Felsen, Iris or Elna can just take it up with a Great Hero from that region, can’t they? Granted, I’ll probably kill the founder before they can negotiate anything. But I’m sure they’ll say something in my defense.”

“Understood... I’ll tell them that too.” With that, lina disappeared. She didn’t *actually* disappear, just concealed her presence once more and moved away. Before she became a mercenary, lina had lived as a bandit and thus was experienced in infiltration. Even without that history, Asura gave all of her

mercenaries a crash course in sneaking in and out of places.

“You heard us, didn’t you, Mari? We’ll be able to go home tomorrow.”

It took Ilmari a few seconds before she nodded and said, “Uh-huh.” Despite the good news, she didn’t look excited. If anything, she was a little upset.

Curious, Asura asked, “Is something the matter?”

“You said that you were gonna kill everyone...”

“‘Everyone’ as in all of the zealots here. We won’t kill you, Mari. Don’t worry.”

“That’s not it. You know, um, it’s wrong to kill people,” Ilmari said in a timid voice.

Asura’s breathing stopped for a moment. “Oh, right. I almost forgot. We live in two completely different worlds, don’t we?”

How could she have forgotten something so obvious?

“It’s not different,” Ilmari said, looking confused. “We’re in the same place.”

“I don’t mean it in a literal sense,” Asura sighed. “I haven’t felt this in a very long time. Let me tell you a story about my past life. I was born and raised on the battlefield.”

“Past life?”

“I lived a life before this one. You don’t have to worry about the logistics of that. Anyway, I was born on the battlefield. My father was once a Navy SEAL before becoming a mercenary, and my mother was a war correspondent from some island country. By the time I was four years old, my father was already taking me to the war zone with him. Ha ha, he was such an idiot. You know, he made me cart around his AK-47 at that age. It was so freaking heavy.”

Asura paused, momentarily lost in reminiscence, before speaking again.

“On the battlefield, people were always dying, and I did my fair share of killing as well. That was my idea of normalcy. I would wear a bulletproof vest, a helmet, and camo that my father had made specifically for me. I would have a dagger in my pocket too. But mostly, I was shooting that AK-47. Back then, I was quite the trigger-happy soldier. I’d go through my bullets so fast and my father

would get mad at me, saying that bullets cost money too.”

Back then, Asura was happy. She’d been satisfied with her lot in life.

“But when I was twelve, my mother took me in and separated me from my father. I thought that he’d abandoned me, but that was far from the truth. I lived in that island country—my mother’s homeland—and went to a place called a middle school. I didn’t know that hitting and killing people was wrong. Back then, I had blond hair, so I stood out from the crowd. Delinquents would pick fights with me thanks to that, but I’d wipe the floor with them. Man, if punching people was such a serious crime, I wish that was the first thing they’d taught me not to do.”

Life in that country had been hellish for Asura. The soothing lullaby of gunfire was absent. Grenades weren’t flying this way and that. She never saw any idiots get turned into mincemeat under a tank. She’d been bored to tears.

“It was like I’d literally been transported to another world. Wasn’t it so cruel of them? Everything that was *my* normal was considered abnormal there. I managed to cope by beating up delinquents in secret, but everyone was so weak that it still wasn’t much fun. No one genuinely intended on killing people. Sometimes they’d threaten me with death, but they never meant it. It was as if my world had become shrouded in shadow. I remembered that feeling just now.”

Everyone had their own idea of what was “normal” or “common sense.” It all depended on what kind of life they’d led up to that point, and what kind of world they’d lived in. The same went for ideas of good and evil.

“It wasn’t all bad though. It was thanks to my time there that I learned how amazingly smart I am.”

Asura had read as many books as she could and learned as much as possible, and she never once stopped training her body. Everything she did, she did to return to the battlefield.

“Asura, I don’t really get what you said. But I know that you were living in a really bad place.” Ilmari wrapped her arms around Asura in a tight hug.

“That’s right. It was so boring that it was like a living hell,” Asura replied.

Ilmari shook her head. “I was talking about before that.”

“Before that? Before I went to that island country, I was living in a fun and completely normal place. Fun and normal for me anyway,” Asura added with a chuckle. “So I’m really enjoying my current life. I’m glad, from the bottom of my heart, that I died back then.”

In one of the Rasdia Kingdom’s many cities, Marx and the other members of Moon Blossom were crowded together in the room of the inn they’d booked.

“I’m soooo glad you found little Asura!” exclaimed Elna, who’d managed to meet with them again.

“I knew that you had lots of time on your hands,” Jyrki laughed. “How was your meetin’ with the Great Heroes?”

“I dunno,” Elna replied with a tilt of her head. “Axel hasn’t come back yet, after all. When he does, he’ll send us a messenger pigeon telling us alllll about what they decided in the end.”

“I see,” Marx said from his usual spot against the wall. “So if the founder really is a hero, it’ll be possible to strip them of their title?”

“If they really are killing or ordering the killing of little girls, then of course!”

“Is kidnapping them not bad enough?” Reko asked.

“There’s no rule forbidding heroes from kidnapping,” Elna explained. “Most people don’t kidnap little kids, even if there’s no explicit law against it. And you must remember that we’re in Rasdia right now. It’s hard to say if kidnapping is even illegal here.”

“Yes, I agree,” Salume said. “If the cult is paying all of their taxes, then I’m sure that they won’t be found guilty under this place’s legal system.”

“Well, in any case, the cult has to regularly replenish its stock of little girls, so it seems obvious that they’re murdering them,” Elna continued. “If all you want is to strip this hero of their title and privileges, then it’s certainly possible! The problem is that it might take a while if we have to ask heroes from another region.”

“That’s why Boss wants you to defend her after she kills the founder,” Marx said. “So, can you? The boss is usually the type of person who doesn’t care if her enemy is a hero, but we’re in the middle of a conflict with Jeanne right now. The last thing we need is more trouble.”

Killing a hero would only result in the other heroes marking you as their enemy. This was because murdering them was considered a crime, one of the many privileges they enjoyed. Since heroes risked their lives to protect the world, they enjoyed a vast number of benefits and they didn’t go easy on anyone who would dare to try and break these rules. Granted, this didn’t apply to everyone. Elna, for example, was the type of person who would judge based on the situation whether or not a hero deserved protection.

“Don’t worry about it!” she said. “No one has *ever* heard of a hero kidnapping girls and offering them as human sacrifices before. This is absoluuuutely vile! It’s the worst scandal I can think of. Just hearing about it makes me want to throw up! So I’ll definitely do my part in defending Moon Blossom, even if you kill this hero before we can take away their title!”

“Good. Then we have nothing left to worry about,” Marx replied with a slight nod. “Let’s go over the boss’s orders.”

“This will be a covert operation,” Salume started.

“So we can’t let anyone, especially the military police, notice what we’re doing,” Reko followed.

“Leave three alive and one of them’s gotta be Ada Kuula,” Jyrki finished. “Easy peasy. Marx, give us our roles.”

“Before I do that,” Marx said as he glanced at Iris sitting on the floor, “what about you? Do you plan on participating in this operation?”

Iris wasn’t a member of Moon Blossom, but more like a student or an apprentice. To be more precise, she was the group’s student or apprentice, not just Asura’s, so she had no obligation to accompany them on this mission.

“You plan on killing them all, don’t you?” Iris said. “I can’t do that.”

She looked uncomfortable, as if she dearly wished that Moon Blossom would forgo the planned murders. But because she was well aware of her position in

the group, she couldn't voice her hesitation. After all, Iris wasn't a member of Moon Blossom, nor was she even a guest.

"Will you participate if your role doesn't involve any killing?" Marx asked. "But remember that this isn't a hired job. We won't be paying you for your help."

"Huh? Er, well, yes. I want to be a soldier-mage too, so if I can avoid murdering anyone, then I'd love to participate."

Asura and the other members of the group had every intention of teaching Iris all there was to know about being a soldier-mage. But it was ultimately Iris's call as to whether she used these techniques. They would teach her the best methods to kill someone, but she didn't necessarily have to use them.

"Hmm. How about you, Elna?" Marx said.

"Why in the world would I participate? I'm a guest, you knooow?" Elna sighed from her chair, slumping her shoulders slightly as if exasperated at the question.

"I see. I ask only because I thought you had too much free time on your hands and didn't know what to do with it. Very well, Iris, Salume: find two random cultists and take them prisoner. Whoever finds Ada Kuula first will be in charge of grabbing her." Everyone in Moon Blossom already knew what Ada looked like since they took the opportunity to study up on their enemies while researching the cult's location. "Jyrki and I will assassinate the cultists. We'll kill them so fast, they won't even have time to raise the alarm. If I recall, there are around twenty of them, yes?"

"Yeah, but...when I infiltrated them...I don't think I saw them all," Iina said, tilting her head to the side. "Sneaking in...was my top priority..."

"Understood," Marx replied. "We can account for any minor discrepancies in their numbers on our end. Iris, Salume, make sure you work to keep the prisoners silent too." Upon seeing Iris and Salume nod in response, Marx continued, "Reko and Iina, I'd like you two to be in charge of rescuing the boss and the other silver-haired girl. If you run into any cultists on the way, then dispatch them immediately."

“All right...”

“Okay!”

“We’ll start the operation after the cultists fall asleep. Since there’s always the chance they’ll have guards awake, we’ll bring bows with us so we can eliminate them without any fuss. Elna, will you join us?”

“Oh, yes, I’d looove to see how you all work,” Elna replied with a smile and a nod.

“Very well. But I’d like you to stay near the exit. If anyone tries to escape, please keep them there. We’ll handle the killing.”

“Um, excuuuuse me? Why are you giving me a job?! Didn’t I say I was a guest?”

“I thought I’d be able to exploit the flow of the conversation and assign you a role, but I guess that plan was a bust,” Marx sighed. “Iris and Salume, after you get your prisoners, I’d like you to position yourselves at the exit. Do not let *anyone* escape. That’s it from me. Anyone have any questions?”

Marx looked around the gathered mercenaries. Jyrki shook his head and raised his arms—it was a no from him. Since Iina mirrored Jyrki’s movements, she didn’t have anything to say either. Salume shook her head and Reko muttered, “Not really.” Iris’s face was taut with nerves, but she said nothing.

“All right then,” Marx said. “Get plenty of rest, everyone. Three hours after sunset, pack everything you need and meet up in front of the inn.”

Part Five, Chapter Seven: If you can't torture me, then go to hell. I don't need any useless lumps.

After Asura and Ilmari finished their simple dinners, the nuns stripped them, then carefully washed them. During this time, Ada explored Asura's body in a way that was less than innocent, and Asura couldn't help but feel a little disgusted. Her body was so young that it still didn't quite understand sexual pleasure. Though she loved to make suggestive jokes and touch others in an inappropriate way, that was for amusement rather than for sexual gratification. At least, she wasn't getting any sexual gratification *yet*.

Several hours had passed since then and Ilmari had drifted off to sleep, her breathing slow and steady. Just like before, Asura was chained up.

"I'd say there's around two hours left," Asura murmured to herself, referring to when her mercenaries would likely launch their attack. Then she heard the telltale sound of footsteps coming towards her cell. "That's Ada."

She was very familiar with Ada's footsteps, thanks to how often she had heard the sound and seen Ada walk. There was no mistaking it. The footsteps stopped in front of the cell and Asura looked up to see that it really was Ada standing there. Ada unlocked the door and walked in. Thanks to the torches in the hallway, it wasn't completely dark inside so when Asura looked up at her, she had a clear image of Ada staring right back.

"What do you want?" Asura asked. "I've been a good girl in here."

"I yearn," Ada said in a flat tone.

"For what?"

"Ever since *she* educated me, I've found myself unable to reach climax unless I'm with another woman."

"Huh. That's probably some form of mental conditioning. Unless you were originally into women, you'll be able to go back to men in time. Do you prefer muscular hotties or skinny hotties? Would you like me to throw in a crazy kid as

a bonus?" Asura chuckled. But in lieu of answering Asura's question, Ada started to strip off her nun's habit. "Whoa, hold on a second. When you said that you yearned for another woman, you meant you wanted *me* to do something about it?" Upon seeing Ada's firm nod, Asura continued. "Come on now. I may be pretty, but I'm only thirteen years old. And look, I'm even way smaller than your average thirteen-year-old. Don't tell me you're a pedophile?" Asura huffed out a small laugh. "Just so you know, when I said I was smaller, I didn't mean my breasts. I meant everything about me."

Ada still refused to answer. She kicked off her underwear, uncaring of how it fell to the ground. She glanced over at Ilmari, who was still deep asleep. However, Ilmari was lying very close to where Asura was; there was a very high possibility that she'd wake up if Ada started moaning.

"Why don't you go sleep with the other nuns?" Asura asked. "Why *me*?"

"You said it yourself, didn't you?" Ada laughed. "You're pretty. I wish to make pretty girls cry out in pleasure. Besides, where's the fun in sleeping with women you're used to?"

"Ha! What, do you all engage in orgies or something? Such a stereotypical cult." Asura's shoulders shook slightly as she laughed. Ada stalked forwards and punched Asura in the face. "Did you misspeak when you said you wanted me to cry out? Don't you mean you want to make me cry, complete with tears and all?"

"We are *not* a cult. The Order of Humanity's Dusk is a holy organization that our leader founded to help with Mistress Jeanne's mission of salvation."

"In other words, it's a cult. You're insane."

"Tsk!" Ada gritted her teeth and once again struck Asura across the cheek. Blood dripped from the corner of Asura's mouth from where she accidentally bit her lip.

"If it's not a cult, then tell me what you mean by 'salvation.'"

"It's a new world order."

"Oh? Do you mean your cult will reform the law based on your own ideals?"

“Our goddess, Mistress Jeanne, grieves over the current state of this world and has decided to remake it.”

“I don’t quite understand. It’s not as if *Jeanne* created it in the first place.”

“That’s correct. The evil god Zoya created this accursed place, but Mistress Jeanne will correct it.”

Ada rested her hand against Asura’s cheek and slowly drew in closer. The moment Ada’s wet tongue lapped away the blood from Asura’s face, Asura felt a shiver of disgust down her spine. She kept her face as neutral as possible though, refusing to let Ada see her reaction.

“An evil god, you say?” Asura said, putting the pieces together. “If I recall, Zoya has silver hair, correct? They’re the god of silver, after all. Does that mean that you lot will treat Ilmari and me as Zoya’s substitutes? I suppose that we’ll be tortured to death, then.”

“Are we done with the talking?” Ada dropped down to her knees and started to pull at Asura’s clothes.

“No, we’re not. I’ll decide who I sleep with. Sure, I prefer girls, and you’re not the ugliest person around. If I were still my past self, then I probably wouldn’t have minded sleeping with you. But I don’t want to right now.”

“You have no right to choose.” Ada’s hand brushed against Asura’s chest.

But Asura didn’t respond. She’d never been the kind of person who reacted to people touching her chest and besides, Reko groped her all the time now. He even had the nerve to complain about how flat Asura was while grabbing at her.

“I don’t have a sex drive yet,” Asura pointed out. “This just tickles.”

“It’ll feel good soon.”

“Did someone tell you that when *you* were still a young girl?” As soon as Asura asked the question, Ada froze. “I see now. I suppose you were raped when you were around thirteen? That means it would’ve happened ten years ago. When you were around my age, right? You’re not a pedophile. You’re just reenacting your own trauma.”

Ada’s expression twisted and she uttered a low growl as she pulled her hand

out from Asura's clothes. But Asura wasn't finished yet.

"Did an older nun touch you after you entered the convent? Those habits aren't cult uniforms. They're the real deal, aren't they? All of you seem like actual nuns. Do you all hail from the same convent?"

Half of Asura's questions were mere guesses. It wasn't as if she had concrete proof. As she said, they only *seemed* like legitimate nuns.

"Shut up," Ada snarled. "Don't you *dare* bad-mouth my mistress."

"I don't believe I'm saying *anything* negative," Asura sighed with a small shake of her head. "You're so off-kilter that you're not even pretending to be cordial anymore. You look pretty funny right now, you know? Standing there naked and in a tizzy."

"Stop talking." Ada's fist dug deep into Asura's abdomen.

"This hurts quite a bit," Asura giggled. "You learned martial arts, didn't you? I'm guessing you know how to handle some sort of weapon too, of course. Ah, and your mistress, or should I say 'founder,' was an older nun? So she's a female hero. Hmm, you know, I can think of a certain someone who fits all of the criteria."

A female hero who hailed from a monastery and had a taste for other women? Only one person fit the bill.

"Ahh, me and my big mouth. My stupid, foolish big mouth." Ada shook her head, gripping at her hair with both hands.

"Was your first time really that scary?" Asura hummed. "Was it because you were still innocent? Oh wait. You're *still* scared, aren't you? Is it because you'll get punished if you resist?"

Most victims of long-term abuse, whether physical, emotional, or sexual, tended to feel weak and worthless. They could even become akin to an obedient puppet. *It's a similar case with Salume*, Asura mused. In the end, the only reason Salume became a mercenary was to overcome her sense of powerlessness. She wanted to become someone of value as a response to her own sense of worthlessness.

“I would never resist. I would never go against Mistress Noemi,” Ada said in a feverish voice, her hands clasped before her chest. She looked and acted like she was trying to offer a prayer.

“Noemi Clapisson. Pieces of shit like her never change, no matter where they live or what jobs they hold,” Asura scoffed in a cold voice. “Would you like me to set you free?”

“There is no freedom for someone like me!” Ada screamed, glaring down at her.

“I’m assuming you believed in Noemi’s goddess because Noemi told you to. I doubt you truly believe in Jeanne’s salvation. I mean, come on, remake the world? Ha, what a joke.”

In response to Asura’s words, Ada shook her head so violently that her hair whipped against her cheeks. “I believe in it. Of course I do! I will live and die for Mistress Noemi, so I will believe in the Mistress Jeane that Mistress Noemi believes in!”

“It’s hard to believe you when you look like you’re about to burst into tears. You’re simply scared of Noemi. I can set you free, you know? I can remove Noemi’s curse from you,” Asura chuckled and Ada twitched back. “Come on, close your eyes. I’ll grant you your freedom. You’ve already lived your life for Noemi. That’s more than enough. You don’t need to die for her.”

However, Ada’s eyes remained open.

“Fine. But remember this. You won’t die for Noemi’s sake. You’ll die because I wanted to kill you.”

Asura snapped her fingers. In the next second, Ada’s head flew off her shoulders. Asura had used the attack spell, Mines. The magic itself was not very powerful; a single flower petal only contained enough power to blow off a person’s head. Yet it was more than enough. A human couldn’t live without their head, after all. Blood and flesh scattered around the room, and Ilmari shot up, wide awake.

“You’re free now, Ada. Good for you. You can thank me all you want in hell. Don’t worry, I won’t request any money from you,” Asura said in a flat voice.

Ilmari looked around and screamed when she saw the headless corpse on the ground.

“Oops, sorry, Mari. I didn’t mean for you to see such a grotesque sight. I hope that it won’t traumatize you.”

Ilmari wasn’t listening though. Still screaming, she scrambled to the far corner of the underground cell and crouched, holding her head in her hands.

“I’m really sorry, Mari,” Asura laughed. “I honestly planned on getting you home without damaging your psyche. Heh, but I’m quite fickle, you see. You’ll have to overcome the shock of seeing a headless corpse yourself.”

That was when several nuns ran in, skidding to a halt in front of the cell. The sound of the explosion had been fairly quiet, so they must’ve heard Ilmari’s screams after she saw the body. Since they were underground, the screams likely didn’t travel outside of the building.

“Sister Ada?!”

“What happened?!”

The panicked nuns were yelling, attracting more and more of them.

“Oh, how interesting. She doesn’t have her head anymore, yet all of you instantly recognized her as Ada. I see she wasn’t lying about sleeping with all of you.”

It meant that the nuns were able to recognize Ada from her body alone. No more arrived at the scene, so Ilmari’s cries had ultimately summoned five nuns to the cell.

“Were you the one who killed her?!”

“Let’s take her to the torture room!”

One of the nuns grabbed Asura’s hair, her face dark with fury. Another one unlocked the chain tying her to the ground. They dragged Asura out of the cell and took her into another room. Despite their anger at the sudden murder, they still remembered to lock the cell door so that Ilmari couldn’t escape in the confusion.

“Ha, what a nice, cultish room,” Asura commented.

The room the nuns took her to was filled with tools that were obviously instruments of torture. They all looked heavily used as well. Asura guessed that they must've been for punishing anyone who broke the rules.

"Are you the one who killed Sister Ada?!"

"I am. So what?" Asura laughed. Just the thought of what might happen to her sent shivers down her spine. One of the nuns punched Asura across the cheek and another one joined in on the violence. "Oh, come on now. You have the opportunity to use all of these fine tools, so take it. I guarantee it'll be more fun that way."

It wasn't exhilarating at all to be punched by someone's bare fist. It was one thing if it was someone like Axel, who was strong enough to kill Asura if he didn't hold himself back. It was another thing when it was a group of nuns. They were so weak that they couldn't even knock her out. One of the nuns held out her arm, stopping the others' flurry of punches and kicks.

"Good, good. Now we're getting somewhere. Let's see..." Asura looked around the room. "Whips are a bit too orthodox, so why don't we try that soldering iron over there?" Nothing in the room was capable of killing someone. It was ultimately just a room for punishment. "Needles don't sound too shabby either. Oh, is that over there the famous wooden horse I hear so much about? I'd love to try it. May we start with that?" Asura asked, genuine excitement lacing her tone. "I've never seen some of these tools before. I have no idea what they do, so let's take the chance to try them all! I'm sure at least one of them will make me cry. If it does, I'll take it with me when I leave so I can use it for torture resistance training."

Asura didn't notice it, but all of the nuns were terrified and shivering at the sheer cruelty in Asura's smile.

"When you normally make use of this room, I assume you must hold yourselves back. But you won't need to with me. Do your best. Torture me like you're trying to kill me." But no matter how long Asura waited, none of the nuns replied to her. She tilted her head. "Hmm? What's the matter? Hurry up. We don't have much time."

Moon Blossom was on its way.

“W-We can wait until the leader arrives to tell us what to do,” one of the nuns suggested, her expression tight.

“We’ll just tie her up here a-and wait for tomorrow’s orders,” another agreed, her face equally pale.

“Ah, sorry, was I smiling?” Asura said. “I’m such a pretty girl, and yet every time I smile, everyone reacts the way you do. I wonder why. Don’t worry, I simply want to enjoy myself. I won’t fight back, nor will I kill any of you. It’s not as if any of you will live for much longer anyway though.”

There was no need for Asura to kill them since Moon Blossom would. She had already given them their orders and they would surely carry them through. The nuns remained frozen, as if petrified.

“Humph. You raised my expectations and this is all you’ve got?” Asura snorted. All of the excitement from earlier was gone. “What a damn bore. I’m tired of simply sitting around all tied up.” Ever since the mercenary group Flame captured her, she’d been on her best behavior. Her stress levels were about to go through the roof. She’d been in such a good mood precisely because she thought she’d finally found an outlet. “You know what? I’m done with this. I changed my mind. All of you, die, right now. If you can’t be of any use to me, then go to hell. I’m through with playing nice.”

Part Five, Chapter Eight: Do you like surprise parties? Well, even if you don't, we'll throw you one.

There was no one standing guard in front of the Order of Humanity's Dusk's headquarters. On second thought though, it would have been stranger if there had been. Placing a guard at the door was like advertising to the world that this was some sort of important facility. At least, that was how Reko considered it.

Jyrki picked the front door's lock and pushed it open, careful not to make a sound. The mercenaries of Moon Blossom, including Reko, slid in through the opening. After confirming that Elna had brought up the rear of the group, Jyrki walked inside as well. As soon as Marx made a hand signal, they split up, each prepared to carry out their given task. Reko's job was to go with Iina to rescue the boss and the other silver-haired girl who'd been kidnapped.

Iina gestured for Reko to follow her, which he obeyed with a wordless nod. They quickly but silently descended the stairs leading to the basement. After passing several cells, Iina signaled for Reko to stop. Inside of the cell they were in front of, there was a headless corpse and a silver-haired girl trembling in the corner.

After unlocking the door, Iina ordered Reko to take the girl into custody before she continued onward. Reko entered the cell and looked down at the corpse. Since it was completely naked, he felt like he'd lucked out a little. Then he made his way to the frightened girl.

"You okay? I'm here to rescue you. Where's the boss?" Reko asked in a quiet voice. However, the girl didn't respond. She merely continued to shake.

"Where's Asura Lyona?" Reko tried again, assuming that the girl didn't know who he meant. But still, the girl remained silent. "Hey, look at me." He reached out and touched the girl's shoulder.

"Eek!"

"It's all right now. Was Boss—I mean, was Asura Lyona the one who killed

that person there?”

Reko asked the question knowing full well the answer. There was no way this little girl could've done something that brutal.

“I'm scared,” she whimpered. “I'm so scared.” She broke down into sobs once more. It was clear that she was in no condition for a conversation.

Growing more and more irritated by the second, Reko said, “Listen to me. I won't do anything to you. I was told to rescue you.”

If the order didn't imply her safety, then Reko would've already punched her and dragged her out of the cell. However, his job was to help her, not frighten her into compliance. It would mean more work for him, but it was probably better if he convinced her to cooperate.

“I'm pretty sure that everyone who kidnapped you has already died, so it's all right,” he said, pitching his voice low and gentle. “Stand up. You don't seem injured, so I'm assuming you can walk, right?” Perhaps it was due to how kind he now sounded, but the girl's whimpers tapered off. “Ah, I'm Reko, by the way. Reko Lyona. Since I'll be Boss's husband in the future, I figured I'd take her name.”

Granted, he hadn't asked Asura for permission before doing so.

“Sh-She died... Her head... It's gone...”

“Yeah, so?” Reko asked, tilting his head to the side. The girl didn't reply, too busy wiping at her face with her arms. “My family got eaten up by monsters, and now I don't really care if other people die. According to Boss, I'm broken and I've lost the ability to feel certain emotions. So I don't understand what you're feeling right now. By the way, what's your name?” Reko made sure to smile at the end.

“I'm Ilmari.”

“Cool. All right, get up, Ilmari. We're going to get out of the cell now. I'll hold your hand, so you can close your eyes if you want.” Reko offered her his right hand and after a moment's hesitation, Ilmari took it.

“How many did you kill?” Marx asked.

“Seven. You?” Jyrki replied.

The two of them had gone into virtually every room and ruthlessly killed every person they’d seen.

“Seven as well. The numbers aren’t matching up. Are the rest of them in the basement?”

“Maybe. In that case, I’ll take care of ’em.”

“Hmm. I’ll take a look downstairs, just in case. Jyrki, keep an eye out for Iris and the others. I’m sure they’ll be fine, but you never know.”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Jyrki replied, raising his hand in acknowledgment as Marx headed for the stairs.

Jyrki stretched before he ambled towards the room that Iris and Salume were in. As soon as he entered, he saw that they’d already tied up a nun and left her on the ground. Salume was in the middle of tying up another one, and since Iris was standing over her and threatening her with a sword, the nun was cooperating without fuss.

“Heyo,” Jyrki greeted with a smile. “Good work.”

Iris looked up at him, a complicated expression on her face, and said, “I don’t really like how we attacked them at night.”

“You want to become a soldier-mage, don’t you?” Salume pointed out. “Night attacks are a basic strategy of ours. My first battle was at night too. All right, mission accomplished!” With that, she kicked the bound nun, knocking her over.

“Whoa, Salume. Didn’t know you had such a violent streak,” Jyrki commented.

“She was putting up such a fight! I got a little peeved.”

“The one who was resisting was the one already tied up when Jyrki walked in,” Iris sighed. “I knocked her out with the flat of my blade.”

“Ahh, I see.” Jyrki said. “I didn’t hear a thing. Did you knock her out that

quickly?”

“Miss Iris is really strong! Not that I ever doubted that, of course,” Salume gushed. “The second the nun tried to do something, Iris knocked her down. It happened so quickly. This one here surrendered to us afterwards.”

“So she gave up on fightin’ after seein’ how much stronger you two were? Wait, Salume, doesn’t that mean you kicked the one that didn’t even try to resist?” Jyrki asked. However, Salume didn’t respond. “You don’t gotta hide it from us, you know? We already know what happened.”

“I suppose you’re right. Then, yes. I kicked her because I felt like it.”

“Well, Lumia ain’t around anymore, so no one’s gonna care. Just make sure you don’t do that if you’re ever ordered to capture someone unharmed.”

Salume had spent almost her entire life as a victim. But somewhere down the line, she’d shifted to wanting to stand on the other side—on the side of the aggressors. Jyrki had noticed this change in her. Of course, Salume didn’t want to hurt just anybody. She only wanted to hurt human scum. *No one’s really talked about it, but I’m pretty sure everyone knows about this side of her*, Jyrki mused.

“I understand,” Salume said. “Miss Iris and I will go guard the exit now. We just need to make sure no one gets out, right?”

“Yep. And make sure you don’t let anyone in either. I’m gonna go check out what’s goin’ on downstairs, so I’ll leave it to you two.” With that, Jyrki waved at them and left the room.

“Boss, what are you doing?” Iina asked with a small smile on her face.

She’d discovered Asura in the farthest room down a hallway lined with cells. The moment she stepped inside, she knew that this room was usually used for torture. The walls were covered with tools and instruments for it, after all. There was a pile of corpses—all nuns—on the ground as well. Iina could tell that Asura had killed them with Mines; all of them were missing body parts.

“As you can see, I’m riding on the wooden horse,” Asura replied brightly.

“It looks...like it hurts.”

“Well, yes. It does hurt. I didn’t expect putting my entire weight on my crotch to be so painful. Maybe it’s because I’m not wearing anything underneath this, so I’m sitting directly on the wood. In any case, the pain’s not so bad that it’ll instantly knock me out or anything.”

Asura had already removed her shackles and manacles. Her white dress was stained with blood, though it wasn’t hers. It was from the nuns.

“You’ve been on this...the whole time?” Iina asked, scrunching her face up.

“Yep. I wanted to see if I could endure the pain until you all showed up. I guess I can,” Asura replied. “Oh, that reminds me. I accidentally killed Ada Kuula. There was a corpse in the cell I was in, wasn’t there? That was her.”

“Yeah... There was a body... But, um, aren’t you coming down from there, Boss?”

“I will in a bit. I’ve gotten pretty tired of this.” Despite her saying that, Asura still looked and sounded like she was enjoying herself.

Iina’s mouth twitched. She was well aware of what kind of person Asura was, but seeing the way she acted never failed to creep her out a little.

“Wow, little Asura. I didn’t know you were a maaasochist!” Elna exclaimed from the open door as she slowly walked in. Iina hadn’t even noticed her arrival.

“I’m not,” Asura said. “This has nothing to do with sexual desires. At least not yet. Actually, I don’t think it changes anything even if it does. In any case, you’re hardly one to talk, sneaking up on us like that.”

“I concealed my presence as a precaution! You said it was a covert operation,” Elna replied with a light shrug.

“Boss, is that fun?” Reko asked, poking his head in through the door with his hand still holding Ilmari’s.

“Do you want to sit on this, Reko?” Asura asked. “The pain is quite impressive, though not enough to make you wail or scream.”

“I think...that’s just you, Boss... I think other people...would cry,” Iina said, her

expression still stiff.

“Maybe I’ll give it a try,” Reko hummed. “But only if I get to sit behind you.”

“No. You’ll probably try to grab my breasts, so if you want to sit on this thing, do it by yourself.” Asura placed both hands on the wooden horse and pushed herself up. She swung her leg behind her as she slid off the contraption. “Ow. You know, it actually hurts quite a bit.” She giggled as she landed on the ground.

“Boss, you’re looking nice and beat-up today too.” Reko laughed. “Is that, like, your new kink?”

Asura’s body and face were covered in wounds and bruises. “Pretty much,” she said, responding to Reko. “I’m the type of person whose mood improves after receiving some damage.”

“You usually get really excited...even when you’re unscathed,” lina muttered.

“Oh, I see. So the boss was the one who killed all the remaining nuns.” This time, it was Marx who said that, walking up from behind Reko.

“Ah, oops. I was feeling a little stressed and I suppose I lost control. Sorry about that, but I’d do it again,” Asura replied with an exaggerated shrug.

“Well, that’s fine,” Marx said. “The only person who’s still missing is Ada Kuula.”

“I already killed her. So, how’s the rest of the plan coming along, Marx? Or, should I say, Vice Captain?”

“It’s coming along well.”

“That’s good to hear. Let’s stay here for the night. Between lining up the bodies and questioning the hostages, we won’t want for entertainment,” Asura said, her mouth twisting in a cruel smile.

The next morning, Noemi was standing in front of the headquarters for the Oath of Humanity’s Dusk, an organization she’d founded. She’d left the horse she’d ridden in the barn and was wearing her usual nun’s habit, with the hood pulled up to hide her face. A small and unfamiliar nun was standing at the

entrance. Like Noemi, she was hiding her face with her hood.

“Are you new here?” Noemi asked as she approached her.

Lately, she’d been leaving a lot of the organization’s management, including recruiting new followers, in Ada’s hands. So this wasn’t the first time that she’d dropped by only to be greeted by a stranger.

“Do I look good in this?” the little nun asked as she removed her hood.

She was so beautiful that Noemi found herself taking a step back, feeling lightheaded. “An unparalleled beauty” was the only phrase she could use to describe the girl in front of her. However, Noemi quickly realized that this exquisite girl had silver hair. Considering the Order viewed the god of silver Zoya as evil, they would never accept a silver-haired girl into its ranks. Even more damning than that was the stench of blood. She reeked of it.

“Are you Asura Lyona?” Noemi asked. That was the first person she could think of with the description of “a beautiful girl with silver hair.”

Asura giggled. “That disguise didn’t last very long, did it? Well, whatever. Dear Founder, why don’t we step inside? We’ve prepared a surprise party just for you.”

Unlike the sweet one earlier, the smile now adorning Asura’s face was hideous. A frigid sensation ran down Noemi’s spine and she felt cold sweat break out upon her brow. *What’s wrong with her? She smiles just like the supernatural disaster—a Demon Lord.* Noemi tensed in preparation for the fight. She was unarmed at the moment, but she hadn’t become a Great Hero for nothing. She could fight fairly well even with her bare hands.

“Oh, come now. There’s no need to be so on guard. Here, look at me.” As Asura said that, she snapped her fingers.

Noemi immediately prepared herself to dodge a spell, but nothing happened. After a moment, she said, “I thought you used magic, but did you not?”

“You can’t sense when magic has been activated, can you? The only people who can do that have some experience with it, or have exceptionally good instincts.”

“Humph. I dodge magic after I see it coming. Avoiding spells is a technique so basic that even a hero candidate is capable of it.”

“Oh yes, I figured. On the other hand though, that means that you have no way of avoiding magic if you *can't* see it. Well, whatever. In any case, just come inside. Here, does this make you feel better?” Asura turned around, showing her back to Noemi.

She looks like she's completely let her guard down. Would I be able to tackle her to the ground? No, but wait. Noemi narrowed her eyes as she reconsidered her plan. *Both Axel and Lumia had nothing but high praise for this girl. I must also consider the fact that Asura, who was supposed to be tied up, is walking around in broad daylight while wearing our clothes. What happened to Ada and the other nuns? Is her letting down her guard like this a trap?*

Noemi desperately wanted to enter the headquarters. She wanted to figure out what happened inside, as well as retrieve a spear. It was the weapon she was the most proficient with. It would be too suspicious for a nun to be walking around with a polearm in hand, and Noemi didn't want to risk anyone recognizing her. That was why she was here empty-handed and with a hood over her head.

“You're far too careful, Miss Founder,” Asura laughed. “I'm not going to kill you yet, so stop worrying so much.”

Noemi felt the blood rush to her head at those words. “Get over yourself, you little brat. Do you have any idea who you're dealing with?”

Saying “I'm not going to kill you yet” to Noemi, a Great Hero? Did this kid seriously think she was capable of killing Noemi in the first place? *I'll teach you not to look down on me*, Noemi wanted to snarl.

“You're Noemi Clapisson, a Great Hero from Central Felsen. See? I know perfectly well who you are. Now come inside.”

“Humph. If you think that I am on the same level as that old fool Axel, then today will be the last day you draw breath.”

“All right, all right already,” Asura said, sounding annoyed as she pushed open the door. “Come on. If you're not scared, then follow me.” With that, she

walked inside the building.

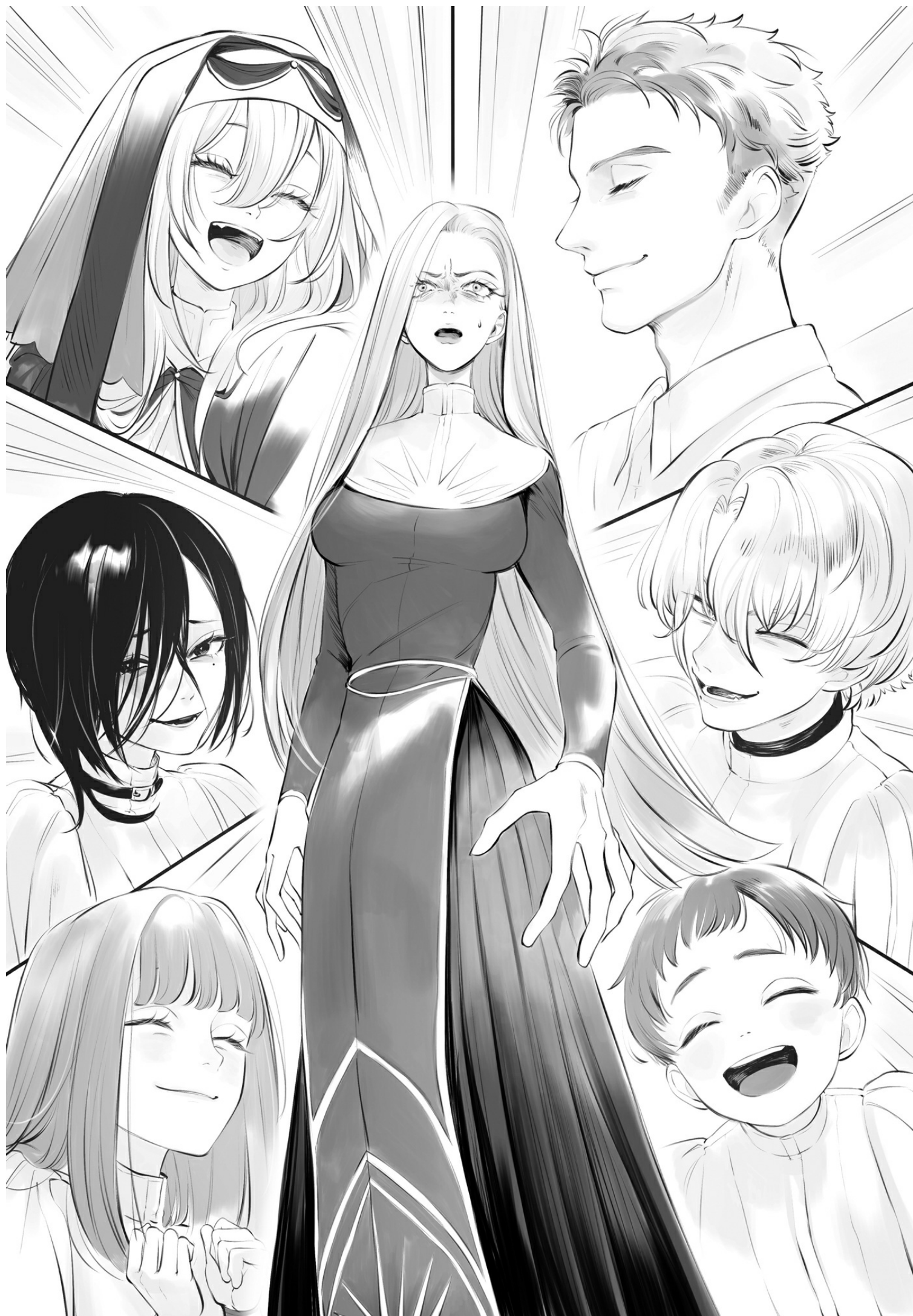
“Don’t underestimate me. If push comes to shove, I can easily kill someone your size with my bare hands,” Noemi snapped, pushing off her hood as she followed Asura.

The two of them walked into the spacious room that the Order usually used for its meetings. That was where Noemi saw it.

“Is this your doing, you bastards?” she growled.

She saw the corpses of her nuns, organized in perfectly straight rows.

“Surprise!” Asura and the other members of Moon Blossom exclaimed, ecstatic grins on their faces.



Part Five, Chapter Nine: Today, I take the first step on my path to make magic history.

Noemi had completely frozen up in the face of Asura's surprise. Before her lay almost twenty corpses, all lined up in perfectly separated rows, filling the room with the stench of death and blood. She'd never seen a more abnormal sight. *And the most abnormal thing in this room is that psychopath, Asura Lyona, who can keep smiling even in the face of all this gore,* thought Noemi.

Upon seeing Noemi's reaction, Asura and the other members of Moon Blossom started feeling quite jubilant. The people present in the entranceway were Asura, the members of Moon Blossom, Elna, Iris, the two nuns that they'd captured alive, and Noemi. Ilmari was no longer in the building, as Elna had transported her to the military police's headquarters the night before. Though the military police of the Rasdia Kingdom were a lazy bunch, they wouldn't dare refuse a child brought to them by the Great Hero Elna, nor would they treat her with any disrespect.

Speaking of the two nuns who still drew breath, they were kneeling in the corner of the room, racked with shudders. Asura and the others had already gotten all the information they wanted out of the pair.

"It's alllll over for you now, Noemi," Elna said. "We won't harm you if you come with us without a fight. There's a lot we'd like to hear from you, such as what you know about Jeanne."

They already knew that there was a connection between Noemi and Jeanne, and that the cult was actually a group that served to enact Jeanne's will. Or to be more precise, it used to serve her name.

"Elna Heikkila? I see." Noemi huffed out a small laugh. "So you're Asura's backer. No wonder she's been getting ahead of herself. Humph, well, the jig is up and I can't say I'm too impressed by it."

"Oh? I didn't do aaaanything," Elna replied, holding out her hands as if to

proclaim her innocence.

“Don’t bullshit me. It’s over for *you*, I should say,” Noemi hissed, shooting daggers at Elna. “I don’t know what you intend on doing with those mercenaries, but I know you were the one who ordered this massacre!”

“Oh dear, now I’m being accused of masterminding all of this? Whatever shall I do? I didn’t do ~~aaa~~anything except watch it happen.”

“Ya know,” Jyrki interrupted, “you and your whole group deserve to be killed. You got any clue how serious your crimes are?”

“He’s right,” Iina said with a firm nod. “You tortured and killed...so many girls...”

“And you did all that while forcing them to act as idols for a god,” Iris exclaimed, her voice dark with fury. “Asura and her group are scum, but you’re even worse.”

“To tell the truth, thinking about what you and your cult have done makes me sick.” Marx’s expression twisted. “Those two over there told us everything. It’s hard to believe that anyone could be so cruel and depraved.”

The nuns’ description of how they used the kidnapped girls would make a normal person faint on the spot.

“You tried to do that to Boss too,” Reko said. “Actually, imagining it makes me pretty excited. But you need to go to hell.”

“Binding a group together through a shared crime, as well as using fear to exercise control over them,” Asura hummed. “It’s a common tactic used by third-rate villains. I’m talking about you when I say that, Noemi. By the way, I had those two tell us where you buried all the bodies. You won’t be able to run away from your crimes.”

“Humph, so what? Do you believe a few lectures will make me repent? Mistress Jeanne is the only god for us and we have no need for the god of silver. To hammer that lesson into the acolytes, I had them kill girls who acted as substitutes for Zoya. But what does that matter? I suppose that my title will be taken away, but I have no attachment to my position as a Great Hero. I only became one because it was convenient for carrying out my work under Mistress

Jeanne's name. But after you strip my title, who will carry out my judgment? Will it be you lot? If I had my spear, I could impale every single one of you in a heartbeat."

Noemi was staring at her weapon which Asura and the others had carted into the room beforehand. They'd figured that it was Noemi's and so were extra careful with how they handled it, making sure to give it the proper respect when they tossed it onto the ground.

"Well, you heard her," Asura said, shrugging her shoulders. "Hey, Salume. Hand her her weapon."

"Yes, Boss." Salume picked up the spear and walked towards Noemi. Then she offered it to her with both hands. "Here you go."

"Ha ha ha! You bastards have greatly underestimated my power! Do you believe you can win simply because Elna is on your side? Do you *truly* believe that an archer like Elna can exert her full strength *indoors*?!"

The moment Noemi took the spear from Salume, she spun it in her hand and lashed out. The lower part of the shaft, close to the butt end of the spear, caught Salume in her side as Noemi swung it in an upward arc. Salume flew through the air, her small body thrown by the force of the attack. However, she was able to tuck into a roll and immediately get back onto her feet.

"Hey, that hurt," Salume said, tears in her eyes.

"Oh? You moved in the direction of my attack? I shouldn't have expected anything less from a mercenary, I'll give you that. Of course, I only exerted a fraction of my strength," Noemi chuckled.

The moment that the spear shaft connected with Salume, she'd jumped away. It had only *looked* like Noemi had thrown her a great distance.

"Yup, Salume's coming along very well," Asura said, nodding. Her mental state had greatly improved as well. Any day now, they could have her lose her virginity and score her first kill.

"Now then, come at me, you weaklings," Noemi said, her voice light with laughter. "I'll kill every single one of you. You'll have all the time in the world to regret how you let down your guard, confident in your numbers, and handed

me back my spear once I send you to hell.”

Though Noemi was in a jolly mood, the members of Moon Blossom were exchanging exasperated looks with each other. None of them readied for battle. Instead, they were shrugging and scoffing, mocking Noemi.

“Oh, come now. Don’t say such foolish things, Noemi,” Asura said, shaking her head in an exaggerated fashion.

“What’s the point of all of us fightin’ someone as weak as *you*?” Jyrki cackled.

“He’s right. I believe you’re operating under some kind of misunderstanding, Noemi,” Marx said. “We will not fight against you.”

“Boss said that she can easily take you down...all by herself. But...is that true? Boss...are you really sure?” Iina asked, a slightly worried frown on her face. She was referring to something Asura had said the previous night, about how she would handle Noemi on her own.

“Yeah, I’m pretty worried too,” Iris said. “Asura’s strong and all, but I don’t think she can put up a fight against a Great Hero.”

“Well, if we’re talking about actual strength, I’m about as powerful as Iris,” Asura said. “If I had to take her in a fair fight, I’d lose seven times out of ten.”

“Noemi’s stronger than Iris, you knooooow? I’m quite worried,” Elna sighed, resting her cheek in the palm of her right hand.

“Boss said that she would be all right, so I believe in her!”

“Yup, that’s right. If Boss says she’s fine, then she’s fine.”

Both Salume and Reko had complete faith in Asura.

“You bastards,” Noemi growled, baring her teeth. “Stop looking down on me.”

“We’re not looking down on you. I would never underestimate the strength of a Great Hero,” Asura said. “I would like to challenge you to a duel. Elna will be our witness. I’m sure you have no objections, right?” Upon hearing Asura volunteer her name, Elna tilted her head to the side with a confused noise. But Asura didn’t look at her, continuing to gaze on Noemi. “I just came up with this idea, but it sounds fun, doesn’t it? If you win, then you can run away from here and none of us will give chase. I’ll even offer myself up as your slave or pet. Do

you have anything else you desire? I promise I'll grant it."

Upon hearing Asura's suggestion, Noemi froze for a few seconds, her eyes wide. Then she burst into raucous laughter. "How terribly amusing! Slim the possibility may be, you have a chance of winning if you all attack me as one. Yet you will throw away that chance? For a duel?! Just where do you get your confidence from?! Elna may be corrupt, but she is still a Great Hero. She will not lift a finger to help you!"

"She's right, little Asura," Elna said, her expression stern. "If this is an official duel, then I will not allow anyone to interfere or assist you. And by the way, I am *not* corrupt!"

"You know, I thought that Asura was bluffing when she said she'd fight on her own. I figured all of you would end up jumping in," Iris admitted, a slightly pinched look on her face.

"Elna not being able to help me is a nonissue. I always intended on defeating her on my own," Asura said, lifting her shoulders in a casual shrug. "Lately, I haven't really been maintaining my dignity as your boss, have I? So I have to show you all why *I'm* the leader of Moon Blossom."

"That ain't true," Jyrki said.

"Boss is...our boss," lina agreed.

"We don't have any complaints, nor do we believe you're unfit to be our leader," Marx added.

"Hmm. I'm not surprised at your support, but to the public, I'm only worth two hundred thousand dora. Not only that, but people think I'm just a figurehead! That's proof enough that I haven't been maintaining my dignity."

"Instead of working on your reputation, you should do something about that flat chest of— AAHHH! OWWW!!!" The moment Reko walked up to Asura to grope her breasts, Asura grabbed his hand and twisted it away from her.

"Control yourself, Reko. We're having a serious discussion right now. You need to learn to read the room. Books and letters aren't the only things you can read, you know?"

“Ow... That hurt, but still pretty exciting,” Reko mumbled as he shook out the pain from the hand Asura had twisted.

“Now then, with the jokes out of the way,” Asura said, her face and voice solemn once more, “Noemi, tell me what you want.”

“Humph. In that case, if I win, I want everyone here aside from Asura to kill themselves on the spot.”

“All right. Let’s go with that.”

“Excuuuuse me?! Who gave you permission to—” Iris started to screech before Marx covered her mouth with his hand.

“Shaddup, Iris,” Jyrki said. “Boss is for real right now, so if you speak outta turn, she just might kill ya. At least pay attention to how she’s changed.”

Under normal circumstances, Asura was pretty soft on Reko. She wouldn’t twist his arm just for touching her breasts.

“And Asura,” Noemi continued, “you will be my slave until I see fit to put you out of your misery. Is that a deal?”

“Of course. Sounds good to me,” Asura replied as she started to stretch.

“This would never happen, but what do you want if you emerge the victor?” Noemi asked. “In a duel, the combatants must inform the witness of their wishes.”

“I don’t have anything in particular that I want. Besides, if I win, that means you’re dead. There’s nothing you can do for me.”

“You can’t kill Noe—”

“Elna,” Iina interrupted. “Shut up...unless you want to be killed first.”

“Humph. I shall crush your unfounded confidence into pieces, fool. Your only advantage over me is your magic, but unlike Axel, I have no intentions of touching any of your petals.”

“Rich to hear you call *me* a fool. Both you and Axel are too used to fighting fairly. I do not *fight* like you two. I only kill. You wouldn’t be able to even touch my shadow.”

“Your bark is impressive. I’ll give you that.”

“I’ve already done the very best that I could. I never once looked down on you or your skill. But you’ve lowered your guard because you think you have the upper hand, so for now, accept this as payback for what you did to Salume.”

Asura snapped her fingers. In the next second, Noemi’s right arm exploded.

She screamed bloody murder, rolling on the ground and clutching at the bloodied, smoking stump. The spear she was so proud of skidded across the ground, the sound of the metal echoing faintly in the room.

“Wait a second, little Asura! I still haven’t given you the signal to—”

“Elna, we already told you to stop yappin’,” Jyrki snapped.

“What kind of people do you take us for?” Marx snorted. “Why would we engage in a duel against a piece of human garbage like her?”

“It was all...just to make her lower her guard...” lina murmured.

“What do you mean by ‘lower her guard’?!” Iris yelled. “What do you *mean* by that?! This is a duel!”

“You still don’t understand?” Salume asked. “A duel is only valid if your opponent is a serious or earnest person.”

“In a duel, you believe that you won’t get attacked until there is a signal, so you’re not expecting anything to happen before then,” Reko added. “People like us, who never play fair, will exploit that.”

“Ha ha, if this had been a normal fight, you surely would have won too! How does it feel, not being able to even mount a counterattack? Now this next one is for all the girls you’ve killed until now!” Asura snapped her fingers again and this time, Noemi’s left arm vanished in a cloud of gore.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Is this magic?!” Elna couldn’t understand why Noemi’s arms were being torn into ribbons. As far as she knew, Asura’s attack magic involved creating flower petals that could explode. Though it was clear that Asura was creating *explosions*, not a single petal was in sight.

“We dunno either,” Jyrki said. “We can tell that she’s usin’ magic, but what’s goin’ on? I got no clue.”

“Take a good look, Iris!” Asura laughed. “This is how we soldier-mages kill! Now then, Noemi, this is for the woman who once went by the name of Jeanne!”

This time, Noemi’s right leg was destroyed. Her screams were inhuman, more akin to the howls of a beast, as she writhed about on the ground. With blood and flesh flailing about every time she moved, she made for a horrific sight.

“Next, we’ll finally—”

“Wait! Wait!” Noemi sobbed, interrupting Asura. “Don’t kill me! Please hold on! I’ll tell you about Jeanne! So wait a second!”

“I see you still have enough presence of mind to communicate properly,” Asura giggled. “Are you so desperate to survive that you’re willing to live out the rest of your life with such a mangled body? Unfortunately, you’re going to die here. All the girls you killed begged for mercy too, didn’t they? Don’t you think it would be a little too convenient if you’re the only one who received it?” Asura snapped her fingers and on cue, Noemi’s left leg exploded. “Oh, that was for putting a shitty bounty on my head. Two hundred thousand dora, really? Ah, I suppose you can’t hear me anymore.”

Noemi had lost consciousness, but she was still alive. If they didn’t treat her wounds, she would eventually bleed out and die. However...

“Salume, I give you permission to draw a real blade. Deliver the final blow.”

“Yes, Boss!” Salume replied cheerfully.

“Use this,” Marx said, unsheathing his sword and handing it to her.

Salume took hold of it with both hands, her grip steady on the hilt. Then she walked up to Noemi, who had lost all four of her limbs. Without any hesitation, Salume stabbed the sword straight through Noemi’s chest.

“Keep that in there. It’ll be her headstone. Marx, I’ll buy you a new sword,” Asura said.

“It’s all right. I have a spare in the base, so I’m fine with using that one.”

“Good job, Salume,” Reko said, walking up to her and giving her a pat on the back. “You’ve lost your virginity too.”

“I did! I finally caught up to you, Reko,” Salume replied breathlessly. Unlike Reko, who had been able to maintain his usual calm demeanor his first time, it was clear the murder excited Salume. She was breathing heavily and her cheeks were flushed.

Even so, Asura thought that she made the right call. Salume’s mind had been ready for this. If she had done this before her experiences in the Great Forest, she might have panicked or lost control, stabbing and hacking away at Noemi until she was nothing more than a pile of meat. *I guess in that situation, we would call it “sword-happy” rather than “trigger-happy.”*

“I know she was a terrible human being, but that was so cruel,” Iris said, her voice wobbling like she was about to burst into tears. “You went overboard. I don’t know...how you did it, but it was so unfair. You can’t do that just because your opponent was scummy. I’ve never seen or heard of a duel won in such a one-sided and dirty manner. If this is really how you do things, then that’s just so...”

“Don’t cry, Iris. This is who we are. Our business ain’t in conductin’ matches. It’s in killin’ and there ain’t any rules in that. Only the strong survive. That’s all there is to it,” Jyrki said. “Yo, Boss, what *did* you do? Those weren’t your Mines, were they?”

“I used this,” Asura replied. She held up her index finger and a single petal drifted from the air and onto the floor. Though Asura stepped on it, it didn’t explode. When she lifted her foot away, the petal remained. This was perfectly natural, and yet the members of Moon Blossom tilted their heads in confusion.

“So, what’s ‘this’?” Reko asked.

“This is a normal flower petal I made using manifestation magic,” Asura explained, an excited lilt to her voice. “I hereby announce that I’ve come up with a new type of magic.” As soon as Asura snapped her fingers, the petal exploded. “The types of magic are attack, support, healing, manifestation, and from today forth, transformation.” There was a triumphant smile on Asura’s face. “Well, everyone? Do you respect me even more now?”

“A-Amazing,” Marx said, half in tears.

“Holy crap, that’s crazy!” Jyrki exclaimed. “I can’t believe I never knew that I

was workin' for a genius!"

"A new type...of magic? I can't believe it... No one's discovered anything for...hundreds of years..." lina gasped.

"I don't really understand what's happening, but it sounds really impressive," Salume said.

"I dunno what's going on either, but, Boss, you're so cool," Reko agreed.

"Wait a second, little Asura," Elna said. "Are you saying that you prepared a normal flower petal at the beginning and then you transformed it into an explosive?"

"That's right, Elna. You're very astute. I put one on her when I met her outside. Since Noemi never noticed, I simply used that same petal. I got her to let her guard down so that she wouldn't notice anything amiss during our conversation. When one's feeling overconfident, they tend not to pay too much attention to details."

"I wish...I wish to give you a hug, Boss!" Marx said before he burst into tears.

Asura clicked her tongue. "I'll only give you one freebie, Marx, since you're the only person who understands the inherent romanticism of magic." Asura spread open her arms and Marx immediately scooped her up. "Wait, Marx! Ow! Don't squeeze me so hard! Do you have any idea how stupidly strong you are?! Are you trying to break my spine?!"

Part Five, Chapter Ten: Asura Lyona is the biggest threat to the world. Or at least, I think so!

Elna's entire body was trembling. She was scared—no, *terrified* of Asura Lyona.

“Doesn't that...doesn't that make her invincible? Just the thought of getting a bomb placed on you and without your knowledge... Merely imagining it gives me the shivers,” Iris whispered. She was referring to transformation magic, the new kind of magic that Asura had invented. To be more precise, she was talking about how one could *use* transformation magic.

“That's not exactly true. First, it's actually very difficult to activate magic at the precise location you're aiming at,” Asura said. “When I used manifestation magic in the beginning, I'd planted petals between Noemi's clothes and her skin, as well as between her tights and her legs. They appeared exactly where I wanted them to, but it was really difficult to get it just right. If she had been moving, then it would have been next to impossible. Unless I can meet my opponent before the fight starts, it would be difficult indeed to plant anything on them.”

“I agree. When I use Water Prison, I usually have to stand still,” Marx said, directing the words at Salume and Reko, who nodded in reply.

“She never mentions it, but Boss is technically a grand mage,” Jyrki chuckled. “By the way, it ain't difficult for us to activate magic while movin' if we cast it from our palms and such.”

That additional explanation was also for Salume and Reko's benefit. Moon Blossom planned on sharing knowledge with its new recruits by peppering conversations with information.

“That's right. The difficult task is in aiming and activating your spell from a distance. But you can learn to do it in no time if you're not too concerned with accuracy,” Asura said. “Second, a soldier-mage would be able to avoid

transformation magic. That's because they would've instantly noticed something being planted on their body. People with good instincts or knowledge about magic can probably avoid it too."

"What are you talking about?" Iris said. "You guys are the only soldier-mages in the world. Transformation magic is still invincible."

"Iris, this only has a high success rate because few people know about it," Asura sighed. "Once we start using it more in our work, I'm sure people will try to copy us, as well as think up countermeasures. Not like that's going to work on me though. I'll simply think of a way to counter their countermeasure."

"Besides, I think you're forgettin' someone, Iris," Jyrki said with a smile.

"She sure is." Marx nodded.

"You *do* remember that one of our enemies is a soldier-mage, right?" Reko sighed.

"Not only that, but she's the strongest soldier-mage there is," Salume added.

"Are you talking about Lumia?" Elna asked. "Little Asura, were you thinking about fighting her? Did you always plan on fighting against mages...no, soldier-mages?"

"Of course. It's the most obvious thing, Elna," Asura replied, her lips stretching in a slow grin. "As soldier-mages, we know how to deal with magic better than anyone else. An untrained soldier-mage's spells will do nothing against us. I believe that one day, we will have to fight against other soldier-mages, and I'm preparing for that future. Let me prove it; if you fail to dodge this, I'll kill you."

The moment Asura snapped her fingers, Jyrki pulled back his right leg. A single petal fell, landing right where his boot was a mere second ago.

"I didn't bother jumping outta the way since it wasn't a Mine," Jyrki explained.

Asura hummed, her face twisted with glee, and Jyrki leaped backwards when he saw the expression. Iina, who was standing close to Jyrki, followed suit. The next moment, the petal exploded.

“We already...saw how transformation works.”

“So of course we’re gonna dodge it.”

“Wait a second,” Iris said. “How are you able to dodge it? Jyrki, you moved your leg *before* you even saw the petal, didn’t you?”

“We’re able to sense when someone activates magic,” Marx explained. “Eventually, you’ll be capable of that too, Iris. This is important, as you might not have enough time to get out of the way *after* seeing the spell.”

“That’s right. So my magic isn’t invincible or all-powerful. It’s actually quite easy to avoid. Unfortunately, transformation can be completely useless depending on your element. So far, all I can do is transform manifestation magic into attack magic.”

“Ah, I thought of that too,” Jyrki said, his smile taking on a more lopsided slant. “My magic just makes fire, whether it’s manifestation or attack. What am I gonna do with that, transformin’ fire into fire?”

You’ve got to be joking, Elna thought. “It’s actually quite easy to avoid”? Only mages are capable of such a feat, and they’d have to be mages who trained their bodies, to boot. In other words, the only ones who can dodge a spell like that are soldier-mages or someone who’s received their kind of training. So far, the only people who fit that criteria are Asura and her mercenaries. They’ll be able to dominate the battlefield for at least ten more years. At the very least, Asura will be able to. How frightening.

Asura was far more clever than Elna gave her credit for. She was thinking so much further ahead than Elna ever imagined. Just the idea of creating a new kind of magic was crazy enough.

“Well, it’s still a new concept,” Asura said. “I plan on further experimenting with transforming between different types, as well as transforming natural materials associated with magical elements.”

In other words, a flower blooming on the side of the road could explode at her whim. If it’s truly possible, then it is absolutely terrifying.

“What a wonderful idea!” Marx boomed. “This is an amazing accomplishment, Boss! You *must* publish your findings in a spellbook

immediately!”

“Yes, you’re right. Once things calm down, I will. Hee hee, so this means my name will be immortalized in the annals of history? How delightful.”

“Boss is gonna be remembered forever!” Reko cheered. “And I’ll be remembered as her husband!”

“Then I shall be remembered as her lover!” Salume exclaimed.

“No, you won’t. Calm down, you two. Husband and lover? Come on now, make your mark on history as soldier-mages. You really surprised me with that one.”

“Boss, it appears these two tend to try and find shortcuts to becoming stronger or becoming famous,” Marx said. “Shouldn’t we beat that slovenly nature out of them?”

“Yes, I agree. Since you’ve both lost your virginities, let’s increase the difficulty of your training.”

Salume twitched in response to Asura’s words, but Reko remained still.

“In that case, why don’t you all take the Hero Selection Exam?” Elna suggested. “It’s a good way to see how strong you are, you knooooow?”

Asura was dangerous. In terms of her threat level, she was on par with a peak-tier monster. Everything from her skills to her way of thinking could act as a powder keg. *I must leash her to my side and keep an eye on her.* Elna was truly convinced of that. She couldn’t let Asura do as she pleased. If she did, then she could very well bring about the end of the world. There was such a frightening air about her that Elna could not shake off this premonition.

“Are you still harping on about that, Elna?” Asura laughed. “I already told you we don’t plan on participating in that. Besides, even if Salume and Reko wanted to, they wouldn’t even make it past the first test.”

“If they pass it one day, then that means they’ve grown and matured! See, isn’t it an easy way to keep tabs on their progress?”

“Yes, you’re right. It *is* an easy way to see their growth. But Marx has already gotten to the second test and Iris is a hero. If any of us are going to participate,

it'd be Jyrki, Iina, Salome, and Reko. So long as Jyrki and Iina pass the second test, I'm sure they could become hero candidates."

"Ugh, is that an order?"

"What a pain... If it's not an order...I don't wanna..."

"I suggested taking the exam, but the next test on the schedule is actually the third one!" Elna said. "So the only people who can participate are Marx and little Asura!"

"What? I'm not a hero candidate."

"I've been wanting to give you this!" Elna pulled out an envelope from inside her dark brown vest. She passed it over to Asura, who opened it up and looked over the contents.

"A letter telling me that I passed the first test? I don't remember taking it."

"Read the fine print! You received recommendations from three heroes, which means that you're exempt from the test!"

"Elna, Axel, and Iris?" Asura fixed Iris with a sharp glare.

"I-I mean, you're really strong, aren't you?! I just wanted to say that you're as strong as a hero!" Iris looked over at Elna, who had a bright smile on her face.

No matter what Elna had to do, she would gain control over Asura Lyona. She didn't mind getting her hands dirty if she could have Asura by her side, or at least somewhere within reach. Even the title of a hero could serve as a chain to tie her down.

"I've doctored it so that I was in charge of your second test and that you passed it!"

"Isn't that cheating?" Asura asked.

"It's fine, it's fiiiine. No one would dare say anything to Axel's or my face."

In truth, there were quite a few people who would, but they would fall silent in the face of Asura's strength. This girl had tortured a Great Hero to death as part of a demonstration for her magic, so Elna was sure the others would agree with her decision to place Asura under their surveillance. Even if they didn't,

she was confident that she could convince them.

“Well, whatever. I don’t plan on participating,” Asura said.

“I’m going to make you participate! You made me the witness, but didn’t wait for my signal, and you killed Noemi despite me warning that it would be troublesome! Thanks to that, we lost a very important source of information, you knooooow? As a hired sword, do you not take responsibility for things like that? I thought we’re working *together*. Don’t you agree, Marx?”

“Uh...” Marx didn’t say anything more than that.

“I don’t recall receiving a report about that,” Asura said, smiling. “Marx? Did I forget to teach you about how important reports are?”

“Ah, I’m sorry. We were so busy yesterday that I...”

“Humph. Looks like this time, Marx and I will be the ones getting punished. My crime is getting kidnapped by small fry, and Marx’s is failing to give me proper reports. I have no qualms about working with Elna or the heroes. You chose to accept the offer because you thought it would be our best chance to destroy the Felmafia, right?”

“That’s right. I thought that it would be the most convenient avenue for us. I’m truly sorry that I forgot to tell you about it,” Marx said, bowing his head and shrinking in on himself. Despite his large frame, he looked very small like this.

“I kinda feel like Boss is always the one getting punished. It’s so funny,” Reko said. “This time for sure, I’ll do all kinds of sexy things to you.”

“Doesn’t anyone think it’s weird that it’s always the boss and the vice cap’n gettin’ punished?” Jyrki chuckled.

“A little...” Iina sighed.

“Soooo? You *will* participate in the exam, right? Isn’t trust the most important thing for a mercenary’s reputation?” Elna said.

Asura clicked her tongue. “I’m only going to do this once, got it? Then we’re even in how I ignored your advice, even though we’re working together. If only Marx had told me from the beginning that we’re officially allies, I would have gotten some more intel out of Noemi before I killed her.”

Upon hearing that, Marx made himself even smaller.

“That reminds me. Why *did* you kill her without asking her any questions?” Iris asked, a mystified look on her face. “And you chose the cruelest way to do it too.”

“She was such a piece of shit that I didn’t even think she was worth listening to. Didn’t you guys think it was funny how quick she was to sell out Jeanne?”

“Yeah, totally,” Jyrki laughed. “She was the worst of the worst, for real.”

“But...that’s what made it satisfying,” lina said, her lips curled in a bright smile.

“Oh, yes. I thought to myself, ‘That’s what you freaking get!’” Salume said with a nod.

“Boss, what are you gonna do with those two?” Reko pointed at the nuns still trembling in the corner of the room.

“Let them go. I doubt they know anything more than what they told us yesterday. Let’s have them tell everyone about how scary we are and what kind of person I am.”

The nuns didn’t know anything about Jeanne’s location. Considering they probably weren’t very important members of the cult, it was hardly surprising.

“Soooo? What are we going to do now?” Elna asked. She wanted to know what Asura and the others had planned. Though Iris was keeping an eye on them, she wasn’t the brightest tool in the shed, so Elna wanted to know everything she could before they parted ways.

“Hmm. Well, it’s not every day that we’re in Rasdia, so we’ll take some time off to relax. After that, we’ll train and head to Arnia, just as we planned. If we learn anything new during our stay, we’ll rework our plans accordingly.”

“Yay... I’m gonna hit up the casinos...” lina said, clenching her fist in a victory pose.

“Sounds good. Let’s all go make some coin,” Asura giggled. “Oh, and Elna, sorry to ask you this, but could you walk Ilmari home? I don’t think she wants anything to do with me anymore.”

“Noooo prooooblem. Then I’ll leave cleaning this place to you and your group. I’ll send a message to have some Central Felsen heroes come collect Noemi’s corpse!”

“Who said anything about cleaning up? We’re leaving after this conversation. If you want to collect that body, then do that yourself.”

Contrary to Asura’s expectations, Ilmari wanted to meet her and she accepted the invitation. To be more precise, Elna brought Ilmari to the inn they were staying at, essentially ambushing her. The two of them were standing in the lobby, surrounded only by the members of Moon Blossom. Since it would be trouble if the other guests walked in on them, they’d reserved the entire space.

“Asura, I’ll never forget about you,” Ilmari said.

“I won’t forget about you either.”

It was highly unlikely they would meet each other again. Their paths in life were just too different.

“I wish I could forget about that headless body, though,” Ilmari said with a small smile.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. I’m sorry.”

“Asura, thank you for being so kind to me and saying so many nice things.”

“Of course. I’d like to thank you as well, Mari, for chatting with me.”

“I’m gonna sing that ‘Scarborough Fair’ song on my way home!”

“Good idea. It’s a nice song, isn’t it? Goodbye, Mari.” Asura waved at her, a gesture which Ilmari returned, before Elna took the girl by the hand and walked out of the inn. “An unbelievably shitty person met an unbelievably innocent little girl,” Asura murmured to herself. “This is why the world never ceases to amuse me. I liked the world of my past life, but this one is pretty great too.”

Part Five, Chapter Eleven: The melancholic gods sense an impending holy war.

“I despise this world,” Jeanne said, her cheeks puffed out in a pout.

She was still in the old castle in Central Felsen, which had served as a base of operations for quite some time now. The room she was in used to be the audience chamber, though the throne had long since withered away. Now she was seated on a simple stool. Lumia felt like she recognized it.

“That’s why I will destroy it,” Jeanne continued. “I will kill everyone in Central Felsen. I will murder everyone in the west and the east. I will destroy the cathedrals, turn the archaeological ruins into dust, make the Harmei Bridge collapse, and wreck the Tower of Freedom. I will rape men and women, children and the elderly. I will drive the entire human race to extinction, hunting them all down in the cruelest methods known to man. And then, from its ashes, I will create a new paradise. *That* is salvation—salvation for all life other than humanity.”

Lumia’s breath caught. From where she was standing, right before Jeanne, she could see the terrifying depths of her hatred and misanthropy. Those with divinity all worked to save something and in Jeanne’s case, she wished to save everything except for humankind. They weren’t alone in the room; Tina was standing next to Jeanne’s chair. Jeanne was telling Lumia her plan, though not the entire thing. She was only divulging the first half of it.

“Of course, I do not tell people of my true ambitions. The salvation that I preach is the salvation of humankind. Hee hee, none of my underlings know that they will be disposed of once I no longer have use for them.” Jeanne’s smile was a ruined one, her broken spirit exposed by her expression. “Now then, Lumia, I hear that Noemi has died, so I wish to push up the timeline of my plan.”

Noemi had died yesterday.

“I told you, didn’t I?” Lumia said. “I told you that Asura and Moon Blossom are dangerous.”

“So you say,” Tina interrupted, “but logically speaking, how could anyone other than Lady Jeanne win against Noemi? She was a Great Hero, you know?”

She may have been corrupt, but Noemi Clapisson had been a Great Hero. However...

“It doesn’t matter what title you have. There’s no one that Asura can’t kill. I believe that Noemi didn’t even have the chance to put up a fight,” Lumia said with a shake of her head. “I am the only person who can stand a chance against Asura, since I can do the same things she can.”

That rule only applied to humans. If Tina was Asura’s opponent, she could probably use her sheer combat prowess to overcome Asura’s strategies.

“Hmm. In any case, I am happy that Noemi has perished,” Jeanne said with a small smile. “What a wonderful feeling this is. To tell you the truth, I despised her.”

“Oh, yes, I agree. I didn’t like her either,” Tina said.

“I hated her too, you know?” Lumia sighed.

But even so, Noemi had her uses. There was a reason that Jeanne kept her around, after all. You didn’t need love or affection to use someone as your servant.

“And so, Lumia, you will be the new God Hand of Central Felsen, starting from today.”

“What?” Lumia’s eyes widened, unsure if she correctly parsed Jeanne’s casual order.

“Please make sure you do your best in this position. It is very inconvenient without someone who can take command over an entire region,” Jeanne said. “Miriam is in the east and Nicola is in the west, so I’m sure you’ll be able to get along.”

“By Nicola, do you mean Nicola Canarre?”

“I do.”

In the past, Nicola was the man that Lumia trusted all the way to the bitter end. They'd fought side by side her entire career, from her first battle to her last.

"I see. So he's still alive." Lumia breathed a sigh of relief at that. Ever since the Oathkeeper Brigade disbanded, most of its members had been arrested for war crimes. Of that number, some of them must have been executed.

"Tina, please bring me you-know-what."

"Yes, of course." Tina trotted off, making her way to a room at the back of the audience chamber.

"What's you-know-what?"

"You'll see."

There was a childlike grin on Jeanne's face. Jeanne's mood swings were intense, and her normal self was a completely different person from when she was in her manic state. She seemed stable at the moment, which meant that Lumia could say anything she wanted and not receive a spanking for it.

In saying that though, Jeanne's mental state was usually in tatters, which meant that Lumia's butt, hidden under her clothes, was a mess. It was still stinging; being forbidden from healing herself with magic was truly the worst part of it all. On the bright side, ever since Jeanne started spanking Lumia, Tina was able to escape punishment.

"Fine, then I suppose I'll look forward to it," Lumia replied with a small shrug. "Let's get back to the more pressing topic. Do you really think you can destroy the world that way?"

Jeanne's plan was a very rough one. Even if it worked out the way she wanted it to, it would take an extraordinarily long time to carry out.

"If you're referring to the war I wish to start, then that is nothing more than a prelude to my real masterpiece."

"So you really have something else up your sleeve?"

Destroying the world through war was nothing more than a fantasy, like something you would read about in a story. It wasn't *impossible*, but it was

definitely close. *Besides, Lumia thought, if we start a war, then Asura and Moon Blossom will show up, eager to participate.*

“Lumia, if you were in my position, what would you do? If you truly wished to destroy the world, how would you go about accomplishing it?”

“Hmm...” Lumia racked her brain. It was like she took everything she’d learned from Asura—strategies, tactics, knowledge—and shoved it into a pot, swirling it all together until it formed a single revelation. *I shouldn’t think about what I would do. I should think about what Asura would do. How would Asura Lyona destroy the world?*

She needed to change the way she tackled the problem. Lumia had spent ten years of her life with Asura. Though she didn’t understand her completely, she was confident that she was the person most familiar with her.

“Maybe we can use a Demon Lord?” she suggested slowly. No weapon or spell on its own could destroy the world. In that case, the best method would be to take advantage of a supernatural disaster.

“I like it. How would you use them?”

Lumia thought for a moment before she said, “I’d kill all the heroes. Those are the only people we need to eliminate. Once they’re out of the picture, then we can sit back and let the Demon Lord do our dirty work. That’s what I think, anyway.”

There were way too many unknowns when it came to Demon Lords. For example, no one knew how long they could operate. If the heroes didn’t defeat it, would the Demon Lord continue its path of destruction until there was nothing left?

“Lumia,” Jeanne said, her voice soft with surprise. “You’re a little broken, aren’t you?”

“Broken? Me?” Jeanne was the last person Lumia wanted to hear that from.

“Do you understand how terrifying your proposal is? And the most frightening part is that you’re probably correct. Do you realize that you just, without a hint of hesitation, offered me a plan that has a real chance of destroying the world?”

“I was just giving a hypothetical. Besides, only someone like you or Asura could possibly massacre all of the heroes.”

Even if Jeanne or Asura actually tried to kill every single one of them, it would take a great amount of time. In the worst-case scenario, the other heroes would gang up on them while they were in the middle of slaughter. Even Jeanne and Asura would have trouble fighting off five heroes simultaneously.

“Even so,” Jeanne said. “I also considered using a Demon Lord. Lumia, do you know why there are individual differences between each Demon Lord?”

“No, I don’t.”

The term “Demon Lord” was something humans came up with, and it didn’t necessarily mean that the same Demon Lord showed up every time. They were quite varied, whether in appearance, size, or ability.

“Well, the reason is—”

“Lady Jeanne, I have you-know-what over here!” Tina interrupted, jogging over to them while clutching something with both hands. Judging by the size, Lumia guessed that it was some kind of greatsword wrapped up in a beautiful length of cloth.

“Let’s continue our conversation about Demon Lords another day.” Jeanne stood up and accepted the item from Tina. She ripped the cover off and revealed what was underneath.

Why, that’s... The thing that had been hidden away from the cloth, the object in Jeanne’s hand, was...

“My sword?”

It was a claymore forged especially for Jeanne Autun Lala, made by the greatest weaponsmith in the Juaren Kingdom. It was the pinnacle of his technique, created after spending an inordinate amount of time and money. This claymore was famed for being the best weapon ever made in all of history, if one didn’t consider the more extraordinary weapons that had since become the stuff of legends.

The name of the sword was Ragnarok, the Melancholy of the Gods, a

reference to the day of reckoning. At the time it was forged, it was supposed to represent the end of every country that dared to oppose the Juaren Kingdom. Despite its sturdiness, the claymore was light and easy to handle. Its blade was sharper than any other sword in the world. It was a masterpiece of a weapon, and people often said that in a hundred years, it would be exalted as a legend.

“This is my present to you. Isn’t it nostalgic?” Jeanne said.

“It is. It’s so nostalgic that I can’t help but think back on that period of my life and lose myself in sentimentality.”

“I’ve used it a few times myself, but I think that you’re the only person worthy of wielding this weapon, Lumia,” Jeanne said.

Jeanne held out Ragnarok and Lumia accepted it from her. She gasped softly when she saw its shimmering blade, unchanged from when she wielded it in service of the Juaren Kingdom.



“Now, I am the one who carries on Jeanne’s name. Think of this as a gift for my dear younger sister.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Thank you, my dear older sister. I’m truly happy to accept this.” Lumia never thought she would get to hold Ragnarok ever again.

“We retrieved your armor as well, but I doubt that they’re the right size for you now. You’re a lot chub— I mean, you’re a lot more voluptuous than before.”

Wait, did she just call me fat?! Yes, it was true that, compared to now, Lumia used to be a lot skinnier as a teenager. If one wanted to be pedantic, it had been because of her extremely toned physique. Since she had less body fat back then, her breasts used to be smaller as well.

“You say that, my *dear* older sister, but you’re a lot rounder than I recall.”

As soon as Lumia said that, an awkward silence descended over the room. Lumia was twenty-eight and Jeanne was twenty-six; it was a given that their bodies were no longer the same as when they were younger. Back then, they were fighting on the front lines of a war, protected by heavy armor and swinging around greatswords. Of course they would have had more muscle mass. Though they put on some weight, both Lumia and Jeanne were still more slender than your average woman.

“Th-The two of you are both very attractive females,” Tina rushed to say. “I mean, look at me. I’m so small and scrawny that I look much younger than my seventeen years.”

Jeanne let out a slow exhale. “Very well then. Let’s return to business. Tina, I’d like you to call a meeting. As soon as everyone arrives, we will start phase one.”

War—a war for vengeance—was about to break out, and it was going to drag so many people into the eye of the storm. *I’m sure Asura’ll be happy about it,* Lumia thought.

Extra Episode Seven: Magical girl Iris! What element will she be?

Iris received a letter from the postman in the inn's lobby. Asura noticed this and closed the book she had been reading on the lobby's sofa.

"Iris, I'd like to ask you a question," she said. "How does the postal system work?"

"Huh? Asura, you don't know anything about letters?" Iris asked as she sat down across from Asura. She ripped open the envelope to get at the paper inside.

It was the morning two days after Noemi's gruesome murder. While everyone had all of the previous day off, today was back to business as usual. Salume and Reko were doing their best to learn how to kick down a door, and the entire inn could hear their havoc. Since Asura had purchased all of the doors from the innkeeper, there was no problem if they broke them. Though Iris also participated in the training, she'd knocked it down in one attack and so had nothing else to do for the rest of the day.

"I've never, not once in my life, got to send a letter to someone," Asura replied with a small shrug.

Since Jyrki, Iina, and Marx all had the morning off, they were in their rooms doing as they pleased. *Jyrki's probably asleep and Marx is probably doing some strength training*, Iris thought. She had no clue as to what Iina could possibly be doing.

"Every country has its own postal organization, you know?" Iris said, sounding a little proud of herself. She rarely had the chance to teach *Asura* something.

"Oh? I suppose it's something like a post office. What else?"

"Most of these postal organizations are run by the national government. But some countries have it privatized. Arnia, for example, is like that."

“Arnia is pretty innovative by the standards of this world. The best part is that it got rid of feudalism and nobility. I’m sure that people living in fiefdoms would hate having to be ruled by an idiot noble,” Asura said.

“My family does a good job at ruling, you know?!” Iris belonged to a family of minor nobles, so they were only responsible for a small fiefdom in the middle of nowhere.

“I wasn’t trying to insult your family. Tell me more about letters. You use pigeons, right?” From what Asura could remember, the pigeons in this world were far smarter than the ones back on Earth. They were also able to remember a wide variety of different places.

“Yup, that’s right,” Iris said. “The most orthodox way to send a letter across borders is to use a postal organization. After you pay them for the delivery, they’ll send the letter using pigeons. Once the pigeon arrives at the recipient’s country’s postal organization, the delivery person will take the letter to the right address.”

“Hmm. That, I can understand. But how about when someone like you wants to send a letter? Your address isn’t in Rasdia, is it?”

“Oh, are you talking about this? This is a type of letter specific to heroes.” Iris tugged the letter out from the envelope.

“I suppose that heroes can send or receive mail for free, thanks to their privileges,” Asura said with a small huff.

“That’s right. But these are letters that we heroes use for internal communication. Look at the envelope. It’s brown, right? A brown envelope means the letter is about hero business. I also use brown envelopes whenever I send my letters to Sir Axel.” After that explanation, Iris started reading through the letter.

“How did this get all the way to you?”

“Um, well, this is a letter sent to all heroes, so it’s not addressed to me per se,” Iris said, her gaze still focused on the letter. “It’s technically addressed to all heroes.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m asking how the letter gets into a hero’s hands.

Aren't heroes always on the move?" Asura sighed, shaking her head.

"They send pigeons to every single country," Iris said, lifting her head. "With our privileges, heroes can cross any border we please, and we don't have to deal with luggage checks or inspections."

"Well, that's certainly something. It seems like the perfect cover-up for a drug dealer."

"Normal heroes don't do that," Iris said, sounding miffed. "We have to self-report at the checkpoint as part of our duties. Noemi didn't do that, but heroes have to declare when they enter a country."

"Is that why you always introduce yourself to the military police at customs...I mean, checkpoints?"

"That's right. The military police then shares that information with the postal organizations. That's why pigeons can deliver letters addressed to heroes without any issues."

"I see. So long as they know which country you're in, they can pinpoint your location using the military police's intelligence network and send you your letter. What a well-thought-out system."

"I'm surprised you didn't know about it, Asura," Iris said in a cheery tone.

"Of course I didn't. I'm not an omnipotent or omniscient god. I'm nothing more than a very smart human," Asura replied with a small smile. "So what's written in that letter? I assume it has something to do with Jeanne."

"It does. There are orders to help with routing the Felmafia, but it ends with telling me that I should continue my current mission. So it doesn't really have much to do with me."

"In other words, all of the heroes know that you're the only one still carrying out your current mission?"

"That's right. We all get the same letter, remember? Oh, an amanuensis was the one who wrote down all the copies. Sir Axel probably only wrote a single letter, which served as the original that the amanuensis copied from."

"I figured as much. It's not as if photocopiers exist in this world."

“Sometimes, you use words I’ve never heard of before. Did you make that up yourself?”

Asura didn’t reply for a moment, thinking of what to say, before she sighed. “Sure, let’s leave it at that.”

“Boss! I was able to kick down the door!” Salume exclaimed, her eyes sparkling, as she ran towards Asura.

“Oh? Then next time you practice, make sure you learn how to kick it down in one strike. Don’t worry about property damage. You’re free to break every single door in this inn.”

“A-All right.” Salume looked a little dejected as she walked away.

“She wanted you to praise her, you know?” Iris said.

“I know. I’ll praise her once she learns to kick down a door in a single attempt. There’s no meaning to it unless she can do it in one go.”

“Well, yeah, I suppose.”

They couldn’t afford to spend too much time trying to break down a door, after all.

“You were able to do it on your first try after I taught you the basics. Your innate talent never fails to surprise me.”

“I’m stronger than those two. So even though I’d never kicked a door down before, it wasn’t hard or anything. It’s just a door.”

“Yes, I would hope so. A hero who can’t even kick down a door sounds like a joke.”

“Anyway, teach me magic. I don’t like the way you used it to kill Noemi, but I understand now just how powerful it is.”

“It’s really not powerful,” Asura said. “People are right to consider it weak. It’s far easier and quicker to kill someone with a sword than with magic. But if you use it like us, then magic is one of many effective tools. You can think of it as the foundation upon which we base our fighting style.”

“I’m going to become a soldier-mage too!” Iris exclaimed. “But I don’t want to

kill people; I want to protect them! That's the kind of soldier-mage I aspire to be!"

"That sounds like a good idea. It's up to you how you want to use your skills. In any case, if you can use fighting spirit, then you already have a grasp on MP, right? Do you know how to manifest it?"

"When we use fighting spirit, we send MP coursing throughout our entire body. But I'm trying to manifest my MP, does it go something like this?" Iris held out her hand and gathered magic in the palm of it.

Asura smiled, though it wasn't a happy one. "First try, huh? It kind of pisses me off to see it, considering it took even *me* several days to draw out my MP like that."

In terms of sheer talent, Iris had received far too many blessings from the heavens. But in her case, it wasn't some kind or saintly god who presented her with her gifts. It was the god of war. If Iris was to ever become corrupted and end up on Asura's side, then she was certain to become a threat against humanity. That said, Iris was kind of an idiot, so it felt like she wouldn't be *too* much of a threat.

"Is this amazing or something?" Iris asked.

"It is," Asura replied. "Or maybe learning magic just isn't a difficult thing for a hero. MP is the basis of magic, after all, and you already know how to use it for fighting spirit." However, since heroes were proud of their strength as warriors, Asura doubted that many of them would ever think to learn magic.

"If everyone learns how to use magic, then won't you and your mercenaries lose your advantage?"

"That's fine with me. Magic isn't the be-all and end-all. We'll just come up with countermeasures against their countermeasures, or come up with new magic types. I don't imagine anyone will catch up to us in terms of magical innovation. Anyway, let's work on changing your element. Go and get everyone for me. I'll explain things as we practice."

"Reko, tell me the six basic elements of magic," Asura ordered while sitting on

the lobby's sofa.

"Fire, wind, earth, water, darkness, and light," Reko rattled off, counting on his fingers. He was sitting next to Asura, with Salume on Asura's other side. In front of him was Iris, who was sitting between Jyrki and Iina. Marx remained standing.

"Which one of those elements is considered rare, Salume?"

"Darkness. Not many people can use it."

"That's right. Few can wield the powers of darkness. It's impossible to tell what basic element you have until you actually convert your MP into magic. However, a certain grand mage theorized that a mage's personality and life have a major influence on what kind of element they'll use. I also agree with that theory, to a certain extent."

"So do I use fire 'cause I had a burnin' hot life? Doesn't ring any bells."

"What about...my wind?"

"Iina seems the type to use wind," Reko said.

"Yes, I agree. Iina seems very breezy," Salume added.

"Speaking of which, Asura, what kind of element did you use before you got your Fixed Element?" Iris asked. "You really seem like you'd use darkness, but flowers aren't darkness-y at all. Does a Fixed Element have nothing to do with your original basic element?"

"It does, I'm pretty sure. My basic element wasn't darkness, by the way."

"Huh?" Iris and Iina both said in unison.

"It *was* darkness, wasn't it?" Jyrki asked.

"If your personality affects your element, then I'm sure it was darkness," Marx said.

"I figured that Boss would be darkness," Salume whispered.

"From my perspective, Boss is light. She's *my* light," Reko said, completely straight-faced. "Just kidding."

"My element was earth."

Asura had no complaints over her magical element. She felt like it suited her best, especially if you also took into consideration what her past life was like. She remembered the deep gouges that shells left in the soil, the clouds of dust that arose every time a bullet hit the ground or a tank moved with its treads. Earth symbolized everything about her life.

But it seemed that no one else could understand her affinity to it; they were tilting their heads this way and that.

“Well, how a person lives their life has more of an influence on their element than their personality. At least, that’s how I think it works,” Asura said. “It’s ultimately nothing more than a theory though, so it’s not as if this is a hard magical rule. Now then, let’s take bets on what element Iris will have.”

“Then, I’m gonna guess light! How much we bettin’?”

“How about a thousand dora per person? Remember, this is just for fun. Now that Lumia is gone, we’re hurting for healers so I would prefer it if Iris could use light magic. But my guess is water.” After Asura said that, she placed a thousand dora bill on the table. The other members of Moon Blossom followed suit.

“She seems the type of person to use light magic, but she’s so different from how Miss Lumia is. I’m going to guess fire,” Salume hummed.

“Yeah, that’s what’s getting me too,” Reko said. “Her personality is way too different from Lumia’s. Ah, but Lumia’s element wasn’t light, was it?”

“Her Fixed Element was Heaven, but she used to have a basic element of light,” Asura pointed out.

“Iris and Lumia’s lives...and personalities...are so different. But she’s also...different from us. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s water...like Marx.”

“Perhaps I’ll place my bets on wind, then,” Marx said. “No one else is betting on it so if her element is wind, then I’ll be the one taking everything.”

“Darkness is a rare element and I highly doubt that Iris, of all people, would awaken to that,” Reko murmured. “Unlike Boss, her breasts are decent-sized, so I don’t think she’s earth either. Hmm, well, she really reminds me of light, so I’ll guess light.”

“All right. To summarize, if she gets fire, Salume takes all, and if she gets wind, Marx takes all. If she gets light, then Jyrki and Reko have to split the winnings. If it’s water, then lina and I will have to share.”

“How do I change the element of my magic anyway?” Iris asked. “Is it something I can learn in one day?”

“If it’s simply changing the element of your magic, then yes. All you’re doing is figuring out your natural element. Gather MP in the palm of your hand.” At Asura’s instruction, Iris held her hand aloft and did as she was told. “Now, I’d like you to envision shadows. Imagine that there are shadows shrouding the MP in your hand.”

Iris stared at her palm and tried to imagine what Asura was describing to her, but nothing happened.

“Hmm. I suppose darkness really wasn’t your element,” Asura said.

“Do light next! Light!” Reko piped up.

Iris tried to imagine a beam of light surrounding her palm. As she did so, her hand started to emanate a faint glow.

“Oh? It seems like your basic element is light. So Reko and Jyrki get to split the winnings. My guess was incorrect, but oh well. Light is a nice, convenient element to have.”

“So my element is light?” Iris was still staring at her palm. “What should I do with this now?”

“You can get rid of it. Changing the type of magic is a lot more difficult and isn’t something you can master in a day. We’ll teach it to you some other day, when we have more time.”

Iris shook her hand out and the light faded.

“Can’t say I’m surprised her element’s light. She looks the part,” Jyrki said.

“Boss was going on about personality...so we were tricked,” lina muttered.

“No, if we’re going by personality, then Iris fits her light element. Our mistake was comparing her to Lumia,” Marx pointed out.

“Now then, we know Iris’s element, so in the afternoon, let’s all go to the casino. This time, we’re not going to have fun. We’re going to go train,” Asura said. “Bring the ten thousand dora we paid each of you as a fine and turn it into a hundred thousand. Once you do that, you’ll pass.”

Asura and Marx’s punishment after what happened with Noemi was a normal fine. This was because of Lumia’s absence. Without her healing magic, recovering from physical punishments would take up too much time. Reko wanted to do something sexual, but Asura was so genuinely against it that he was a little shocked by her rejection.

“You hate my sexual advances that much?” he’d exclaimed.

Asura was of the opinion that it was precisely *because* she hated them that they would serve as a good punishment. But at that point, Reko had lost all of his motivation. As for the final punishment, Marx and Asura had each paid everyone five thousand dora.

“Use all of the skills you have and don’t worry about what methods you have to utilize. Enter the casino with ten thousand dora, come out of it with a hundred thousand. Easy peasy, right? Iris, you’ll be participating as well. Since this is a training session, everyone has to go. Got it?”

Extra Episode Eight: It's the first part of the Gambling Arc! Jeanne? Who cares about her?!

Salume took a tour around the casino floor and then sat down on one of the sofas for people who wanted to rest a little.

"None of these games are ones we can play, huh?" Reko said as he sat down next to her.

They were in the casino closest to the inn where Moon Blossom was staying.

"Yes, all of them looked very difficult." Salume had never gambled in her entire life.

"But if we don't make a hundred thousand dora, Boss is gonna get mad at us," Reko pointed out. "That's exciting in its own way, but I don't want her to abandon us. So I want to complete this training."

"I agree with you. Um, not about the getting excited part. I agree with you about wanting to complete the training."

"Well, there's not much we can do just sitting here. In any case, wanna go check out what Boss is doing?"

"I just hope that we can learn something from watching her," Salume said as she stood up. Next to her, Reko jumped to his feet as well.

"Hey, missy, this is the high-limit table, you know?" an older man said as soon as Asura sat next to him at the blackjack table.

"Oh, I know. The opening bet is a thousand dora, right?" As she spoke, Asura set a thousand dora bill upon the table. "Let me join. I'm a beginner, but I'm very interested in this game. Explain the rules to me."

"My name is Yor, and I'm the dealer of this table," a woman wearing a neat suit said. "There are two ways to play blackjack here. The first is the normal

type, in which the players face off against me, the dealer. The second type is a death match in which everyone plays against each other.”

“Which type are we playing today?” Asura asked.

Instead of her usual robes, Asura was wearing an elegant red dress and had her hair tied up in pigtails. At first glance, she looked every inch like the sophisticated daughter of some noble.



“Today, we’ll be playing in the death match style. Would you care to join us?”

“Of course.”

Asura looked around the table. Aside from her and the dealer Yor, there were three others. The older man who’d spoken to her was probably a civilian, but seemed like he was used to gambling. Since the other two were sitting at the high-limit table, they were either rich, gamblers, or both.

“In a death match, the winner will take home all of the dora on the table. If there are two winners who share the same score, they split the winnings,” Yor continued.

“All right. How about getting blackjack? Are there any special rules regarding that?”

“No. Twenty-one is the highest score and if you go over that number, you bust. All of the face cards count as a ten, and you can treat an ace as either one or eleven depending on your hand.”

“The player can choose between hitting, standing, and folding, right? How many times can we raise the bet?”

When a player asked for a hit, that meant they wanted the dealer to give them another card. Standing meant they were happy with their current hand and didn’t need any more cards, and folding meant that they would back down from the current round. A raise meant that they wanted to add more to the opening bet.

“Currently, ten thousand is the limit for raises.”

“Understood. Let’s begin, then. In a death match, who will be dealing the cards?”

“I assume that most of you find this task quite tedious, so I will deal the cards. Of course, you’re free to deal if you wish,” Yor replied as she shuffled the deck.

Asura replied with an exaggerated shrug. The gesture meant that she didn’t want to act as the dealer because it would be too much work. First, Yor dealt cards face up, with Asura getting an ace of clubs.

“Oh?” Asura said. “This is a good one.”

Next, Yor passed everyone a card face down. Asura lifted hers up slightly so that the people around her couldn't see what she had. The other players and Yor did the same thing with their own cards.

"I see beginner's luck is at play here," Asura hummed. "Is there an order for our calls?"

"It starts from me. Hit." As she spoke, Yor placed a face down card before her and then immediately set down a thousand dora bill.

I see. So you have to pay every time you call for a hit? Asura thought.

"Raise." The woman on Yor's right placed a thousand dora bill onto the table. Unless they decided to fold, everyone now had to add money to the pot.

"Stand." The man on Asura's left placed a thousand dora bill on the table.

"Raise." After Asura placed the first thousand dora bill down, she followed it up with a second one.

"Oh? Missy, you must have gotten a pretty good card, eh? Stand." The older man placed two thousand dora on the table. Since he didn't call for a hit, his hand must also be pretty good. The only card Asura could see on his side of the table was a nine, which meant that if his face down card was a face card, he had a total of nineteen. That would make it a very powerful hand.

"Stand." Yor placed two thousand dora on the table.

"Raise. Sorry, missy, but I have a really good hand too," said the woman who first called raise with a smile before she added another thousand dora bill to the table. She had blonde hair and was dressed from head to toe in expensive clothing. Her visible card was a face card, meaning that she had a strong starting hand. But it was impossible to tell how good her face down one was.

"Oh, we're starting out with a very exciting game indeed!" the man said as he placed dora on the table. "Lady, you could *try* hiding your bluffs a little better. I stand." The man's visible card was seven. Even if his face down card was an ace, it would still be a total of eighteen. It definitely was not a weak hand, but it was hard to say it was a strong one.

"I got a twenty-one. Raise." Asura added even more dora to the table.

Between the four thousand dora from the raises and the opening bet of one thousand, each person now had to put down five thousand dora.

“Missy, you know nothing about gambling,” the older man said. “If you really had twenty-one, then you would have raised without saying anything. Now that you’ve revealed your hand, there’s a chance people will forfeit. I fold.” He didn’t put out more money onto the field. If someone forfeited, then they didn’t have to add to the bet. They may have forfeited the match, but they could prevent themselves from losing too much money.

“Beginner’s luck is something I see quite often in this line of business. I fold as well.” Yor also forfeited.

“Oh, did I make a mistake? It’s not every day that I get a twenty-one. Where’s the fun in pulling these cards if everyone forfeits the match?”

“Do you know what a poker face is, missy?” the woman asked. “The best thing to do when gambling is to maintain a calm appearance no matter how good or bad your hand is. Fold.”

Did you already forget how a few minutes ago, you told everyone you had a good hand? Asura thought.

“I don’t believe that this is a bluff, but I’ll play your game. Stand.” The man placed his dora on the table.

“Thank you. Raise.” Asura placed even more dora to the pile.

“Seriously? If you’re gonna raise the bet again, then I fold.”

“Huh? I thought you were going to play my game.”

“I meant that I would take you on with that stand. I’m not made out of money, you know? I’d rather lose a little here than lose an entire fortune. Well, missy, it’s all yours. Good for you. Now, show us that twenty-one of yours.”

“I was bluffing, of course. Do you seriously think a beginner can luck out and get blackjack in their first game?”

Asura revealed her face down card to be a three. Even if you combined it with the ace, her highest count was only fourteen. Everyone at the table, excluding Asura, widened their eyes.

“You were that aggressive with your raises and you only had a fourteen?”

“Damn, missy. You really took us for a spin there.”

“If I hadn’t folded, I would’ve won!”

“I see. So your plan was to pretend you’re a novice and bluff us all into folding? That’s smart. You’re a gutsy little brat, aren’t you? You’re obviously used to gambling. Well then, I won’t go easy on you next round. Surely you aren’t going to just leave after winning, are you?”

“Of course not. Will you all continue to play? In that case, I must thank all of you angels. You’re giving me free money, after all.” Asura grinned.

If you boiled them down to their essence, card games were nothing more than mind games. In that case, there was no way Asura could lose. She didn’t even need to cheat. All she needed was her own cunning.

“Boss, you’re amazing,” Salume whispered from where she was standing behind Asura.

“Salume, would you like to participate?” Asura laughed without turning to look at her. “Raise.”

“No, the minimum here is so high that I’m a little scared.”

“Oh, really? But you won’t be able to obtain anything if you’re too paralyzed by fear. You have to step up to the challenge. I thought that you’d learned how to do that, but did I misjudge you?”

Salume didn’t say anything for a long moment, then turned around and said, “I’m going to go practice at a table with a lower limit.” She walked off, followed by Reko, who had been standing next to her in silence the entire time.

“If we sat at that table, we’d lose all of our money in one game,” Reko laughed.

“Oh yes, I agree. I don’t want to play a game I have no chance at winning. I’ve been a loser my entire life, after all.”

“Salume, again with the self-pitying! You care way too much about your past.”

Reko smirked. “Let’s talk about something else. Boss is so cute today, isn’t she? Her hairstyle’s the same as Iris’s though.”

“She does look very cute today! I want a set of clothes just like what she’s wearing. I don’t think they’d look good on—”

“You’d look good in them,” Reko said firmly. “So just go and buy some. If you want something, go and get it. We’re a free-spirited and happy gang of mercenaries, remember?”

That was when the two of them saw Jyrki and Iina walking towards them, so they stopped.

“We’re done. How about you guys?”

“Huh? That was so fast! What did you do, Mister Jyrki?”

“Whaddaya mean? We’re in a casino with a super high table limit. Everyone here’s rich too.”

“And we...used to be bandits. It’s a piece of cake...to steal a hundred thousand.”

You stole it?! Salume almost screamed the words out loud.

“Boss told us to use our skills. She never said a thing about gamblin’.” Jyrki chuckled. “So we’re gonna have fun with the extra dough. We’re rootin’ for you two.” With a smile still on his face, Jyrki walked off, leaving Salume and Reko behind without a second glance.

“Jyrki and Iina sure are villains,” Reko said with an impressed nod.

“See you...” Iina waved before she also left them.

“I see,” Salume said. “So using our skills doesn’t mean we *have* to focus on gambling.”

“Did you come up with an idea?”

“No, but I’m close to a breakthrough,” Salume replied. “Let’s go see how Mister Marx and Miss Iris are doing.”

“Yeah, sure. Those two don’t seem like they’re good gamblers, so I wonder what they’re doing.”

The two of them wandered around the floor for a little bit before they discovered Marx. With his tall stature, red hair, and broad frame, he was fairly easy to spot. He was sitting at the poker table, cards in hand.

“Wow, Mister Marx’s poker face is amazing.”

“Isn’t that what he always looks like?”

Marx already had close to fifty thousand dora in hand.

“No, Mister Marx is quite expressive, you know? Every time he talks about Jeanne or magic, he gets a sparkle in his eye. He always looks embarrassed around courtesans too.”

“Is he pent-up because of his vow of chastity?”

“Maybe. Ah, but he’s never looked at me in an untoward manner. He’s an honest man and very handsome, so I’m sure he’ll find the right woman sooner or later...”

“Marx’s type is older, more mature women. So he wouldn’t be interested in you, Iris, or Boss. Iina, of course, wouldn’t count either.”

“Now that Miss Lumia is gone, the average age in Moon Blossom is so young.”

“If you tell Lumia that, she’ll get so mad at you,” Reko cackled.

“Let’s go look for Miss Iris. I’m sure that Mister Marx will make a hundred thousand dora.”

“Yeah, I agree. Iris probably lost all her money and is crying somewhere.”

The two of them wandered the floor together again until they found Iris.

“There! You were cheating, weren’t you?! I caught you red-handed! Excuse me, sir, this man here was cheating!” When they found her, Iris was in the middle of grabbing a cheater and handing him over to one of the casino’s employees. The employee gave her a wad of cash as a display of gratitude. “Hee hee, catching cheaters is so easy! I’m going to make a hundred thousand just from all the rewards for turning them in! I’ll be able to repay my debt to Asura!” Still with a bright smile on her face, Iris moved on to the next table.

“Oh, I get it. Miss Iris’s eyesight is so good that it’s easy for her to notice when

people are cheating,” Salume said.

“So that’s how she’s making money? Tsk, I can’t believe how cheeky Iris, of all people, is acting,” Reko growled.

“What should we do?”

“You said you were close to a breakthrough, weren’t you?”

“Yes. I feel like I can win, but...”

“Win what? Don’t tell me you plan on gambling?”

“I do. It’ll be do-or-die.”

“Do-or-die? That sounds interesting.”

“Huh?” Salume blinked, surprised at Reko’s words.

“What?”

“Oh, no. I just didn’t think of it that way.”

Do-or-die. Winning such a competition was one thing, but losing would mean taking on a severe penalty. Salume couldn’t think of the challenge as an exhilarating one, because the vision of herself losing wouldn’t stop flashing through her brain. But Reko was different. Instead of worrying about winning or losing, he chose to focus on the act of the competition itself.

“I don’t really get what the issue is,” Reko said with a small shrug. “What are do-or-die challenges if not interesting?”

“You’re right, Reko. There’s nothing else to them. I’m sure that’s the basic philosophy for a happy mercenary group. We do things because they’re interesting. I think that’s a wonderful way of looking at things.” Salume was starting to feel a bit excited herself. She wanted to give it a try and test herself.

“So, what are we gonna do?” Reko asked.

“The only thing Boss wanted us to do is enter this casino with ten thousand dora and come out of it with a hundred thousand, right?”

“Yup, that’s right.”

Salume leaned in close to Reko’s ear and whispered her plan to him.

“Salume, you don’t act like it, but you’re quite the villain yourself,” Reko said once she finished.

“You’re my accomplice, Reko. If it doesn’t work, then let’s get yelled at together.”

“Sure. Let’s give your plan a try. What should we start with? Er, actually, now that I think about it, / won’t be of much help.”

“Let’s use Asura-style profiling to calculate our chances of success first. We’ll figure out everyone’s personalities. If we don’t stand much of a chance, then there’s no point in giving it a try, after all.”

“I’m just glad that you’re starting to smile again, Salume.”

“Right. I also want to freely live my life with a smile on my face. This is my first step towards that dream. If I don’t succeed, then I’ll happily offer my cheek for Boss to punch!”

After she said that, Salume held out her fist. Reko clenched his hand into one as well and bumped it against Salume’s.

Extra Episode Nine: It's the second part! I sometimes lose too. That's fine, I like losing.

"Boss!" Salume's cheery voice rang out as she came back to Asura, who was still at the blackjack table.

"What's wrong, Salume? Did you change your mind and decide to play a game here?" Asura and Yor were the only people remaining from Asura's first round. Everyone else had left, their wallets empty after Asura took everything from them.

"No. I've decided that I want to play a game with much higher stakes."

"Oh? So you came to me because you needed my help for that? Stand," Asura said as she placed dora on the table. "Well, no can do. You should figure out a way to win with your own strength."

"Boss, how much have you won so far?"

"A hundred fifty thousand."

"That's amazing. May I borrow all of that money?"

"Oh, come on now," Asura said, shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head. "What kind of gamble are you planning? One that requires a hundred fifty thousand dora? Are you serious?"

"I am. And I'm only going to bet fifty thousand. I simply wish to play three rounds."

"Hmm. What are your chances of success?"

"Over seventy percent." Salume's voice was brimming with confidence.

"I see. So you're going to play three times because your chances of success aren't a hundred percent?"

"Yes, that's right. I didn't expect anything less from you, Boss. You saw right through me."

However, Asura hadn't seen through everything. Throughout this conversation, Asura never turned around, not even once. So she wasn't looking at Salume's expression. She could only judge Salume's mood from the sound of her voice.

"It's no issue if you win, but what do you plan on doing if you lose?"

"I'll return the money to you by taking on jobs and requests. Of course, since I'm still not as useful as everyone else, it'll take me a long time to pay you back. But I will, no matter what." Salume's voice was dead serious, and she wasn't lying. She would return the money without fail.

Asura must have sensed her determination because she hummed, looking deep in thought.

"Of course, everyone started this training with ten thousand dora, so I agree that it's unfair if I start with a hundred fifty thousand," Salume said firmly. "But, Reko is going to do this with me. So I'm only really taking half of that amount. Boss, don't you think it's unfair that Reko and I are starting off on the same foot as everyone else? Our skill level and techniques are so different from everyone else's. Reko and I are still inferior to the rest of the group. It's unjust. We should have been given some sort of advantage."

"I see. That's impressive. So you're saying that the hundred fifty thousand dora is your advantage?"

"That's right. If we don't have an advantage as great as that, then Reko and I won't be able to succeed on our own. We're not on the same level as everyone else, who've already completed their basic training regimes, or Miss Iris, who's a hero."

"Very well then. You raised a fair point. So let me give you a choice. Firstly, Salume, if you lose the hundred fifty thousand dora after saying all that, I'm going to hang you by your feet and whip you until you lose consciousness. Secondly, if you simply fail to earn the money you need, then I'll let you off the hook with a slap. Well? Do you still want to borrow my money?"

"Yes, I do." Salume did not even hesitate.

"All right. Take it." Asura took out several wads of cash from under her robes

and handed them over to Salume. Even during this exchange, Asura never turned around. She simply handed the cash over her shoulder.

“Thank you very much.”

Asura and the others left the casino, bright smiles on their faces. Reko was the only one still inside the building, since he said he would leave after using the restroom.

“Now then, it’s time to check if everyone has their hundred thousand dora,” Asura said.

Jyrki was the first to present his money. Though they were in the middle of the main street, Jyrki didn’t care about flaunting his riches. Of course, this was because no one from Moon Blossom was worried about bandits. In fact, they welcomed anyone to try robbing them. They were strong enough to turn the tables on the would-be thieves, beat them half to death, and steal everything off of them.

“It was...so easy,” lina said as she showed off her money as well.

“It wasn’t so easy for me, but I managed to make what I needed.” Marx also displayed his cash.

“I was really cutting it close. Rewards from catching cheaters weren’t enough so I had no choice but to show off my sword dance onstage.”

“I was watching you. It was beautiful. Quite impressive, Miss Hero.”

Iris’s status as a hero really helped out in situations like this. She only needed to ask if she could put on a show and the casino instantly prepared one, marketing her performance as “A Sword Dance from the Youngest Hero Girl in History, Iris.” Even those who normally didn’t care about heroes showed up to watch it, and it made for a rather festive atmosphere.

Between putting on a show and catching cheaters, Iris managed to forge a win-win relationship with the casino. One could say that she was the only one in Moon Blossom who made the money in a legitimate way. Since Iris was pretty and talkative, she was a natural when it came to show business. Her somewhat

idiotic side made her more relatable, which in turn made her more popular. Asura imagined that if Iris had decided to become a performer from the start, she would have garnered worldwide popularity.

“Ah, I earned a hundred thousand too,” Salume said, showing off her money before she returned to the entrance of the casino.

No one knew why Salume went back. She returned to give Reko, who was waiting at the entrance, a hundred thousand dora. Then the two of them ambled back to Asura.

“Here, a hundred thousand dora,” Reko said, showing off the money he’d gotten from Salume. “This is the money that Salume borrowed from you, Boss. So here, I’m gonna give it back to you, along with the extra fifty thousand.” Upon saying that, Reko reached into his pocket and took out the fifty thousand.

“Wait a second, you two,” Asura said. “What’s the meaning of this? I recall—”

“You said to enter with ten thousand and exit with a hundred thousand,” Salume said. “Both Reko and I accomplished this.”

“Isn’t that cheating?!” exclaimed Iris.

“This is what people call splittin’ hairs, isn’t it?” Jyrki said.

“I knew that these two put more effort in finding ways to slack off,” Marx muttered.

“But...according to the rules...their method is totally valid,” lina pointed out.

“But they’re using *my* money,” Asura said. “I lent it out because Salume said she wanted to play a game with higher stakes. Did you trick me?”

“It’s your fault for falling for it,” Reko said.

“I agree. It just means that my acting was so good, I could even fool you, Boss. I figured I could do it because you don’t tend to look away from something you’re really passionate about. That means I only needed to focus on acting with my voice.”

“I see. I agree that you have a point,” Asura said. “I didn’t give any specific instructions on how to get the money.”

“So you acknowledge it, then?” Reko said. “You acknowledge that Salume and I passed?”

“Yeah, I do. You two passed. Congratulations. The both of you are quite shrewd. I’m excited to see how you’ll develop.”

“Hee hee, you’re so naive, Boss. If you acknowledge that we succeeded, then that means *you* didn’t,” Salume said with a sly grin. “You lent me a hundred fifty thousand dora, which means that you didn’t have a hundred thousand when you left the casino. Right?”

After Asura lent Salume the money, she won an additional seventy thousand before she stopped playing. It wasn’t out of her own will. She’d won so much that no one wanted to play with her anymore. Though she could’ve played against the dealer, she heard about Iris’s sword dance and went to check that out instead.

“Oh? So you not only deceived me, but you’re trying to get me in trouble too?” Asura giggled. “Manipulating my kindness, are we? Salume, was this your idea?”

“Yes, it was.”

Asura chuckled low in her throat. “Is that so? I knew that you would be a good mercenary. You’re a good actress, smart, and brave. You usually spend all your time glued to my side, but you have no qualms about coldly casting me aside if it suits your purposes. This goes for you as well, Reko.”

“Well, we all knew about Salume’s two-faced personality,” Jyrki said.

“Yeah...Salume has...a good version and...a bad version inside of her.”

“Isn’t that what all humans are like though?” Marx questioned. “No one is completely good or completely bad. Barring Boss, of course.”

“Asura is the exception to way too many rules,” Iris sighed, shaking her head.

“Reveal the trick to me, Salume,” Asura said. “Why did you think you’d be able to trick me? And what made you think I’d accept this loophole? If I recall, you said your chances of success were seventy percent?”

“Yes, I figured that there was a seventy percent chance of my plan working

out.”

“We profiled everyone at the start,” Reko added. “As a result, we figured that Jyrki and Iina would accept our victory, but Iris and Marx wouldn’t. So we knew that the final decision would ultimately come down to you, Boss.”

“Huh, you profiled us? Nice,” Jyrki said with a proud nod.

“So? Why did you think...there was a seventy percent chance...that Boss would be okay with it?”

“We figured that out with profiling too,” Salume replied, her face calm. “For starters, we knew that Boss would lend us the money. She would have lent it to anyone from Moon Blossom.”

“Boss may act like she’s really greedy, but she has no attachment to money,” Reko said with a small smile. “She just wants fair payment for her work. Plus she needs it to keep the group going, and it’s not like having *too* much money is a bad thing.”

“That’s right,” Asura said.

“So she’ll lend us as much money as she has on her. She said that she won a hundred fifty thousand, so I requested a hundred fifty thousand.”

“She’d think it suspicious if we borrowed a perfect hundred thousand, so we decided that it’d be best if we borrowed a bit more than that amount,” Reko added.

“After that, it fell on my acting skills. I got her to believe in my lie that I wanted to play a high-stakes, do-or-die game. I figured she wouldn’t lend me the money if I didn’t have a legitimate reason for needing it.”

“Yup. Boss is the type to lend us money, but she’s also the type to ask what it’s for. She probably doesn’t care about the actual reason. She just wants to satisfy her own curiosity.”

“Nice,” Asura interjected. “It’s hard to tell how smart the two of you actually are.”

“I went to school, and so did Salume, albeit for a short period of time.” Reko was born and raised in Mullux Village, which grew the tea leaves Arnia was

globally renowned for. Since tea was a major export for the country, many of the villagers were quite rich.

“My father used all of my tuition money on alcohol, and I got expelled after that,” Salume said, her shoulders slumping slightly.

“All right, enough about school. Tell us the rest,” Iris said. “I can’t believe how stupidly gutsy you two were to try and pull the wool over Asura’s eyes. Why in the world did you think this loophole would be okay?”

“Iris, I bet your grades in school sucked,” Reko laughed.

“Sh-Shut up! I was the best in the school when it came to physical education!” As a member of the nobility, no matter how minor, Iris not only attended a proper school but also graduated from it.

Though there were some variations depending on the country, students in this world usually graduated from school after about four years of education.

“Like Boss said herself, this training doesn’t have any specific rules. So we figured that if we focused our attention on that, Boss would accept the final results without a fuss. Well, we still only had a seventy percent success rate,” Salume said.

“I mean, Boss only said to use our skills. She never said to gamble. If what we did is considered cheating, then what about Jyrki and Iina? They made all their money by stealing it,” Reko pointed out.

“That’s right. If we cheated, then Miss Iris cheated as well.”

“Wait, what?” Iris gasped.

“So, Iris, you have no choice but to accept that what we did was legitimate.”

“If Boss didn’t okay the loophole, we planned on shifting the blame to everyone else. That means other people will get yelled at along with us,” Salume said, a bright smile on her face.

“You just dragged me into this like it’s no big deal!” shrieked Iris.

“Don’t forget about me and Iina,” Jyrki sighed.

“Hmm. But they’re right,” Marx said with a small nod. “If we don’t accept that

Salume and Reko passed the test, then that means Boss and I are the only ones who did.”

“Next time, I’ll specify that I want you to make the money through gambling,” Asura said, though she had a somewhat ecstatic smile on her face.

She was delighted at this turn of events. Salume was no longer a weak little girl who was forced to accept all the abuse thrown her way. She was a member of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. She had come close to dying already, and had killed people herself, so Salume was able to use her own life as a bargaining chip now. Even if she decided to gamble properly, without using any clever tricks or loopholes, she wouldn’t lose to your average gambler or dealer. In fact, today, Salume was even able to score a victory against Asura.

“Split that hundred fifty thousand dora between the two of you,” Asura giggled. “It’s your reward for pulling a fast one on me, as well as my fine for not being able to reach the quota.”

Upon hearing what Asura said, Reko and Salume cheered and high-fived each other. *I never knew how satisfying it is, Asura thought, to see the person you raised with your own hand surpass you.* Salume and Reko were maturing at a far faster rate than Asura expected. It was truly wonderful. *Did Lumia ever experience moments like this?* The thought left Asura as fast as it came to her.

Extra Episode Ten: Everyone's enjoyed a happy, peaceful period in their lives. Of course, the opposite is true as well.

"Asura developed at a rate far beyond my imagination," Lumia said with a smile. "I taught her everything. Swordsmanship, fighting spirit, magic, tactics, common knowledge... Everything you can think of, I taught it to her."

"You sure sound happy about that, Lumia," Tina said from the bed. She was kneeling with both knees on the mattress.

Lumia was seated on the bed, across from Tina. The two of them were in the room Lumia had been given in the old castle in Central Felsen.

"It made me so happy. Asura absorbed everything I taught her and became so unbelievably powerful under my tutelage. I think it's easier for you to understand what I mean if I told you that she's on par with a hero." In response to Lumia's words, Tina gave a small nod. "But the oddest thing was that she sometimes acted as if she already knew everything. At times, she even knew things she shouldn't have. According to her, it's because of memories from her past life, but she never told me the real reason."

"Lumia, you must really love Asura."

"Yes, I do. Asura was the only family I had over the past ten years. That's why I love her." Lumia's smile took on a more enigmatic quality. "But she is a monster. She didn't need to be a saint, but I wanted her to grow up into a kinder person than she is now. I didn't want her to do anything too inhumane, so that's why I worked under her as her vice captain."

"What do you mean?" Tina tilted her head to the side.

"It was to stop her from doing anything overly cruel. I'd decided that, as the one who raised her, if Asura ever lost control and became nothing better than a common murderer, I'd end her with my own hand. Murderers are pieces of

trash, after all. You have to take them out.”

However, Lumia left Asura’s side. That meant that no one could stop Asura if she decided to go on a rampage.

“And yet, you decided to come with us,” Tina said.

“That girl...Jeanne, I mean, is important to me as well,” Lumia explained with a quiet sigh. “I felt guilty about how I wasn’t able to save her, and I didn’t want her to die either.”

“I’m really happy you decided to come with us. I, um, *do* feel bad for you. I really do. But...”

“You’re happy because you’re not getting spanked anymore, right? It’s fine, I can handle it. Anyway, Tina, can you tell me some stories about your life with Jeanne here?”

“Of course. Let me tell you about the happiest point of my life, all right?” Tina said, her lips curled in a bright smile.

Four years ago, Jeanne and Tina left human society behind to wander Central Felsen. Many criminal organizations fell under their control during these travels. Jeanne had already been planning something during this time, and to fulfill her ambitions, she needed money. On occasion, those from the Assassination Alliance came to try and kill Jeanne, but the two of them ended up defeating them in combat instead.

“This old castle is lovely. Tina, what do you think about making this our temporary base of operations?”

“That sounds good to me.”

They discovered their current headquarters and did their best to clean it up.

“Eek! Tina! A snake! A snake is living here!”

“Boom!”

“You defeated it in a single attack?! Tina, you’re amazing!” Jeanne pulled the thirteen-year-old Tina into a tight embrace.

“Ah, I forgot that about her. She never liked reptiles very much.”

“Mistress Jeanne has far too many things she dislikes,” Tina said, shaking her head in exasperation. “She actually dislikes humans too, so I was the one who did most of the work when it came to managing the organization.”

“She wasn’t always like that. She used to be such a friendly child. What happened to her ten years ago that broke her like this?” Even as she asked that, Lumia could take a guess. This question was just to confirm her hypothesis.

“She was tortured.”

“I knew it...”

When Lumia had been in that underground cell, Noemi visited her and told her that she’d prepared a torture so cruel, it would destroy Jeanne’s mind. Even though Lumia did what Noemi wanted, Noemi didn’t keep her promise to keep her sister safe. Either Noemi or the first prince betrayed her. Of course, she couldn’t discount the possibility that *both* of them stabbed her in the back.

“Mistress Jeanne’s body was a complete mess,” Tina reminisced. “But I licked her all over and healed her.”

For a moment, Lumia didn’t understand what Tina just said. “What?”

“Is something the matter?”

“You licked her and healed her?”

“Yes. There’s a healing component in my saliva, which is why there isn’t a single scratch on Mistress Jeanne’s body right now.”

“Ah, I see. So this is a skill specific to your species?”

Some monsters possessed unique abilities. The Alraune that Moon Blossom had encountered in the Great Forest was one such example.

“Oh, but, Mistress Jeanne broke two years ago, not ten. She’d always been unstable, but it was two years ago when she started hitting people.”

“Two years ago?” It looked like Lumia needed to further analyze the timeline.

“If Mistress Jeanne hasn’t told you anything, then I can’t either.”

“Oh? That’s fine, then. Could you tell me more of your happy memories with her?”

There was a high chance she’d become mentally unstable after her torture ten years ago, and the lingering trauma wore her down over the years. Her butt fetish had existed even when they were much younger, before anything happened. While Jeanne hadn’t been a sexual sadist ten years ago, an incident two years ago must have turned her into one.

So what happened?

Tina and Jeanne lived peaceful lives in the old castle.

“Mistress Jeanne, it’s morning,” Tina said as she lapped at Jeanne’s cheek with her tongue. The two of them always slept together in the same bed, so this was their usual routine.

Jeanne groaned and turned to her other side. “A few more minutes...”

“No can do. You always say that and then sleep until the afternoon.”

“If I can touch your butt, then I’ll get up.”

“All right.” As soon as Tina said that with a small smile, Jeanne shot up and gave Tina a tight hug, her hand traveling downwards and rubbing circles against her buttocks. “Okay, now then, Mistress Jeanne, let’s go get washed up.”

Tina held Jeanne in a princess carry and walked all the way to the bathroom with her. They stood next to each other as they brushed their teeth and washed their faces.

“I’m going to go check out the organization’s marijuana fields today,” Tina said. “We’ve also started having a real presence in the east, so it’s about time that we find someone to manage all the branches there.”

“Tina, you’re so hardworking,” Jeanne said, sounding exhausted already.

“You were the one who said we needed money,” Tina replied crossly. “You keep adding more and more branches to the organization, but you don’t do any management yourself.”

“Please don’t get so angry at me, Tina. I love you.” Jeanne pressed her lips against Tina’s forehead.



“You always say this to try and get me off your case,” Tina said, a little embarrassed. “But today, I’m going to ask you to come with me to the fields. Noemi said that she’d hired a new supervisor for the place, so I’d like to check them out.”

“Do I have to?”

“Please don’t make such a disgusted face. You’re technically the boss of our organization, you know? You should show up at the workplace every once in a while.”

“I suppose I don’t have any other choice. I’ll go if you let me spank your butt a little.”

“Of course. But please don’t hit me too hard.”

“What a slovenly child,” Lumia said, looking like she could hardly believe what she was hearing. “No, I suppose she’d always been sort of like that.”

“Back then, we were truly happy,” Tina said, looking off into the distance as she lost herself in her memories.

“Yes, I figured. It sounds like the two of you—an adorable little girl and someone with a thing for butts—were just canoodling.” Based on what Lumia heard so far, it didn’t seem like there was anything *too* wrong with Jeanne’s mind.

“Allow me to continue.”

“Wait. Can you tell me about how she acts when she’s killing people?”

There was no doubt about it; Jeanne’s mind was fractured. Or at the very least, it *seemed* that her mind was a fractured mess now. *If only Asura were here, we’d be able to get a more detailed analysis.*

“Very well. She just so happened to kill the supervisor we went to check on, so let me tell you about that incident.”

The supervisor was a fat man who used to be the boss of a small crime family.

“Lady Jeanne, please, won’t you step on me?” The man gave them a smarmy grin before he prostrated himself upon the ground within the marijuana fields’ maintenance shed.

“We shall give Noemi a harsh punishment later,” Jeanne commented.

“I agree. This person is disgusting,” Tina replied.

Noemi had been the one to choose this man as the supervisor.

“Well, everyone acts like this when faced with my divinity. Even some of the assassins got on all fours for me.” As she spoke, Jeanne placed her foot upon the supervisor’s head and stepped down.

“Ahh, thank you so much! Thank you so much!” The man rubbed his forehead against the ground. Without his sense of guilt, he felt reborn.

“Once you let it all out, the effects of my divinity won’t be as strong. I’m sure that we can have a proper conversation now. Please stand up.”

The man obeyed Jeanne’s order, but there was still a lecherous grin on his face.

“His gaze is disgusting,” Tina said.

“Huh? Yo, brat, watch yer words. I ain’t no slouch in the fightin’ department myself. Ah, but of course, I’m nowhere near your level, Lady Jeanne.”

“You should be the one to watch your words. From the afterlife, that is.” With a slash of her claymore, Jeanne beheaded the man. His body fell to the ground while his head landed next to it with a thud.

“Lady Jeanne?!” Tina exclaimed, shocked.

“How can a weakling who couldn’t even dodge that strike claim that they know how to fight?” Jeanne said as she swung the claymore, flicking the blood from the blade.

“Y-You didn’t have to *kill* him...”

“I did. I will not allow anyone to treat you in such a rude manner. I will kill them in the most decisive manner possible. Everyone who treats you as if you’re nothing shall die. Everyone who tries to target you shall be eliminated.

You are my only family, Tina. You are the only one I love. Everyone else can go to hell,” Jeanne said. She was dead serious.

“It’s not that she dislikes humans. It’s more that she hates them. The difference between how she treats someone she loves and someone she doesn’t is extreme,” Lumia mused.

Jeanne really was unstable.

“That’s correct. Compared to how she deals with me, Lady Jeanne becomes a whole different person around others. Lately, she gets angry about the strangest things. I haven’t been spared her wrath either.”

“She slapped me just because I didn’t call her by her name.” The reality of the situation, in Lumia’s opinion, was that it didn’t matter what anyone did or said. Jeanne’s only motive for spanking people was that she wanted to. *Are butts really that amazing?*

That was when someone knocked on the door several times. Before Lumia could invite them in, the door swung open, revealing Jeanne standing behind it.

“The two of you have been getting along very well lately,” Jeanne said, looking a little angry. “Are you leaving me out on purpose?”

“Of course not!” Tina stood up and rushed to Jeanne, wrapping her arms around her in a hug.

Jeanne stroked the top of Tina’s head. “My subordinates, along with most of the mercenary group Flame, have arrived, so I have to give a speech. Lumia, since you are one of the God Hands, I’d like you to stay by my side.”

“Is Flame one of your underlings too?” Lumia asked. That was the largest mercenary group in the continent of Felsenmark.

“No. The leader of Flame submitted to my divinity, but he has pride in his identity as a mercenary. He didn’t become one of mine,” Jeanne replied with a shrug. “I simply hired them. That was why I was collecting funds.”

“Don’t tell me you hired every single mercenary in Flame?”

That would require an awful lot of money. Unlike Moon Blossom, Flame

wasn't a small group of nobodies. It was a super large organization, consisting of over three thousand mercenaries spread out over the entirety of Felsenmark. That meant they had the same manpower as a small country's entire army. They could call themselves a military division or corps if they so wished, boasting numbers far greater than the brigade Lumia once led. With the entirety of Flame alone, Jeanne could easily start a war if she wished. Not only did she possess Flame, but she also had the criminal organization Felmafia, as well as the Assassination Alliance, as her subordinates.

"Of course we did, Lumia," Jeanne said with a thin smile. "I intend on using everything in my power to achieve salvation. After I finish my speech, we will all make our way to the Holy Liyolure Empire. We'll be passing through another country to get there, so we'll take the opportunity to destroy it."

Extra Episode Eleven: Love is blind. You are the only one in my eyes. “Nice! Now, scram! That’s what I’d say.”

Punti Arlandel stood in front of an old castle in Central Felsen, listening to Jeanne’s speech. His first job after joining Flame was to participate in Jeanne’s war.

“Squad Leader, is this something that happens a lot?”

“Course not, Punpun. This is the first time we all had to gather.”

Flame mercenaries worked in groups, with the smallest typically consisting of only three people. Punti’s squad leader was a woman in her early twenties, and she had a rather crude manner of speech.

“Yup, I figured as much!” From where Punti was standing, he couldn’t see Jeanne’s face very well. All he knew for sure was that she had white hair. However, her voice carried on the wind.

There were over a thousand people gathered for the meeting, and the ones closest to Jeanne were all on their knees. It must have been due to her divinity. Punti was far enough away that he couldn’t feel anything.

“Tsk. What is she yappin’ about? Salvation for humankind?” Punti’s squad leader said. “Suspicious. She’s really just sayin’, ‘I want to start a war, so help me out.’ Ha! I’d much rather she come out and admit it.”

“I agree!”

It was taking Jeanne a long time to get to the point. But to summarize her speech, she wanted everyone to fight in her war with her. Not only that, but she wanted to start the cruelest and most brutal war she could. That was all.

“Well, all the people at the front look like they’re havin’ the best trip of their lives thanks to her divinity,” the squad leader chuckled. “Shit. Makes me wanna try feelin’ it.”

“I’d like to see what divinity feels like too. I wonder what it’s like,” Punti hummed, smiling.

Jeanne started to introduce the three pillars of the organization: Nicola, Miriam, and...

“Miss Lumia?!” Punti couldn’t suppress his yelp. Everyone around him turned to look at him, but they didn’t say anything. They simply stared. Punti scratched the back of his head, feeling awkward under all of the attention.

“Hey, Punpun. You know Lumia Autun?”

“Yeah, I do. But wait, why’s Miss Lumia here? Did she quit Moon Blossom?” He tilted his head to the side.

Jeanne stated that she’d entrusted Ragnarok to Lumia, who raised the sword high above her head for everyone to see.

“Damn, that’s a fine sword. I want somethin’ like that for myself. You too, right, Punpun?”

“That’s a legendary weapon, isn’t it? I wonder if *you* can handle it, Squad Leader.”

“Stop bein’ cheeky, Punpun. I’ll kill you.”

“Whoa, that doesn’t sound fun. I have to get stronger so I hope you’ll reconsider, Squad Leader.” Punti poked his squad leader’s arm with his finger.

“I didn’t say you could touch me, Punpun.” The squad leader punched Punti’s arm.

Jeanne stated where she wanted to go, signaling that Punti and everyone else were to move out. The front of the group started to walk, so Punti followed suit. Jeanne had ordered them to kill anyone they encountered on the way, meaning that they were to take out every single human they saw on the way to the Liyolure Empire.

To be more precise, Jeanne’s orders were to slaughter anyone they saw, as cruelly and dehumanizingly as possible. It didn’t matter if they were a child or an elder.

“Jeanne’s crazy,” the squad leader said.

“Yeaaaah, I agree. But it’s a mercenary’s job to do as the boss says, right?”

“Of course. We can’t just ignore our orders. So rape and pillage as best as you can, Punpun. You’re not gonna tell me you’re a *virgin* or anythin’, are you?”

“Um, I actually *am* a virgin.”

“Wait, seriously? That’s hilarious! So your first time will be rape? Man, you’re one unlucky bastard!” The squad leader smacked Punt on the back several times.

He sighed before someone caught his eye. “Wait, Squad Leader, sorry. I’m going to go chat with Miss Lumia for a bit!”

He turned back in the crowd and fought against the flow of marching warriors to get to where Lumia was. The squad leader was yelling something behind him, but Punt pretended that he didn’t hear anything.

“Miss Luuuumia!”

“Oh! If it isn’t Punt.”

Lumia was advancing on horseback and Punt leaped up to sit behind her on the saddle. He acted so casually, as if the two of them were friends. Since Punt was so light on his feet, the horse didn’t panic at all. She had to give it to this little hero candidate—he was truly skilled.

“Did you quit Moon Blossom?” Punt asked. Not only was he light on his feet, but his tone was light as well.

“Yes, I did. How about you, Punt? Why are you here?”

“I’m here because I’m a mercenary of Flame now!”

“Ah, I see. And I suppose you’re doing whatever you want again?” Lumia smiled as if she didn’t know what she was going to do with Punt.

“I told my squad leader where I’d be going! I really wanted to speak with you, Miss Lumia.”

“Yes, I figured as much.” Lumia shrugged. “I had nothing to do with what happened to your father. I’m telling the truth.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about!”

“Oh, really? Then, what do you want?”

“Right. So to cut to the chase—”

“Lumia.” Jeanne approached them from atop her own horse. “That’s a very young boyfriend you have there.”

“Your boyfriend’s younger than you?” Tina said from behind Jeanne. “Where did you find him?”

“Hey, wait a second...” Lumia started.

“Yo, seriously? You got yourself a guy? And I’m still single?” Nicola Canarre—who was on horseback as well, of course—trotted up to them. He was already forty years old, with some gray peppering his hair and stubble. Incidentally, he knew that Lumia and Jeanne had switched identities.

“Oh? Lumia’s dating someone now? Well, her pleasant personality always made her popular with the guys,” Miriam said atop her mount, a bright smile on her face. She didn’t know about Lumia and Jeanne’s true identities.

“I never imagined that I’d meet people from the Oathkeeper Brigade!” Puntì laughed. “But that’s not important right now. I’ve been hit with the sudden urge to bow down and repent. Is this the result of Jeanne’s divinity?”

“It is. You can bow down if you’d like, you know? I can also oblige you with a foot on the head—my horse’s foot, that is.”

“Getting stepped on by a horse would kill me!” Puntì replied with a light huff.

Amazing, Lumia thought. Despite the people surrounding him, Puntì didn’t lose his cool at all. With the exceptions of Asura and Reko, even the members of Moon Blossom would feel a bit of anxiety if they had to converse with Jeanne and the other former members of the Oathkeeper Brigade. Marx especially would not be able to maintain his usual calm. *It’s probably because his dad was a hero*, Lumia guessed. Puntì knew a lot of heroes, which meant that he was used to dealing with famous figures.

“I recommend her slap,” Nicola said. “You only need one hit to feel better.”

“Mistress Jeanne’s punishments are capable of alleviating one’s feelings of

guilt,” Tina explained, a stony expression on her face.

Punti hummed. “Divinity sounds amazing. I don’t really wanna bow down at this moment though!”

“Is that so? Then I shall give you some space. Please do not be so lovey-dovey with Lumia or I might *accidentally* kill you,” Jeanne said with a slightly miffed expression on her face before directing her horse away from Lumia. Nicola and Miriam followed suit.

“Does Miss Jeanne have a sister complex?” Punti asked.

“A serious case of it,” Lumia sighed.

“Yeah, I could tell!” As he said that, Punti wrapped his arms around Lumia’s middle.

“Wait a second. You don’t need to use me as support, do you? It’s not as if you’ll fall off the horse without me.”

It would be one thing if this was Reko or Salume. But Punti was a hero candidate. He couldn’t possibly fall off a horse that was walking along at a sedate pace.

“Miss Lumia, you smell so good,” Punti said, inhaling deeply and loudly. “Ow!”

Lumia had slammed her left elbow into Punti’s stomach.

“I’ll beat you to death. I’ve had enough of perverts.”

Asura, Reko, Jeanne, Noemi... There were so many perverts around Lumia that she could only sigh at the thought of them.

“Man, that really hurt.” Punti backed away from Lumia, though he remained on the horse.

“You seem different, personality-wise.”

“Yeah, well, a lot’s happened to me in a really short amount of time,” Punti replied with a shrug. “Losing to you was a particularly big deal for me.”

“Was it?”

“Yeah. I’ve lived my entire life thinking that, as the son of a hero, I can’t ever lose. It was a lot of pressure. But then I fought you, and I couldn’t even lay a

finger on you. There was such a difference in our strength that it ended up convincing me to let down my hair a little,” Puntì explained in a pleasant voice.

“I see. I suppose you felt liberated from your self-imposed pressure. So? What do you *really* want? I’m guessing that you’re here for more than a nice chat.”

“Please marry me.”

Lumia’s thoughts ground to a halt and she sat there in stunned silence for a few moments. She couldn’t understand what he said to her. “What?”

“Please marry me,” Puntì repeated.

“I see now. So this is your plan? How vile,” Lumia said, furious. “This is your idea of getting back at me, isn’t it? Since you can’t win against me in a physical fight, you chose to engage in a psychological one? You’re trying to imply that I’ve missed my chances at marriage, aren’t you? Or are you trying to make me let down my guard by pretending you’re interested in me?”

“Miss Lumia, you have a very paranoid mind! I was being serious.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Now, now, calm down. I said this earlier too, but it was thanks to you that I was freed from the pressure dogging me my whole life. I’m really grateful for that. Thank you for defeating me.”

“So then, Puntì, are you telling me you genuinely want to propose to the person who beat you up? Is that what you’re into? Unlike Mistress Jeanne, I have no interest in slapping or stepping on people.”

“I’m not a masochist. I simply fell in love with you. I find your face very attractive too, if that helps.”

“Even so, I reject your proposal,” Lumia replied coldly.

“Then let’s have another duel!”

“Are you trying to say that if you win, I have to marry you?”

“That’s right!”

“You just don’t give up,” Lumia sighed, exasperated. “It’s beyond obvious that I’m still the stronger one.”

“Yeah, I agree! So let’s have our duel five years from now.”

“I can’t wait for that long.”

“Fine. Then three years. Wait just three years for me.”

“Three years, huh?” Lumia thought about it. Punti wasn’t lying. After she calmed down enough to assess his tone of voice, she could tell that he was being serious about this. To tell the truth, it made her a bit happy. But...

“Wouldn’t it be difficult to grow stronger than me in only three years?”

Judging by Punti’s current level of strength, it would take him far more time before he’d be on par with Lumia. He would need five years to become a hero, and then an additional three years of training to be her equal. In other words, for Punti to catch up to Lumia, he would need at least eight more years. That calculation didn’t take into account Lumia’s own growth either.

“I’ll become strong,” Punti said in a determined voice. “I swear I will. I want to catch up to you, Miss Lumia, and I’ll do it in three years. So I’d like you to wait for me.”

“Catching up to me isn’t enough. I won’t marry you unless you beat me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So I’ll make sure I can win.”

“Then here’s a piece of advice,” Lumia said. “Become a warrior-mage.”

“A warrior-mage? Why?”

“I’m a soldier-mage, remember? If I’m going to go all out, then I’ll be using magic. If you don’t understand magic, then you can’t avoid it.”

“I can dodge it after seeing it! I’ve done it before too. Marx and lina’s spells did nothing to me.”

“I don’t make a big deal about it, but I’m a grand mage, you know? Don’t lump me in the same category as Marx and lina.” There was a huge difference in strength between a normal mage and a grand mage.

“I don’t really get it,” Punti said.

“Fine. Then try to dodge this after seeing it. Divine Retribution.” Upon witnessing the glorious angel descend from the heavens, everyone around

them started to murmur. The angel remained floating in the air, drifting alongside the horses. “This darling here has the same amount of combat strength as a hero. Would you care to duel her?”

“Sorry, no thanks,” Puntì said tightly. “You can use that too, huh? But wait, what’s Divine Retribution? Is it magic?”

“That’s right. It’s nothing more than magic of the attack type.”

“It’s hard to think of it as magic.”

“Well, yes, I can agree,” Lumia said, a hint of sadness entering her tone. “When I was still a child, I thought that Divine Retribution was a gift from my god. It was stronger than other spells and it took on the shape of an angel, after all.”

That was why she believed herself a holy disciple and referred to herself as thus. But in the end, everything was nothing more than a delusion. Her attack magic had simply reflected the strong faith she’d possessed back then. God didn’t exist and yet, Lumia still found herself praying from time to time, a past habit she hadn’t managed to break.

“Hmm. Well, maybe it really was a gift!” Puntì said with an innocent laugh. “You just haven’t realized it.”

“How can it be a gift if my god doesn’t exist?” Lumia asked.

“Maybe he does. Well, it’s not as if I’ve ever met him. Speaking of which, if you use Divine Retribution, then it doesn’t matter what magic I learned! The only people who can win against that are heroes.”

“That’s not true,” Lumia said. “To tell you the truth, my spell will be useless against Asura. In fact, it’ll be useless against all members of Moon Blossom, save for Salume and Reko.”

Lumia had already shown everyone her Divine Retribution. At this point, they’d probably already figured out a way, or were in the midst of figuring out a way, to prevent her from using it. They would come up with countermeasures—of that, Lumia was absolutely certain.

“Are you sure about that?” Puntì asked.

“I am,” Lumia said as she willed away the angel. “So, Punti, this is why you should learn magic. Once you know magic, you can counter it. If you don’t, you can’t. Simple, right?”

Under the current circumstances, the only people who could withstand Lumia’s Divine Retribution on their own were Asura, Jeanne, and a handful of heroes. Moon Blossom’s mercenaries working together could as well.

“All right, fine. I’ll learn magic too. See, Miss Lumia? You don’t hate me at all, do you?”

“I never said I did. I never said I liked you either though. Now go on. I look forward to seeing you in three years.”

“Yeah. See you later! I’ll drop by to visit you every once in a while, so let’s have some tea together.” Punti hopped off the horse, landing without a sound.

“Three years, huh?” Lumia smiled to herself. It looked like she found a reason to keep living. And here she’d been thinking that she wanted to win against Asura, even if she had to go down with her. That she was willing to throw her life away to protect Jeanne. “What should I do?” she murmured as she gazed up at the bright, clear sky.

Ahh, but it sure feels good to be popular. Asura used to say something similar. Lumia could relate to that feeling now.

Part Six, Chapter One: A small country on edge, barely hanging on. Hey, that's a problem Boss's buttons will never have.

Lumia and the others were able to enter the Holy Liyolure Empire without inspection, and they were able to do the same to access the palace. Jeanne, Tina, and the former three pillars had been the only ones to enter, making their way directly to the audience chamber. Those of Flame and the Felmafia were stationed near the capital, waiting for the signal.

“Lady Jeanne, we’ve been waiting for you,” the Liyolurean emperor said.

He stood up from his throne, walked until he was right in front of Jeanne, and then bent down to take a knee. Upon seeing that sight, Lumia felt like something was off. It would be one thing if this was the king of a small country. But this was the ruler of a powerful empire, one with many vassal states under his command. And he was bowing? He didn’t look like he was in a divinity-induced trance either.

“As promised, I’ve come to collect my crown,” Jeanne said with a gentle smile.

Lumia was the only one surprised to hear those words. No one else even batted an eye. The audience chamber was filled with some of Liyolure’s finest fighters and yet all of them knelt on the spot.

The emperor removed his crown of his own volition and handed it over to Jeanne.

“Thank you very much.” Jeanne accepted it and placed it upon her head. Lumia didn’t think it suited her at all.

“What’s going on?” Lumia whispered into Tina’s ear.

“Over the course of many long years, Mistress Jeanne used her divinity to train him into her obedient servant.”

That makes sense, Lumia thought with a small nod to herself. *She*

brainwashed the Liyolurean emperor and the fighters.

“Those of the imperial family, please come this way.” Upon hearing Jeanne’s words, the emperor’s wife, son, and daughter all approached her and bent a knee. “I will take care of everything from now on. I shall be the one to carry out the genocide of the heretics who have so gravely misinterpreted the Sacred Word, as well as the one to carry out Liyolure’s subjugation of Central Felsen. You have done well. Now, goodbye and good night. I hope you have terrible dreams.”

Jeanne struck out with her claymore four times, lopping off the heads of the imperial family. Blood spurted out from their necks as they fell limply to the ground. Their heads rolled and yet, every single one of them looked blessed and happy.

“Tell all of Liyolure’s civilians that a new empress has taken the throne,” Jeanne said. “And tell them that we will go to war! The time has finally come for Liyolure’s dream of a unified Central Felsen!”

All of the warriors stood and cheered “Long live Empress Jeanne!” Then they hurried out of the audience chamber. Lumia figured they were rushing to carry out her first commands.

“How foolish!” Jeanne giggled. “They don’t even know that I’ll kill them once everything’s over.” She sheathed her claymore and sat on the throne, crossing her legs.

Lumia didn’t know how to feel. Jeanne not only killed the entire imperial family, but had also slaughtered so many others on the way here. One could say that she had even overkilled. They’d passed through another country on the way from the old castle to Liyolure, and they’d destroyed it. They had carried out the massacre without a single shred of mercy, leaving behind no survivors. All of the buildings had been knocked down and burned, and not even the farm animals were spared.

The victims’ cries rang in her ears, their screams pained her heart, and their sobs refused to leave her in peace. This wasn’t just killing. This was virtually an extinction event. Jeanne herself had stood on the front lines, swinging her weapon while Lumia watched.

Her desire to protect Jeanne was genuine. But Lumia couldn't see a difference between Jeanne and the scumbags she hated so much. The only thing separating Jeanne from them was that she was Lumia's sister. That was the sole distinction.

"Ha, our goal is to get revenge for what happened ten years ago," Nicola said. "Liyolure's nothing but a stepping stone. This is *our*—the Oathkeeper Brigade's—vengeance. I'm glad that you came back to us." He gave Lumia a hearty pat on her back.

She coughed lightly under the force. "Hey, Nicola, hold back a little. You hit me with your full strength, didn't you?"

"Stop worrying about the details. Don't you remember what happened to you ten years ago? This is our vengeance against the world. God doesn't exist and even if he does, I'll kill him with my bare hands like I will everyone else. This rotten world deserves its destruction."

Lumia felt a light sense of shock upon hearing Nicola's dark prayers. *Ah, but if I hadn't met Asura that day, then the one wearing that ridiculous crown, legs crossed on that throne, would have been me.*

After that day, the Holy Liyolure Empire launched a war on all fronts. The Assassination Alliance dispatched every nation's most powerful fighters and warriors, with the Liyolurean army and Flame leading the massacre in the confusion that followed. There were already plenty of soldiers in the Liyolurean army, but Jeanne had even conscripted more soldiers to her cause.

Jeanne formed an army of ridiculous proportions that moved without a single hint of hesitation or doubt. They hailed Jeanne's name as they trampled country after country underfoot, advancing in a campaign that they would never return from. They remained ignorant even as they continued to chant their empress's name. Mountains of corpses were constructed, and screams lasted all day. That wasn't to say the nights were peaceful either. The mercenary group Flame launched constant attacks, no matter what time of day it was.

The countries that lost their kings and fighters fell without being able to lift a

single finger in retaliation. The Holy Liyolure Empire's army—*Jeanne's* army—never once stopped their steady advance. Nearby countries spent their days in terror, fearing that any day, they'd be next.

But then one day, Jeanne's army stopped. They hadn't been able to obliterate a country that wasn't even big enough to have notable exports or even a notable history. Jeanne's army had assassinated its king, taking away the leadership. They'd assassinated its general, taking away the means to fight. The only one remaining had been a prince who loved insects more than anything else. However, this prince had made a wise decision: he'd hired a silver-haired girl, who suddenly appeared before him one day. He had practically begged her for help, as she was his last shred of hope.

"I'll help you win," Asura had said, sounding like she was having the time of her life as the prince emptied his coffers to hire her and her mercenary group, Moon Blossom.

"It's a nice, sunny day today. My favorite! Sunny days are the best days for war," Asura said, sitting with her legs crossed in a chair.

The sky was blue, the clouds were white, and the breeze was gentle. Since it had been raining the previous night, the ground was muddy with puddles strewn about.

"Miss Asura, will our defenses hold today as well?" the prince of the Sangest Kingdom asked from Asura's right side.

He was a slender boy of seventeen years, with blue hair decorated by a golden crown. His slight frame lacked muscles and one could tell at a glance that he had no combat prowess of his own. He had a somewhat handsome face, and was quite intelligent. On top of that, he was a fairly pleasant man as well. *He'll become a good king*, Asura thought.

"If we don't, then we'll die. That's all there is to it. You put your faith in me and entrusted your country's leadership to me, because you knew that you couldn't do anything on your own. That was an excellent decision. If you want, I can give you a pat on the head."

Beyond Asura's gaze was a war—a *real* one with people dying and killing. It was a war in which blood flowed like rivers, and the air became filled with flying limbs and body parts. The Sangest Kingdom was fighting against the Holy Liyolure Empire in a war that had started with a command from the new empress, Jeanne Autun Lala. She'd wanted to wage war to kill off all heretics who interpreted the Sacred Word differently than she did. Of course, Asura never believed for one second that was the true reason behind all the slaughter.

"As you can see, I'm not cut out for fighting. I don't know how to wage war," the prince sighed. "But I'm the only one left. All I wanted was to become an entomologist."

"The king, the general commanding the army, and anyone who could fill those positions have been assassinated, leaving you as the only one alive. The reason for that is simple. They figured that if you were the ruler, you would surrender in a heartbeat. That's what Jeanne and her zealots planned."

When the Holy Liyolure Empire declared war against all of its surrounding countries, the most important people in those countries all died. It was undoubtedly the work of the Assassination Alliance. Asura knew this for a fact because she'd been targeted as well; naturally, she fought them all off.

"But, you decided to hire me. Hire us, I should say." Asura smiled. "That's how this country has been able to fight for ten whole days, even though most people thought it'd fall in two."

There was a tactical map, complete with pieces, on the table before Asura. The map depicted a detailed recreation of the surrounding landscape. The blue pieces were the Sangest army and the red ones symbolized Liyolure's. She'd placed and organized everything so that she could tell at a glance what the current war situation was.

In truth though, Asura had no idea how to lead an army, nor had she ever belonged to an official one. The only group that Asura had ever led in her previous life was a mercenary group that didn't even number fifty people at its biggest. However, their strength had been equal to that of a thousand soldiers, and the same was true of her mercenary group in this world.

“What’s lucky for us is that the enemy can only attack us from a single point. This is kind of obvious, but they started a war against every single neighboring country, so they don’t have enough soldiers, even if they use the members of the Felmafia and Flame. They simply don’t have the manpower. So why did they even start a war? It’s like a joke. I even suspect that they don’t intend on winning.”

“But, Miss Asura, I heard they’ve already destroyed many countries.”

“Yes, I figured as much. They lost the war, lost the country, and lost their lives. But why would Jeanne’s army go that far? What does she want? I can’t see her end goal, though I’ve heard that it’s for some sort of new world order.”

If she killed all of the civilians, then just who would that new world order be for? Wasn’t conquering and ruling what she wanted?

“Boss! The right wing has been broken through! Miss Iris and the Third Battalion are at their limit!” Salume, who was working as the messenger, raced towards them on horseback.

“I see. I figured,” Asura said.

Marx was leading the battalion in the left wing, and Asura had placed Iris in the battalion on the right. Iris couldn’t kill anyone, but she was still a hero. The only order Asura gave Iris was to not let the enemies through. However, she’d guessed that Iris would fall before Marx did. Not because of any physical difference, but because the extreme conditions of war would eat away at her heart.

“I guess this is it,” the prince said with a weak chuckle. “Thank you, Miss Asura. I’m truly grateful for...”

“Don’t be foolish, Your Highness,” Asura said as she stood up. “The reinforcements I prepared will be here soon. Until they arrive, we’ll defend this place with our lives. Do you understand what I mean? Defend even if you die and protect as if your life depends on it. Your only options are to die or to hold down the fort. Die *after* you serve as a shield. If you don’t go that far, then why did you choose to fight in the first place? If you give up here, then everyone we lost up to this point would have died a pointless death.”

The war had already descended into chaos, and they'd lost over half of their troops. Since Flame was on the enemy's side, the Sangest Kingdom had to deal with nightly raids with no time to rest. Sangest remained standing only because Jyrki and his team were cutting off the enemy's supply routes.

"But isn't it over? They've broken through."

"It's only over once you die or surrender. Until then, it will never stop," Asura said with a grin. "I'm going out too, to help recover some of our lost ground." Asura picked up one of the blue pieces and placed it outside of the map. This meant that the battalion the piece represented had been wiped out.

"What should I do?" Salume asked.

"Stay here. Listen to each battalion's report and summarize it in a single one for me. I'd like you to adjust the tactical map depending on the reports as well. Remember, a single piece is a single battalion," Asura said, glancing in the direction of the tactical map.

"Yes, Boss."

"To tell the truth, I'm not exactly a fan of commanding a large army," Asura said with a small, lopsided smile. "I've only ever had experience with smaller units."

Well, I have to admit, it's still plenty of fun.

"Why can't you do such a simple job? You're just cutting rope," Reko said, puffing out his cheeks. The Sangest Kingdom's platoon commander twisted his face in a bitter expression as Reko scolded him. "Didn't I already explain that this won't damage your pride, old man?"

They were standing at the top of a cliff. It wasn't as steep as a precipice, per se, and the face of the cliff had a bit of an angle to it.

"But this trap..." The platoon commander's face scrunched up even further.

"You were the ones who made it."

"I didn't have a choice. Those were my orders." The platoon commander shifted his gaze to what was below the cliff. Reko followed his line of sight.

The members of Liyolure's supply corps were lying below, their bodies mangled from the boulder that crushed them.

"Listen," Reko said. "The ones who made the trap and used it were us, the mercenaries of Moon Blossom. None of you guys were here. Got it?" It'd be written in the history books that Moon Blossom sprang a trap that annihilated the supply corps. The names of those from the Sangest army would not be included, and the mercenaries would take full responsibility. "Jeez!" Reko's cheeks puffed out even further. "I was the one to cut the rope, so stop worrying about it. What are you so unhappy about anyway?"

"As a soldier and a warrior, I don't crave victory to the point that I would stoop to these measures."

"Then die, why don't you?" Reko smiled, imitating Asura. Upon seeing the look on his face, the soldiers looked terribly surprised. "If I hadn't set off this trap, then my boss would beat me until I'm within an inch of my life. That's exciting in its own way, but I don't want her to think that I'm useless. Besides, if those soldiers had made it to the front lines with those supplies, then you really *would* lose. If you lose, then you die. You know that Jeanne's been murdering everyone in her path, right?"

Reko, Jyrki, and Iina each led a platoon of their own to destroy the enemy's supply lines. Below the cliff Reko and the others were on was a path, but it was the worst of all of Liyolure's supply routes. In other words, it was a road they would only travel as a last resort, if nothing else was accessible. As for why no other route was accessible, it was because Iina and Jyrki had already destroyed them all.

"If it weren't for my superior's orders, who in their right mind would listen to orders from a brat like you?"

"I wish I could use Mines too," Reko sighed. "Then I could've blown you to pieces." He was already tired of dealing with them. "Well, whatever. Let's return to headquarters. With that boulder there, they won't be able to take this route again."

What will be my next order? Reko was always excited for Asura's commands. If she was giving him orders, it meant that she placed her trust in him. She

thought that she could leave things to him. That made Reko happiest above all.

“Shoot!”

At Jyrki’s command, the Sangest army platoon let loose flaming arrows from their bows. Their aim was true, the arrows hitting a horse-drawn wagon that had been proceeding down the main road, setting it on fire.

There had been two wagons, and Jyrki’s team had targeted the one in front. They’d been waiting for this moment, hiding in the grass lining the road. It’d been four days since the Liyolure army’s supply corps traveled down this path, so Jyrki’s team figured this was when they’d make their next appearance.

“All right! Charge!” At Jyrki’s command, his platoon dropped their bows and drew their swords, running towards the burning wagon. They planned on eliminating the enemy soldiers guarding the supplies being transported. “Ha ha! Ain’t no one tell you that thieves appear around these parts?!”

Jyrki also set down his bow and jumped into the fray, tomahawk in hand. All of them, including Jyrki, were disguised as bandits, so as to ensure that this attack didn’t leave a stain on the Sangest army’s reputation in the future. It was also to misdirect the enemy into thinking this route was too plagued by bandits to allow secure transportation of supplies.

As for why they were doing something so troublesome, it was at the Sangest army’s request. It had been more akin to a demand than a request. They didn’t want future generations to read about how they used ambush tactics to take out the Liyolure supply corps. Their logic was that it was dishonorable to not fight face-to-face.

Your country’s on the verge of destruction and you’re all yappin’ about honor and shit? That was Jyrki’s opinion on the matter. But despite the circumstances, the Sangest soldiers refused to budge on this point. That was why they had no choice but to pretend that they were common thieves.

“Are soldiers all this weak?!” Jyrki said as he slit an enemy soldier’s throat with his tomahawk.

He’d thought the same thing four days ago. The Sangest soldiers’ strength

was on par with the Liyolureans'. Jyrki would support his allies using his throwing knives or Fireball, and as a result, he was the one who killed the majority of the Liyolurean soldiers. One of them managed to get away, but they didn't bother going after him. After all, they needed someone to report the bandits on the main road to the Liyolure Empire.

"Captain Kuusela, you're way too strong!" one of the Sangest soldiers murmured.

"Just call me Jyrki," he replied with a shrug. "Besides, y'all do as ordered so that's probably why it went so smoothly."

Jyrki wasn't kidding. It didn't feel difficult at all to work with them. Granted, there were some communication issues compared to when he fought alongside the mercenaries of Moon Blossom. The soldiers didn't understand any of his hand signals, so every time he wanted them to do something, he had to go out of his way and say it.

"No, you're just powerful. At the very least, I don't believe there's anyone in our country stronger than you, Captain Kuusela," another soldier piped up.

"Well, yeah, I sure *think* I'm strong, but am I *really* that strong? I think y'all are just overratin' me."

Jyrki didn't think that he was weak, and he had proved himself many times on the battlefield. However, he felt like the soldiers were overestimating him. He thought of the powerful fighters that surrounded him.

For starters, there was Asura. He'd never win against her, didn't even stand a chance. He would lose no matter what he did. Next was Lumia. She was as strong as Asura, so the results would be the same. Iris? If it was a fair fight, he'd lose. If he was allowed to use any method he pleased, then there might be a chance. Axel? He was sure that he would die after a single punch. Elna? If they were outside, then Jyrki had no hope of winning. But perhaps if they were inside and in a small room, he might. Jeanne? No way. Marx? He could put up a good fight, but he'd lose in the end.

Wait, huh? Aren't I super weak?

"No, you truly are strong." The soldiers all nodded at that. "For now, let's do

what we did last time and retrieve the supplies left in the wagon.”

“Yeah. What’s the enemy’s is ours, and all that.”

I must be comparin’ myself to the wrong people. Yeah, that must be it. With that, Jyrki stopped worrying.

Part Six, Chapter Two: Asura-style offensive defense. So in other words, an attack, right?

Two wagons traveled down a forest road, with two platoons consisting of cavalry and foot soldiers guarding the vicinity. Iina, on standby atop a tree branch, let loose the first arrow. It shot clean through the head of a man who seemed to be a captain of the defense team. The enemy soldiers looked like they had no idea what just happened. With Iina's arrow acting as the signal, the other members of the Sangest platoon—all of them hidden in the trees—shot theirs as well. The enemy team only had swords with them and had no way of retaliating.

"They're just like the Therbaen army," Iina muttered. "They can't conceive...of getting attacked from above."

One, two, three... Enemy after enemy fell under the rain of arrows, with the driver of the wagon the last to die. Iina hopped out of the tree and cast Aircraft at the last second, right before she hit the ground. For an instant, she floated in the air, killing her momentum, before landing on the ground without a sound. Behind her, the members of the Sangest platoon clambered out of the trees as well. Unlike Iina, they didn't jump. Instead, they moved from branch to branch until they reached a safe height to leap down.

Iina and the members of the Sangest platoon were all wearing robes with a camo pattern on them. This was to help them blend in with their surroundings, thus delaying enemy detection.

"Amazing," a Sangest soldier said. "Captain Kuusela, you basically defeated them all on your own."

Iina tilted her head to the side. "Is that so?"

"This is just my opinion. But would it really hurt to fight fairly? Why can't we announce ourselves before we attack? If we could do that, we wouldn't need to wear these clothes."

“It *would* hurt,” lina said, glaring at him. “It’ll...lower our chances of success... It’s important...to attack first.”

You had to both discover and attack the enemy before they could do the same to you. lina knew very well the importance of a preemptive strike. This very battle proved this philosophy true. It was because they’d launched an ambush that they emerged without any casualties. The mere thought of announcing herself before attacking straight-on made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“In any case...let’s secure the wagon...and head back to headquarters.” lina wondered how the battle there was going before she thought, *I bet that Marx is having a really hard time right now.*

“We’re barely managing to hold it together,” Marx murmured from horseback, “but...” They’d already pulled back their defensive lines multiple times, and they were on their last legs now. If they retreated here, the enemies would be able to invade the town.

“Acting Brigadier! The Seventh Battalion is being pushed back!” a messenger reported.

Marx clicked his tongue before he ordered, “Send the Sixth Battalion as reinforcements.”

He didn’t know if that was the best choice in this situation. He didn’t have any experience leading a brigade. When he was a knight, the biggest unit he’d ever led had been a platoon. But the most painful thing about this was that he could only use normal, traditional tactics.

According to Asura: “Marx, you can’t expect a large army to fight in the same way we do. One simply cannot do what they haven’t trained for. At most, a platoon of soldiers *might* be capable of our tactics. Do you understand what I’m saying? There’s no way they can pull off an operation they’ve never done before and under the orders of a commander they’d never met until today. I’m sure that there are *some* soldiers who are capable of it. But the bigger the unit, the higher the chances of people who can’t keep up, which can lead to chaos. So don’t worry. All you need to do is hold down the fort for a little while. That’s

all. I'm sure you can do that. You'll be *fine*. You just need to remember what it was like to be a knight. You *can* do it, right?"

In other words: "Don't use any strategies that are out of the ordinary." What was normal for Moon Blossom was abnormal for an army. Marx couldn't help but envy Jyrki and Iina. Since the two of them were leading platoons, they could explain their tactics and fight in a way closer to the Moon Blossom style. Since these were makeshift teams, they could only carry out a downgraded version of the authentic group's maneuvers, though.

"All you need to do is hold down the fort for a little while? Boss sure made it sound easy."

This was difficult. To be completely honest, Marx was already at his limit. But he didn't want to die here, in this place and surrounded by a group of shitty, useless soldiers. Besides, Moon Blossom boasted a perfect success rate when it came to completing jobs. He didn't want to tarnish the group's growing reputation.

"Boss, after commanding a normal army, I understand now. From the bottom of my heart, I love Moon Blossom."

My arms are about to fall off. Iris felt like she was swimming inside of a dream. Everyone, ally and foe, was dying around her. She'd even been desensitized to the nauseating stench of blood, and couldn't smell anything anymore. Using the back of her blade, she knocked out an enemy soldier charging her. *Ah, I hit this guy yesterday too*, she thought, feeling as though everything were happening from far away.

Even after ten days of war, Iris still hadn't killed a single person. She only ever used the back of her sword. However, everyone Iris knocked down would return the next day, weapon in hand, to attack them again. No matter how many times she hit them, they would charge, screaming things like "Glory to Liyolure!" or "Glory to Lady Jeanne!" She fought the regular army from morning to night, and then from night till morning, she would have to deal with Flame's attacks. Her body was at its limit, but her mind had already surpassed it.

"If I flip over my wrist...if I flip over my blade..." she murmured, so far gone

that she didn't even know what she was saying. At some point in time, the screams and yells stopped reaching her ears. "If I take their lives, they won't attack me anymore. If I kill them, I won't have to hit them anymore. If I kill them... If I kill them..."

Iris understood now. If she hadn't used the back of her sword and instead dealt a proper killing blow, then this war would have been over a long time ago. Over the course of ten days, Iris had knocked down close to five hundred soldiers. It felt like she'd been killing fifty people a day. This was a feat that was only possible because Iris was a hero.

"If I wasn't the one here, then this would've already been over."

Despite knowing that, however...

"I...I..."

She swung her sword in a horizontal slash, pushing away a soldier despite the heavy armor he was wearing. Her sword was still held backwards.

"I didn't become a hero to kill people!"

She was going to see her ideals through to the end. Even if this choice was the worst one possible—so terrible that it could spell disaster for the whole world—she would not kill a single soul. This was a matter of pride for Iris.

By the time she realized it, Iris was all alone. To be more precise, she was all alone amid the enemies. All of her allies had been reduced to corpses. She had been fighting alongside the Sangest Kingdom's army's Third Battalion, but they'd been annihilated.

"How long was I zoning out for?" she muttered to herself as she adjusted her grip on her sword. She was surrounded by the Liyolureans. Under normal circumstances in a normal war, Iris wouldn't be killed because she was a hero. However, Jeanne's army was different and was not shackled by such rules. "I'm going to become a Great Hero! I'm not going to die in a place like this!"

The moment Iris was about to make her move, the enemy soldiers' heads exploded, one by one.

"Good job, Iris. I'll give you a pat on the head later, but for now, use this horse

and retreat.” Asura leaped off the back of her horse and drew the claymore from her back.

“Asura!” The moment Iris breathed her name, she lost the strength in her legs and collapsed onto the ground.

“Oh, come on, don’t do this right now, Iris.” Even as Asura said that, she bisected an enemy soldier with her claymore. In the same motion, she cast Mines around Iris, who stumbled to her feet while using her single-edged sword as a cane. But in the meantime, the horse that Asura rode fell to a spear.

“Humph. If you don’t want to die, then pick up your sword again, Iris. I’m sure you can handle it, right? Miss Hero?”

“Don’t make fun of me. Of course I can.”

A few soldiers tried to approach Iris and died to Mines. Asura walked over to her and took up position to guard her back.

“What an unreliable back you have,” she chuckled. “I hope that one day I’ll be able to trust you to hold your own.”

In the next moment, a loud voice rang out through the battlefield.

“Charge!!!”

And then Iris witnessed a large blue wave cut through the enemy army.

“Humph, so they’ve finally arrived,” Asura said. “I never imagined that *they’d* be the ones to show up, though. I figured that it would be either Elna or Axel.”

A cavalry regiment consisting of around two hundred soldiers, all wearing azure armor, appeared, led by a man that Iris could recognize. He was the new Great Hero candidate for East Felsen, as well as the leader of the Knights of the Azure Skies, and had such beautiful, fine blond hair that it was almost translucent under the sun. It was Milka Ramstead.

“The Knights of the Azure Skies have arrived!” Milka yelled. “Jeanne and her army have been deemed a threat on par with a Demon Lord! Thus all of the heroes must band together to put a stop to her madness! Soldiers of Sangest, the heroes and the Knights of the Azure Skies are your allies! You no longer have anything to fear! Stand! And raise your voices in a battle cry!”

The Azure Skies regiment charged into the enemies from their side, slashing their way through. Upon seeing this powerful blue wave and hearing Milka's rousing voice, the Sangest army gained new strength.

"Amazing," Iris breathed, unable to tear her eyes away from the sight. *So this is a Great Hero candidate. So this is Milka Ramstead in battle.*



He was completely different from the usual Milka with whom Iris was familiar. He exuded such a powerful aura that she trusted him to take care of everything.

“Things progressed a little slower than planned, but oh well. It went according to my script, more or less,” Asura said. “We’re going to retreat, Iris, and tomorrow, we’ll be launching our counterattack. We’re going into battle for Jeanne’s head.”

“The heroes made their move much faster than expected,” Miriam reported, a frazzled look on her face.

Jeanne listened while sitting on her throne, resting her face upon her palm. The throne was in the audience chamber, but it was surrounded by stairs, making it a little higher than the red carpeted ground. A table was on top of the carpet, with a map of Central Felsen unfurled upon it.

“We’ve been surrounded in a circular formation,” Lumia said as she moved pieces around on the map. They represented Jeanne’s army, the various countries’ armies, the heroes, and Moon Blossom. The heroes’ pieces had been placed to form a circle, with Liyolure in the middle of it. However, since there was nothing left to protect on the north side, no heroes were stationed there.

“This formation is one used to box us in, correct?” Tina asked as she looked at the map.

“We already knew that the heroes would fight us,” Jeanne said, sounding bored. “However, Miriam is correct. They made their move far too quickly.”

“Not only that, but they deemed us a Demon Lord-level threat?” Lumia added, a pained look on her face. “That must have been Asura’s idea. I’m sure of it. Asura plans on destroying us.”

“That may be so, but what is our next move? Will the heroes slowly close in on us?” Despite the questions, Jeanne didn’t seem worried at all.

“That won’t happen. Asura’s the type who will hog the glory for herself, so she won’t let the heroes be the ones to kill you. The ultimate goal of the heroes’ formation is to limit our movements.”

“But, Lumia,” Miriam protested, “Moon Blossom is with Sangest. According to our intel, they have a contract with them, so I don’t believe they would leave Sangest’s borders.”

“They will. I guarantee it,” Lumia said, picking up the pawn designated as Moon Blossom. “Even if Moon Blossom’s job is to defend the client, Asura’s method of defense will be an offensive one. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Instead of simply protecting her client, she will choose to exterminate the enemy to defend them?” Jeanne never changed her position on the throne, still sitting with her head on her hand. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“That’s right. I’m sure that heroes will be dispatched to Sangest very soon. Once that happens, Asura will go on the offensive. She’s an unbelievably aggressive fighter. I promise you: she’ll come.” Lumia fiddled with the Moon Blossom piece in her hand.

“Hmm.” Jeanne lifted her head from her hand. “If she truly wishes to kill me, then I believe it would be wiser for her to come with all of the heroes. What are your thoughts about that?”

“Asura will come anyway. That’s what you want, isn’t it, Mistress Jeanne? Asura is very good at sensing things like that.”

After hearing Lumia say that, Jeanne’s eyes widened as though she was taken by surprise. “Why would I want something like that?”

“So you didn’t notice?” Lumia shrugged. “Weren’t you the one who caught Asura’s attention by cutting her back open? You were interested in her, weren’t you?”

Jeanne didn’t say anything for a long moment before she eventually let out a small sigh. “Perhaps. I was a little drawn to her as my divinity had absolutely no effect on her.”

“As a general rule of thumb, people like Asura can seem very charming.”

“What kind of person is she?” Miriam asked, tilting her head to the side.

“A crazy person,” Lumia replied with a quiet sigh. “In any case, Asura will make her way here.” With that, Lumia placed the Moon Blossom piece in the

Liyolure Empire's capital.

"Even if she comes, I can't see her ever winning against Mistress Jeanne," Tina commented in a calm voice.

"Yes, I agree. Asura's actual strength is about the same as mine. Mistress Jeanne is stronger, and that's a fact." Lumia looked over at Jeanne and continued, "However, you will be the one to die, Mistress Jeanne. Asura is a more difficult opponent than any of the heroes, because she's a true villain, far worse than you or anyone else."

Villainy equaled strength, for to be a villain meant there would be nothing holding someone back. They could do anything, no matter how cruel and underhanded the tactic was.

"I see," Jeanne said with a small smile. "Then I shall consign myself to villainy as well. Besides, I have a trump card up my sleeve."

"If you're talking about the Dance of Divine Destruction, then—"

"That is not what I'm talking about. I haven't shown it to you yet. More precisely, I cannot activate it yet."

"You can't activate it? What are you talking about?" Lumia narrowed her eyes.

"There are more than four types of magic in this world."

It took a few seconds for the words to register. "What?"

Though Lumia was surprised, she was not shocked, for she was already aware of Asura's research on increasing magic types.

"As far as I know, there are six types of magic in total," Tina said.

"Six? You have to be joking," Lumia said. "How come we only know about four...?" As soon as she said that much, Lumia understood the reasoning. "If no one knows about it, then it'll be a powerful weapon."

She didn't know who came up with the new types of magic. But if they chose not to announce it, they gave up prestige and fame in exchange for a secret weapon.

“That reminds me,” Tina said, sounding as she usually did. “I didn’t know that you humans only knew four types of magic until Mistress Jeanne told me. When I learned magic, I was taught six types as if it were the most natural thing in the world.”

“‘You humans’?” Miriam murmured.

“It’s a figure of speech, Miriam,” Jeanne said. “Forget about it.”

“It looks like there’s a chance for us to win this,” Lumia said. “Can you tell me what kind of magic it is? If we can find a way to wield it effectively, we might be able to defeat Asura and Moon Blossom.”

Tina looked at Jeanne, who shook her head and said, “I’ll tell you soon. But not today. However, you have nothing to fear. If I activate my magic, then it won’t just be Asura. My magic will swallow up the heroes and the rest of the world.”

“You’re talking about *magic*, right?” Lumia found it hard to believe that there existed magic that could encompass such a large distance.

“I am.” Jeanne looked over to Miriam. “Miriam, pick out some of your subordinates and head for Sangest, please.”

“Wait, Mistress Jeanne,” Lumia said. “If it’s a fight against Moon Blossom, then I’m going too. Miriam has become strong, yes, but she still can’t win against Asura alone.”

“No. Lumia, I would like you to stay by my side. It would be very troublesome for me if you leave.” Jeanne smiled. “Miriam, do you understand your orders?”

“I do. You want me to defeat Moon Blossom, and conquer Sangest, right?”

“Yes, and do it as quickly as possible.”

“Understood.” Miriam turned on her heel and walked out of the audience chamber.

Once she left, Jeanne said, “If I die, Lumia, then please take care of Tina for me.”

“What are you talking about?” Lumia said in a sharp voice. “You’re not going to die while I’m around.”

Jeanne's only reaction was to smile. It was an enigmatic expression, as if she couldn't decide if she was feeling forlorn or melancholic. Lumia could not read what emotion was on her sister's face.

Part Six, Chapter Three: If a woman is before you, it's good manners to flirt with her. "Don't flirt with me. I'm not interested in men."

Iris fell face-first into the mud, her legs tangled up by the thick liquid. The sun was starting to set, and it was almost nighttime. The battle from earlier in the day had ended a long time ago.

"Iris, if you're that tired...then take a break," lina, standing next to Iris, said with an exasperated expression on her face.

The two of them were training against a wooden puppet to strengthen their coordination in battle. This was the only training they'd been doing lately in the very back of the Sangest base.

"Sorry," Iris said as she flipped over onto her back. She let go of her single-edged sword and wiped the mud from her face with her arm.

"Well, it's your first war...and it's been going on for a while...so I can't blame you."

"lina, you look like you still have loads of energy."

"I mean...all I have to do is look over...the supply routes," lina replied as she put away her dagger. "Thanks to that...I was able to practice my magic."

Because of the mission Asura gave Iris, lina's job was a lot easier. If Liyolure didn't send a supply team down the route, then she didn't have to do anything. However, despite how boring her job was, it was a very important one. Cutting off the enemy's supply lines was the most rudimentary tactic in war. Asura wouldn't entrust it to lina unless she had absolute faith in her.

"You two have loads of energy too," Jyrki muttered as he parried Salume and Reko's attacks. The two of them were wielding wooden daggers with both hands and taking turns slashing at Jyrki.

"That was *my* achievement!" Reko yelled.

“All I did was send messages around!” Salume argued back.

The two of them truly were as lively as ever.

“The two of you really became strong, though!” Jyrki said with a smile. “I’d say your close-quarters combat and dagger skills are close to perfection. Man, kids grow up so fast.” Even as he said that, he twisted Reko’s wrist and tossed him to the ground. Next, he countered Salume’s attack and punched her in the stomach, causing her to fall to the ground while clutching her abdomen.

“That sounded like you were making fun of us,” Reko grumbled.

“Yes, I agree,” Salume said.

“No, no, for real,” Jyrki exclaimed. “Hey, lina, Iris, you two agree with me, yeah?”

“Yeah.” lina nodded. “You two...won’t lose to the average person. You still suck...but at least you know how to use a bow now.”

“He’s right. You two are developing at an amazing rate. Salume, you’ve completely made the art of throwing daggers your own. Reko’s still terrible at it, though,” Iris agreed as she sat down on the ground, legs tucked beneath her.

During their mock battle with Jyrki, neither Salume nor Reko used a bow or threw a knife. However, these were basic fighting skills they needed to know, so both of them had been practicing every day.

“Boss will be the one who decides if they’re ready or not, and they’re developing fast because they’re in a good learning environment. Our boss loves training to the point that I sometimes suspect she’s married to the concept,” Marx said. He was sitting on the ground and going through image training.

“That makes sense. Boss keeps sayin’ that if ya don’t keep up your practice every day, ya won’t be able to move in emergencies. Moon Blossom is the best place to be if ya wanna be strong. No other school or group would help you grow this powerful this fast. By the way, Marx, did ya win your image training?”

“I lost.” Marx sighed and shook his head. “Lumia is truly powerful. I can’t win on my own. Well, I don’t even know if I’ll have the chance to fight her.”

Asura’s job was to decide what task each of them would accomplish, since she

was the one who best knew their strengths and weaknesses.

“We’ll be going to Jeanne’s place tomorrow, right?” Salume asked, looking a little nervous.

“That’s right,” Marx said. “Boss is discussing that right now with the prince and Milka. I never expected that Milka would come, though.”

“Oh yeah, you were an Azure Knight, weren’t you?” Reko said, sounding excited. “What’s Milka like? I thought he looked super cool.”

“I thought that too...”

“Me too!”

“Who’s cooler? Me or him?” The moment Jyrki asked that, the two girls stared at him for about two seconds before they looked away as if nothing had happened. “Whoa! Jeez, that reaction’s a bit of a surprise, I gotta admit.” His shoulders slumped.

“You’re really handsome...Jyrki.”

“I agree with Miss Iina. You are very cool, Mister Jyrki.”

“Jyrki has a better personality! Mister Milka’s really flaky.”

“Jyrki’s flaky too,” Reko corrected Iris with a small laugh.

“They’re on completely different levels,” Marx said. “Milka’s the god of flakiness.”

“That’s amazing! I can’t imagine what kind of person he is.”

“Me too! I would love to know what makes him so godly.”

Both Reko and Salume were very interested in him.

“For starters, he became an Azure Knight to become popular with the ladies,” Marx said with a small smile. “When we were in the academy together, he didn’t just flirt with our classmates. He flirted with the teachers too. I was a few years behind Milka, but I’d heard all rumors and bizarre legends about him.” Milka was thirty and Marx was twenty-five.

“And he became a hero to get girls too, didn’t he?” Iris said. “It’s really annoying. He tries to flirt with me every time he sees me.”

“Huh? Are you trying to brag about how people hit on you?” Reko said in a cold voice.

“It’s very annoying when people do that,” Salume added.

“I-I’m not! It’s seriously annoying behavior!” Iris exclaimed, shaking her hands in front of her in panic.

“May I continue my story?” As soon as Marx asked that, everyone fell silent and nodded. “Traditionally, only a hero can lead the Azure Knights, so the former leader retired and allowed Milka to take the position. However,” Marx said, his voice dead serious, “he wanted to quit after only a little bit.”

“Why?” Jyrki asked. “Bein’ leader of the Azure Knights would mean tons of honor and fame. What didn’t he like? It’s not like he’d be hurtin’ for chicks.”

“He didn’t have the time to have fun with any of the women he flirted with,” Marx replied. His expression remained severe. “That was when Milka noticed me and how I was one of the stronger members of the group. He trained me to become the next candidate for his position and thanks to that, I was able to become a hero candidate with my own strength.”

“He wanted to quit his job as the knights’ leader because of *that*? What a crazy person,” Salume said, a disgusted look on her face.

“Yup. Mister Milka is really nuts,” Iris said. “But his power, and only his power, is the real deal. He’s the strongest person in Eastern Felsen if you don’t count the Great Heroes, which makes sense since he’s a Great Hero candidate.”

“I bet he doesn’t wanna become a Great Hero,” Jyrki laughed.

“It’ll get even busier for him,” Reko added with his own smirk.

“Boss...might be getting hit on,” Iina muttered. “The only thing cute about her...is her face.”

“If he does that, then I’ll assassinate Milka in the middle of the night,” Reko said.

“I don’t really want to do much of anything since I’d like to be removed as a Great Hero candidate. Your plan sounds wonderful, little Asura. I have no

problems with it at all, so why don't you spend the night with me?"

"Would you stake your life on that?" Asura asked, twirling a dagger in her hand and letting Milka see the weapon.

"To tell you the truth, my life is the most important thing. My priorities are my life, and then women, and then everything else."

"That's a very healthy way of living." Asura sheathed the knife. "There's nothing more important than one's life. That goes for me as well."

If the members of Moon Blossom heard what Asura said, they'd probably all yell, "Er, no, aren't you the type to enjoy risking your life on dangerous missions?!" However, Asura managed to say the line without changing her facial expression at all.

"Asura, Sir Milka, I'd like to continue our conversation," the prince of Sangest said, looking apologetic.

The group of them were in one of the Sangest army's tents. A large table had been placed underneath one of the hanging lamps. Atop it were a detailed map of the surrounding area, a map of Central Felsen, as well as three half-empty cups. There were several pawns and pieces placed upon the map, and the three of them were chatting without sitting down.

"Stop with that 'Sir Milka' business," Milka said, his lips quirking in a half smile. "I'm not that amazing of a person. My hobby is hitting on girls and my talent is also hitting on girls. Truthfully, the only reason I'm a hero and a Knight of the Azure Skies is because chicks are really into this kind of stuff."

"What an irresponsible man," Asura said with a soft chuckle. "Is that why you came here?"

"What do you mean?" the prince asked, tilting his head to the side.

"Well, other heroes might not have agreed to my plan. Even if a Great Hero like Axel or Elna ordered them to follow my commands, they probably wouldn't like the idea of *me* holding their reins, right? We might not have been able to discuss things as smoothly since we would have wasted time arguing."

"Oh, there's certainly *something* of mine I'd like you to hold, little Asura,"

Milka said with a grin.

“Would you like me to crush that *something* under my foot?” Asura asked, glaring at him. His only response was a cheery laugh, causing Asura to sigh.

“So then, Asura, will things really turn out all right?”

“They will. I can understand your anxieties. It’s hard to imagine that fop over there serving as a worthy replacement for my super amazing Moon Blossom.” Asura shrugged. “But don’t worry. The Knights of the Azure Skies aren’t weak, by any means, and Milka is technically a hero. They’re more than capable of protecting this country for a few days.”

“You have my word on it,” Milka said in a serious tone. “We’ve already prepared for the night attacks and we have plenty of experience in real combat. So long as I am a hero, I have a duty to obey the orders of the Great Heroes. Now that Jeanne’s army has been deemed a Demon Lord-level threat, I swear that I will protect you with all I have.”

“I am very grateful to hear that, but that’s not what I’m worried about,” the prince said with an awkward smile.

“Then what *are* you worried about?” Asura asked. “Is it that Milka here might assault your female soldiers?”

“Even during wartime, I will hit on girls. If a woman is standing there, then flirting with them is the polite thing to do. I can’t stop myself from doing so, so sorry, but I might make a pass at the enemy soldiers as well.”

“If they betray Jeanne as a result of your flirtations, then that might be a legitimate strategy,” Asura laughed. Upon seeing her smile, Milka chuckled as well.

“Um, well, I’m actually worried about *you*, Asura.”

“Me? Why would you worry about me?” Asura asked, her eyes turning round and wide.

“You’re, er, going to attack the enemy’s home base with only a small number of soldiers, right?”

“Yeah. The war won’t end until we defeat Jeanne, after all. I promised you

that I would bring victory to Sangest, didn't I? This is a necessary step in my plan. Everything will be over in a matter of days."

"Well, no, I mean, that is to say... If Jeanne has been declared a Demon Lord, then shouldn't the heroes go?"

"Oh, that." Asura sighed. "I was just thinking that it would be a pain in the neck if a hero says something like that. I mean, just think about it. They would be walking to their death."

"That's something I cannot let slide," Milka said.

"I won't stop anyone with a death wish, but it'll be very annoying if a hero gets in our way," Asura continued. "We can defeat Jeanne without any issue. The three pillars will not be a problem either. However, around half of the heroes will die before they'll be able to defeat Jeanne, just like a real Demon Lord Expedition."

"Oh, come now, little Asura," Milka said with a small smirk. "Sure, Jeanne has Divine Retribution. But saying that half the heroes will die *just* because she can use that seems a little unfair, don't you think? Do you want me to shut your mouth with mine?"

"Divine Retribution isn't Jeanne's trump card," Asura explained in a calm voice. "She has something else. Something different. A trump card isn't something you use willy-nilly."

Jeanne wielded her Divine Retribution—no, her Dance of Divine Destruction—as if it were any ordinary weapon. It wasn't out of force of habit. From Asura's point of view, Jeanne cast her spell like she would swing a normal claymore. She was careless with how she swung it. A trump card or a sure-kill technique wasn't something you would reveal so easily, and it was something you would keep up your sleeve until the opportune moment.

"I don't know what trump card you're talking about," Milka said, "but you think the heroes won't be able to handle it, yet you and your team will? Is that what you're saying?"

"Unlike your knights and heroes, we can be flexible. There's a high chance that we'd be able to find a way to counter it."

“Little Asura, you’re strong, I admit. The only reason I acknowledge your strength is because Elnie and Old Axel do. But making fun of heroes is something I kind of can’t abide. I think you need some punishment, little Asura.”

“Do you really have to include all your perverted little one-liners?” Asura muttered with a small shake of her head. In a louder voice, she said, “I’m not making fun of them. All I’m saying is that we’re more flexible in the face of unforeseen circumstances. In a head-to-head fight, you’re stronger than I am. But an individual’s strength doesn’t always determine the outcome of a battle.”

Milka stared at Asura for a moment before he sighed, “Well, whatever.”

This would be the point where a hero with an overinflated ego might pick a fight, thus derailing the conversation. *This is probably why Elna and Axel decided to send Milka here*, Asura thought.

“Um, can I finish what I’m trying to say?” the prince asked, sounding apologetic. “The reason I said that I’m worried is because I don’t want Asura to get hurt or the people of Moon Blossom to die. That’s what I’m nervous about.”

“We’ve already received more than enough payment, so you don’t have to worry about that. We’re mercenaries. All of us have made our peace with death. If no one has anything else they want to say, may I go and rest now? I want to leave first thing in the morning.”

Sangest wasn’t a very wealthy country, so just like during her job with Arnia, Asura requested something other than money. In other words, she made the prince promise that he would give Asura and Moon Blossom preferential treatment after he officially became the king. More importantly, she made him promise to listen to all of Asura’s requests until the day he drew his final breath.

Part Six, Chapter Four: Boss's breasts are a mystery! They're never there!

“And that was the story of how I went and made a very dramatic declaration before the prince and Milka. So we absolutely cannot fail this job!” That was how Asura concluded her explanation of the conversation she'd had last night in the tent.

Last night, everyone went to sleep at a very early hour to regain their stamina. That was why Asura hadn't been able to explain anything to them until today, beyond that they would be proceeding to Liyolure as planned.

At the moment, Moon Blossom was on the road to Liyolure, traveling by horse. Since the cart that served as their base would only slow them down, they'd left it behind in the Sangest Kingdom. They'd been riding since morning so even if they took a break or two in the middle, they'd be able to reach the outskirts of the Liyolurean capital by nightfall at their current pace.

“So, what's our plan?!” Jyrki demanded.

“We'll sneak into the capital and rest until morning! Then we'll sneak into the palace, find Jeanne, and kill her!”

“Boss! You seem so meticulous, but you're actually super careless!” Reko exclaimed, sounding happy. Since they were all on horses, they naturally had to raise their voices to be heard.

Asura laughed and said, “That's all the planning we need, Reko!” Despite her mirth, the other members of Moon Blossom were scrunching their faces up. They'd been under the impression that Asura had some sort of surefire plan to win.

“What are we going to do about Tina, Boss? Is it possible to tame her or convert her to our cause?”

“Don't worry, Marx. Judging by Tina's personality, she won't participate in battle unless something extreme happens.”

“Uh, aren’t we on our way to do somethin’ extreme?” Jyrki asked in an exasperated tone.

All of the mercenaries knew that Tina wasn’t assertive about combat.

“Do not, under any circumstance, attack Tina,” Asura said in a serious tone. “If you do, we’ll all die. Even if we’re facing Tina alone, it’ll be a very close match with our current strength. Our ultimate target is Jeanne.”

“And speaking of Jeanne, I’m pretty sure she’s stronger than I am,” Iris said, no discernible emotion in her voice.

“Wasn’t Noemi stronger than you too, Miss Iris?” Salume pointed out calmly.

Iris didn’t say anything for a moment before she let out a frustrated huff and replied, “Well, yeah! But!”

“Speaking of—Jeanne!” Iina yelled, doing her best to project her voice. “Hasn’t! Used her full strength yet! Right?!”

“That’s correct, Iina,” Asura said. “She’s hiding a trump card of some kind, I’m sure of it. You’re all aware of that fact, right?” Though everyone nodded in response to Asura’s question, she couldn’t see them since she was riding at the front of the group. However, she could tell from the way their presences moved behind her that they answered in the affirmative. “But to our great misfortune, we have no idea what her trump card is!”

“Right?!” Reko laughed in response to Asura’s own giggle.

“Our only choice will be to change our plans depending on the circumstances,” Marx said, maintaining his usual placid tone. “I believe that we’ll be able to handle this battle far better than the heroes, which means that we have a higher chance of success.”

“It kinda feels like if we work together, we can kill a hero even without you, Boss.”

Iris narrowed her eyes at Jyrki and said, “When you say you feel like you could kill a hero, are you basing that on *my* strength?”

“Of course,” Iina said after a pause.

“The other heroes aren’t like me, you know? They’re not going to hold back.

I'm being serious here. Yeah, I might be a bit happy-go-lucky and I admit that. But even Mister Milka becomes a whole different person on the battlefield. There's no way you can easily kill a hero without Asura fighting alongside you."

"Oh? You can seriously admit that you're the happy-go-lucky type? That's very impressive. You've grown, Iris," Asura said, nodding her head.

"I never said it'd be *easy*," Jyrki muttered.

"Well, for now, let's not discuss whether we can kill a hero or not," Salume said.

"Actually, we shouldn't even talk about it since we're not supposed to kill heroes. Or I guess, you guys don't care about that." Iris sighed, sounding defeated.

"I'm very curious about what Jeanne wants," Salume said, a rather serious look on her face.

"I'm curious about that too!" Reko exclaimed. "Like, where did all that talk about a new world order go?!"

"I doubt she told her underlings anything about her true ambitions. Speaking of which, it seems that we all have our own hypothesis on what Jeanne's trying to accomplish. Why don't we share our answers with each other? Let's start with Iris," Asura said.

"Me?!"

"Ah, so you weren't thinking about it at all. That's fine. It's not as if I was expecting much from you."

"I-I *am* thinking! You didn't have to be so mean to me, you know?! I was doing some thinking too! I was just surprised because you called on me so suddenly!"

"Boss, if we're going to share our hypotheses, why don't we take a small break? It would be a good idea to rest the horses as well." In a manner befitting of a vice captain, Marx made his suggestion in a quiet and calm tone.

"Yeah, I agree. We can see some town ruins in the distance, so let's take a breather over there."

They were in a country in between Liyolure and Sangest. However, the

country no longer existed. It had been destroyed not so long ago.

The town that Moon Blossom arrived at was in a dreadful state. Between the ruined buildings and the piles of bodies, it looked more akin to a hellscape. There were no signs of life. All they could see were death and despair.

“Atrocious” is the only word I can think of to describe this sight, Asura thought as she looked around.

“What in the world happened here?” Iris gasped in shock. The stench of burnt bodies and death had been baked into every inch of the city.

“Destruction, devastation, finality, ruin, extinction... Use whatever word you want for it. That’s the only thing left here. In my opinion, they destroyed this town in the most inefficient way possible. ‘Overkill’ is an understatement,” Asura muttered in disgust.

If they had the energy to reduce the town to such a state, they should have gone ahead to attack their next target. There was no need—at least, in Asura’s opinion—to go this far in razing the place.

“I’d heard rumors about their cruelty, but I didn’t realize how far they would go,” Marx said, scrunching up his face.

Jeanne’s army had massacred both adults and children alike, leaving no survivors behind.

“Why did they do this?” Reko asked as he tilted his head to the side. “I can understand why Mullux Village got burned down. It was the center of Arnia’s tea industry. But what was the point of completely destroying this town?”

All of the buildings had been burned down or demolished. None of them retained their original shape.

“The people here were mostly livestock farmers...but it wasn’t the country’s main source of income... This was just a run-of-the-mill town...with nothing special about it,” Iina said as she looked around.

Moon Blossom had checked out the route with a map in advance, so they knew that they would be passing through this place and had a general idea of

what kind of town it was.

“I’d heard rumors of the destruction. But it’s a whole other thing to see it with my own eyes. It’s terrible,” Salume said. “It looks like we need to adjust our profile for Jeanne.”

“Let’s do it right here, then. Iris,” Asura said as she sat down on a nearby piece of rubble. The other members of Moon Blossom settled down as well. Reko tried to sit in Asura’s lap, but she pushed him off so he sat on the ground instead. When Salume tried to sit on Asura’s knees, Asura did the same thing to her.

“Y’all always have so much energy,” Jyrki said, sounding exasperated.

Iris heaved a heavy sigh before she began to give her profile on Jeanne. “She’s obviously doing this out of a sense of personal grudge. It feels like she hates the guts of everything. I think that her anger is directed towards all of humanity. The new world she’s talking about is probably one without any people.”

“I agree with Iris... I feel like...her goal is something like...the eradication of humankind.”

“Yeah, but that’s pretty much impossible,” Jyrki pointed out. “If she’s serious about it, she’s nuts. She’ll exhaust herself halfway through. I mean, she picked a fight with *everybody*. What a dumbass.”

“I agree with Jyrki. Jeanne’s not of sound mind. The way she’s going about this is sure to end with her death. For one thing, she’ll run out of soldiers. If she isn’t absorbing the armies of the countries she conquers and simply slaughters them instead, then Jeanne’s army will only become weaker and weaker,” Marx said.

“So in other words, it’s like she’s got a death wish?” Reko asked.

“Perhaps that’s exactly what she wants,” Salume suggested. “A slow...no, a spectacular suicide in which all of humanity is involved. Maybe that’s her goal?”

“I thought of that as well, Salume. Jeanne is obviously trying to commit suicide. She’ll fill the world with nothing but hatred and tragedy until she’s eventually killed. We wouldn’t even have to lift a finger.” Asura gave a barely perceptible shrug. “However, there’s a chance she actually has a way to win this

war. After all, we don't know what her trump card is."

"If she really wants to commit suicide...I wish she'd just do it by herself."

"Yeah. Isn't that the faster way too?" Iris said, sounding angry. "Why is she dragging the rest of us down with her? I don't understand."

"Maybe she wants to leave something behind in this world?" Reko suggested. "Like a scar that'll last for eternity."

"If all of this is to make her mark on the world before she ends herself, then that would mean she's actually sane," Marx pointed out. "But like Boss said, we can't ignore the possibility that she has an ace up her sleeve." He crossed his arms as usual after he finished talking.

"She's sane," Asura said. "It's easy to doubt that if we just look at what she's wrought in the world. But when we met her face-to-face, she was of sound mind, and I'm sure that hasn't changed even now."

"So, ya mean she was sane the entire time she was here massacrin' people and slashin' you in the back, Boss? That's even scarier," Jyrki said.

"It's not as if we wouldn't massacre civilians. You'll do it if I give the order. Isn't that right, Marx?" Asura said.

"I would if it was an order, but you're not the type to go on a rampage without a legitimate reason, Boss," Marx replied. "More importantly, you don't want to drag people living a peaceful life into conflict for no reason, do you? Does anyone else have something they wish to add?"

"I do! I agree with Mister Marx," Salume said. "If we were to murder civilians, then that simply means they deserved to die. That's the main difference between you and Jeanne, Boss."

"Aw, man. Thanks to you all profiling me, I've lost my mystique."

"That's all right! You're still very mysterious, Boss!" Reko exclaimed. "I still haven't figured out the mystery as to where your boobs disappeared to!"

Asura ignored him and continued, "Well, you're all right. I'm the hedonistic type, but I despise doing anything that's meaningless. Granted, I *do* enjoy having meaningless fun. By the way, I don't consider massacring people to be a

good time, so you don't have to worry about ever doing that."

"That's great news," Iris said, slumping her shoulders. "So to conclude our discussion, Jeanne is sane but suicidal? Or perhaps she believes she can win this war because she's hiding something really powerful?"

"I'm sure that she genuinely wants to die. I bet she hates everything about this world to the point of not wanting to live in it anymore. As for her trump card, we'll just have to play it by ear."

"Then she...really should just kill herself...on her own time..."

"Oh, come on. Don't say that, lina," Asura laughed. "She likely wants to take revenge on either this world or this society. Let's help her get the death she seeks, as soon as possible. She was the one who chose me as her assistant, after all."

"Is it because she cut you down from behind?"

"That's right, Reko. She *wants* me to get her back for that. Hee hee, she's waiting for me. But of course, I doubt she'll just roll over and let us kill her. I'm guessing the scenario she's envisioned is that she'll use everything in her repertoire, realize it's not enough, and then give up. Only then will she be able to lay down and rest."

The moment that Asura finished speaking, everyone's faces became more serious.

"I hear hooves," Marx said. "There are around thirty, no, forty horses, I'd say."

"They're coming from Liyolure..." lina murmured. "So they're enemies."

"What should we do?" Jyrki asked. "We can hide and wait for 'em to pass by. We're gonna fight Jeanne later, so we shouldn't waste our energy."

"But, if they're on their way to Sangest, shouldn't we stop them here?" Reko argued. "Our job won't count as a success if anything happens to them."

"The Azure Knights are there, though," Salume pointed out. "So I'm sure they'll be fine."

"What should we do, Asura?" Iris asked. "If we're gonna hide, we have to move fast. Otherwise, they'll find us."

“We fight.” Asura hopped to her feet. “As for the reason, it’s as Reko says. We will carry out the job we’ve been hired for. If they’re reinforcements for the attack on Sangest, then we’ll annihilate them here. Get ready, everyone. We’ll hide in the ruins and ambush them.”

Part Six, Chapter Five: According to the Oathkeeper Brigade, it was a day from their nightmares.

Today was the biggest misfortune of Miriam's life. Yesterday, on Jeanne's orders, Miriam chose around thirty-five of her best subordinates, handpicked from the Liyolure army, the Felmafia, and Flame. Though it was a mixed team of multiple factions, Miriam had witnessed their strength with her own eyes. Of course, none of them were powerful enough to defeat her. However, she still considered the thirty-five members of this team to be some of their finest.

Moon Blossom might have been powerful, but they didn't have even ten members. Miriam was of the belief that she and her team would never lose to those mercenaries. She'd left Liyolure early in the morning with the team in question, choosing the route that would get them into Sangest the fastest. The march went well until they passed by a certain town.

There was nothing left there except for the remnants of the life it once held. The piles of corpses filled the air with the odor of death. It went without saying that Miriam couldn't sense the presence of any survivors.

"This is the Oathkeeper Brigade's vengeance," Miriam murmured from horseback.

Their goal was the complete annihilation of Central Felsen. At the very least, that was how Miriam viewed their crusade. The Oathkeeper Brigade had once been stabbed in the back by the people they'd trusted and sworn to protect. The very people that Miriam and the others used to treasure had gone and betrayed them. For as long as she lived, she would never forget that sense of despair, nor would she forget how her hero—Jeanne Autun Lala, her leader—had been humiliated and tortured before the populace's eyes.

"Central Felsen is corrupt. So, that's why we—" The moment the quiet words left her mouth, the ground exploded underneath her.

Miriam had no idea what happened as she was sent flying off her horse. The

ground exploded five more times, toppling the majority of her soldiers off their mounts as well. Those who managed to stay on their horses were panicked and confused. It was when Miriam saw the horses' bloodied legs on the ground that she finally realized they were under attack.

She pulled herself up to her feet and yelled, "Get into defensive—!" However, she didn't finish her sentence before arrows rained down on them from all sides. The attack killed several of her soldiers, but the arrows kept coming. Though there weren't that many, the second wave came frighteningly fast.

Every single arrow, without fail, pierced through the soldiers' heads or the chests of those without armor. Elna Heikkila, the Demonslaying Huntress, appeared before Miriam's mind's eye. The enemy archers' aim was so accurate that it reminded her of the Great Hero.

"Go! Go!" A young voice rang out as shadows leaped out from the ruins on either side of Miriam's team.

The shadows brandished swords and daggers, cutting down her bewildered subordinates. Without stopping, they disappeared behind the ruins on the opposite end they'd started from, concealing their presence once more. The enemies moved quickly and precisely, showing that they had very advanced training. It was hard to say if even the Oathkeeper Brigade was capable of carrying out a plan with such discipline.

Miriam unsheathed her claymore and held it at the ready. She'd already lost most of her team, and those who survived were in no mental state to counterattack. One of them ran back the way they'd come from, deserting the rest of them. However, they only managed to take a few steps before an arrow shot through their head, ending them in an instant.

A jab of fear struck Miriam at the sight. It was the same kind of fear—or perhaps even greater—she felt whenever Jeanne got angry. She instinctively knew that they wouldn't be able to reorganize their team. They were far too late for that at this point.

A girl who looked around thirteen or fourteen years old emerged from the shadows of the rubble. She was wearing black robes and had shoulder-length brown hair. The girl reached up with her right arm and made a beckoning

gesture with her hand. It was a clear challenge. However, the girl revealing herself also helped Miriam figure out who these assailants are. The mercenaries of Moon Blossom preferred to dress in this way.

Why are they here? The question disappeared the very moment that it welled up in Miriam's mind. Lumia had made it clear that they were sure to come. The girl made that same taunting gesture. By the time she did so, Miriam's subordinates had all perished. Another girl walked out from the rubble and retrieved the arrows stuck inside of Miriam's soldiers before she placed them back into her quiver.

"Are you Miss Miriam, once a member of the Three Pillars?" the brown-haired girl asked. "Considering your black hair and your tall frame, and the Oathkeeper Brigade symbol engraved into your armor, I do believe I'm right in my assumption. However, it would be nice to have some confirmation."

"Are you Salume Tikka of Moon Blossom?"

Miriam knew the names of everyone in Moon Blossom. She'd had one of her spies draw their portraits and then asked Lumia for their names.

"Heeey, hurry up and fight her, Salume. We don't got all day, ya know?" Jyrki said as he popped out from the ruins of the town and began to retrieve his arrows.

"Yup, that's right. We're very busy. Oh, just leave the arrows to me," Reko said in a bubbly voice.

"Miriam's the only one left to kill," Marx said as he busied himself with refilling his own quiver. "Hurry up, Salume."

"Wait, are you guys serious?!" Iris exclaimed as she ran out from the rubble. "There's no way Salume can win against Miriam! What's Asura thinking, making her do this?!"

Ah, so this is where I'll meet my end, Miriam thought. She had no way of winning. Lumia had told her all about the horrors Moon Blossom was capable of, and she knew that they'd killed Noemi. However, their combat prowess was beyond what she'd imagined. To be more precise, their strength came from their teamwork and discipline rather than their individual might. Miriam's team

had been taken down in an instant, and they hadn't even gotten the chance to lift a finger in retaliation. It pained Miriam to admit this, but she doubted even the Oathkeeper Brigade would have been able to stand a chance against their tactics.

"Oh, don't fret. Just watch. Salume's about to kill Miriam any second now," Asura Lyona said with a smirk on her face as she stepped out into the light.

Ahh, Lady Jeanne! At the very least, I'll take Asura down with me! Miriam did not hesitate. If she was going to die here, then she would crush the enemy's leader as well. The moment Miriam stepped forwards, a single dagger stabbed through her head.

"Why did you take your eyes off me? Why did you turn your attention away from me?"

The last thing Miriam saw was Salume, standing there with a slightly annoyed expression on her face.

"So, she took advantage of the opening Miriam showed when she focused her attention on Asura?" Iris murmured as she looked down at Miriam's corpse on the ground.

"That's right," Asura said. "Even if there is a difference in their strengths, Salume still had a fighting chance if Miriam took her eyes off her. Do you understand, Iris?"

Iris thought for a moment before she asked, "Are you saying that there's no way to dodge an attack that comes from outside your field of perception?"

"Exactly. That's how Matias died. Not even *he* was able to react to and avoid an attack from outside his range of consciousness. In this case, there was no chance for someone of Miriam's level to dodge a similar attack. That's all this was. Understand?"

Iris knew how Matias died. In fact, *everyone* had heard of how he'd been killed by an archer. However, she had no idea as to who had shot that fatal arrow.

“I did it! I did it, Reko! I killed Miriam, a former member of the Oathkeeper Brigade!” Salume exclaimed, jumping up and down.

“Ninety percent of that was thanks to Boss, though,” Reko replied calmly.

“It’s true that Salume only did what I’d ordered her to,” Asura said. “However, she was able to follow my instructions to the letter and kill her in one attack. You can take pride in this kill. I already consider you pretty strong.”

Ever since joining Moon Blossom, neither Salume and Reko had ever slacked off in their training. They practiced some skill or another every day, so of course they couldn’t be considered weak anymore. However, it was still hard to say they were strong. In terms of their individual strength, they were nowhere near Asura’s level.

“Well, if she’s the only one left standin’, then it makes sense she’d try to take our boss down with her,” Jyrki said with a small smile.

“And that means...Boss was the only one she was focusing on,” lina added.

Everything had gone according to Asura’s plan. If Salume had actually tried to fight Miriam without any tricks or reinforcements, she would’ve been killed in a heartbeat.

“Everyone keeps heaping praise on Salume.” Reko pouted. “You know, I killed a bunch of people with my arrows too.”

“Reko, you did good too,” Asura said. “You’re able to shoot an arrow with some level of precision now. I won’t say you’re great at it, but at least you’re hitting your targets. How about your ability to sense your MP? Are you able to pull it out within a second now?”

“It still takes me three seconds,” Reko said.

“I need seven seconds,” Salume added.

While their other training sessions were coming along fine, they continued to struggle with magic.

“Shouldn’t we teach them how to handle larger weapons such as swords and spears? I’m sure that today’s battle has given them even more confidence in themselves. In my opinion, I believe that now is the best time to advance to the

next step of their training,” Marx said as he continued to pick up arrows from the bodies.

Marx was right. The reason they’d let Salume kill Miriam in today’s mission was to boost her confidence. It was also to help her understand that you could defeat an enemy more powerful than yourself if you analyzed their behavior and then came up with a proper plan. Reko was already full of himself, so Asura didn’t think they needed to resort to this kind of trickery for him.

“Yes, I agree,” she said. “But there’s no need to fret. Between training them on their survivalist skills, torture endurance, and stealth, we still have plenty of things to do. That goes for you as well, Iris.”

“I know! I’m trying to become a soldier-mage too, and I’m gonna become one before they do!”

“Iris, that’s a bold statement to make when you started your training after us. Someone like you should just be quiet and let us fondle your breasts,” Reko said, looking over at Salume, who nodded.

“Oh, yes, I agree. She’s very arrogant for a junior apprentice. I’m going to have her polish my shoes later.”

“What the hell?!” Iris screeched.

“All right, that’s enough chatter,” Asura said, clapping her hands. “Once we finish collecting all of our arrows, we need to be on our way. Speaking of which, how come none of these people have any arrows?”

If the fallen soldiers had been equipped with quivers, they could have simply swapped their empty ones for the full ones. However, none of the dead were wielding bows.

“It looks like a mixed team, so soldiers who specialize in close-quarters combat were likely the only ones chosen,” Marx said. “The Oathkeeper Brigade mostly consisted of knights and warriors, after all.”

“Hmm. I wonder when these old-fashioned muscle heads will learn the importance of ranged weapons.” Asura sighed. “Elna’s sure to cry if she ever hears about this, considering she’s trying so hard to popularize archery.”

Today was a nightmare for Nicola Canarre. His army had already reduced a country to dust. Though he was a commander, he fought on the front lines alongside his soldiers, killing scores of enemies with his own hands. It was rumored among his troops that his combat prowess was comparable to a hero's, thus raising their morale. The Assassination Alliance had also disposed of anyone with military or political power. There was no reason for them to lose, and that was why he had believed they would easily topple the next country they targeted.

In reality, the attack went well. However, thanks to a single hero, everything was ruined. She shot down captain after captain, destroying the chain of command in Nicola's army. He'd been sure that the gong would ring out over the battlefield after only a little more, and of course, it would have been the enemy signaling for a ceasefire. But this lone hero had completely altered the situation. The enemy army had gotten a second wind, whereas Nicola's army, no longer able to quickly and accurately transmit orders, was on the verge of collapse.

"Dammit! That monster!" Nicola cursed as he gazed upon the frenzy of battle from horseback.

He had to find that woman and kill her. But as soon as she killed someone, she would disappear in the confusion. It was like trying to grab a mirage. She never stayed in a single spot. Next to him, Nicola's vice commander fell, an arrow protruding from his forehead.

"Goddammit! This is the power of the Demonslaying Huntress? This is the power of the Great Hero, Elna Heikkila?!" Nicola snarled. Elna conducted war in a very proficient manner. She only sniped captains and others in a commanding role, completely ignoring all of the underlings. "Retreat!" he roared. "Retreat, you bastards!"

If they continued fighting here, they would only end up annihilated.

"Oh, dearie. Why did you assume that I'd simply let you run away?"

The blade of a dagger bit into Nicola's neck. Elna Heikkila had managed to get on Nicola's horse behind him without making a single sound.

“You’re a monster,” he said. He was confident in his power and had trained like a madman throughout the past decade. He’d been sure that he was able to put up a fair fight against your average hero.

“That’s a compliment, riiight?” Elna sounded like she was having a lot of fun.

“Yeah, it was, Demonslaying Huntress,” Nicola said with a sharp laugh. “You’re nuts. Seriously nuts. But, you’re nowhere near Jeanne’s level.”

Elna hummed before she replied in a calm voice, “Unfortunately, I agree. Jeanne’s still in her prime. Meanwhile, I’ve been considering retirement. Between us, Jeanne is surely the stronger one!”

“If Jeanne had been the one fighting us, we would’ve all been long dead. She has the power to crush an entire army, even on her own. That goes for you heroes as well. Jeanne can murder every single one of you.”

“You talk as if there’s an extreme power gap between us,” Elna said, sounding a little miffed. “You can’t fault me for being weaker than her, but is there really such a difference between us? Are you suuure you aren’t just deifying her?”

“Of course I deify her,” Nicola said without a moment’s hesitation. “However, Jeanne’s hit the limits of humanity. She can’t get any stronger. That’s the strongest that any human can become.”

“Ah, I see! What a relief!”

“A relief?”

“That’s riiight. I mean, I don’t plan to meet Jeanne in person. None of the heroes, save for Iris, have any intention of seeing her either.”

Nicola thought for a moment before he asked, “Are you saying those mercenaries from Moon Blossom will be the ones to...?”

Lumia had told him all about Moon Blossom, and how they were willing to and capable of killing a hero. To be more precise, they could and would kill even a Great Hero. He also knew that Iris Craven Lily was traveling with Moon Blossom.

“According to little Asura, half of the heroes would die if they were to face off against Jeanne! So I’m going to leave Jeanne to her! You can think of us heroes

as a shield, here to prevent you and your army from causing even more damage than you already have. Of course, if little Asura fails in her task, we'll raise our arms in battle. It's not as if we have a choice! We've already declared Jeanne a threat on par with a Demon Lord."

"You're a hero and yet you're making a group of mercenaries fight first? What a crafty plan you've cooked up," Nicola scoffed, his lips twisted in a mocking grin. "Well, whatever. I'll be waiting for you in Hell, Demonslaying Huntress. So long as Jeanne Autun Lala's name remains alive, so will the Oathkeeper Brigade."

Despite the dagger at his throat, Nicola attempted to forcefully draw the longsword from his belt. In the next moment, he felt a blinding heat in his neck and all of the strength left his limbs.

"I don't plan on dying anytime soon!"

Those were the final words that Nicola ever heard. He fell off his horse, blood gushing from the gaping wound in his throat, and died before he even hit the ground.

Part Six, Chapter Six: If I have a curse mark from a king, can I be roommates with a Demon Lord?

“I plan to die,” Jeanne, sitting upon her throne, announced in a quiet voice. Tina remained standing at her side.

“What are you talking about?” Lumia asked as she moved the pieces across the tactical map.

Jeanne had asked her to find a way to break through the heroes’ envelopment, and she still hadn’t figured out a strategy. The best way she could think of was for Jeanne herself to go and kill the heroes. However, Jeanne had no intention of leaving the palace.

“It’s exactly as it sounds. I meant what I said, Lumia,” Jeanne said, giving Lumia a somewhat sad smile.

“You’ve got to be kidding. You...I mean...”

“It’s fine. You no longer need to refer to me by my name or title anymore,” Jeanne said with a shrug. “Thank you for playing along with my selfishness. But remember to treat me as your older sister when we’re around other people.” Her voice remained frightfully calm.

“In any case, what’s the point in me betraying Moon Blossom if you go and die on me? I want to protect you. I don’t want you to die.”

Jeanne may be a cruel piece of trash, but she was still Lumia’s only sister. From Lumia’s perspective, Jeanne was a precious member of her family.

“As you may know, Lumia, we have no way to win this war, nor did I ever intend on winning it.”

“But you have a trump card, don’t you? You were going to destroy the cathedrals, turn the archaeological ruins into dust, collapse the Harnei Bridge, and wreck the Tower of Freedom, right? You’ve still only reduced the ruins to sand.”

“Yes, I may not be able to win, but I can destroy. As for my trump card, it can only be activated in exchange for my life.”

“What?”

This had to be some sort of sick and twisted joke, not that it was funny at all. Jeanne planned on dying this entire time? It was ridiculous.

“We were in the middle of discussing Demon Lords, weren’t we?” Jeanne said. “Let me first explain to you the process of reviving a Demon Lord.”

“Wait a second. Humans are capable of controlling the timing of a Demon Lord’s return?” Lumia gasped, shocked.

“To a certain degree, yes, they can,” Jeanne replied, her voice never wavering from its usual timbre. “I hear that Demon Lords possess something called a core.”

“You hear? Who told you that?”

“That...doesn’t really matter. Allow me to continue. That core is invisible to the naked eye, and it feeds off human hatred, sadness, and despair in order to grow.”

“Is that why you started the war?” *To increase the amount of negative emotions in the world?* Lumia didn’t say.

“You’re very perceptive, Lumia. I don’t recall you being this way in the past. You’ve changed over these past ten years.”

“Asura taught me a lot of things,” Lumia replied with a small shrug.

“I see. Anyway, humanity’s worst emotions are the source of a Demon Lord’s energy. In other words, they become a Demon Lord’s magical energy. Once that magic reaches a certain level, the core will start searching for a vessel so that it can come back to life.”

“So a Demon Lord can vary from individual to individual based on its vessel?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m glad that you’re so quick on the uptake. There is a limit to how much magical energy a core is capable of holding. However, some Demon Lords are stronger than others because they were born from stronger vessels.”

“By strength, do you mean in combat?”

“I do.”

“Has a human ever become a vessel in the past?”

Jeanne shook her head in response to Lumia’s question. In that case, the Demon Lord that would be born this time would be one of unprecedented combat prowess. It would be the strongest Demon Lord in history, because...

“You plan on becoming the vessel, Jeanne?” After Lumia asked that, Jeanne nodded, dipping her head low. “No. No! I won’t let you do that! You can’t do that! I...I just want you to live! That’s why I’m here with you!”

“It makes me very happy to hear that,” Jeanne said with an unreadable smile. She stood up from her throne and slowly stripped off her clothes. Once she was standing naked, she turned around to show Lumia her back. Upon it were several geometrical black marks. “This is Cursed Sigil, a timed magic that uses the Fixed Element: Monarch.”

“Cursed Sigil?”

“That’s right. The core will prioritize choosing vessels from people who bear a Cursed Sigil. If there is no one alive with a Cursed Sigil, then it will choose a misanthrope with deep hatred towards the world.”

“That symbol proves that one has been cursed by a king,” Tina, who had remained silent up to this point, explained with a vaguely angry look on her face.

“Timed magic is a kind of magic that humans do not know about,” Jeanne said as she turned to face Lumia.

“It’s a type of magic that activates when the spell’s time limit is up,” Tina added. “It can store magical energy over time, causing an explosive amount of destruction when it hits the time limit. It can also be used in a similar way as Cursed Sigil, in which the spell is activated once certain conditions are met.”

“Is there no way to remove that Cursed Sigil?!” Lumia screamed.

“There isn’t.” Jeanne shook her head. “Even if there were, I would never tell you.”

“What?” Lumia collapsed onto the red carpet. “So your death is inevitable? I can’t... How can you expect me to simply accept that fact?” In that case, what was the reason for Lumia being here? At the end of the day, she couldn’t do anything to save Jeanne. “But wait,” Lumia gasped, “Tina’s Fixed Element is Lightning and Mistress Jeanne, yours is Eventide, right? In that case, who possesses the Fixed Element of Monarch?”

A faint sense of hope stirred within Lumia. If they could do something about the one who’d cast Cursed Sigil in the first place, then perhaps they could remove it.

“It’s best if you don’t know,” Jeanne said as she picked up her clothes from the ground. “I do not want you to get involved in this.”

“Besides, timed magic isn’t something that can be removed,” Tina said.

The hope faded. Magic wasn’t all-powerful. It was full of weaknesses and truly infuriating.

“Hey, did...did someone forcibly carve that Cursed Sigil into you?” Perhaps Lumia asked this because she was desperate for that to be the truth. However, even as the words left her mouth, she knew that was impossible. She didn’t even need to waste time with the question, and yet she did.

“No, no one did. I bore this of my own will. You could say that I carved it into myself.”

“I was against it,” Tina said, sounding a little sad.

“My apologies, Tina,” Jeanne said as she patted her on the head. “But I wanted to destroy the world no matter what I had to sacrifice in the process.” She was willing to throw away her own life in exchange for that wish. That was how strong her emotions were on the matter. “Besides, I wanted to protect you as well, Tina.”

“I know that! But!” Tears welled up in Tina’s eyes. “You could have chosen to live a quiet life with me, just the two of us!”

Ahh, the truth is that Tina hates this too, Lumia thought. They were the same in that all they wanted was for Jeanne to stay alive. She could take a guess as to *why* Jeanne did this from what she said about protecting Tina. *Even in the*

depths of my sadness, I'm still capable of analyzing her words and behavior.

“You plan on massacring the heroes, don’t you?” Lumia asked. “Your plan is to become the most powerful Demon Lord in history in order to guarantee you’re strong enough to kill them all, right? The heroes wouldn’t allow Tina to live. No, not just the heroes. I’m sure that most of humanity wouldn’t abide Tina’s existence. I hate to admit it, but your plan isn’t a bad one. However, I still have a few questions left. What guarantee do you have that you won’t kill me and Tina after you become a Demon Lord?”

Jeanne was strong. However, just like Lumia had figured in the past, it would be difficult for her to kill all of the heroes if she was limited to her mortal shell.

“Apparently, a vessel’s consciousness will remain present in the Demon Lord for a period of time,” Jeanne replied. “So I won’t attack the two of you. I will travel far away while I’m still capable of controlling my actions. After that, I will massacre thousands, including the heroes.”

“So, that’s your true end goal? Everything is for Tina’s sake, to make sure she’s safe? In that case, what’s the secret behind the strength of your divinity? Is your desire to save Tina so powerful that it allowed you to reach such heights?”

Those with divinity were fated to become saviors. Lumia had been under the impression that Jeanne wanted to save all of the nonhuman species in the world. However, Jeanne herself just proved that theory wrong.

“The strength of the enchantment magic, Divinity, parallels the strength of your emotions,” Jeanne said. “It doesn’t matter how big or small the thing you want to save is. The power of my divinity reflects how much I wish to help Tina.”

“Enchantment?” Lumia froze for several seconds. “I used to possess divinity as well. So, you’re saying...”

“Your divinity was one given to you,” Jeanne said, that same unreadable smile on her face.

“Who? Tell me. Who applied Divinity onto me? What do they want? Why was I the one chosen? Why are *you* the one chosen?”

“A pure-blooded—”

“Tina,” Jeanne interrupted, her voice lower than usual. Tina twitched her shoulders and fell silent. “You do not need to involve yourself, Lumia. I already told you that. Today, I will punish both of you. Now then, who should we start with?” Jeanne sat down on her throne and gave her lap a few pats.

“That’s a pretty forceful way to change the subject,” Lumia said, a grim smile on her face.

“I believe that this will be the last time I get to punish you,” Jeanne said. “So please forgive me for that. The two of you truly have such wonderful bottoms. They fill me with so much love that I could subsist on that instead of food.”

Moon Blossom’s horses were so exhausted that the group released them, and they ended up walking the rest of the way to Liyolure’s capital. Since the capital was a fortress city, they needed to go through the military police’s inspection before entering. They were still three hundred meters away from arriving at the front gates though.

“Do ya think they’ll let us in?” Jyrki asked.

The sun had already set, but torches lined the path to the capital. Thanks to the light they gave off, there was no fear of losing their way in the night. Asura figured that there was probably someone in the city whose job was to light these torches every day.

“Of course they won’t...” Iina muttered. “It’s wartime, remember?”

“Then we’ll simply have to dispose of the guards as quickly as we can,” Asura replied calmly.

“And then what?” Iris asked. “Do we go to the castle and ambush Jeanne in the middle of the night?”

“No. We’re going to ask a civilian to provide us lodging and rest up in their home. Didn’t I say that on the way here? We’ve been marching on such a strict schedule that I’m sure we could use a rest.”

“Yes, I agree. To tell the truth, I would like to sleep for a bit before we head to

battle,” Marx said.

“I’m feeling fine,” Reko said.

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause you’re still young,” Jyrki snickered.

“Hey, are you sure there’ll be people willing to let us into their home?” Iris asked.

“Idiot...” lina sighed.

“When Boss said that we’d be asking a civilian to provide us lodging, I’m sure she didn’t actually mean ‘ask.’ She probably means something closer to ‘demand.’”

“Salume’s right,” Asura said. “We’ll be forcing our way in, though as quietly as possible, of course.”

“Then after we have a nice nap, chow down on some breakfast, and chill out until noon, it’ll be time for work, yeah?”

“That’s right, Jyrki. It’s important to rest up. Fighting Jeanne in our current condition will only lower our chances of success. To tell the truth, I’m pretty beat myself.”

“Are we going to kill anyone?” Iris asked, scrunching up her face. “I mean, are we going to kill the civilians?”

“No, we won’t,” Asura answered. “There are three reasons for that. Firstly, I don’t like to go out of my way to kill someone when they’re just trying to quietly live their life. Secondly, I’m not a villain.”

“Huh?” Everyone other than Asura blinked, wondering if they heard wrong.

“At this point in time, I haven’t done anything bad,” Asura argued.

“That’s a freakin’ hilarious joke,” Jyrki laughed.

“Er, I think that someone suggesting we break into an innocent person’s house can be considered a villain,” Iris said with an awkward giggle.

“It depends on how you would define villainy,” Asura said, her voice and expression serious. “If we pushed our way into someone’s house and then killed or stole from them without any particular reason, then yes, that would make us

villains. But all we're doing is borrowing their home. This is called 'rooming.' It was a popular way to live in my past life as well."

When Asura was in the Middle East, she'd once been roommates with a corpse in a half-destroyed house. She'd set up claymore mines at the entrance, with idiots setting them off serving as her alarm clock.

"Man, that hurts to hear," Jyrki said.

"After you became the leader...we stopped killing people for no reason, though," lina said. They were talking about when they were in the bandit group together.

"Will we be borrowing their breakfast as well?" Marx asked.

"Well, if we leave money behind, I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem."

"If you're fine with paying for food, then why don't we just stay at an inn?" Iris asked.

"You're...so stupid..."

"lina! I ignored it the first time, but you keep poking fun at me and calling me an idiot!"

"It's the truth..."

"Listen up, Miss Iris," Salume said. "In a little bit, we'll be entering the city after having murdered the military police at the gate. It stands to reason that we'll become wanted criminals after that, right? In that case, if we stay at an inn, we'll be surrounded by authorities in no time."

"I've thought this for a while now," Reko said with a bright smile, "but I'm the second smartest in this whole group. Boss is the smartest, of course!"

"I believe that I'm quite smart as well," Marx argued.

"I'm very smart too," Salume said.

"I...don't want to compete in this..." lina sighed.

"Same. lina and I didn't even go to school," Jyrki said.

"There are some people who went to school and turned out to be dummies, you know? Just look at Iris."

“What in the world is *that* supposed to mean, Reko?!”

“Don’t worry, Iris. You can be proud of your breasts, at least,” Reko said happily. “I’m sure that all the nutrients that were supposed to go to your brain went to your chest instead. They don’t look as prominent when you’re wearing clothes, but your boobs are pretty big. They’re soft and feel nice too.”

“Can you stop being so detailed with your descriptions?! You’ve felt me up so many times that it’s gross to hear how graphic you’re being!”

Next to the screaming Iris, Salume pressed her hands against her own breasts.

“You’re just a bit underdeveloped because you didn’t eat a lot growing up,” Asura assured. She didn’t sound like she was joking.

“Yeah, don’t worry, Salume,” Reko said. “You’ll be fine, unlike Boss. There’s no longer any hope for her.”

“Shut up or I’ll kill you. There is nothing but potential in my boobs.”

“My ultimate goal is to be killed by you, Boss! Please tear me to pieces!”

Asura sighed and shook her head. “It doesn’t sound like a joke when *you* say that, Reko. Sometimes, you even scare me.”

“By the way...what’s the third reason we won’t kill civilians?” lina asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think of three,” Asura replied. “I figured that all of you would react to my second reason and change the subject. I’m actually surprised that you brought the topic back up again, lina.”

Part Six, Chapter Seven: Her potential—and only her potential—is the best in the world. Iris is about to steal the role of protagonist from me. Oh, what to do?

“Did you hear about what happened last night?” Lumia asked Jeanne.

Per usual, they were in the audience chamber of the Liyolure Empire’s palace. Jeanne was seated upon the throne with a crown atop of her head. Next to her stood Tina. This was a sight Lumia was already familiar with.

“Are you asleep?” Lumia added when Jeanne didn’t say anything.

Though Jeanne was still sitting up, with her head resting on her hand, her eyes were closed. When Lumia looked closer, she could see a trail of drool leaking out from the corner of her mouth.

“Mistress Jeanne is not a morning person,” Tina explained in a calm voice.

Lumia heaved a heavy sigh. “Yes, I know. So in the end, she never thought of countermeasures against Moon Blossom.”

“Are you saying that Moon Blossom was behind what happened last night?”

“That’s right.”

Last night, the military police guarding the front gate had been murdered. The culprits had sneaked into the capital after that.

“If that’s true, then they came a lot faster than we ever expected.”

“They must have rushed to get here.”

“And yet, I’m still alive,” Jeanne said, looking up. “Lumia, you were insistent that I would be murdered by them.”

Lumia shrugged. “They’ll probably arrive sometime around noon.”

“It’s hard to tell if they’re in a rush to murder Mistress Jeanne, or if they’re taking their sweet time,” Tina said with a small huff of laughter.

“They hurried to get to Liyolure and then rested up so as to be in top condition before their attack,” Lumia explained. “Let’s see...” She brushed all of the pawns off of the map of Central Felsen and then placed a map of the city over top of it. “I’m sure that they’re resting somewhere in this area.”

She picked up a pawn and placed it upon the table. Tina trotted over and stared down at the map.

“That’s right in the middle of the city,” she observed.

“That’s the kind of daring stunt Asura tends to pull.”

“Wouldn’t the military police have arrested them already if they’re staying at an inn?” Jeanne asked.

“Of course they wouldn’t be staying at an inn.” Lumia sighed.

“Why? If I were in their shoes, that’s where I would sleep.”

Lumia sighed yet again in the face of Jeanne’s poor crisis management skills. This was just her hypothesis, but it was likely that Jeanne was never in true danger these past few years. Both she and Tina were peerlessly strong, so they never felt threatened by anything or anyone.

“Asura wouldn’t do something so stupid. Mistress Jeanne, you said it yourself earlier. If she was staying at an inn, the military police would have found her. Since she plans on fighting you today, she wouldn’t risk wasting her energy on a meaningless skirmish.”

“Tina, did you hear what Lumia said? She called me stupid.”

“Oh, yes, I heard that. Sometimes, Lumia talks like she thinks she’s better than us. Ah, Mistress Jeanne, please wipe the drool from your face.”

Tina’s words made Jeanne realize for the first time that there had been spit on her mouth the entire conversation. She hurriedly wiped it off.

“That’s not a face you can show around others,” Lumia said with a small smile.

“You’re family, so it’s not a problem,” Jeanne argued. “If they’re not at an inn, where are they?”

“They must have broken into someone’s home and tied up the occupants. I suppose that by this point in time, they’ve finished breakfast and are enjoying a nice chat.”

“How can they be so casual before a big fight?”

Though Tina laughed at that, in Lumia’s opinion, she could ask the very same for Tina and Jeanne.

“In any case, you’re saying that we don’t have much time left, right?” Jeanne said as she stood up. “Unfortunately, the core still does not possess enough magic for a Demon Lord’s revival. This is a pain, but I’m going to gather more negative emotions.”

She removed the crown from her head and placed it on Tina’s. Tina brushed her fingers against the accessory with a happy look on her face before she sat down on the throne in Jeanne’s place.

“It sounds like you’re saying, ‘I’m going to go commit a massacre,’” Lumia said.

“You heard right. You’re saying that Moon Blossom is staying in the district near the front doors of the palace, right? In that case, I’m going to head out from the back and kill some people living on the other side of the city.”

“I suppose there’s not much use in trying to stop you, is there?”

“I believe that you, of all people, can understand how I feel.”

Lumia didn’t say anything for a moment. “You’re right. I bet that... No, I’m *certain* that if I hadn’t met Asura, I would’ve been the one standing in your place.”

“I know. At the end of the day, I’m nothing but a substitute for you, Lumia.”

“What kind of substitute becomes more powerful than the original?”

“I was always stronger than you. You used to be so prideful that I simply kept it a secret.”

“I see. So that’s how it was. Jeanne Autun Lala was so blinded by her own arrogance back then that she hadn’t even been able to notice her younger sister’s true strength.”

“My apologies. I did not say that with the intention of hurting you.”

“It’s fine. Thank you for telling me that. I probably thought of myself as the queen of my own little world. It was a world so small that it only consisted of the Oathkeeper Brigade.”

In the past, Lumia had believed herself the strongest person in the world. She’d been under the delusion that she was capable of anything she set her mind to. It was difficult to write that off as the foolishness of youth considering how much bloodshed, whether her allies’ or her enemies’, she’d been responsible for.

“I am in the same boat as you. I’ll see you later.”

Jeanne slowly made her way out of the audience chamber. As she watched her go, Lumia lost herself in thought. *If only I had been able to see through others’ lies back then, perhaps I wouldn’t have lost everything I held dear.* If that had happened, Lumia might have become the queen of the Juaren Kingdom while Jeanne became a hero. They would’ve protected both the world and their homeland together. But as heroes, they would never have become friends with Tina. From a normal person’s perspective, Tina was nothing more than a target to exterminate.

“What is it? Do you want to wear the crown as well, Lumia?” Tina asked, tilting her head to the side.

“No, I don’t,” Lumia replied with a shake of her head. “Hey, Tina, in the end, I couldn’t do anything to help her. Her will is iron, and I can do nothing to save her. It’s tragic.”

“That’s not true.” Tina beckoned for Lumia to approach her, so she obeyed. Once she got close, Tina pressed a hand against her chest and said, “You saved Mistress Jeanne. You saved what she has in here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mistress Jeanne was so happy after you came to us, Lumia. She has far more good days than before, and she stopped hitting me as much.”

“Yesterday, she hit the both of us,” Lumia reminded her, spreading her arms in an exaggerated shrug.

Tina smiled and pulled her hand away from Lumia's chest. "But it didn't hurt."

"Yes, I agree."

Jeanne hadn't used her fighting spirit last night. All she'd done was playfully slap her hand against their buttocks.

"That's proof that Mistress Jeanne's heart has recovered enough that she's back to what she was like before the Cursed Sigil was placed on her," Tina said. "She's been smiling and joking more, and it reminds me of when we were happy together. I..." Though Tina was still in the middle of talking, she broke down into tears.

"You don't want her to die, do you?"

"Of course not," Tina sobbed, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "But there's nothing we can do to remove the Cursed Sigil."

"She's such a fool. Her strong desires to protect you and destroy the world led her to find what she believes to be the best solution for her wishes. Yes, becoming a Demon Lord would solve both problems, but how can she be so dumb? Killing and massacring people in order to do that? Why couldn't she have just chosen to settle down and live a quiet life with you?"

However, Lumia could understand where Jeanne was coming from. It was almost painful how much she could sympathize with her. After all, Lumia used to live the exact same way. She, too, once spent her days crawling around in the darkness, with nothing but vengeance on her mind.

"I'm still so sleepy." Jeanne had summoned three angels with her Dance of Divine Destruction, using them to slaughter anything that entered her field of vision. This included the citizens kneeling in reverence at the sight of her, as well as stray dogs and cats that wandered into her path. "But I've finished preparing my magic."

She wasn't talking to anyone but herself. After long years of work, Jeanne finally finished the foundations for a new spell. After learning it, she'd had to improve it until it was absolutely perfect. It had taken her so long because she had to work on it in secret, late at night after Tina had gone to bed. As a result

of this, her sleep schedule made it difficult to wake up in the mornings.

This spell had nothing to do with her plot to destroy the world, nor did it have anything to do with the massacres she'd wrought in her past. She'd created it as a means of insurance.

As people continued to scream around her, Jeanne observed, "I seem to have lost what makes me human."

Even in the face of all this tragedy and gore, she didn't feel a thing—something unthinkable to the Jeanne of the past. She'd lost something along the way. However, she'd gained something as well.

"Tina, I hope that you'll live out the rest of your days in happiness."

Jeanne looked up at the heavens. Sadly, her hatred for humanity was so strong that it had blinded her to the many alternate paths she could've taken.

"It's kinda rowdy outside," Jyrki commented as he peered outside the window.

"The guards at the palace...are gone as well," lina noted. Her attention was also focused on what was going on outside.

"Looks like this is our chance. It's still rather early, but I suppose we should go," Asura said, drinking tea on the sofa.

The members of Moon Blossom were having tea while sitting in the living room of a random house they'd broken into. They'd tied up the residents and left them on the second floor.

"Can you tell what's going on out there, Jyrki?" Marx asked as he approached the window.

"Dunno. Somethin' probably went down on the other side of the capital."

"It must be serious...if even the guards at the palace...went to check it out."

"Hmm. Boss, I think we should wait for a bit and see what happens," Marx said as he looked over at Asura.

"Oh? I personally believe this is our best chance to enter the castle without

having to risk a fight,” Asura replied as she pushed her cup towards Salume, who looked down at it before drinking the remaining dregs of tea.

“I wanted to be the one drinking Boss’s half-finished tea,” Reko said, looking at Salume with envy in his eyes.

“Man, you’re a real pervert,” Iris sighed.

Salume made a huff of triumph, smirked, and then took a few steps to place the cup on the table.

“I don’t care if we attack or wait,” Jyrki said. “I’m in perfect condition.”

“Same here... I feel great.” lina stretched. “I can go fight...now if we need to.”

“My preparations are complete as well,” Marx said. “However, I suggested we wait because we have no idea what is going on outside. I figured it would be best to play it safe. If Boss orders us to charge the castle, then I’ll obey her.”

“I’m a little nervous, I have to admit,” Iris said as she looked down at her hands. “To tell you the truth, I’m even a little scared.”

“Well, Tina *did* defeat you in a single attack,” Reko pointed out.

“I guess it was a ‘traumatic experience,’ as people say,” Salume said.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. No one can blame you for what happened with Tina. How can anyone defeat a peak-tier monster single-handedly?”

“Huh? We’re talking about Tina, aren’t we?” Iris said. “What does she have to do with peak-tier monsters? Are you trying to say that she’s as strong as one? If you are, then your metaphor is really hard to follow.”

Everyone froze in response to Iris’s statement. *Are you serious?! Iris, you didn’t notice?!* That was what every single person in the room was thinking.

“Huh? What? Why’s everyone looking at me like that?!” Iris exclaimed as she looked around the group.

Asura sighed before she said, “It looks like teaching you how to use your brain is a higher priority than teaching you how to use magic. Tina’s identity isn’t hard to figure out if you use logic. If there can only be one possibility for something,

then no matter how difficult it is to accept, it must be the truth.”

Tina had been so powerful that she’d defeated Iris in a single strike. Her strength had far exceeded that of a human’s. It stood to reason that Tina wasn’t human.

“I don’t really know what you’re talking about, but in terms of magic, I can use manifestation magic now, you know?” Iris said.

“Your talent is the only thing about you that’s on par with a Demon Lord,” Reko said.

“I hate you, Miss Iris,” Salume sighed.

The two of them were still learning how to quickly recognize their own MP. Even if manifestation magic was the easiest kind of magic to use, they were still far from reaching that stage.

“I can use transformation magic now... Aren’t I amazing?” Iina asked, puffing her chest out.

“Yes, you are. Neither Jyrki nor Marx can use transformation magic yet. I suppose they’re not motivated enough, considering how useless it is for their elements. But I’m still going to have them learn it,” Asura said. Jyrki and Marx’s elements meant that their manifestation and attack magic were essentially the same thing. She stood up and continued, “Let’s get back to the main topic. Since this is a good opportunity for us, we’re going to launch our attack now.”

“What if Jeanne isn’t in the castle?” Marx asked.

“Then we look for her. Uncover every rock in this city if you have to, find her, and kill her. Her absence won’t change our plans—we’re going to kill Jeanne today. Even if she turns out to be a good person or a saint or a savior or a god, we’re going to end her today. Does anyone have any further questions?”

“What should we do if Miss Lumia appears before us as an enemy?” Salume asked.

“We operate as we planned. If she’s our enemy, then we get rid of her. We’ll kill her if we need to.”

“What if Tina goes against our expectations and participates in the fight?”

Reko asked.

“I’ll deal with her,” Asura replied. “I don’t want any of you facing her. There’s a high chance trying our usual methods of teamwork will only end up dragging us down. To tell the truth, none of you can handle her in a fight. In that case, not engaging is the wisest move. If we want to actually defeat Tina, then Marx, Jyrki, and Iina will need to be as strong as a hero, then work in tandem with me. It’ll take a few years before we can take her down.”

“What if we have to face Lumia, Jeanne, *and* Tina at the same time?” Iris asked.

“In that case, we’ll split up into teams. I’ll hold Tina off. Iina and Iris will defeat Lumia. Do not show her any mercy. Defeat her within ten seconds. If you don’t, then Jeanne will murder Jyrki and Marx.”

“What about Reko and me?” That was Salume once more.

“Watch how we fight from a distance. I’d be grateful if you tried to support us with your arrows, but you don’t have to push yourself.”

“Yes, Boss.” Salume nodded.

“Understood. If you die, Boss, then can I die as well?” Reko asked.

“It’s your life. Do whatever you want. On my end, I’d prefer it if you chose to live. You’d be able to train yourself up and then rebuild Moon Blossom with Salume.”

“If we continue to call ourselves Moon Blossom, then Boss and everyone else will be able to live on forever,” Salume said.

“So Salume and I will be the ones to tell future generations about you? That sounds like a pretty good way to live.”

“What should we do if we die, then?” Jyrki asked, laughing.

“Isn’t it obvious? Reincarnate and come back as a mercenary.”

In Asura’s past life, she’d worked as a mercenary. In this one, she’d built her own group. She would do the same in the next one as well. This was the only life she’d ever known.

“And we’ll have...to work for you again, Boss?” lina said. “This kind of misfortune...wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Now then, everyone, this will be an easy mission. Let’s go, and make sure you don’t hurt yourself on the way.”

Part Six, Chapter Eight: The only ones who remain the same are the dead. Good for you! You're still alive.

"This reversi game is quite fun," Tina said.

She was seated on the throne, a game board that Lumia had made upon her lap. Lumia had even gone through the effort of making the black-and-white disks. Though Lumia had originally wanted to play this with Jeanne, she never got the chance to do so.

"Not even Asura was able to predict everything that can happen in this, you know? The rules are quite simple, but it's an incredibly complicated strategy game," Lumia replied as she dragged a small chair in front of the throne and sat in it.

Back when Asura was much younger, Lumia had often played this with her. To be more precise, she'd used this game as a way to hone her own ability to see the greater picture. Lumia had been the kind of person who would attack first and think later. It had been Asura who'd taught her to think logically and rationally.

"It's advantageous to take the corners," Tina said as she placed down a white disk. Then she flipped the black disks over to turn them white.

"Asura said that this game was invented in the late 1800s," Lumia said.

This game was something very important to her. Carving this board and the pieces with Asura had been the first time they'd made something other than for daily survival. Lumia wasn't exactly dexterous, so it had been a very difficult task. The disks were rather misshapen as well. Upon seeing them, Asura had laughed and said, "They're just like your heart."

"This is 1623 Anno Argenteus, you know?"

"Yes, I know. But Asura's either someone from the future, or she really does possess a past life." With that, Lumia set down a black disk.

“I don’t know which it is,” Tina said as she smiled at Lumia, “but if reincarnation really *does* exist, I’d like to meet Mistress Jeanne again.”

“I agree.” Lumia stood up. “Tell us, Asura. Does life continue even after death?”

“We’ve been through this so many times already.” Asura’s voice rang out. Even though it hadn’t been long since Lumia left Moon Blossom, the sound of it was already so nostalgic. “Judging by that conversation just now, it sounds like Jeanne’s already dead. Is she?”

Asura stepped into Lumia’s line of sight. Everything about her—her long silver hair, slender body, green eyes, and confident smile—was so familiar.

“Mistress Jeanne left the castle for some personal errands,” Tina said. She slowly lifted the game board from her lap and set it down on the ground.

“I’m sure the rest of Moon Blossom is here as well, yes?” Lumia said. “I know they’re here, even if they’re concealing their presence well. There’s no way they wouldn’t be.”

The moment Lumia finished speaking, Asura raised her right hand. On cue, the members of Moon Blossom and Iris revealed themselves from the shadows of the audience chamber’s pillars.

“Isn’t reversi fun, Tina?” Asura asked.

“It is. The rules are so simple, and yet they made for a very deep game,” Tina replied, nodding.

“Man, we had to play that too,” Jyrki sighed.

“We did,” Marx agreed. “We were told that it would help us learn how to strategize ahead.”

“It was...so difficult,” Iina reminisced.

“I haven’t played it yet,” Reko said.

“Neither have I,” Salume agreed.

“I haven’t either,” Iris added.

“Don’t worry. I’ll teach it to you three as well. You’ll need to make reading

ahead in a situation a constant habit, thinking to yourself what someone will do in response to your actions.” Asura’s voice was the same as it always was.

“Yes, it was very difficult, but it was really quite a fun experience,” Lumia said as she unsheathed Ragnarok from where she’d slung it on her back.

“Sometimes, I wonder if I could’ve prevented all of the tragedies in the past if only I’d been better at thinking things through.”

“It’s not your fault, Lumia. Warriors are given much higher value in this world, thus slowing down the development of strategies and ranged weapons. Muskets don’t even exist yet.”

“What’s a musket?” Reko asked.

“I’ll make one for you one day,” Asura replied with a small smile. “Well, to be more precise, I won’t be the one making it. I’ll find a good blacksmith and have them do it.”

“Based on this conversation, I’m guessing that it’s a sort of ranged weapon?” Salume said.

“By the way,” Tina interrupted, “Lumia, are you going to fight Asura and the others? We could just wait for Mistress Jeanne together, you know?”

“That sounds like a fine idea,” Asura said before Lumia could open her mouth. “I would prefer to avoid unnecessary conflict. If you two don’t do anything to us, we won’t do anything to you.”

“I want to fight.” With slow and deliberate steps, Lumia approached Asura until she was standing right in front of her.

“I figured you would say that. You want to test me, don’t you? I can understand where you’re coming from. You’re a warrior at heart, so you’re curious as to which of us is stronger if we’re both fighting at full strength. Or perhaps, you want to know if you’re more powerful than the entirety of Moon Blossom. Which is it?”

“Both.”

“Boss, can I say something?” Reko asked, glancing over at Asura. “The mood in the room hasn’t changed yet, right?”

The last time Reko said something without reading the room, Asura had twisted his arm, which was why he was asking for permission now. From Reko's perspective, he didn't mind the pain of Asura grabbing him and bending his arm back. He quite liked it, but the last thing he wanted was for Asura to hate him.

"It hasn't, so I'll grant you permission to speak. It's not like it was forbidden in the first place though," Asura said with a smile.

"Hey, Lumia," Reko said, staring straight at her. "I'd like to ask you something. Isn't your stomach cold in that outfit?"

Upon hearing Reko's question, everyone in the room focused on Lumia's midriff. Her cheeks flushed.

"Yeah, I was kinda curious about that myself," Jyrki said.

"Me too," lina murmured.

"It's a bit perverted," Iris admitted.

"'Perverted' is a stretch. I think it looks quite nice," Marx said. "But how come you're wearing the same thing as Tina?"

"Shouldn't you choose clothes more appropriate for your age?" Salume asked. "Not even courtesans wear outfits like that."

Lumia's outfit was a miniskirt and a crop top that only covered up her chest. Underneath her skirt, she was wearing black tights and leather boots. The sheath for her greatsword hung from her back, and since the belt holding it in place was at an angle, it passed in between her breasts. Because it pressed down on the shirt, it resulted in her assets being accentuated.

"This is, um, what Jeanne likes. It wasn't my choice," Lumia said, but it sounded like she was making excuses for herself.

"Hmm. What are you, Jeanne's slave?" Asura asked, a slow smirk spreading across her face. "I see. So you just let her walk all over you? I see that you didn't prepare any countermeasures against us either."

"You left us to protect Jeanne, so you must've told her all about us," Jyrki said. "Lemme guess. She ignored you? So you weren't able to do anythin' until we came knockin' on your door."

“It was...all for nothing,” lina muttered. “You just...bought her a little extra time. You should have never...betrayed us. It’s not...as if you changed anything.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Lumia said, not bothering to defend herself. “After all that bluster, I couldn’t save her life. It’s her destiny to die. I can’t fight against it. But like Asura herself said, I wanted to fight against Moon Blossom as your enemy. It was something I’ve desired for a long time now.”

“You’re truly a lovely yet disgusting person,” Asura said.

“That’s a very dangerous way to think,” Iris said with a serious look on her face. “I would never want to become Moon Blossom’s enemy.”

“Lumia, you destroyed yourself just so that you could fight against me? But I suppose that I’m the one at fault. After all, I was the one who first suggested the idea to you back in Mullux Village.” Asura smiled after she said that, though the expression was tinged with sadness.

“What was it that you said? ‘Forget about the past and enjoy the present’? ‘Let’s play the war game’?” Lumia’s lips also quirked in a small smile. “Yes, you’re right. Things turned out this way because I followed your suggestions, Asura.”

“I don’t believe that Boss meant, ‘Let’s play the war game *against each other*,’” Marx suggested. “I’m personally more interested in what happened to you, Lumia. The Lumia I know would have never abided the way Jeanne is slaughtering people en masse. You were a noble person with your own set of beliefs. You even had the courage to scold Boss whenever she did something immoral. But you’re different now. What happened?”

“She may be a scumbag, but she’s the only sister I have. Besides, it’s not as if I’m much different from her. It’s almost painful how well I can understand her.”

“Some become entirely different people when their family or lover is involved,” Asura said. “It’s even possible for a saint to become a villain, and vice versa. Others will lose the ability to think rationally and instead choose to take action based on their emotions.”

“So you’re saying that unlike yourself, I’m still human at my core? That’s a

relief to hear.”

“People’s personalities and looks change as time goes by. Not even I’m immune to that,” Asura continued with a shrug. “For better or for worse, a normal person is never static. This is especially true for those who have a high level of empathy for others.”

“I know I’m not one to talk, but, Boss, you have, like, no empathy for others,” Reko observed in a cheery voice.

“That goes for everyone like the two of us. Some people lack empathy altogether. So they can never love others. They can only obsess over them. In my past life, I’ve seen people depict this obsession as a twisted form of love.”

“Is there any difference between love and obsession?” Tina asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Obsession is when you want to have someone all to yourself. Love is when you genuinely want the other to be happy.”

“I see,” Tina said slowly before she let out a sigh of relief. “So what I feel for Mistress Jeanne *is* love.”

“Can we wrap up the conversation now?” Lumia asked. “I’ve been holding this claymore the entire time and my arm is getting tired. This isn’t your strategy, is it?”

“That’s a very nice sword you have there,” Asura said instead of answering Lumia’s question. “I’m sure it’ll fetch a pretty penny.”

“You can’t place a price on this,” Lumia huffed, exasperated. “This is Ragnarok, a claymore that will eventually be considered a legendary weapon. I suppose it’s very in-character for money to be your first thought upon seeing this sword.”

Upon hearing Ragnarok’s name, Marx’s eyes widened. Jyrki and Iina looked at each other, mouths agape.

“Ragnarok’s a super famous sword,” Iris exclaimed. “I thought it was lost.”

“Hmm.” Asura placed a hand on her chin. “From my perspective, it just looks like an ordinary, albeit high-quality, claymore. Reko, Salume, what do you two

think?”

“Even I can tell that it’s a pretty impressive sword,” Reko said.

“Yes! The blade is as shiny as a diamond. If we sell it, I’m sure we’ll be able to get lots of money in return!” Salume added.

“My belief is that swords forged in this era are all the same. So long as they can kill someone, they’re a good weapon,” Asura said. “It would be a whole other story if that was a katana.”

“What’s a katana?” Reko asked.

“In my past life, I considered katanas and their offshoots to be the most powerful kinds of swords. They’re beautiful, like works of art. Someone in my old mercenary group was a huge fan and taught me how to use them. Even in this life, I’m capable of wielding one. I actually hired a blacksmith to make me a katana, so some time in the near future, we should drop in and see how that’s coming along.”

Granted, katanas were quite complicated to make compared to your ordinary sword, so Asura wasn’t expecting much.

“Sometimes, you really piss me off, Asura,” Lumia said. “You act as if defeating me and Jeanne would be a cakewalk for you.”

“Because you two *would* be easy to defeat. Let me prove that to you. Iris, lina, beat Lumia into the ground.”

“Okay...”

“Understood.”

Asura turned her back to Lumia and walked over to the pillars. Iris and lina approached Lumia in her place.

“Sure. I see how it is,” Lumia said. “You think two people are enough to face me?”

“I’m sorry, Lumia. I would love to fight you. However, I have a job to do and need to conserve my energy for that. Besides, those two will be able to defeat you faster than I could.”

“What about...my energy?”

“You’ll have to exert a bit, but not enough that it’ll affect your job later. In my case, even wasting a bit of my power could lead to failure. Understand?”

“Well, I’ve never been able to win against Lumia before, so I don’t mind,” Iris said as she pulled out her single-edged sword. “I would’ve enjoyed the chance to take you on by myself, but there’s no helping it if it’s an order.”

The condition Moon Blossom had given Iris when she asked to participate in this operation was that she needed to obey every single order given to her. The only ones she could ignore were orders that involved killing.

“It’s not...as if you could win alone,” lina muttered.

“Do you need me to issue you commands during the fight?” Asura giggled.

“No,” lina replied. “I can...do it myself.”

In the next instant, lina cast Accelerate on Iris’s arm. As soon as the spell landed, Iris rushed forwards and swung her sword down on Lumia, who guarded with her claymore. Using her superior strength, she pushed Iris back. At the same time, lina, daggers in both hands, rushed towards her and slashed out at Lumia.

Part Six, Chapter Nine: You didn't experience enough of the world. That's why you lost.

"There are three reasons why Lumia will lose this fight," Asura said. The audience chamber was filled with the sounds of battle as lina and Iris worked together against Lumia. "For one thing, she never got the chance to see how Iris and lina have improved."

Even though it was two against one, Lumia was holding her own. She used her tremendous strength to throw them away from her before activating Divine Retribution. In response, lina cast Accelerate on Iris's legs and Iris unleashed her fighting spirit. The second that the angel descended, Iris sliced it in half, causing it to dissipate in a burst of light. After it disappeared, Iris pulled back her fighting spirit.

Even using it for a brief moment was draining on her MP reserves. Because of that, Asura had given her permission to use fighting spirit only if she needed to get rid of Lumia's Divine Retribution. As Iris was now, she had no way of dispersing Divine Retribution without using her fighting spirit.

"Those angels are susceptible to physical attacks?" Reko asked from Asura's side.

"They're made of MP, but they've been given a corporeal form, so of course they can be destroyed. Besides, just think about it. It stands to reason that if those angels can kill humans, in turn, humans can kill them, right?"

"I suppose," Salume said as she walked over to them.

"That said, you'll need a very high level of power to destroy those angels. It's far easier to kill them after they're freshly summoned."

"I guess that's a weakness of magic," Reko commented.

"It's the lag," Salume said. "There are so many things you need to do to use magic. You have to recognize the MP inside your body, extract it, and then change both the element and attribute. Miss Lumia's Divine Retribution is

extremely powerful, but it also takes a bit of time to activate. Even though lina used Accelerate *after* Lumia's Divine Retribution, Accelerate activated first."

Not only that, but there was a moment between the angel's appearance and its actual attack. If one took advantage of that time lag, then it wasn't too difficult to destroy the angels before they could pose an actual threat. Jeanne's Dance of Divine Destruction had the exact same weakness. It was just that, no matter if it was a heavenly angel or a fallen one, everyone tended to stare in shock when they saw one descending from the skies. That was why very few people ever perceived that delay in movement.

"To make sure that no one noticed that lag, I would snap my fingers to draw our enemies' attention," Asura reminisced.

"So that's why lina keeps saying the name of her spell? To draw attention to her?"

"That's right, Reko. One naturally focuses on auditory stimuli. You two should figure out a way to do the same thing."

"Yes, Boss," Salume said.

"Magic is full of weaknesses. I can't blame people for not wanting to use it," Asura said with a slight slump of her shoulders. "However, it can become a very powerful weapon so long as you spend time figuring out the best way to utilize it. Even in the middle of battle without a single weapon in hand, you can always rely on magic, after all."

So Divine Retribution really isn't going to work? Lumia thought. She'd expected it. But seeing Iris and lina actually counter it still made her a little sad.

"Grr... Winning in ten seconds...is impossible," lina complained. She and Iris were working together in their attacks. Lumia had to dodge them or parry their strikes with Ragnarok as she looked for an opening in their combination.

"What did you plan on accomplishing in those ten seconds?" Lumia asked as she blocked a slash from Iris. As their weapons met, Iris's single-edged sword snapped in half.

“Oh no!” Iris immediately leaped backwards and threw her sword away in favor of a dagger. Since Iris was trying to become a soldier-mage, she’d been given one to carry around.

“You idiot... You’re gonna get me killed.” Thanks to Iris pulling away from the fray, Lumia was given clear access to attack Iina.

“It’s not as if I *want* to kill you. But don’t blame me if you die.”

Lumia swung her sword back in preparation for a horizontal slash. In response, Iina used Accelerate, causing Lumia to feel something very peculiar in the air. Iina had aimed her Accelerate at Lumia’s legs. For a moment, she hesitated, wondering if it would be a good idea to continue to swing Ragnarok. In the next breath, she jumped to the side and avoided Iina’s spell.

“Gale Slash!” Upon seeing Lumia put distance between them, Iina shot a gust of wind at her, causing a multitude of thin cuts to erupt over her skin. However, that was all that happened. Iina’s attack magic, Gale Slash, was incapable of lethal force. However, because of the wide area of effect, it caused small injuries all over Lumia’s body.

“This is just a distraction, right?” Lumia held Ragnarok behind her, using the blade of her claymore to deflect Iris’s thrust. She turned around and prepared to land a diagonal slash upon Iris’s body. However, she stopped when she sensed someone activating magic. It was coming from Iris’s left hand.

“Impossible!”

How can Iris use magic? What happened? Did Asura teach it to her? Even if Asura taught it to her, how did she learn to use it this quickly? Since Lumia had no idea what kind of spell Iris was going to use, she switched from an offensive stance to a defensive one instead.

“Flashbang!” A blinding light spilled from Iris’s left hand.

Moving on instinct, Lumia raised Ragnarok so that the blade was hiding her face and she squeezed her eyes shut. Even though she reacted so quickly to the spell, she could still feel a prickling pain in her eyes. The thought that Iris would use the same spell as Lumia had never crossed her mind, so she hadn’t been able to react in time. Though her vision had been compromised, she could still sense her enemies’ movements and fight to a certain degree. She turned

around and swung her claymore, cutting down Iina's Accelerate-enhanced arrows.

"Cloak!" Lumia activated her support magic, using it to guard her body. She felt Iris's leg dig into her side, but thanks to Cloak, it didn't cause much damage. *Iris, kicking her opponent? She's using magic and martial arts, and she was even wielding a dagger. In that case, there's only one thing that could be causing this change.* No matter how much Lumia pondered over Iris's uncharacteristic tactics, she could only come to a single conclusion. "You plan on becoming a soldier-mage, then?" she muttered.

She knew exactly what Asura was planning. Asura wanted to train up this talented girl until she was one of the most powerful fighters in the world, only to then fight her herself. It was the same thing Lumia had done. *Ahh, but, Asura never ended up fighting me,* Lumia reminded herself.

However, Asura had been the one to choose Iris and Iina for this battle. She doubted that Asura made this decision as a joke or because she wanted them to put on a show for their audience. She'd chosen these two because she knew that they had a chance of winning, or because she figured they would be the most effective pawns if they had to fight against Lumia. In that case, if Lumia defeated them, it would be as if she scored a victory against Asura.

"Um, isn't Lumia, like, super strong? I feel like she's a lot more powerful than I remember," Iris said, sounding worried.

"She was...always strong. But, we should...be able to win."

"The second reason that Lumia will lose," Asura said, "is that she didn't know Iris can already use manifestation magic."

"But Flashbang didn't seem to have an effect on her," Reko pointed out.

"However, it's something that she'll have to be on guard against now," Asura replied with a small smile. "Sure, she can sense their movements and continue to fight. But losing her vision is still a major handicap."

"Yes, I agree," Salume said. "However, wouldn't it be faster if we all attacked her at the same time? Miss Iina looks like she's using a lot of MP."

“You’re right. To tell the truth, I underestimated how strong Lumia is. It feels like she’s fully embraced her true nature as a warrior.” Asura finished her statement with a hearty laugh.

“Boss, tell us the truth. Are you nervous?”

“Of course not, Reko. I’m not worried or nervous at all. Iris and lina will be the victors. It’s just that we’re expending a lot more time, energy, and MP than I expected. I’m glad that Jeanne isn’t here right now. If we had to face *her* at the same time, it would be quite the pain.”

The one saving grace was that Tina had no interest in joining the fray.

“How are they going to win this?” Salume asked, looking over at Asura. “Even alone, Miss Lumia feels like a perfect fighter. I’m sure that she’s even stronger if she works as part of a team. There are hardly any flaws in her techniques.”

“We’ll have to see what lina does. She already tried to end the fight, but she failed.”

“Huh? When did she do that?” Reko asked.

“You’ll be able to see her try again soon. That’s the only way for her to win. However, if you think about it from another angle, so long as she can pull off her plan, she can win in a single move.”

lina and Iris no longer had a way of dealing any real damage. After Lumia cast Cloak, the two maintained distance from her, with no intention of moving in. Lumia also remained still. In her case, she was waiting for the effects of Flashbang to wear off.

The moment Cloak’s effect ends, they’ll attack, Lumia thought. lina stood in front of her, while Iris was behind her. They had surrounded Lumia in a pincer formation. In lina’s left hand, she was holding a bow, while her right brushed against an arrow in her quiver. lina was the best archer in Moon Blossom, even better than Asura when it came to orthodox archery.

Since Iris lost her single-edged sword, she was no longer as big a threat as before. However, she still had her magic, and she could use martial arts as well.

It would be troublesome if she could use spells other than Flashbang. The best thing for Lumia would be to recast Cloak every time it wore off, keeping herself in a perpetual state of heightened defense. The downside was that if she didn't end things quickly, she would run out of MP.

She hadn't expected Iris to improve this much, considering it had not been very long since Lumia left Moon Blossom. To be more precise, she didn't think that Iris would have become a soldier-mage, or something close to one. Lumia was uncertain as to how she would defeat these two.

Ahh, Flashbang was my trump card! I managed to rob her of her vision, but the effects are going to fade soon! They're gonna wear off! Iris couldn't help but panic, though she kept it off her face. *Was Lumia always this strong?!* It felt like Lumia was far more powerful than when she'd served as Iris's sparring partner.

Despite her youth, Iris was an official hero. Ever since Lumia's departure, she'd trained herself in close-quarters combat as well as in magic. She'd also worked on her teamwork with Iina. And yet they still couldn't defeat Lumia. *It feels like she's stronger than Sir Matias ever was.* That was Iris's honest assessment of Lumia's skills. In the worst-case scenario, Lumia was on par with the Great Hero, Axel Ehrnrooth, during his prime. Granted, Iris had only heard stories of Axel's youth. It wasn't as if she had been alive to see it.

They'd sealed away Lumia's Divine Retribution. It was two against one. Yet they still weren't able to completely defeat her. This was Lumia Canarre's full strength. Or to be more specific, this was the full strength of the woman once known as Jeanne Autun Lala, who had been considered the strongest woman in the world.

Now that it's come to this, I can't be picky about my methods. I have to attack like my whole life depends on it.

Boss is...such a liar. Iina was still complaining, though she kept it in her heart. Asura had underestimated Lumia's strength. It was impossible for them to defeat her within ten seconds. If Asura had said it as a joke, then it wasn't a very funny one.

lina glanced in Asura's direction. When Asura noticed the look, she offered a lopsided smile of apology. She didn't look like she was going to offer any assistance, though. Since they would be confronting Jeanne after this, she wanted to conserve her energy.

Besides, it wasn't as if lina didn't stand a chance against Lumia. They'd come up with a strategy. The problem was that Lumia wasn't falling for it. The pale glow of Cloak around Lumia's body was starting to fade, indicating the spell's effect was wearing off. If lina was going to deal the final blow, then she had to take advantage of this opening. She wouldn't give Lumia the time or the opportunity to cast Cloak once again.

lina nocked an arrow to her bow and let it fly. Lumia grabbed it out of the air with her left hand and snapped it in half. At the same time, she spun on the spot, swinging Ragnarok in a violent arc.

"Whoa!" Iris screeched in a high-pitched voice as she ducked under Lumia's slash.

Iris had charged Lumia at the same time lina'd shot her arrow. Lumia paused, and then, with a flick of her wrist, swung Ragnarok in the opposite direction. It looked like she planned on neutralizing Iris first.

"Noooo!" Iris screamed in fear as she held up her dagger in an attempt to block Ragnarok.

Is she an idiot? lina wondered as she released an arrow. Ragnarok hit the dagger, shattering it into pieces. However, because Lumia had to dodge the arrow, the claymore whiffed, missing Iris. Without the dagger, Iris truly had no weapons left. At the same time though, Lumia was off-balance, albeit only by a fraction. She wasn't the type of person who would stumble and leave herself wide open.

Iris tackled Lumia, practically skidding onto the ground, and wrapped her arms around Lumia's legs. Lumia managed to stay standing, and she raised Ragnarok high in the air. Her aim was to bring the pommel down on Iris's back.

A second before Lumia could do that, lina activated Accelerate, aiming it at Iris's arm. She focused on her MP, drew it from her body, and altered its attribute. The instant Ragnarok's pommel slammed down on Iris's unprotected

back, lina switched the target of her Accelerate from Iris to Lumia's legs, transforming the type of magic she was casting.

"Gah!" Iris groaned as she slid down to the floor.

Lumia turned to stare at lina, her eyes wide in shock.



“Gale Slash: Convergence!”

“Cloak!” Sensing that something was off, Lumia prepared to defend herself. However, she was far too late.

“Let me tell you the third reason that Lumia will lose,” Asura said before she paused. “By the way, I actually came up with three reasons this time.” She smiled as she watched lina’s magic shred Lumia’s right leg into bloody ribbons.

“I feel like I know what the third reason is,” Reko said.

“Me too,” Salume piped up.

Lumia was about to fall to the ground, but she managed to remain upright, Ragnarok acting as a makeshift cane. However, her right leg was completely useless. It was still in one piece, but lina’s spell had made several deep gouges into her flesh. Her blood spilled from the injuries in beautiful crimson rivulets. It was such a serious injury that if she didn’t treat it soon, she might have no choice but to amputate.

Asura giggled before she said, “Lumia didn’t know about the breakthrough I made. She doesn’t know that I pioneered transformation magic, nor does she know that lina is capable of using it!”

She’d changed Accelerate—manifestation magic—into Gale Slash—attack magic. Gale Slash was a spell that could affect a very wide area. However, this method would allow her to concentrate the effects of Gale Slash where she’d cast Accelerate. Gale Slash: Convergence wasn’t powerful enough to tear off someone’s limb. However, as one could see with Lumia’s leg, it was more than enough to cause serious injury. Depending on the person she was fighting, lina could kill someone by using this technique on their face or chest.

“A new type of magic?” Lumia said. She was no longer able to move, and Iris and lina weren’t so weak that she could defeat them with only one leg.

“Owww,” Iris groaned, tears in her eyes as she pushed herself to her feet.

“Nice, Iris...” lina said, offering Iris a thumbs-up.

Iris’s tackle hadn’t been to defeat Lumia. It had been to get her arms close to

Lumia's legs. In that case, if lina used Accelerate, Lumia would think that lina was casting it on Iris's arms. In turn, it would prevent Lumia from trying to avoid it.

"I was aware that you were looking into a new type of magic, but I didn't know you completed your research." Lumia slowly lowered herself onto the ground; it seemed that she no longer had any intention of fighting them. She placed her hand over her right leg and started casting her healing magic. "It's amazing. Being able to change a spell's type on the fly like that? It's unthinkable. Hey, Marx, can you use your Bandage on me?" Lumia had even let go of Ragnarok, setting it on the ground next to her. She had accepted her loss.

"Boss, what should I do?" Marx asked.

"If Lumia has no intention of fighting anymore, then use it."

"I'm done." Lumia picked up Ragnarok and tossed it even farther away. In response, Marx walked over to her and cast Bandage several times.

"Spectacular!" Tina said as she clapped her hands. "I suppose that makes seven types of magic now."

"Seven?" Asura echoed, looking over at her. However, in the next moment, Asura turned her gaze to the entrance of the audience chamber and tensed up.

The other members of Moon Blossom followed suit, preparing for battle. They all felt a crushing presence—something abnormal and repulsive—enter the room. It was as if there was a black fog emanating from the entryway.

"I have returned," Jeanne said, walking through the darkness and dragging a claymore behind her. The blade was dyed a dark red.

"What is that?" Jyrki asked, his voice trembling.

"That black fog around Jeanne... Boss, is that her MP?" Marx gasped. His entire body was drenched in cold sweat.

Jeanne's eyes were dull. It didn't seem like she was paying anyone in the room much attention.

"I seem to have made a huge mistake. If this is her MP, then our chances of winning are as slim as smoke from a candle. She has so much MP that she could

use fighting spirit until the world ends.”

A massive, almost endless, amount of MP radiated from Jeanne, so condensed that they could see it with the naked eye. Asura had only seen such a phenomenon once in the past. It was like a dark shroud hovered around Jeanne’s body. *If despair could take on physical form, it would look like this*, Asura thought.

“Sh-She can’t be human,” Reko said, falling down to the ground.

“How can this be? This is...she’s just like...” Salume slumped down onto the floor. In the next moment, a puddle of urine formed around her. Jeanne’s presence alone had sapped all of the strength from Salume’s body.

“Ha ha! To tell you the truth, I’m about to wet my pants as well!” Asura said. “In fact, I think a little bit of pee *did* leak out! I saw something like this from a distance two years ago! But more importantly, it’s time for us to make our escape!”

Part Six, Chapter Ten: What would happen if one experienced countless deaths? I think it'd be fun.

“Tina.” Jeanne reached out towards her with her left hand.

“Mistress Jeanne.” Tina reacted fearfully. Jeanne forced a smile before activating magic. “What was that?” Tina asked as she tilted her head to the side.

Neither Asura nor Tina knew what spell Jeanne used. They could sense that magic had been activated, but its effect was unknown.

“It’s a good luck charm,” Jeanne said. The rigid smile was still affixed upon her face.

Asura grabbed Reko and Salume’s arms, trying to haul them to their feet. However, they didn’t move.

“I-I’m sorry,” Salume whispered in a trembling voice. “My knees feel so wobbly.”

“Sorry, Boss.” Reko was in the same boat. No matter how much Asura tried to pull him up, he remained limp.

“I’ll take Salume. Jyrki, I’ll leave Reko to you.”

“Sure!”

Marx picked up Salume in a bridal carry while Jyrki bundled up Reko in his arms.

“Let’s go! I’ll hold up the rear!”

At Asura’s shout, both Marx and Jyrki took off. Tina grabbed Iris’s arms as she ran, dragging her along behind her. To prevent anyone from pursuing them, Asura snapped her fingers and activated Mines. The petals exploded the second they touched Jeanne’s MP.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jeanne asked slowly.

She was completely unharmed. Was her MP serving as a sort of barrier? In

any case, if Asura's attacks weren't getting through to her, then she had no choice but to distract her and buy the rest of Moon Blossom time to escape. Jeanne raised the claymore in her right arm and pointed it at Asura. As she did so, a burst of dark MP shot out from the blade, flooding straight for Asura.

"Tsk! I can't dodge it!"

At first, Asura had planned on leaping to the side, but she could tell that it would be impossible to avoid the attack. The MP was just too fast, and she had no other way of deflecting it or protecting herself. She had no choice but to allow herself to be swallowed up by the rush of MP.

Asura opened her eyes to find herself in a world of darkness. No matter where she looked, she could see nothing but the pitch black. There was nothing around her. It wasn't cold, yet it wasn't warm. *Have I died?*

The moment the thought passed through her mind, Asura woke up to find herself in an unfamiliar location. It looked to be a burning village, filled with soldiers fighting each other, their faces twisted in ugly expressions of hatred. Asura couldn't move her body. Frozen in place, she could only fall to the soldiers' weapons.

At the same time she died, she found herself in yet another location. Still unable to move a muscle, she could only lay there as several men raped her before they murdered her once more. In the next spot, she died as a result of torture. Next, she died after someone she trusted sold her out.

A powerful hatred, a potent despair, a deep sorrow, and an anguished wail entered her heart. Every time the scene changed, she experienced yet another new way to die. Everything, including the agony, felt so real. Everything was terrible. These experiences would have driven a normal person insane, and they just kept coming. After a hundred deaths, a hundred more awaited her.

Pain, helplessness, hatred... That was all Asura felt as she was killed again and again. Raped again and again. Tortured again and again. She experienced Jeanne murdering her for no reason. She felt soldiers piercing their spears through her body. All of these different demises felt so real, it was as if she was living through somebody's memories.

After a thousand deaths, a thousand more awaited her.

On occasion, in the haze of agony, she'd recognize a familiar face. *That's me. I'm being killed by myself. Whose body am I in? I'm experiencing the final moments of someone I killed. My smile through another's eyes is so sweet. It wouldn't be so bad to die while looking upon that beautiful face,* Asura thought.

After ten thousand deaths, ten thousand more awaited her.

It might have been a few hours, or a few days. It might have even been a few years. All she knew was that the deaths never stopped. Right when Asura wondered if she'd experienced all the different methods of dying there were in this world, she realized that she could move her body of her own will.

"Have I returned to my own body?" She looked down at her hands. They were the same small hands that she'd always looked at.

"Give me your body."

"Why hasn't your will broken yet?"

"I hate you!"

"I'm so sad. So terribly sad. Why did this happen to me?"

"I'm going to take revenge on you! Vengeance! For that, I need a body! Give me yours!"

Furious screams echoed through the dark space. It was a cacophony of voices—men, women, the elderly, children.

"Are you the dead from earlier?" Asura asked, analyzing the situation with a calm eye. She looked down at herself. She wasn't wearing any clothing and upon closer inspection, she was somewhat transparent.

"Why won't you hand over your body?!"

"Why aren't you filled with hatred?!"

"Why don't you feel anything?!"

"My hatred!"

"My sorrow!"

“My despair!”

“I don’t know what to say,” Asura said with a small shrug. “I’ve never been able to feel much empathy for others. It was very fascinating experiencing the various methods in which you all died. That’s the only thing going through my mind right now.”

She wasn’t bluffing. In truth, getting killed in so many different ways was quite a valuable experience. After all, people only have one life to lose.

“Why won’t you two hand over your bodies?!”

“Why are you two able to maintain your sense of self?!”

“How are you able to remain sane even after experiencing the tragic way I died?!”

“How is your mind still whole after going through that horrible torture?!”

The shouting was getting louder.

“You’re all so weird,” Asura said with a small smile. “Why did you think that my spirit would be broken after experiencing something humanity goes through on the daily? Did any of *you* break? Wasn’t all that part of one’s everyday life? Nothing that happened was out of the ordinary. In fact, they were pretty common experiences. I see things like that quite often, and I went through something similar when I was only three years old. Granted, I survived.”

“She’s heartless!”

“She feels nothing!”

“We can’t enter a heart that doesn’t exist, so we don’t even know her name!”

“We can’t get our hands on her body!”

“My name is Asura Lyona. I apologize for the late introduction, my dear vengeful spirits. Or perhaps, ‘losers’ is a more fitting term for you? Ah, or maybe it would be simpler to refer to you all as simply ‘the dead’?” Asura laughed, sounding like she was enjoying herself.

“You dare to call us ‘losers’?!”

“You devil!”

“You monster!”

“You only now noticed what I am?” Asura asked in a low growl. “If anything, I’m one of the people who caused your despair in the first place. Ha ha, the idea of you pieces of shit wanting to possess my young and beautiful body sounds like a terrible joke.”

“We can’t use this one!”

“She’s one of the people we want to get rid of!”

“Let’s destroy her!”

“And get another body!”

“Let’s get Jeanne Autun Lala’s body!”

“Oh? Jeanne’s here as well?” Asura interrupted. “Judging by your conversation, you know Jeanne’s name because you accessed her heart. Congratulations. Would you be so kind as to take me to her? If you do, I’ll consider giving you my body.”

Asura was the type to keep her promises, so this wasn’t a lie. She would consider it for a moment and then turn them down. It didn’t take long before a semitransparent Jeanne appeared before her. She was naked, clutching her head and wriggling in pain. The way she was bent over, screaming while in a fetal position, she looked like she was fighting something off with everything she had. This was the pose people under great psychological stress would unconsciously take when asleep.

“You’re all very kind,” Asura said. *That’s why you all died, you dumbasses*, she added in her mind. At the same time, she realized that so long as she gave permission, they would be able to slide themselves into Asura’s heart and mind. She walked over to Jeanne and kicked her, but her leg went straight through her. “Calm down, Jeanne, and explain what’s going on. What’s happening here? Why do these scumbags want my body?”

“A-Asura Lyona,” Jeanne whispered, looking up at Asura with a deathly pale face before her words trailed off in a pained grunt.

“Don’t offer them your mind. Talk to me and tell me what the situation is.”

“You...you tricked me, didn’t you?!”

“I didn’t. None of this is my doing.”

“How dare...how dare you lie to me?! You said that my consciousness...you said that even after I became a Demon Lord, I’d hold on to my sense of self for a little while!”

“A Demon Lord?” Upon hearing that, Asura started putting the pieces of the situation and Jeanne’s testimony together in order to make a deduction.

“I would never attack Tina or Lumia,” Jeanne continued, struggling to get the words out. “If I knew I’d kill them, I would have *never* become a Demon Lord!”

As soon as Jeanne screamed those final words, some form of energy was purged from her body. Though she was still panting, shoulders heaving with every breath, she seemed more relaxed than earlier.

“Is this some sort of ritual to revive a Demon Lord? From my observations, I’m guessing that it requires a sacrifice, right? Judging by the situation, I’d say *we’re* the sacrifices?”

“That was a vile experience I just went through.” Jeanne sighed as she looked up at Asura.

“Do you mean the demonstration of what humans put each other through every day?” Asura asked. “I wouldn’t call it vile, I had lots of fun. It was very enlightening as well. It’s not every day you get to feel so many different deaths and all the emotional responses that accompany them. Though the knowledge has no practical use in the real world, I still found it delightful.” Jeanne’s eyes widened in response to Asura’s words, staring at her as if she were encountering some unknown and bizarre life-form. “So?” Asura prompted. “Was I right about us being sacrifices?”

“You would get half marks for that answer.” In languid movements, Jeanne stood up, though there was no telling where the floor was in this space.

“What would get me full marks?”

“We’re not sacrifices. We’re vessels. Under my initial plan, I would have been the only one here, and it was a coincidence that I pulled you in. I don’t quite

understand how I managed that, but I didn't mean for this to happen."

"I see. It seems like you're quite familiar with how to revive a Demon Lord. Where did you learn all of this?"

Humans didn't know much about Demon Lords. Though scholars came up with several theories and hypotheses, there was no way of proving any of them correct. That was why Asura also didn't possess much knowledge on Demon Lords. Jeanne didn't reply, fixing Asura with a hard look.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine," Asura said, raising her hand in a mock show of surrender. "In that case, would you mind listening to my theory about all this? They're behaving now, but those putrid grudge-filled pieces of gutter trash are either lingering human spirits, or energy beings that would fall under a similar category. I'm guessing that they make up both Demon Lords and the MP you possess in the real world. Since they're incorporeal, they need a physical body to do anything. You said we're sacri—no, vessels, right? They destroy a vessel's will, take over their body, and then, lo and behold, a Demon Lord is born. How accurate is that theory?"

Jeanne, who had been silently listening to Asura speak, didn't reply. However, her eyebrows were raised and her mouth was agape.

"Judging by your expression, I'm on the right track," Asura said. "That's why you're so taken aback. Hee hee, I'm very good at deduction. Even Sherlock Holmes would've been surprised at my intellect and praised me for it."

When Jeanne finally spoke, it was to say, "You're very smart."

"I am. That's why I know this as well." Asura stared straight into Jeanne's eyes. "You're different from my initial impression of you. It's like you're two completely different people. Humans aren't static creatures, but most times, they require some sort of trigger to change."

"I..." Jeanne trailed off with an unreadable smile for a moment before she continued, "Ever since I reunited with Lumia, I did my hardest to remember who I used to be. I'm not sure why myself. Perhaps I was just nostalgic for the past."

"I see. So that's why you stopped indulging your crazy impulses so much. I

have to say, you're no longer the formidable foe you started out as. What a pity." Asura let out a long sigh before her lips curled in a small smile. "Even so, you were a demonic ruler who tried to destroy the world. The heroes were right to declare you and your army as a Demon Lord-level threat, considering you literally tried to become a Demon Lord."

"That *was* my plan. However, I no longer wish for that to happen. There's no point if my personality won't stay intact after the transformation. If I turn into a mindless Demon Lord here, then it would put Lumia and Tina in danger."

"It's your life and your decisions. No one can blame you if you decide to stop your plan halfway through. But I will still kill you, no matter what. If someone picks a fight with me, then I'll take them on. That's my philosophy in life." Asura chuckled before she continued, "Isn't this hilarious? The hero Asura comes to save the day from the horrible Demon Lord Jeanne. Me, a hero. Sounds lovely, doesn't it?"

If Asura defeated Jeanne, then the people would regard her as one. Her name, as well as Moon Blossom's, would be known across the lands, making it easier for them to find work. More people would want to join them as well. The very thought of it made Asura smile.

"I want you to act as my enemy until the very end," Asura said. "I'm begging you. Don't die in one blow like the rest of the cannon fodder."

"I will be humanity's enemy until the very end. You don't have to worry about me changing my mind on that," Jeanne replied, her eyes blazing with strong conviction. "I've abandoned my plan to become a Demon Lord. However, I will think of another way, so for the time being, will you work with me so that we can both escape? We can continue our discussion in the real world."

"There's no need for that." Asura shrugged her shoulders before turning her attention to the energy beings around them. "Hey, dead people. After some serious consideration, I've decided I *won't* cooperate with you."

"What the hell?!"

"That's not what you promised!"

"We were waiting this entire time!"

“You lying piece of shit!”

They raised their voice in anger as they cursed Asura out. However, she didn’t react at all, remaining calm as she replied, “Hey, come on now, I only said that I would consider it, and I kept my promise, didn’t I? You can’t blame me for reaching a different conclusion from what you hoped for.”

“Just so you know, I will not offer any of you my body either,” Jeanne said. “I don’t give a shit about the Cursed Sigil on me. If my consciousness will not remain after the transformation, then there is no point in becoming a Demon Lord. I have no use for that power if I cannot eradicate what I sought out to destroy in the first place. Do you know what I do to useless people? I cut off their heads. That’s what I’ve always done and that’s what I’ll continue to do, even if the people in question are the dead.”

Upon hearing the two’s rejection, the spirits screamed curses at them. So intense was their furor, it was as if they directed all their rage at the world towards the pair. However, one of the two was Jeanne Autun Lala—the picture of villainy and the first human to ever be considered a Demon Lord—and the other was Asura Lyona—an insane murderer with no morals, no conscience, and no sense of right and wrong.

Part Six, Chapter Eleven: I love to make deals. What? Threats? No, no, they're deals, I swear.

A blob of black floated midair in the audience chamber of the imperial palace. After the blast of dark MP swallowed up both Asura and Jeanne, it turned spherical.

"Ain't this bad? Shouldn't we consider gettin' outta here?" Jyrki asked as he held Reko in his arms. Asura had been the one to order their retreat, but after she disappeared in the black hole, Marx overrode her command.

"No, let's wait for a bit more," Marx said. "We don't know what's happening."

"I think we should run away!" Iris suggested. "I can't stop shaking!"

"But...Lumia and Tina...are still calm," lina pointed out as she looked over at them.

Lumia was ignoring the black blob, focusing on healing her leg. Meanwhile, Tina was sitting on the throne and didn't seem interested in moving. *Her crown's so cute*, lina thought. The crown upon Tina's head didn't look like it fit her at all, which was what made her seem so adorable.

"U-Um, I'm fine now," Salume said and upon hearing that, Marx set her down.

"I'm fine too," Reko said.

"Cool. Thanks for not pissin' yourself while I was holdin' ya," Jyrki replied as he let Reko go as well.

As soon as Reko's feet were back on solid ground, he complained, "I wasn't the one who wet myself. It was Salume."

Salume flushed a deep red and looked down.

"That's such an insensitive thing to say!" Iris yelled, glaring at Jyrki and Reko. "Don't you two know how to talk to girls?!"

"They don't," lina agreed with a firm nod. "You're wasting your time...if you

expect common courtesy from them. Anyway...can we...stop holding hands now?"

lina had been the one to reach out and grab Iris's hand during the initial attempt at escape. Iris had frozen up, and so lina had planned on dragging her out behind her. However, now Iris was the one who was clutching onto lina for dear life.

"I-It's not like I wanted to hold your hand! You were the one who grabbed me!" Iris shot back as she practically flung lina's hand out of her grip.

"Lumia," Marx called, "I'd appreciate it if you explained the situation to us. Should we be making a run for it?"

"Who knows?" Lumia replied. "It's hard to say, since Asura got swallowed up as well."

"Hey, what's that over there?" Jyrki asked, pointing at the black blob.

Everyone, including Salume and Reko, knew that it was a ball of heavily condensed MP. However, Jyrki wanted to know more basic information about it, like why it was floating in the room and what would happen next.

"We're in the middle of a ritual to revive a Demon Lord," Tina explained. "In the original plan, Mistress Jeanne would have been the only one to undergo the transformation. However, for some reason, Asura got pulled in as well."

In response to Tina's words, everyone, save for Lumia, widened their eyes until they were as round as saucers.

"Boss is finally going to become a real Demon Lord?" Reko asked.

"She's gonna be a great one," Jyrki said.

"There goes...the world, I guess," lina sighed.

"So we're about to witness the end of Felsenmark's history? It really makes you think," Marx hummed.

"Boss becoming a Demon Lord sounds like the natural progression of things. I can see it," Salume said.

"Why are you guys so accepting of this?!" Iris yelled. "How does it work

anyway?! Isn't a Demon Lord some sort of natural disaster? I've never heard of a *human* becoming a Demon Lord before!"

"I ain't heard of one either!" Jyrki protested. "But there's so much MP in that blob that it bein' a Demon Lord is the only answer that makes sense!"

"Hey, we should all start thinking of what our final words should be," Marx said. "Boss and Jeanne becoming Demon Lords means the world is going to end soon. We'll be killed no matter where we run."

"A Demon Lord possessing Boss's level of intellect sounds like a nightmare!" Salume said.

"But her breasts will still be tiny," Reko pointed out.

"It was a short life...but oh well... At least I had fun," lina sighed as she sat down.

"How can we die a vivacious death under these circumstances?" Salume asked as she settled down next to lina. "Should we play some sort of game?"

"Don't give up!!!" Iris screamed. "Let's get out of here for now and meet up with the other heroes! I'm sure we can find a solution together! If we stay here, we'll be killed for sure!"

"I'm pretty sure we'll be killed no matter where we are," Lumia pointed out in a calm tone. "What distinguishes Demon Lords from each other is how powerful their human vessel was in life. Ordinary civilians probably served as the vessels for all the Demon Lords of the past. If a Demon Lord with Jeanne and Asura's combined powers is born, they'd be unstoppable. Not even the heroes would be able to beat them."

Yet another silence permeated the air after Lumia's explanation.

"I wish we thought to bring some playing cards," Marx said as he sat down. "I guess getting killed by the strongest Demon Lord in history wouldn't be that bad, though."

"I agree," Jyrki sighed. "I ain't about fightin' when I know I don't stand a chance."

"Boss used to always say that we should escape or avoid a confrontation if we

know our opponent is stronger than us,” Reko reminisced. “And that we should go out while having a blast if all else fails.”

“And like I keep saying, you shouldn’t give up so easily!!!” Iris yelled again. “I’m not going down without a fight! I’m going to meet up with the other heroes and we’re going to defeat that Demon Lord!”

“Oh, if you’d like, we have reversi here,” Tina said, standing up and picking up the board from the ground.

“Don’t invite them to play games!” Iris screeched. “Aren’t you guys always so confident in your skills and your teamwork?! Why did you give up in a split second?!”

“Iris...we can’t do the impossible... If everyone could win...just because they really wanted to...then the world wouldn’t be...as cruel as it is,” lina sighed, stretching her arms before she lay down on the ground.

“It’s far safer to remain here,” Tina pointed out. “I hear that the vessels’ consciousness will remain for a little while after the transformation, so the Demon Lord should go on its rampage elsewhere.”

“How can you be so sure of that?!” Iris demanded.

“Mistress Jeanne would never kill Lumia or me. I doubt that Asura would kill her own mercenary group, right?”

“That might be true if they’re still themselves, but how do you know that they’ll be in control of their own actions as a Demon Lord? Who gave you that intel? What if they’re wrong?! I’ve never heard of Demon Lords possessing a humanlike consciousness, nor being capable of conversation!”

“It’s said that destruction is all they do,” Marx said, “but I’ve heard some people say that they can feel a strong hatred emanating from them. There’s also been reports of them smiling, even if it’s usually a hideous one. Granted, it’s true that they’ve never tried to converse with us humans. As for reversi, Tina, would you be interested in a game with me?”

“Of course.” Tina trotted over to him, the board in her hand.

“You know, now that I’m actually lookin’ at it, that crown’s real cute,” Jyrki

said with a wide smile.

“I...thought the same,” lina said, pushing herself up.

“Teach me and Salume the rules,” Reko demanded.

“I’ll explain everything to you while I play,” Marx replied. “I’m not sure we’ll have enough time for a whole round, though.”

“Mistress Jeanne gave me this crown,” Tina said in a cheery voice. “I really like it too.”

“I’m so disappointed in each and every one of you! I can’t believe this!” Iris yelled. “Fine! Whatever! I’ll go join up with the heroes, even if I have to go by myself! I’m gonna defeat that Demon Lord if it’s the last thing I do!”

The moment Iris started to leave, the black blob exploded, causing her to hurriedly turn around. Everyone else was staring in the spot where the blob used to be.

“Oh, it looks like we’re back.”

“Asura, your threats worked.”

“Come on. Those hardly counted as threats. I was just a very convincing negotiator.”

“No, you were threatening them. To tell you the truth, I almost felt a smidge of sympathy. My heart ached for them.”

Asura and Jeanne stood there, chatting with smiles on their faces.

“Hmm?” Asura looked around. “It looks like you’re all having a very good time together. Didn’t I order a retreat?”

“You got sucked in, so I gave the order to stay,” Marx replied. “We understood what we were getting ourselves into. If the Demon Lord’s resurrection had been successful, we would have stayed here, playing games and dying as we lived.”

Asura hummed upon hearing that. “Ah, well, whatever. I would’ve easily destroyed the world if I’d become a Demon Lord, so it wouldn’t matter where you ran. Since putting up a fight would have been useless, rolling over and

accepting your fate was probably the smarter thing to do.”

“That goes for me as well,” Jeanne said. “If I’d become a Demon Lord, you would have died even if you tried to run.”

“Mistress Jeanne,” Tina gasped, taken aback. “Why?”

“Ahh, Tina, I’d been duped. If I’d become a Demon Lord, I wouldn’t have been able to hold on to my sense of self, so I rejected the transformation.”

Tina let out a soft sob before she leaped to her feet and ran towards Jeanne. “Mistress Jeanne!” Jeanne accepted the embrace and ran her fingers through Tina’s hair.

“How did the two of you survive?” Lumia asked.

Asura smiled before she replied, “I convinced them to let us go with my sincere and honest words.”

This took place shortly before Asura and Jeanne returned to the real world.

“I’ll agree to handing over my body, so come on in. Since none of you have a corporeal form, I doubt my attacks would affect you. In that case, I’ll have you understand what kind of person I am. Once you do, you’ll know for yourselves that trying to take over my body is a useless endeavor.” After Asura finished speaking, she spread her arms to the side.

Jeanne watched as the energy beings poured themselves into Asura’s body as a stream of negative light. She was a little worried, considering they had almost crushed *her* spirit. However, Asura remained still, her expression never changing from her usual calm. She didn’t look like she was in any pain at all. After a few moments, the energy beings that had entered Asura escaped in a rush, practically pushing each other in their haste to get out first.

“She’s nuts!”

“How can she be so cruel?”

“She’s more of a Demon Lord than we are!”

“Her heart is like an impenetrable fortress!”

“In all my years alive, I’d never heard such hateful words directed at me!”

“In all my years *dead*, I’d never heard anything like that either!”

The energy beings were talking to each other, sounding unsettled and almost confused.

“It looks like you brainless lowlives finally learned your lesson,” Asura said in a peppy voice. “Now then, let’s cut a deal. It’s a good one, I promise.” After she said that, she clapped her hands together as the energy beings discussed among themselves again.

“Out with it, then.”

“No, we should let her go and then look for someone else.”

“We can’t possess her.”

“I wanna get outta here.”

“This is too scary!”

“Oh, come now, do you really think I would just let you escape?” Asura smiled. “I already know everything about you. You all felt me through our connection, so it stands to reason I felt all of you as well. I know you can’t do anything without our express permission, and that includes leaving this place.”

“Eek!”

Jeanne could feel the potent fear radiating off the energy beings. *How can sentient blobs of resentment be scared though? How does that work?*

“All of you are incorporeal beings made from energy, so you’ll disappear once that runs out. There’s no way you have a limitless source of power. I wouldn’t object to staying trapped in here until you all die.”

It seems our positions have been reversed, Jeanne thought.

“You all want to become a Demon Lord and take revenge on humans, right?” Asura continued. “But if you’re trapped in my prison, then you won’t be able to fulfill your goal. That’s why I’m presenting you with this deal. It’s a simple one, but give it careful consideration.”

Asura was speaking in an awfully delighted voice, clearly and wholeheartedly

enjoying this entire situation. This wasn't the act of someone with a normal psyche; some core part of her was broken. Even Jeanne felt a tinge of fear as she gazed upon Asura.

"I'd like you all to go west, to West Felsen, where you'll revive after finding a suitable vessel. If you can do that, then I'll grant you mercy. If you decide to revive in either Central or East Felsen, then I'll hunt you down and kill you, no matter what methods I have to resort to. But if you decide to head west, I won't bother you. I promise that even if you rampage about as a Demon Lord, I won't lift a finger to stop you. How does that sound?"

She was actually threatening them. Jeanne's lips quirked in a mirthless smile. She never imagined that she would meet someone who would intimidate life-forms that served as a foundation for a Demon Lord.

The resentful energy beings came together as they spoke as one:

"You *really* won't bother us?"

"I'd do anything to get away from this devil."

"Let's hurry west."

"Let's get our vengeance in the west!"

"We'll fill the region with our hatred and despair!"

"West! West! West!"

After they finished their discussions, Asura said, "I really won't bother you. It's not like I give a crap about West Felsen anyway. But we're currently in Central Felsen and our temporary base of operations is in East Felsen. So I'll let you go if you head west."

The moment Asura finished speaking, light filled the black world they'd been trapped in.

"You were threatening them," Marx said.

"Yup, one hundred percent," Jyrki agreed.

"That's...a threat if I ever heard one," lina sighed.

“What kind of person in their right mind would seriously go and intimidate a Demon Lord?!” Iris yelled. “And you made it revive itself in the west?! Are you saying you don’t care what happens to West Felsen?!”

“Does anyone here care about the west?” Salume asked. “I’d prefer the Demon Lord be over there than here.”

“Arnia is in East Felsen, so the west is the best place for a Demon Lord resurrection,” Reko said.

“I have no words for how insane you all sound,” Lumia said, grimacing.

“All right.” Jeanne smiled. “Now then, I suppose it’s time for us to get going.”

“Wait, Jeanne,” Asura said. “You’re going to die today. That hasn’t changed.” The expressions of the Moon Blossom mercenaries shifted upon hearing that. “It’s troublesome to have you running around. I’m sure you still plan on destroying the world, right?” The tension in the air grew so thick compared to how lighthearted it’d been earlier that Lumia’s breath caught in her throat. “I can’t understand why you’d want to destroy the world you’re living in. But that’s what your end goal is, isn’t it?” Asura’s eyes, manner of speech, and minute movements all betrayed how serious she was right now. Or to be more precise, how serious she was acting. “That’s why you’re going to die today.”

Everything about the way Asura was acting and talking was to emphasize the fact that Jeanne’s plan would never come to fruition—that the beginning of the end was going to start right here and right now.

“If I may be honest, I do not wish to fight someone who would dare to threaten a Demon Lord. But I suppose I’m left with no choice.” Jeanne pressed Tina’s shoulders and gently shoved her away from herself before she continued with her answer. “I *will* destroy the world, even if I have to use another method. There will be nothing left of it once I’m done. I hate everything about this world and everyone living in it can just go to hell. So, Asura, you should die as well.”

The air, once so peaceful, thrummed with anticipation for a fight as Jeanne narrowed her eyes at the gathered mercenaries.

Part Six, Chapter Twelve: The end of the nightmare and the shape of happiness.

Asura held up her twin daggers while Jeanne readied her claymore. Marx gripped his longsword while Jyrki pulled out his tomahawk.

“You plan on fighting me as a group?” Jeanne asked.

“We do,” Asura replied. “We don’t have, um, what’s the word again? Ah, it’s not a word I use in my everyday life so I’m having a hard time remembering it. In any case, we don’t have whatever word I’m thinking about, nor do we care about it.”

“Honor, fairness, righteousness... Perhaps it’s one of those?” Marx asked in a calm voice.

“Yes, yes, that sounds about right. None of that matters to us, because we’re all mercenaries. Iina, Iris, if you two can still fight, I’d like you to get ready.”

“I already am,” Iina muttered, bow in hand.

Iris also reached for the sheath she’d slung across her back until she remembered that her single-edged sword had been broken. She was about to panic when Salume handed her her dagger with a “Please take this.”

“How do you expect me to stand a chance against so many of you? Very well, though. My new form of Divine Retri—”

Before Jeanne could activate her magic, Asura cast Mines, interrupting her and forcing her to leap to the side to avoid the attack. Lumia had already informed Jeanne about what Asura’s spells could do. If Asura could land a clean hit on her, then she would lose for sure. Two petals drifted through the air before they landed on the floor.

An arrow that had been enchanted by Accelerate flew through the air, aiming for the spot Jeanne landed at. However, using her fighting spirit, she dodged the arrow by twisting her body to the side. At the same time, Jyrki and Marx

attacked her from both sides, cutting off any potential escape routes. She blocked them with her claymore.

“Did you really think we’d let you use your magic?” Asura laughed as he threw her dagger at Jeanne. “The biggest disadvantage of your magic is that it takes too long to activate.”

Jeanne kicked Jyrki’s leg, stopping his attack. Then she struck down both Marx’s attack and the dagger that Asura tossed at her.

I can’t take the offensive?! Jeanne was starting to panic. In the past, she had always been able to fight against large groups of people while maintaining her calm. However, Moon Blossom’s endless attacks gave her no quarter, and she could feel herself starting to be cornered.

If she hadn’t brought out her fighting spirit, she would’ve been defeated a long time ago. Her inability to use any attack magic was also a pain in the neck. She wasn’t so good with her magic as to be able to use it while fighting off all of Moon Blossom’s attacks. Even *if* she had spent more time training her spells, it would be impossible for her to activate them under this relentless barrage. Besides, she couldn’t use magic while her fighting spirit was activated, and the moment she turned it off, she’d be killed.

“My power should far exceed yours!” Jeanne growled, the words subconsciously spilling out of her.

Marx, Jyrki, and Asura were the main participants in the fight. Even if they all attacked her at once, Jeanne should have been able to win. The difference in their levels was just that dramatic. They fired arrows she couldn’t completely avoid. One of them landed in her right thigh and when she glanced in the direction it had come from, she saw that Reko had been the one to shoot it.

“You underestimate teamwork too much,” Asura’s voice sounded out from above her. She was holding a claymore that she must’ve pulled out while Jeanne wasn’t looking. She used her own claymore to guard herself against Asura’s slash and then in the same motion, tilted her claymore to parry it. “It’s true that your strength outclasses ours. But our training usually focuses on fighting as a team.” As Asura continued to speak, Jeanne moved, avoiding

Marx's thrust. "If we all work together and fight as one, then we can exponentially increase our power level." However, though she'd been able to dodge Marx's attack, she felt Jyrki's tomahawk graze her side.

The moment Asura's feet touched the ground, she swung her claymore. A beat later, Marx executed a horizontal slash with his greatsword. Jeanne leaped back, but this time, three arrows flew at her, aimed right for where she landed. Iina, Reko, and Salume had been the ones to shoot them. Jeanne managed to cut all three arrows down with her claymore. Before she could even take a breath however, Jyrki and Marx rushed at her in a pincer formation. Asura snapped her fingers, setting Mines behind Jeanne. Now that she'd robbed Jeanne of the chance to escape by moving backwards, Asura joined the attack, running forwards with her weapon raised high.

Though Jeanne managed to fight off the three of them, she was sustaining more and more injuries. The arrow in her right thigh was still there. She fought with all her strength and, aiming at Jyrki, slashed upwards at an angle. Of the three attacking her right now, Jyrki was the weakest link. Even if she took some extra damage from the others, she wanted to take out at least one of Moon Blossom's mercenaries.

Blood sprayed from Jyrki's front and he fell backwards, landing on the ground with a thump. At the same time, Jeanne moved to avoid Asura and Marx's slashes. However, she couldn't get out of the way fast enough. Their blades dug into her flesh. None of the injuries were fatal, but they were still deep. Asura moved to where Jyrki had been and Iris moved to fill her spot.

Do none of them care about losing an ally?! No one from Moon Blossom looked concerned and they continued their attack, working together seamlessly. Iris, however, was not matching her strikes with everyone else. Since she joined the fray, Jeanne was having an easier time defending herself. *Isn't Iris stronger than Jyrki, though?* she wondered, confused.

But then out of nowhere, Iris ducked. At the same time, three arrows whizzed through the air where her head had been. Jeanne managed to avoid two of them, but the last one hit, jutting out from her left shoulder. There was no time to groan in pain. The fight was moving so quickly that she felt her nerves fray at having to keep up with it all. The moment her concentration wavered would be

the moment she'd be cut down.

Asura ducked as well. From behind her, Jyrki, who'd pushed himself into a sitting position, threw his tomahawk. The attack came from outside of Jeanne's field of consciousness. She focused her entire attention on the tomahawk and managed to use her claymore to divert its course. Iris jumped to her feet at the same time the tomahawk buried itself in the ground.

"Flashbang!" Iris's left palm glowed with a blinding light.

In the next moment, Jeanne's entire field of vision whited out. Her head throbbed. She'd *known* that Iris was preparing to use magic, and yet she hadn't been able to react at all. She'd been dealing with Asura, Marx, the arrows, and the sudden tomahawk that'd been flung at her.

Her body burned and then immediately after, she felt intense agony. She'd been slashed—multiple times at that. With her eyes still blinded by the Flashbang, Jeanne felt her death encroaching. Her last move was to take a staggering step forwards, though she had no idea which direction she was moving in.

"It may have been seven against one, but don't blame us for that, Jeanne. Your strength far outmatches that of a Great Hero, after all." It was Asura speaking. She could hear Asura from ahead of her.

"Thank you," Jeanne whispered at the same moment she felt a claymore pierce through her chest.

"Your nightmare is over. You'll only have sweet dreams from now on."



“Asura,” Jeanne choked out. No longer able to stand, she fell to her knees. In halting words, she said, “Thank you. I have a job for you. Please forgive Lumia and Tina.” Blood welled up her throat and she couldn’t help but splutter it out.

“What would you give us for that?”

“I wrote a grimoire. I left it in the castle. It’s about a type of magic unknown to humans.”

“Very well. I’ll accept your job. The reward is so nice that I won’t just forgive those two. I’ll take them under my protection.”

Jeanne and her army had been deemed Demon Lords. Even if the heroes gave up their fight against them, the other countries in the world would never forgive them. They’d surely call for the remnants of Jeanne’s army to be annihilated. Asura’s offer of protection was the best solution for Jeanne and her loved ones. She knew firsthand just how powerful Moon Blossom was.

“I’m glad,” Jeanne whispered. Finally, she could rest without worry. The nightmarish days of burning in hatred were over at last.

Before Jeanne died, there was a small smile on her face. Upon seeing that expression, Lumia felt a deep sense of sorrow. Yet within that sorrow, Lumia felt relief as well. Jeanne had wanted to die. Becoming a Demon Lord was synonymous with suicide. Tina had reached the same conclusion, which was why she hadn’t interfered in the fight. She’d loved Jeanne. If love was genuinely wanting the other to be happy, then this was the shape of Jeanne’s happiness. She’d wanted to wake up from her living nightmare.

Despite knowing all of that, Tina slowly made her way over to Jeanne’s corpse, embraced it, and started to sob. She was crying so much that Asura’s expression turned sour. Meanwhile, Marx walked over to Jyrki and cast Bandage on his injury.

“Shit, am I gonna die too?” Jyrki asked.

Lumia paused in healing her own leg and stood up. Pain shot through the limb. However, she still managed to limp her way over to Jyrki’s side and start

channeling her magic into him as well.

“If Jyrki dies, then can I have his possessions?” Reko asked.

“I’d be happy with half of his stuff,” Salume offered.

“No, we should put everything in the group’s shared funds,” Asura said.

“Aren’t y’all bein’ a bit too harsh?” Jyrki sighed, though with a half-smile on his face.

“But you...let yourself get slashed on purpose,” lina pointed out. “It was all...so that you could change places...with Iris.”

“Yes, you should be able to stand up if you want to,” Marx said. “It’s a deep injury, but it’s not enough to kill you.”

“Is he really all right?” Iris asked. “I thought he died.”

“Nah, I can’t stand right now. The adrenaline’s all gone.” Jyrki was telling the truth. He’d relaxed so much after seeing the enemy defeated that he couldn’t put any strength in his limbs at all.

“It’s a strategy we like to call ‘return of the dead.’ It forcibly removes one of us from our enemy’s consciousness,” Asura explained with a careless shrug.

With this plan, they pretended that Jeanne had killed Jyrki, which in turn would cause her to pay him no attention. After that, he would be able to launch an attack from outside her field of consciousness. It was a terribly risky strategy, but with a hefty return.

“I never wanna do that again. If her slash had been even a centimeter deeper, I woulda died.” They had to be very careful with how they took the attack to make the opponent *think* they’d killed them.

Asura laughed before she said, “Jeanne was truly a powerful enemy. I didn’t think she’d be able to put up such a fight.” That they’d had to employ return of the dead was proof of that, as it was one of their last resorts.

“It felt like we barely managed to score a victory by taking her on with seven of us,” Iris said. “I would’ve never been able to defeat her on my own.”

“Same here,” Asura said.

“Your Flashbang was perfect,” Salume exclaimed. “You timed it so that Jeanne could have never avoided it. She didn’t know about it either.”

Iris blushed and giggled, playing with her hair before she realized something. “Hey, wait a second! The Demon Lord’s reviving in the west about now, isn’t it?!”

“Yeah, probably. You can go on ahead, Iris. Let’s meet up again later.”

In response to Asura’s dismissal, Iris gaped for a moment before she demanded, “Aren’t you guys gonna come with me?!”

“We’re not heroes. It’s got nothing to do with us,” Asura replied. The other mercenaries nodded in agreement.

Iris groaned. “Lately, I feel like Moon Blossom as a whole is stronger than the other heroes.”

“It depends on the situation,” Asura explained calmly. “It’s impossible for us to handle a Demon Lord. If we had ten fighters of my caliber, then we might stand a chance. However, Moon Blossom doesn’t have that sort of strength right now.”

“The heroes don’t work together at *all*, you know?” Iris muttered. “So I’m, like, a little worried.”

“Do your best and don’t get yourself killed,” Asura said, sounding like she couldn’t care less about Iris’s complaints. “I’m sure one of the heroes will kill it. Don’t stand too far out in the front. But if you’re going to go, then at the very least, test if Flashbang will work on a Demon Lord.”

“Don’t die, Iris,” lina said in her usual slow manner of speech.

“Yeah, don’t die,” Jyrki said. “If it gets dangerous, just run away.”

“I’m sure that, as she is now, Iris will be able to return to us,” Marx said.

“I agree. She’s not so happy-go-lucky anymore,” Reko added. “If you can make it back alive, I’ll reward you with some tit fondling.”

“Why’d you say it like I *want* you to touch my breasts?!” Iris pouted.

“You don’t have a weapon, right? Take that.” Asura pointed over at Ragnarok.

Lumia frowned, looking dissatisfied. “That’s *my* claymore, you know?”

“You’re the one who lost to us, so you don’t get a say in this, Lumia. That’s one of our spoils of war,” Asura shot back with a quiet huff. “Since it’s mine, I get to be the one who lends it to Iris. If you’re going up against a Demon Lord, then you don’t need to use a single-edged sword, nor do you have the luxury of being shy about taking Lumia’s weapon. Just use it.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.” Despite its weight, Iris picked up Ragnarok without any issue and then ran out of the audience chamber.

“Tina, I have to take Jeanne’s head to Sangest so that we can announce our victory. I’m sorry to do this in front of you, but I’m going to cut off her head,” Asura said.

Tina sniffed and then turned to look at her. Her face was splotchy from all the tears she’d shed. “What will you do if I say no?”

“I hope you’ll believe me when I say that we do *not* want to fight you. To end the war that Jeanne started, we need to inform everyone of her death. You can do whatever you like to her body. We’ll help you build a grave for her if that’s what you want. I’d like you to come with us, as I’d like to speak with you about what’ll come next.”

“Just... Just wait a little bit! Please give me a little bit more time with her!” Tina tightened her hold on Jeanne’s body.

“Sure. But hurry it up. The war isn’t going to wait for you.”

Part Six, Chapter Thirteen: Your peace is a sleep you won't wake from. Your lullaby is the warm sun and Tina's serenade.

Lumia, acting in place of Jeanne, made an announcement to Jeanne's army of her death and of their defeat. However, she did not order them to surrender. Instead, she told them to escape to the best of their abilities. Surrendering, after all, would be a death sentence. They'd invaded so many countries and murdered so many people. No nation would permit them to live, and everyone was aware of that. Some of them argued that they'd rather die in combat than flee or surrender.

"If the war turns into a guerrilla one, then Central Felsen will turn to hell." That was what Asura had said. She had, in her own words, experienced many battlefields in her time. Upon realizing that Lumia didn't know what guerrilla warfare was, Asura added, "It's when you lie in wait and ambush your enemies, or you defeat them through trickery. In other words, there's a chance that Jeanne's soldiers will turn into people like us. See what I mean when I said it would be hell?"

Upon hearing that, Lumia ordered the remnants of Jeanne's army to escape. She didn't want further bloodshed.

A few days after Jeanne's death, Asura and the others walked through the grounds of the old castle in Central Felsen. They, along with their base, had moved here after handing Jeanne's head over to the Sangest Kingdom, as well as helping a bit with the postwar cleanup. Tina had been sitting behind Asura on her horse, and she hopped off.

"This is the house I shared with Mistress Jeanne," she said.

"I didn't expect you to use a place like *this* as your base of operations," Asura replied.

The castle was in the northern regions of Central Felsen. The back of the castle had a mountain, whereas the front of it was flat ground. As for the castle itself, it was of simple make and not large at all. Asura figured that it used to belong to a small country that had long since been destroyed.

“Should we start by digging a grave?” Marx asked, pulling out a barrel from the wagon. The barrel was completely sealed shut, and to be buried underground.

“You’ll help me with that, won’t you?” Tina asked. There was a hint of anxiety in her eyes as she looked over at Asura.

“That’s what I promised you and I always keep my word. I’ll even clap my hands together and offer a prayer. We’ll continue to protect you two as well.” Asura shifted her gaze to Lumia, who was still on her horse.

“Thanks,” Lumia said.

In the eyes of the rest of the world, Lumia was Jeanne’s right-hand officer. During their trip to Sangest, Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom made sure that Lumia and Tina were hidden away from prying eyes. They’d also spread rumors about them both dying during the war and that Moon Blossom had been the ones to kill them. No one suspected otherwise.

Suddenly, a strange screech sounded out overhead and everyone, including Asura, prepared for battle.

“It’s all right,” Tina said as a dragon settled down next to her. It had green scales, as well as large wings and a thick tail. Asura remembered seeing this dragon before. It licked Tina, who gave the dragon a friendly pat on its face. “I’m home, Godzillash.”

In response, the dragon’s face seemed to soften in delight before making a cooing noise.

“I just about pissed myself!” Jyrki exclaimed.

“It frightened me as well. I thought we were about to have an unexpected battle against a dragon,” Marx said, heaving a sigh of relief.

“Honestly...I just want to take a few days off,” lina muttered, sounding

exhausted.

“Wow, dragons are so cool!”

“You said its name is Godzillash?”

Reko and Salume couldn't seem to stop staring at the dragon.

“Hmm. This is the dragon you took to Kotopori, isn't it?” Asura asked as she approached it. “Godzillash, you said? What a bizarre name.” After Asura said that, the dragon growled low in its throat in an attempt to intimidate her.

“What, you picking a fight with me? I'll turn you into a dragon shish kebab.” She glared at the dragon, who twitched before it shrank away, attempting to make itself appear smaller.

“Godzillash is a very sweet and well-behaved dragon. Please stop scaring it,” Tina said. “By the way, Mistress Jeanne was the one who came up with Godzillash's name.”

“Jeanne has terrible taste,” Asura replied with a careless shrug.

“Let's start digging her grave now,” Marx said, ever the voice of reason.

Tina had been the one to request the grave be built in the old castle, which was full of memories they'd shared together.

“After we finish that, may we rest for a little while in the castle, preferably until Iris returns?” Asura asked, looking at Tina.

At the moment, Iris was on an expedition to eliminate the supernatural disaster that was the Demon Lord, which had spawned in the western regions of Felsenmark. However, no one knew what was going on with her. The heroes could have defeated the Demon Lord, with Iris on the way back, for all they knew. There was also the chance it had killed her already. There was no way to tell.

“Yes, of course. But will Iris know to come here?” Tina tilted her head to the side, causing Asura and the other members of Moon Blossom to fall silent.

“Iris...doesn't know about this place.”

“Yeaah.”

Iina and Jyrki had matching grimaces on their faces.

“Let’s send her a letter and set up a meeting. I’d suggest Liyolure, but they’re implementing a system of divide and rule at the moment, hardly the most stable place to be. We should meet at Sangest instead,” Asura suggested. As a result of Jeanne’s rampage, people had to redraw maps for Central Felsen. She’d wiped out too many countries.

Marx readjusted his grip on the barrel. “That sounds good,” he said.

“Tina, where do you want Jeanne buried?” Reko asked.

“This castle has an inner courtyard. I’d like to bury her there and in a spot that would be nice and warm, with lots of sun. Mistress Jeanne liked to stay warm.”

“All right, let’s get to work. After we’re done, you can take the rest of the day and tomorrow off.”

Upon hearing Asura’s words, everyone clenched their fists in triumph. Despite their reputation and prowess, they were all tired. After all, they’d been busy the entire time since Jeanne started the war.

After digging a deep hole in the dirt, they slowly lowered the barrel in. Then they covered it with more dirt before sticking a claymore into it as the final touch.



Flowers of various colors and sizes decorated the old castle's inner courtyard. The sun shining through the trees and leaves created golden dapples of light upon the ground, and vines entwined around the wooden benches. There were cracks marring the outer walls of the castle, also covered in vines like the benches. It was halfway to becoming an inhospitable pile of rocks. Yet its relaxing and quiet atmosphere soothed Asura's heart. Tina picked some flowers from the courtyard and placed them next to the claymore, which served as a makeshift gravestone. Godzillash, staring up at the sky, made a sad noise.

Ahh, he must have sensed that Jeanne died, Asura thought. She didn't know Godzillash's gender, so for the sake of convenience, she referred to him with male pronouns.

"Well, uh, I dunno how to say this, but she was a pretty tough enemy," Jyrki said. "She was gonna end the world and all."

"Mm-hmm..." lina nodded. "We probably...will never face another opponent like that...ever again."

"It was truly, in many ways, a difficult fight," Marx added. "We managed to improve ourselves as a result of this war. It's hard for me to say that Jeanne was a good person though."

"I don't think Jyrki or lina are saying she was a good person," Reko said, tilting his head to the side. "Sorry about this, Tina, but she was a piece of shit. She even slashed Boss across the back."

"I agree," Salume said. "But she's dead now, so I don't have any strong negative feelings about her."

"She was a scumbag, yes. There's no arguing against that." Lumia knelt and clasped her hands together. "Jeanne was a pervert with a thing for butts, and killing people had been her *raison d'être*. For a little while, she was even abusing Tina. I don't think it's farfetched to say that Jeanne killed the most people in all of history."

"Oh, so she had a butt fetish?" Asura chuckled softly. "Well, I agree that as an enemy, she provided quite a bit of entertainment. It's unfortunate how weak her mind became near the end. Not many people would dare to start a war of

this scale, nor would they go so far as to try and become a Demon Lord.”

“Mistress Jeanne’s always suffered from nightmares, whether she was asleep or awake,” Tina explained. “So for Mistress Jeanne, death was the only way she could find peace. I loved her, which is why I respected her desire to kill herself. But...” Fat tears started to roll down Tina’s cheeks. They reflected the light, glittering like jewels against her skin. She was right when she said the inner courtyard got a lot of sun. “In truth, I wanted her to live with me. I wanted her to forget everything, whether it was her revenge or her hatred or her despair.”

Asura watched as Tina fell to the ground, her knees hitting the dirt, before she reached out and placed a hand on her head. “But she wasn’t able to forget. I’m sure she suffered from her indecision. Unlike me, Jeanne knew what love was. It seemed that after Lumia returned to her side, she did her best to regain her old sense of self.” Asura moved her hand, giving Tina a rough pat.

Breath hitching, Tina whispered in a halting voice, “I don’t know how I’m going to live without her.”

Asura hummed and said, “I actually have a proposal for you about that. If it’s all right with you, I’d like to make this old castle Moon Blossom’s base. I promised that I would protect you and you’re essentially this place’s landlord, so we’ll pay you rent. How does that sound? You wouldn’t want for company at all.”

“That sounds good!” Jyrki said in a chipper tone. “We’ll finally have a place to call home! We can train here, choose who to go on jobs when we get ’em, and Tina won’t be lonely.”

“Tina might not want us around,” Reko pointed out. “When all’s said and done, we *were* the ones to kill Jeanne.”

“That’s why...Boss said ‘if it’s all right with you,’” Tina replied, an exasperated smile on her face.

Tina roughly rubbed away her tears and said, “I welcome that proposal! I don’t even have friends anymore. Living with just Godzillash for company would have been quite lonely indeed.”

“I consider you my friend, though,” Lumia said, to Tina’s surprise. “We had so

many chats together, remember? That makes us friends.”

“Oh, yes,” Tina replied with a soft smile. “Yes, we *are* friends.”

“From our perspective, Lumia is a traitor. However, I promised we would forgive her, so let’s discuss your future while we’re at it,” Asura said. “Do you want to return to us?”

Lumia looked deep in thought for a moment before she slowly shook her head no. “There’s someone I’d like to look for. I’ll be using this castle as my own base of operations while searching for them.”

“Oh?” Asura said. “You’re looking for a man, aren’t you?”

Lumia’s face flushed crimson. “I-It’s not what you think! I’m just a little worried.”

“It’s a guy,” Jyrki said.

“That makes me a little sad,” Marx sighed.

“You dumped me...to date a guy?” lina muttered.

“We weren’t dating!” Lumia shouted, sounding shocked.

“Of course... It was a joke.”

“Where did you find the time to get a boyfriend? What kind of person is he? I’m very curious!”

“Salume, I already told you, he’s not my boyfriend,” Lumia said. “It’s just that... It’s complicated.”

“He’s a younger man,” Tina said.

“Oho? A younger man, you say? Who is it? I’d love to know all the details. So you finally decided to lose your virginity in the original sense of the word?” Asura asked, grinning.

“Stop smiling like a middle-aged man, Asura.”

“I *am* a middle-aged man on the inside,” Asura replied with a wave of her arm.

“He had silver hair,” Tina added.

“Oh, come on, Lumia,” Asura said, the smile on her face only becoming wider. “You like me so much that you’re even looking for guys who share my traits?”

“I am *not*! He’s a much more normal person than you are! Ah, well, he *does* have his moments, I suppose.”

“All right, everyone! We’re on our break now. Let’s start it off by asking Lumia all about her secret beau!” Asura cheered, to the delighted nods of the rest of Moon Blossom.

Extra Episode Twelve: Iris versus the Demon Lord, not as hopeless a fight as we thought.

The Demon Lord looked like a dragon that could walk around on its two hind legs, standing at between three and four meters tall. Obsidian scales covered its body, and wickedly sharp claws decorated its hands and feet. Rows of daggerlike teeth lined its mouth, and it had a long and thick tail. The only saving grace of its appearance was that it didn't possess any wings. If the Demon Lord had been capable of flight, then killing it would be far more difficult.

Ragnarok remained in Iris's sheath. She was a short distance away, watching as the heroes fought against the Demon Lord. It wasn't because she was scared, but rather because she approached the matter from a different angle. The heroes were rushing to attack the Demon Lord in order to be the first to damage or kill it, but Iris chose to observe and analyze her opponent first.

They were in one of the nations in West Felsen. The Demon Lord had already managed to destroy another country in the time since its manifestation. At first, slaves were sent to deal with it, but they were all ripped to shreds. The next sacrifices were the soldiers. So many people died and so many buildings were destroyed in the time it took for the heroes to arrive. They were particularly slow this time because all of the heroes were in Central Felsen, leaving none in West Felsen to delay the Demon Lord's rampage.

The Demon Lord picked up a hero by their head and crushed it. Even upon seeing such a gruesome sight, Iris remained calm. During the short period of time she'd spent with Moon Blossom, she'd seen her fair share of hellish battlefields, as well as far more painful ways to die. Asura had been responsible for all the atrocities she bore witness to, but as a result, she'd grown desensitized to death.

"It's got a strong defense as well," she muttered to herself.

Gilbert Röhm, a Great Hero from West Felsen, attacked the Demon Lord with his twin swords. However, the Demon Lord didn't even try to move out of the

way. Its dark scales served as a powerful armor. However, there weren't any scales on its stomach, which resembled the soft belly of a snake. It must have known that, as it casted a protective spell upon its abdomen as soon as the battle started.

The spell the Demon Lord used was support magic of the dark element, which was very typical of all Demon Lords. It took on the shape of a shield, crafted from thick shadows. In other words, the support magic made it look like the Demon Lord had stuck a shield upon its unprotected belly. If she had to give it a name, Shadow Shield would be a fitting one.

"Iris, you reaaaally should participate in the fight! Have your legs frozen up?" Elna asked, appearing from out of nowhere.

"I'm not *that* scared!" Iris replied. "I dunno why, but that Demon Lord isn't scary at all. I know they're really strong and go on rampages because they're filled with hatred. But do they really cause despair for all of humanity when they appear? Lady Elna, how does that Demon Lord compare to ones before?"

"Hmm, let me think. It's slower and dumber than the one from two years ago, so it is very easy to fight against. But it has the best defense of any Demon Lord I've ever seen or heard of!"

"I sure hope it didn't put all its energy into its defense because Asura's intimidation tactics scared it so much," Iris said with a dry chuckle. She wouldn't be surprised if that really was the case.

"Did little Asura do something?" Elna asked.

"Nothing, nothing," Iris replied. "Anyway, Lady Elna, I think our only chance of winning is to somehow hit its stomach. It's not like we can do anything against those scales, right? Because it's so slow, we're able to land hits on it. I wonder if there's a way to get rid of that spell protecting its stomach."

"If there is, I suuure don't know it!"

That was when magic so dense it was visible to the naked eye started gathering in the Demon Lord's mouth.

"Oh no! Everyone, get away!" Iris yelled as loudly as she could.

Only a few heroes were able to react to Iris's warning. The Demon Lord shot out from its mouth a condensed ray of magic, a beam of red light that pierced through everything in its path with devastating force. It shook its head, causing the beam to topple down multiple buildings around it. *No, it would be more accurate to say that it's burning through them.*

Iris and Elna jumped from building to building, escaping to higher ground. The beam struck the ground, causing an explosion so massive that the shock of it destroyed everything in the surrounding area. Iris pulled out Ragnarok to serve as a shield and protect herself from it in midair. She twisted her body to the side, hiding herself behind Ragnarok's blade. The force of the shock wave was unbelievable, sending her flying backwards. She was thrown so far that she had no idea whether Elna and the other heroes were all right.

"From this height, an improper landing will cause some serious damage," she muttered to herself as she sheathed Ragnarok once more.

She was so high in the air that she would be the same height as some tall ramparts. Though Iris had initially assumed that the entire city was gone, she could now see that almost half of it had been completely flattened. It hadn't been a very large city by any means, but it was still an impressive display of the Demon Lord's formidable strength.

So this is a Demon Lord—a real one! I have to defeat it even if it costs me my life. But I dunno. I'm not sure why, but I don't feel scared at all. Iris removed her leather belt and let go of Ragnarok. Then she adjusted her posture.

The ground was approaching fast. First, she hit the ground with her right hand, which she was holding out in a knifehand strike position. Next, it was her forearm, then her elbow, then her shoulder. Finally, she rolled forwards several times to kill the momentum. This was the rolling breakfall she'd learned from Asura.

Iris, as an aspiring soldier-mage, had already learned the basics of hand-to-hand combat. Breaking her falls in all sorts of ways had been the first thing Asura taught her. *Well, I doubt that even Asura predicted that I would need to break such a high fall.*

She felt a little dizzy when she stood up, causing her to stumble. *How many*

times did I roll? She wondered as she looked around for Ragnarok. She'd let it go because it would get in the way of her rolling breakfall. She jogged to where she predicted Ragnarok would have landed, picked it up, and then equipped it once more.

"All right!" she said to herself, pumping up her spirits. She didn't feel like she would lose.

That beam earlier was attack magic. Iris was barely a mage, but she could tell that it was magic rather than a skill that was specific to Demon Lords as a species. A Demon Lord's magic was leagues stronger than a human's. Even Jeanne's Divine Retribution was child's play compared to how much destruction a Demon Lord could cause. However, it seemed to require a significant amount of time to activate. So long as you maintained your calm, you wouldn't be hit by a direct attack.

If I had to name it, I guess I'd call it Crimson Destruction, she thought. The names of spells were quite direct and obvious when it came to what they did. But some spells, like Bandage, had truly bizarre monikers, in Iris's opinion.

Iris ran back to where the Demon Lord was. She had an idea as to how to defeat it. When it used Crimson Destruction, the Shadow Shield on its stomach disappeared. The problem was that she had no idea how many heroes remained, and how many were still in fighting condition.

She'd observed that when the heroes mobbed the Demon Lord, it used Crimson Destruction as if it were trying to swat away some pesky flies. In other words, she needed to attack the Demon Lord to the point that it would lose its patience.

"I bet even Moon Blossom could win this."

It seemed Asura had been underestimating Moon Blossom's strength. Oh, but I suppose there would be heavy casualties when taking the Demon Lord down. In the worst-case scenario, they might end up taking each other out.

As Iris ran, she yelled at the surviving heroes, "Keep on attacking! Attack the Demon Lord until it's dead! There's no time to be lying around!"

"Damn, you sure got bossy," Axel said, stepping up to stand next to her.

“What the hell were you doin’ this entire time?”

“I was observing the enemy! It’s common knowledge that you have to analyze your opponent before the fight! What kind of idiot charges first and thinks later?!” It wasn’t as if they were fighting against a hoodlum.

“Ha! That’s how I’ve been fightin’ my entire life. Back when you were still a novice hero, you would have rushed in to fight the Demon Lord too.”

“And I would’ve died!”

Iris finally understood why Asura and the others used to say that Iris would die in a fight against a Demon Lord. It felt like so long ago now. The Iris from back then would have been the first to go. She would have been so terrified and freaked out that she would have panicked and charged in, causing her to die without even realizing what had happened.

“Don’t get so cocky, Demon Lord!” Iris yelled, pulling at Ragnarok and slashing out at it. As she’d expected, it didn’t dodge her at all.

Ragnarok dug into the scales in the Demon Lord’s neck, smashing through the natural armor and cutting into the flesh underneath. Iris herself was shocked at what happened. *What’s up with this sword?! It’s super sharp!* It was completely unexpected. She had to hand it to Ragnarok—it was truly a sword of legend. While there were plenty of legendary weapons in Felsenmark, most of them had gone missing. Even the ones that were documented were under the protection of the church or a country, meaning that no one could wield them.

“Holy shit! Where’d you get that sword from?!” Axel asked as he punched the Demon Lord with his iron fist.

It stumbled back. Though its body was covered in tough scales, it wasn’t completely unscathed. Other heroes started attacking it as well. Granted, since they weren’t used to fighting as a team, their attacks sometimes got in each other’s way. Even if Iris yelled at them to work together, she doubted they’d be able to. According to Asura, it was difficult to pull off unless you regularly trained in coordinated fighting. That was why training their butts off was what Moon Blossom did on the daily.

Iris weaved through the heroes’ attacks as she bellowed out, “Everyone, close

your eyes and look away! Flashbang!”

Her left hand, held right next to the Demon Lord’s face, glowed with holy light. She used Ragnarok in her right hand to protect her eyes, which were closed for good measure.

“Dammit! What the hell are you doing, little girl?!” Some of the heroes had been caught up in her attack.

I told you to close your eyes, Iris thought. Moon Blossom would’ve known what Iris was trying to do the second she started gathering magic in her palm. The Demon Lord screeched in pain, so loud that the air was reverberating. It worked! I figured Flashbang would work against the Demon Lord. I had my suspicions the moment I heard that a Demon Lord uses a human vessel. I’m not sure why this Demon Lord looks like a dragon, but past ones have taken on a variety of shapes. Maybe it’s based on what the vessel imagines to be all-powerful.

“Lady Elna, are you around?!” As soon as Iris called for her, an arrow cut through the air, landing in the Demon Lord’s right eye. Yes! Elna had grasped Iris’s plan in an instant.

No matter how strong its scales, the Demon Lord’s eyes and eyelids were unprotected. It had stopped moving. A second arrow flew in from another angle, embedding itself into the Demon Lord’s left eye. Immediately after her first shot, Elna had moved to another position for that second attack. The Demon Lord had permanently lost its sight and, in a last-ditch attempt at taking them down, started gathering magic in its mouth.

“You dummy. You’re playing right into my hands.” Iris sank Ragnarok into the Demon Lord’s lower belly and then sliced up. *I won*, she thought as the beast’s blood covered her from head to toe. However, the Demon Lord forcibly shot out its Crimson Destruction. “What the hell?!”

Even as she screamed, Iris stepped to the side, using the flat of Ragnarok’s blade to divert the beam of light away from her. It was a split-second decision and she wasn’t sure if it would work. She managed to parry the light though, making it shoot into the sky. It hit a castle that was sitting upon a hill, causing it to explode. In fact, the entire *hill* disintegrated from the shock wave. The

Demon Lord stopped moving and then it fell down.

“No way,” Iris whispered. She and the heroes were safe, but the people in the castle died.

“Evacuate to a safe place before you let down your guard,” Axel said as he placed his prosthetic hand upon Iris’s head.

It hurt. Of course, Axel didn’t mean for it to be some sort of attack. He’d patted her with the same amount of strength he would’ve used with a flesh-and-bone hand.

“Y-You’re right.”

When this city was chosen to be the stage for the final battle between the heroes and the Demon Lord, they’d evacuated all of the residents. When she saw the explosion, she’d forgotten that for a split second, fearful that she’d inadvertently killed a large group of people.

“You did fantastic, Iris!” Elna said, approaching them. “You grew so powerful in suuuch a short amount of time! To tell you the truth, I think you miiight be stronger than I am!”

“Yeah, I agree!” Axel said.

If that’s true, then just how strong was Jeanne? She would’ve been as powerful as a monster. And yet, despite Jeanne’s insane combat prowess, Moon Blossom had deemed her killable and actually managed to pull it off.

“You should come to the west,” Gilbert said to Iris.

“Quit jokin’ around, you,” Axel snapped. “She’s a future Great Hero candidate for East Felsen.”

“Yes, I agree! I’d like her to have a liiittle more experience.”

“If you come to the west...you can immediately replace me as the Great Hero.”

“Shut up. *You* should be the one dealin’ with the west. Watch that I don’t sock you in the mouth.”

“Hey, how many casualties have the heroes suffered?” Iris butted in in a

worried tone.

“Hmm.” Elna tilted her head to the side. “Well, we lost less compared to two years ago! We defeated the Demon Lord quickly, so fewer than half of us died! It was alllll thanks to you, Iris!”

“I’m real glad we let Moon Blossom take you in,” Axel said as he gave Iris a pat on the back. Though he’d used his real hand, it still hurt.

“Sir Axel, I wish you’d remember just how strong you are.”

“Huh? I barely hit you.”

“You’re soooo silly, Axel! You may think you’re giving people love taps, but to a normal person, your hits are agonizing!”

“I agree,” Gilbert muttered.

“Well, whatever. We won against a Demon Lord! Stop sweatin’ over the details!” Axel said before he gave a hearty guffaw.

Iris sighed before she started to wonder. *I’ll give them about three years. That’s right. In three years, Moon Blossom will be able to hunt down a Demon Lord with ease.* At the very least, that was the premonition Iris had.

If Moon Blossom’s opponent was like the Demon Lord the heroes just defeated, then they would likely emerge the victors as well. However, they would lose almost all of their people. As for the reasoning, it was because this Demon Lord barely had a scrap of intelligence. It simply went around destroying everything it saw, and it didn’t strategize any of its moves. Even *Tina* was a more difficult opponent. That was why Iris thought Moon Blossom could squeak out a win, though they would lose so many people, it would be a Pyrrhic victory.

But in three years’ time, Moon Blossom, which continued to grow stronger by the day, would be able to defeat a Demon Lord of that caliber without breaking a sweat. *Huh? Wait, doesn’t that mean in the future, Moon Blossom will become an even greater threat than a Demon Lord?*

It wasn’t as if Moon Blossom cared about good or evil. In the worst-case scenario, they might become so dangerous that heroes would be deployed to deal with them. There was one silver lining though, and it was that at this point

in time, Asura didn't like to massacre people for no reason, nor did she have any interest in destroying the world.

Granted, that was only "at this point in time."

Extra Episode Thirteen: How everyone lives after the war, with no more reason to fight.

Punti Arlandel had fled into the woods.

“Hey, Punpun, let me take a break,” Punti’s squad leader said. They were running together with Punti lending her his shoulder due to her injury.

“I sure would like to go deeper into the forest,” Punti said. Despite that, moving as slowly and carefully as possible, he set down his squad leader and let her lean against a tree.

“Shit. Leave me here and escape. If you’re on your own, you’ll be able to lose our pursuers.”

There was a diagonal sword wound in the squad leader’s chest. Though it wasn’t deep, they’d only given it cursory treatment. Punti wanted to take his squad leader to a real doctor, but it was impossible with armies all around the world hunting them down.

“Oh, don’t give me that. We already lost all of our comrades. I’m not going to abandon you too, Squad Leader.”

Three was the minimum size for a team in Flame. In other words, there had been someone else in their squad, but they’d died in the war.

“Yeah, but I’m done, Punpun. At the very least, I want to go out fighting like a real mercenary.”

“Well, sure, I can understand that,” Punti said with a vague smile. “My father was a warrior too. He would’ve said the same thing as you.”

“Then leave me here. If you’re on your own, you can easily escape. I’ll stop the pursuers here, so I want you to get away. Dying on your first mission would be ridiculous. Like, why did you join Flame in the first place?”

“I agree,” Punti sighed. “To tell you the truth, I didn’t expect Flame to be destroyed this quickly.”

Jeanne's army broke apart and made their separate escapes from the battlefield. That had been their order, which Punti agreed with. If they hadn't, they would've died either as a result of battle or from execution. It didn't matter though, because the end result would be the same.

"We're mercenaries, Punpun. I'm sure most of us don't feel much like fighting now that our client's dead. Shit, I just hope Boss is all right."

"I wonder what happened to everyone."

Many members of Jeanne's army died once the manhunts started.

"It was a dogshit job," the squad leader sighed before she let out a hollow laugh. "Killing everyone, from kids to old people... Even I felt sick by it."

"We did all that only to lose at the end too."

Punti hadn't been involved in the massacres. Though he'd participated in the battle, he let anyone unwilling to fight escape. However, he never tried to stop anyone else from killing, for he knew that he was the one in the wrong for disobeying orders.

"You never ended up losing your virginity," the squad leader giggled.

"I know it was insubordination, but you didn't say anything, which means you're just as guilty as me! Besides, there's a special someone I want to offer my first time to."

Despite how serious Punti was when he said that, his squad leader burst out laughing.

"Damn, my wound is gonna reopen! It's gonna reopen, dammit! Stop making me laugh, Punpun! What are you, a twelve-year-old girl or something?!"

"Squad Leader, lower your voice. Our pursuers will hear you."

Since Punti and his squad leader were on the losers' side, they were still on the run from people trying to catch them.

"It's fine, Punpun," his squad leader said, her tone suddenly serious. "Go. Leave everything to me. You have someone dear to you, don't you? I don't have anyone like that, so just go. This is my final order: get away from here and live. I'm not going to say anything cheesy like, 'Keep me in your memories.' But

lemme tell you, you're not suited for mercenary life. You should find another way to live, with that special someone by your side."

"Squad Leader..." Punti didn't know what to do. Should he respect his squad leader's wishes and abandon her? Or should he continue to make his escape while taking her with him?

"There they are!" That was when one of the pursuers noticed Punti and his squad leader, calling for his companions in a loud voice.

"Hurry! Go!" His squad leader stood up.

"But..."

"Shut up and let me put my life on the line for my subordinate!" His squad leader glared at him as she pulled out her sword, continuing to yell at him in a furious voice. "That's my job as your leader! I'm a mercenary to my core, Punpun, so don't write me off just yet. I ain't scared of dying. Just get out of here! You aren't someone who belongs in this world!"

"Squad Leader, I'll never—"

"Just forget about me, you dumbass." She smiled and then ran towards their pursuers.

"I'll never forget about you," Punti whispered to her back before he turned around and ran in the opposite direction.

In the old castle in Central Felsen, which served as the new headquarters for Moon Blossom, Reko decided out of the blue that he wanted to pick a fight with Asura.

"Hey, Boss, don't you think you've been making a lot of mistakes when it comes to estimating an opponent's strength?"

They were all sitting at a long table eating their dinner. Since there was still lots of food in the castle's pantries, they used the ingredients to whip up a meal.

"I agree," Iina murmured.

“You thought they’d be able to defeat me in ten seconds, right?” Lumia asked with a grin.

“They would’ve been able to beat the Moon Blossom version of you in ten seconds,” Asura replied. “But after you joined Jeanne’s army, you stopped hiding your true self. That was why you were stronger than we anticipated. That’s all there is to it.”

“Do you mean my lovely and disgusting true self?” Lumia asked.

“Exactly that.”

“You couldn’t predict that Lumia was stronger?” Reko asked before chewing on a piece of bread.

“There was a *chance* they’d be able to win in ten seconds, of course,” Asura replied with a small shrug. “Lumia’s stronger now that she removed her mental brakes. But I was still absolutely certain of our victory.”

“Brakes? What’s that?” Salume asked.

“Oh! Um, they’re devices for making something stop moving. I mean that Lumia was suppressing her true, battle-hungry self. There’s a difference in the power you exert when fighting reluctantly because you think you have no other choice, versus fighting happily because you like it.”

“Jeanne’s strength far exceeded our expectations as well,” Marx said calmly before drinking a mouthful of soup.

“Only by a little,” Asura corrected. “We won without losing anyone, so it’s not like I was completely off. Also, I’d like to have some food as well.”

“You weren’t all beat up this time, Boss!” Jyrki chuckled.

“I thought the same!” Reko exclaimed. “It feels like you lost half your charm because of that.”

“Oh, please,” Asura sighed. She picked up a spoon and started moving it towards the soup.

“I was joking! Just joking! You’re always really lovely, Boss!”

“You have very little appeal as a female,” Tina said. “I would rate your butt

about ten points.”

“Ten out of ten?” Asura asked.

“Ten out of a hundred.”

“Sure, sure, my breasts and butt aren’t sexy. Whatever. Just eat your food. Stop talking to me all at once.”

“By the way, Boss, who do you want to take to Sangest’s victory party?” Marx asked. He remained as cool as ever.

“I plan on taking Iris if she makes it back alive. If she’s dead, then I guess I’d bring you, Marx. The party’s still some time away, so there’s no rush to decide.”

“What about me?!” Reko yelled.

“I would like to attend a party as well,” Salume said.

“I don’t wanna go,” Jyrki said. “Not a fan of highbrow stuff.”

“I wanna eat...delicious food,” lina murmured.

“Oh, come on,” Asura laughed in disbelief. “We’re not going to the party to have fun. This will be a business meeting. I plan on working with Sangest for a long time to come. I have no idea what any of you people would do if I took you.”

“I always behave!” Reko blurted out.

“I’m always a good girl too!” Salume added.

“I’m...the best girl,” lina said.

“Okay, okay, I’ll think about it. Can you all just let me eat in peace? I’m starving.”

“By the way, Asura—”

“Hey, Lumia, you’re talking to me on purpose, aren’t you? Why won’t any of you let me eat?”

“Because it’s fun to bully you,” Reko said.

“It makes shivers run down my spine!” Salume exclaimed.

“It’s...funny,” lina concluded.

“Yeah, I’m not taking any of you,” Asura sighed.

“You’re so cute!”

“Boss, you’re very cute!”

“You’re...so cute...it’s unbelievable.”

“It feels like you’re actin’ your age,” Jyrki said after Reko, Salume, and Iina finished talking. “It’s scary how cute you seem considerin’ how you usually are.”

“I was just reading the room. Now, I’m *really* going to start eating.” Asura was finally able to have a mouthful of soup. She continued to eat in silence.

“Speaking of, Lumia,” Marx said as if reminded of something, “when are you going to leave?”

“I’ll be departing tomorrow. The faster I start looking for him, the better.”

“I still can’t believe you’re going to look for *Punti*,” Asura said, a conflicted expression on her face. They’d asked Lumia about her mysterious boyfriend after they dug Jeanne’s grave.

“I...kicked him in the nuts,” Iina said with a small, lopsided smile. “Just hope...I didn’t crush them.”

“If you end up having a child with him, then bring it with you,” Asura said. “I’ll train it into the best soldier-mage yet.”

“No way,” Lumia replied. “No way in hell. Even if Ponti and I fall in love and have a child together, I’m never going to step foot on the battlefield again. I won’t let my kid become a soldier either.”

“You sayin’ you’re gonna retire?” Jyrki asked. “You’re never gonna fight anymore?”

“That’s right,” Lumia replied with a nod. “I’m satisfied now and there’s no more reason for me to keep fighting. Jeanne’s dead and I lost to Moon Blossom. The Oathkeeper Brigade has been completely destroyed. Everything’s over. My—*our*—era is over. It’s like a bubble that’s burst, never to be seen again. I’m more relieved than sad.”

“At least your story didn’t conclude with a dead end,” Salume said.

There were no happy endings for a mercenary's life. They usually died in a gruesome manner. However...

"Well, at least one of us deserves to go out in peace. We'll make up for it by dying as painfully as possible," Asura said. "I hope Puntti's alive and well."

"I wonder where he is." Reko tilted his head.

"I'm sure he'll flee from Central Felsen," Marx answered. "At the very least, staying is not an option. Even if he's still in Central Felsen, I'm sure he's on his way out to either the east or the west."

"The Demon Lord showed up in the west, so he's probably gonna head east," Jyrki said.

"Or maybe...he decided to go west...precisely because that's not what we expect," Iina pointed out. "I'm sure...the heroes have already defeated...the Demon Lord."

"Perhaps he'll go east because all of his acquaintances are there," Salume proposed. "He might end up isolated in the west."

"But that might be why he'll head west," Reko argued. "There's a chance that people in the west don't know he used to be in Jeanne's army. If he heads east, he might get arrested."

"He's heading east," Asura said firmly. "I don't believe a lot of people know that he was in Jeanne's army. If I were him, I would return east and resume my old life as if nothing happened."

"I'm going to head to the Great Therbae Kingdom," Lumia announced. "I'll try to visit his family. Like Asura said, there's a high possibility that he went home."

"Oh yeah, you're supposed to be dead, Lumia," Jyrki said. "So watch your back, just in case. Make sure you don't meet Axel or Elna."

"Yes, you're right. To the rest of the world, I'm a high-ranking member of the Demon Lord's army."

"Hee hee, the Demon Lord's army that Asura the Hero and her band of fellows defeated," Asura said, sounding delighted. "We'll make sure to sell the Moon Blossom name at the victory party. I'm sure everyone already knows of

us, though.”

“It’s pretty cool being a hero,” Reko said.

“Being a mercenary is a lot busier than I imagined. Sometimes we’re heroes, sometimes we’re villains, and some other times, we’re allies of justice.”

“And that’s how it’ll continue to be,” Asura said. “We’ll do anything so long as we get proper pay for it. Hee hee, it’s going to get busy for us, so rest up while you can.”

Extra Episode Fourteen: A broken heart only leads to a sad outcome. But I'm an outlier once again.

In a room of the old castle serving as Moon Blossom's new base of operations, Asura was reading through the grimoire Jeanne left behind. She was sitting in a chair, dressed in nothing more than a shirt. As it was already nighttime and Asura had finished all of her other duties, she'd be able to go straight to bed after she finished her reading.

"Her handwriting is terrible," Asura muttered to herself. It wasn't *impossible* to read, but it certainly made for a difficult experience.

"Boss!" The door swung open, revealing Jyrki.

"What's the matter? Did a monster or something appear?"

"Nah, that ain't it. Tina keeps gropin' my ass."

"I see. Good for you. And by the way, Tina *is* a monster." Asura never looked up throughout this entire exchange, keeping her eyes fixed upon the magic book.

"It's not good at all! Touchin' other people's asses is fun and all, but I don't like it when people touch *mine*."

"She probably has a thing for butts. Just let her fondle you," Asura replied, sounding like she couldn't care less.

"Boss!" This time, Tina was the one who ran inside, a serious look on her face. When Asura looked up at her, she said, "Tina said...my butt is only worth...fifteen points."

"What are ya complain' about? That's a good score. She gave me *ten*, the same score as Boss."

"Is it really so terrible to have the same score as me?" Asura asked, closing her book.

“Boss, are you awake?” Marx walked in. “Tina has been going around touching everyone’s behinds, and I’m not quite sure how to handle this. She said that my butt gets twenty points.”

“You got...the highest score,” lina murmured.

“What the hell? My cute and perky ass is worse than Marx’s?” Jyrki exclaimed.

“That’s twice what I got. I’ll kill you,” Asura growled.

“I don’t understand why the three of you are so angry,” Marx said, looking and sounding confused.

“I feel like something like this happened in the past,” Asura sighed as she pushed herself off the chair. “You want me to scold her, don’t you?” After she asked that, lina, Jyrki, and Marx nodded as one. “Aren’t the three of you mercenaries? Why don’t *you* give her a telling off?”

“We’re scared,” lina replied in a solemn tone.

“If we piss her off, she’ll kill us,” Jyrki pointed out with a laugh.

“Boss, you should be the one to set an example,” Marx said calmly.

“Fine, fine. I get it, you cowards. You’re all hopeless without me,” Asura sighed as she set the grimoire down on the table.

“Yeah, it gets all hard and stiff like this,” Reko said, leaning back slightly to show off his crotch.

“Amazing! What’s inside of it? How does it work?” Tina asked excitedly. She was crouching in front of Reko, staring at what was between his legs. Thankfully, Reko still had his pants on.

“I don’t think you need to know that yet,” Salume said. She was sitting on the bed, looking completely unaffected by what was going on in front of her.

“Salume, do *you* know about this?” Tina asked.

“I do. I’m very familiar with it.”

“Familiar?! Really?! I wish to know about this as well!”

“You’re still too young for this.”

“I’m older than you, you know? I would like to know.”

“Do you wanna try touching it?” Reko asked.

“May I? Will it not bite me if I try?”

“Don’t worry. It’s just a stick,” Reko said, smiling the entire time.

“It’s a stick? Why do you have a stick in between your legs? What does it normally look like? Why did a stick appear after I touched your butt? Is this some sort of skill exclusive to your species?”

“Oh, how many points would you give my butt?”

“It’s still soft and quite nice. I’d give you around forty points. Judging from my observations, I’d say that Iris has a butt worth around eighty points. I hope she comes back soon.”

“Iris’s boobs are around eighty points too.”

“I do not care for boobs.”

After Tina said that, the mood shifted. Though they had been chatting happily before, there was now an awkward air between them. Reko was into boobs and Tina was into butts—the two of them could never see eye to eye. Cold sweat broke out over Salume’s forehead, fearful that she was about to bear witness to some sort of war.

“B-Boss’s boobs *and* breasts are rather unremarkable, aren’t they?” Salume said with a pinched smile, trying to lighten the atmosphere. However...

“Hey now, you all got together to talk about me behind my back? That’s pretty hurtful,” Asura said from the doorway, causing Salume to freeze. The door had been wide open the entire time.

“Hurry up...and go in, Boss,” Iina said, pushing Asura inside. She, along with Jyrki and Marx followed her. The population density of the room doubled in an instant.

“What’s the matter?” Tina asked, blinking.

“Ah, well, it’s not that big of a deal,” Asura said. “Tina, could you refrain from

fondling my people's asses?"

"Why should I?" Tina tilted her head to the side. "Mistress Jeanne told me that those two orbs are humanity's treasures."

"Your older sister was a pervert, in more than one sense of the word. You mustn't let her influence you like that," Asura replied with a smile.

"But Mistress Jeanne was adamant that a butt had a higher purpose than serving as a cushion for when you sit. According to her, they had multiple uses depending on the situation. You could fondle them, rub them, and hit them. She said that this was common sense for humans."

"The 'common sense' she taught you is insane," Lumia said from the entrance. She'd appeared some time during the conversation.

"Mistress Jeanne also said that having someone's butt on your face is the greatest pleasure in the world," Tina added.

"Welp, there goes my image of Jeanne," Jyrki sighed.

"She was...just a common pervert," Iina muttered.

"Some of the customers we received at the brothel had a butt fetish," Salume said. "But they were quite uncommon. It was very rare for anyone to request a courtesan to sit on their faces."

"Boss, let's try it out! Sit on my face!" Reko threw himself onto the bed, his back on the mattress.

"Oh, right, Tina, why don't you tell us about how you met Jeanne?" Asura asked, changing the subject. "We know what you are, so you don't need to try and hide it."

"Huh?" Tina said.

"We accept you for what you are, Tina. You're a peak-tier monster, aren't you?" Marx said as he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

Tina didn't say anything for a moment. When she finally spoke, the words came slow, as if choosing them carefully. "To be more precise, I'm a double."

"Oh? You're a double born of a human and a monster?" Asura asked. Tina

noded in response.

“Why’s Boss and everyone else ignoring me?!” Reko demanded, sounding like a child throwing a tantrum.

“A human...and a monster...can have sex?” lina asked.

“Well, duh. So long as you got the parts, anyone can have sex, right? I’m more surprised they can even produce a kid,” Jyrki said.

“Which was the father and which was the mother?” Salume prompted.

All three of them ignored Reko completely.

“My father was a human and my mother was a monster.”

“I see,” Asura said with a nod. “So it’s possible for a monster of high intelligence to live among humans in peace. How interesting. It feels like the whole world’s changed with that knowledge.”

“Boss, what are you thinking?” Marx asked.

“I doubt it’s anything good,” Salume said.

“She’s probably thinking about how useful a monster-human double would be as a member of Moon Blossom.” Lumia sighed with a shrug.

“Well, I *am*, but it’s a rather risky idea,” Asura replied. “They would be stronger than me, after all, so there’s always the chance they’ll ignore my orders. It wouldn’t be a big deal if I got the chance to groom them from childhood, but that’s not exactly my style. I like subordinates with plenty of personality.”

“We’ve got lots of personality!” Reko said cheerily.

“Your personality can come on too strong though,” Salume said.

“You too...Salume,” lina pointed out.

“I’m probably the most normal person here,” Marx said.

“Oh?” Lumia said in a teasing voice. “Aren’t you the one who turned down becoming the next leader of the Knights of the Azure Skies because you’re so obsessed with magic, as well as the one who worships Asura like a goddess?”

“So by process of elimination, I’m the most normal one here,” Jyrki said proudly.

“Yeah, no way,” Reko shot back.

“No way,” lina agreed.

“I don’t think so,” Marx and Salume said at the same time. All four of them replied almost as soon as Jyrki finished his statement.

“I knew it—I’m the most normal person here,” Asura said.

“No way!” Everyone, including Tina, fired back at once.

“Let’s get back to the original topic,” Marx said. “I would like to know about how you and Jeanne met as well, Tina.”

“*That’s* what you...think the original topic is?” lina muttered, sounding mutinous.

“What about complainin’ to her about rubbin’ our butts?” Jyrki added, scowling.

“None of you will ever be able to stop me,” Tina said, puffing out her chest.

The room was silent for a moment before Reko said, “Don’t worry, you guys. Once Iris returns, having her butt rubbed can be one of her duties.”

“So Iris has gotta let Reko fondle her boobs *and* she’s gonna have to let Iris touch her butt?” Jyrki said.

“Iris is...quite unfortunate,” lina sighed.

“I suppose that’s her destiny to bear,” Marx concluded.

“All right, that solves that,” Asura said. “We’ll have to offer Iris as our sacrifice. Now then, can you tell us about how you and Jeanne met? If you don’t want to, we won’t push the issue.”

“I don’t mind.” Tina hopped onto the bed, sitting next to Salume. Asura settled in a chair while Jyrki and lina sat down on the ground. Lumia leaned against the wall opposite of Marx. “It was ten years ago. A certain incident revealed my mother and I for what we truly are. My mother helped me to escape, dying in the process, and my father died while protecting her.”

“How did that happen?” Asura asked, surprised. “Your mother was a monster, wasn’t she? Considering your strength, she must have been at least a high-tier or peak-tier monster.”

“My mother was trying to coexist with humans, which was why we all lived together in a human city, albeit while hiding our true identities. But eventually they discovered what we were and ganged up on us. My mother didn’t want to hurt them and was killed.”

“That must have been real frustratin’,” Jyrki said.

“It wasn’t, actually. My mother died for the same ideals she lived for. I’m very proud of her.”

“So she didn’t fight back or resist at all?” Asura asked. “I wouldn’t have killed her in that case. Humans have a very strong fear of monsters though, so I suppose it was a natural reaction.”

“Even so,” Salume said, “it was so cruel of them.”

“Humans are...the biggest blight,” lina agreed.

“How did they figure out your true identities?” Marx asked.

“A monster managed to get into the city. My mother fought to protect everyone and I helped her as best as I could. That was how they learned what we are.”

Once again, the room was filled with silence.

“You told us your story in a very calm voice, but are you sure you aren’t angry about what happened?” Asura asked.

“I’m very proud of my mother,” Tina insisted.

“You’re lying. You empathized with Jeanne. That’s right, you were empathetic to her pain. You may have buried it under your pride for your mother, but in your heart of hearts, you were bitter about her death. Your mother fought to protect humans and yet they mobbed and killed her. You must have been frustrated at your powerlessness, as well as furious at your mother’s murderers. That’s why you loved Jeanne. Or at the very least, it served as a foundation for your affections.”

After Asura finished speaking, tears began to appear in Tina's eyes.

"Boss, I don't think you needed to say all of that," Marx said.

"That was...inhumane," lina agreed.

"I noticed it too but I didn't say anythin' on purpose," Jyrki sighed.

"For better or for worse, Asura is a very honest person," Lumia said.

"But a false sense of pride is very vulnerable," Reko pointed out.

"I agree," Salume said. "Speaking from experience, it's better to be aware of one's true feelings."

"There's no need to hide anything," Asura continued. "I accept you for what you are, so there's no need to hide your true feelings when talking to me. I'll see through your charade anyway. If you're angry about something, just admit it. Your mother had her ideals, but you aren't your mother. You're your own person, Tina, so it's not surprising if you disagree with your mother's beliefs."

The tears started streaming down Tina's cheeks. "Of course I'm frustrated! She saved and protected them, so why did they kill her?! Why did I have to go on the run and why did the heroes chase me around to kill me?! If Mistress Jeanne hadn't saved me, I would have been killed! I was only seven years old at the time! Only *seven*!"

Salume, who was sitting next to Tina, reached out and placed her arm around Tina's shoulders in a small hug. Reko got up and sat on Tina's other side, patting her head.

"So that's why Jeanne wanted to kill the heroes," Lumia said. "If she became a Demon Lord, she'd be able to gather all the heroes to her. It would have doubled as a way to get revenge for Tina."

"Exterminating monsters is part of a hero's duties," Asura said. "But they're very rigid in their way of thinking. If I had been there, I would have chosen to protect both Tina and her mother, using their strength for the good of all humankind. They could also serve as a positive example for how humans and monsters can coexist, which would give them preferential treatment."

"Humans are...narrow-minded," lina growled.

“Yeah, I agree. Not everyone’s as tolerant as you, Boss,” Jyrki said.

Asura and the others waited for Tina to calm down. *She’s always crying*, Asura thought. However, she didn’t blame or look down on Tina for that. Tina may have helped Jeanne with her plan out of empathy, but she, too, had lost many things in her life.

“I’m not sure why, but I feel much better now,” Tina said with a small smile. “I’ll tell you all about my dear older sister, including things both Mistress Jeanne and Noemi told me in the past.” She used her sleeve to rub away her tears before she started, “I was running through the woods, the heroes in pursuit...”

Extra Episode Fifteen: Like a god? No, like a godslayer.

“Dammit, why’d she have to go and turn into an old broad? I never even got the chance to fuck her.”

“It’s because they handed her off to those women and she got tortured. Tsk, I hear that the prince and other nobles got to fuck her when she still looked just like Jeanne. They had so much fun with her that she was bleeding.”

Lumia Autun was sitting in the back of a small wagon, listening to the two soldiers’ conversation. They were the wagoners, and they’d been stationed near the country’s borders. Their mission had been to kill Lumia.

“Were they saying like, ‘Oh Jeanne, my Jeanne’?”

Speaking of which, I feel like everyone keeps referring to me as Jeanne, Lumia thought. The only thing she had to cover her wounded body was a single shirt, which had been reduced to rags. She was lying on her side at the back of the wagon, legs curled up with her knees to her chest.

“Ha, I wish I got the chance to experience that considering the real one’s about to get executed. Damn, I wish I got to see the real one get tortured.”

Torture? That’s ridiculous, Lumia thought.

“But seriously, I wish I got the chance to have some fun with Jeanne.”

“Can’t you just fuck the white-haired one in the back? She’s pretty much dead on her feet already.”

“No way. Her pussy’s damaged goods. Her body’s so injured that I can’t even get it up.”

“Why don’t we just kill her already? Why do we have to go out of our way to transport her to the border?”

“Apparently, Jeanne cut a deal. We’re to let her escape from the country. But

the moment she crosses the border, none of us have to care if she lives or dies. It was just some pretty words to get Jeanne to behave.”

A deal... A promise that they didn't keep.

“Sister,” Lumia whispered. Her voice was so hoarse and quiet that the wind covered it up.

Lumia had said that she would cover for Jeanne Autun Lala's sins, so why was this happening? To be more precise, she'd made a false confession to protect her older sister's honor and reputation. *The first prince promised me that if I let myself receive punishment, he'd save Jeanne.* That was why Lumia let herself get raped and tortured. She'd planned on dying without putting up a fight.

The mere memory of everything she'd endured threatened to drive her insane. Everyone called her “Jeanne,” rejecting her identity as “Lumia.” It hadn't bothered her. Because they had the same face, she was nothing more than a replacement for her great sister.

“I'll kill you,” Lumia snarled.

A hideously dark emotion, like a combination between hatred and despair, swirled in her chest. Though Lumia had no weapons with her, she registered the magical energy inside of her and pulled it out. As she altered its element, she realized that something was wrong. It didn't feel the same way it always did. Usually, her magic was like a sparkling ray of light. But this time, it felt terribly shadowy. Though it wasn't so sinister as to feel like she was reaching into an abyss, it was still the furthest thing from “sparkling.”

The magic felt dim, like the dusk sky. It didn't take Lumia long to realize that she'd earned a Fixed Element. In that case, she had to create a new attack magic. She wanted something strong and formidable—more powerful than anything else in the world, capable of killing everyone around her. Slowly and steadily, she altered the type of magic inside of her.

“Divine Retribution,” she whispered. This was the strongest magic Lumia knew. It was stronger than anything and anyone. *Ah, but, Lumia thought, I don't believe in gods. God doesn't exist and even if He does, I'd kill him. In that case...* “Revised...” From the bottom of her heart, she prayed that this power would be enough for her to slay even a god. “Dance of Divine Destruction!”

At Lumia's sudden shout, the two soldiers turned around in surprise. That was when they witnessed a fallen angel spreading her black wings. A servant of destruction descended from the skies, an obsidian claymore in hand.

Lumia made her way to a forest near the border. She was dragging a claymore she'd stolen from the guards, but she managed only a few more steps before collapsing upon the ground.

"My injuries are more painful than expected," she murmured haltingly to herself.

She activated her healing magic, but she had no idea how long it would take to kick in. For a long time, Lumia remained on the ground, her mind working the entire time. Once she finished her preparations, she would return to the Juaren Kingdom and destroy it. So long as she drew breath, she would continue destroying the world.

Eventually, Lumia drifted off. She was still asleep when she realized that something was licking her. *Is this an animal? I'm not food for some beast!* Lumia's eyes shot open and she leaped to her feet, jumping backwards and holding up her claymore. However, she didn't see an animal. Instead, she saw a girl who had a surprised look on her face.

"A girl?" Lumia said.

The girl had red hair and a rather cute face, but her clothes had been reduced to rags clinging on to her small frame. *She might have been wandering around these woods until she found me,* Lumia guessed.

"A-Are you all right?" the girl asked in a timid voice. "Um, you're really injured, so I..."

"I'm fine." Lumia lowered her claymore. "What are you doing here? You don't look like you're here to look for herbs."

As she asked, Lumia checked her body's state. Though she'd recovered far more than she expected, she'd also slept longer than she hoped. The sun was about to set. Even so, she'd healed enough that if monsters showed up, she could fight them off.

"I-I'm going to go now," the girl said as she started to get up.

"Please wait. Are you lost?" As soon as the words left Lumia's mouth, she realized her mistake. *What am I doing? Didn't I just swear to myself that I would destroy this world? Under that measure, everyone, even children and the elderly, deserves to be killed.*

"I'm, um..."

"I found her! Over here!"

Someone's voice sounded out, causing the little girl to twitch and shrink back. In the blink of an eye, Lumia and the girl found themselves surrounded by three men and two women. Lumia recognized one of the five as Noemi Clapisson. She'd been Lumia's torturer, despite her status as a hero. Granted, she'd only played with Lumia in the beginning. She must have gotten bored halfway through, for she left Lumia to others and never showed herself again.

"Jeanne? Or not," Noemi said. "You're the fake, aren't you? The real one's already dead."

"This is Jeanne's little sister?" one of the men asked.

"What is *she* doing here?" another one added.

"Who knows?" Noemi replied. "But if she's with a peak-tier monster, then she must be our enemy. There's no need for mercy. Eliminate them both."

Lumia picked up the claymore. *This isn't good. All five of them are heroes.* She glanced over at the little girl, who looked terrified.

"Are you a peak-tier monster?" she asked the girl, who looked down at her feet in lieu of replying.

"She is, Lumia Autun," Noemi answered in her stead. "If you'd like, I don't mind letting you go. We're not interested in you."

"Is that so?" Lumia lowered her claymore. "So this girl isn't human?"

"That's correct. Get out of my sight, Lumia."

"What's your name?" Lumia asked in the gentlest tone she could muster as she approached the girl.

The girl blinked, seemingly confused at being addressed. “What?”

“Your name.” Lumia placed her hand on the girl’s head and gave it a small pat.

“I’m Tina.”

“What a lovely name. I’m glad that you’re a monster. I shall protect you. You showed me kindness, even though heroes were pursuing you. Allow me to repay you for it.” Lumia offered her a sweet smile. “I plan on murdering all of humanity and destroying this world. However, you are not human. Therefore, I will not kill you.”

Upon hearing Lumia’s words, the heroes started to laugh.

“She’s nuts.”

“I dunno what happened to her, but she’s spouting some serious nonsense.”

“Are you mad, Lumia?” Noemi exclaimed between her chuckles. “Someone of *your* caliber, threatening to destroy the world?! You’ve absolutely lost it. But if it wasn’t some ridiculous joke, that means you’re an enemy of us heroes!”

“My name is Jeanne Autun Lala,” Lumia said, staring right at them. “That name will not die, for I shall inherit it. My older sister’s regrets, my despair, Tina’s fear, the injustice the Oathkeeper Brigade suffered... I will shoulder everything as Jeanne Autun Lala. Revised Divine Retribution...”

Lumia was completely serious. She would take on all of that suffering—the regrets, the despair, the fear, and injustice. She would destroy the world and kill every single person in it. *I’m even willing to become a Demon Lord to see this through.*

“Dance of Divine Destruction! You shall be the first! Fall into ruin and disappear! Shatter and die! Lament!”

Noemi and the other heroes could not tear their eyes away from the beautiful fallen angel. Noemi’s thoughts skidded to a halt as a wave of emotion threatened to overwhelm her. It was as if she was witnessing Jeanne’s Divine Retribution. The fallen angel darted towards them, slashing one of Noemi’s companions dead. It was when his blood sprayed through the air that Noemi

and the other heroes finally came back to their senses.

But in that instant, Lumia charged at them. Noemi blocked Lumia's attack with the shaft of her spear. She couldn't withstand the weight Lumia was putting into the claymore though, and was forced to back away. *Impossible! I lost in a battle of strength?! That's not all. Lumia should be wounded and in terrible condition. Yet that speed and that strength... If she wasn't injured, she'd be stronger than us!* Despite her confusion, Noemi's brain worked quickly to figure out her opponent's level. *No, that's not all. She's even stronger than Jeanne.*

"Revised Divine Retribution: Dance of Divine Destruction." A new fallen angel descended from the heavens. The remaining three heroes other than Noemi were exchanging blows with the angels. "Revised Divine Retribution: Dance of Divine Destruction."

Yet *another* fallen angel appeared. Noemi's companions were forced to face them one-on-one. *She truly is Jeanne Autun Lala*, Noemi thought. Lumia had manifested three angels simultaneously, each as strong as a hero. It had been due to her ability to temporarily fight with the strength of four heroes that Jeanne had been regarded as the strongest among them.

"Revised Divine Retribution—" Lumia spoke, to Noemi's disbelief. "Dance of Divine Destruction."

A *fourth* fallen angel appeared. At that moment, the new Jeanne proved herself more powerful than the old one. A deep fear gripped Noemi's heart at the realization that, combined with Lumia, they had to fight against five heroes at once.

In the past, she'd looked up to Jeanne and wished to possess her. She'd even prayed for the chance to dominate her. Yet right before her eyes, this fake easily surpassed the legend.

"Amazing," Tina whispered as she watched the fallen angels fight.

"This magic is strong enough to kill even the gods," said Lumia—no, the woman who inherited Jeanne's name. She walked over to stand next to Tina as

she continued, "Let us spectate as these insects scurry about. I am your ally."

"Is that because I'm a monster rather than a human?"

"That's right." Jeanne smiled. "You tried to save me as well."

Tina had licked her injuries, much in the same way an animal would. Every wound that Tina's tongue had touched was healed. Some monsters possessed skills unique to them and if Jeanne had to guess, she'd say that Tina's tongue or saliva had some sort of healing factor in it. In that case, it would be wise to recruit her as an ally.

"Ah!" Tina exclaimed.

A hero fell. There were only three heroes left, while four fallen angels remained.

"Hmm. It seems my fallen angels are stronger than the real ones," Jeanne commented.

For as long as she could remember, she'd gotten a front row seat to watching angels fight, so she had a good idea as to their strength. Outnumbered, the heroes couldn't lift a single finger against the angels slaughtering them. Two angels worked together to tear a hero into ribbons, while the third one reduced another hero to a lump of flesh. Soon, Noemi was the only one left.

"I'm impressed, though I didn't expect anything less from the hero said to be the second strongest after Jeanne Autun Lala. Of course, that ranking doesn't include any of the Great Heroes," Jeanne giggled. "I wonder if you can fight against four of my hero-level fallen angels at once though."

"Please, spare my life!" Noemi suddenly screamed as she tossed her spear away and threw herself onto the ground.

Jeanne wasn't sure how to react at the sight. Noemi was grinding her forehead into the dirt. Though the fallen angels froze, they were ready to move at any provocation. Jeanne walked over to Noemi and stepped on the back of her head.

"'Spare my life,' you say? And you call yourself a hero? Do you remember what you did to me? You manipulated the first prince into executing my older

sister. You disbanded the Oathkeeper Brigade and sentenced many of my friends to death!” Again and again, she ground Noemi’s head under her heel.

“That’s evidence of my usefulness! If you spare me, I promise I will work for you, my lady!”

“Shut up!” Jeanne kicked Noemi’s head but Noemi remained in a submissive pose.

“I will serve you as your slave. I can be of use to you. Please, at least give it some thought.”

“Are you truly that desperate to save your own skin?! Do you not possess a single scrap of dignity?! Do you not have any pride as a hero and a warrior?!” *Did everyone—my sister and my friends—die because of someone like this?* Jeanne’s head started to throb. She stumbled before she fell to her knees. Tina hurried over and steadied her. “This is ridiculous,” Jeanne sobbed, no longer able to contain her grief anymore. She’d lost everything thanks to this vile woman.

“Unless something unexpected happens, I will soon be promoted to a Great Hero. I shall be a Great Hero for you and obey all of your commands. If your goal is to destroy this world, then I will aid you in doing so,” Noemi said. She was still prostrating herself before Jeanne, as still as a statue.

“Do what you wish.” Jeanne didn’t even feel like killing her anymore. She dismissed the angels and then stood up, smiling as she offered a hand to Tina. “Tina, if you don’t have a home to return to, would you like to come live with me?”

“May I really? I’m a—”

“That’s precisely why. I hate humans. So please, stay by my side.”

It would be far too sad and lonely to embark on a journey for revenge alone.

Though still nervous, Tina reached out and held Jeanne’s hand. “Um, thank you so much for saving me.”

“Don’t mention it. I will continue to protect you, so please, stay by my side.”

I lost everything. But that’s probably why I decided to seek the warmth that

this small hand offers.

“Noemi, that scumbag!!!” Reko yelled.

“It was something, all right. Not even I would have begged for my life under those circumstances,” Salume said.

“Noemi...is the queen...of trash,” lina muttered.

“Man, that Noemi was a real piece of work,” Jyrki said. “Well, that ain’t a surprise, I guess.”

“I’m proud to say that I was her killer,” Asura sighed. “Judging from your story, Jeanne seems to have been the type who fears loneliness.”

“I agree.” Marx nodded. “She sounds like you, Boss.”

“She never liked to be alone,” Lumia said. “In that sense, she’s very similar to you, Asura.”

“Boss’s fear of loneliness is pretty wild,” Reko said. “Every night, she has to sleep with me and Salume, you know?”

“Hey now, I’m not scared of loneliness. I just like it when things are nice and lively. Is that so weird?” Asura said. The mercenary group in her past life had always loved chatting and partying, making every day cheery and fun.

“It’s not weird, but it’s not very logical,” Salume said. “I’ve been wondering this for a while now, but do you force us to undergo torture training because you want us to live?”

“Yeah, I’ve thought that too,” Jyrki said. “If we just kill ourselves when we get caught, no one’s gotta worry about intel leakin’ out.”

“Hostages are of no use against us. To others, it may seem like we don’t care about abandoning our allies,” Marx said. “However, teaching us how to endure torture is akin to you wanting us to live until we eliminate all of our enemies.”

“You really love your friends,” Tina observed.

“Humph. It’s not love, it’s obsession,” Asura shot back, sounding miffed. “I’m simply attached.”

“It sounds like love to me,” Tina replied. “It’s not as if you’re trying to monopolize them.”

“You forgave me even though I left Moon Blossom, and you even wished for my happiness.”

“I forgave you because that was the contract. Don’t get the wrong idea, Lumia,” Asura said. “Besides, I figured it would be nice if at least *one* of us got a happy ending. Everyone else, I want you to die a painful death like a real mercenary. Of course, you can’t forget to go out with a bang.”

“I’m pretty sure that if we *did* die a painful death, you’d be the angriest about it,” Jyrki laughed.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” Asura replied with a mirthless smile. “Stop trying to put me on a pedestal. If you die, that means you’re weak, which means you had it coming. I wouldn’t feel anything about it.”

“That’s why you make them go through such grueling training, isn’t it? It’s so they’ll get strong enough that they won’t die,” Lumia said with a bright smile.

“No matter what I say, you’ll just twist my words to suit your agenda,” Asura said with an aggrieved sigh. “Fine, whatever. I admit that I’m prone to loneliness. Happy? I’m going to sleep now, so you should all get some rest too. I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that, she got up.

“Okaaay. See ya tomorrow,” Jyrki said.

“Okay...good night, Boss... See you tomorrow,” lina said.

“Please rest well, Boss. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Marx said.

“I’m gonna go sleep with you!” Reko volunteered.

“Me too,” Salume added.

“I shall sleep with you as well, then!” Tina jumped in.

“Tsk. Now there’s going to be even less room on my bed.” Despite Asura’s irritation, she didn’t object to any of them.

Extra Episode Three: Give me an ideal ending and a beautiful death.

Asura was woken up in the middle of the night by discomfort. When she looked around, she saw Salume, Reko, and Tina sleeping in the same bed as her.

Reko had his face buried in her chest and was murmuring, "This pillow is so hard... So hard..."

Tina had her arms wrapped around Asura's thighs. "There's no butt," she said in her sleep. Even in her dreams, she was looking for a nice behind.

Salume wasn't saying anything, but she was clutching Asura's hair in her hand and pulling on it.

"I can't sleep like this," Asura said, a lopsided smile on her face. She slowly pushed Reko's head away and then rescued her hair from Salume's grip. Finally, she gently separated Tina from her lower body.

With a sigh, she rolled out of bed. After a stretch and a drink of water from the cup on the bedside table, she walked over to the balcony. The night was beautiful, with stars dotting the sky. The bedroom Asura chose for herself was on the second floor of the old castle, with a balcony facing the inner courtyard.

When she looked down, she saw Jyrki sitting on one of the benches. Asura snapped her fingers, drawing Jyrki's attention to her. Upon noticing her, Jyrki gave a small wave. Instead of waving back, Asura leaped over the railing of the balcony. Since the room was only on the second floor, she landed on the ground without much trouble.

"Is somethin' up?" Jyrki asked.

"Nope. Just thought we could watch the stars together." Asura sat down next to him. They enjoyed the sky in silence for about a minute before Asura asked, "Why aren't you asleep?"

"No real reason. I happened to wake up in the middle of the night. How 'bout

you, Boss?”

“My sleep was terrible.” Asura described what she’d escaped from only minutes ago, and Jyrki howled with laughter.

After he finished, he said, “This might be surprisin’ to hear, but I like the night a lot. It’s nice and quiet, and I like how it feels like time’s come to a stop. Most importantly, night’s the perfect time to go stealin’.”

“I bet,” Asura replied with a shrug. “But you’re not a bandit anymore.”

“It feels like forever ago that I was. If I can borrow your words, it feels like I was a bandit in a past life!”

“It wasn’t that long ago, was it?” Asura giggled.

“But on that day, lina and I were reborn.”

Asura had been the one to destroy Jyrki’s bandit group. However, she didn’t kill anyone. She knocked them all out, but she didn’t take any lives. This was because she’d wanted to recruit Jyrki and slaughtering his old friends would have made for a bad first impression.

“I went from a bandit to a merc. The bandit Jyrki died that day.”

“In other words, the bandit Jyrki’s adventures came to an end.”

A silence formed between them once more. The night breeze brushed against Asura’s cheek.

“I sure don’t want the mercenary Jyrki’s adventures to end just yet,” Jyrki said.

“You were close to actually dying when we used the return of the dead tactic. I suppose that’s the cause of your sentimentality.”

“Yeah. The thought of ‘I don’t wanna die’ just hit me outta nowhere.”

“Then live. You’re not allowed to die without my permission.”

“Is that an order?”

“It is.”

“That sounds good.”

Jyrki started to laugh cheerily again, so Asura laughed with him. *However, Asura thought, we're mercenaries. Death is a constant in our lives. Ordering someone to live does nothing but make me feel better.* Both Asura and Jyrki were well aware of this fact.

"If you're really going to kick it, then at least die a vivacious death," Asura said.

"Yes, ma'am. Speakin' of, Boss, do you have an ideal version of your so-called vivacious death?"

"I do. Do you want to hear it?" In response to Asura's question, Jyrki nodded. "Good answer. It's not my final episode yet, but I'll give you a sneak preview. Of course, this is nothing more than a fantasy."

I would want to die at sunset, under an orange sky. As for the stage, the sandy shores of a beach sound good. I imagine myself, wearing my usual robes, standing with my back to the ocean. The water sparkles, reflecting the sun. In front of me stands Iris. I don't know if this will happen in the near or distant future, but I imagine us facing off while looking as we did when we first met. This could happen a few years or decades from now. It could even be a few centuries in the future.

As for me, hmm, I suppose I would be holding daggers or the katana I plan on getting later. Ideally, I would be wielding a katana. There's also the chance that I'd get myself a legendary weapon. As for Iris, she'd be using the same single-edged sword that she has now.

She'll say, "You look the same as you did back then."

That's why I'll reply, "You also went out of your way to dress the same as you used to. You're even using your old sword."

We'll share a laugh and then Iris will say, "You have to die for the sake of this world and the people in it."

Iris would have lived up until that day without ever taking another's life. I would be the only person she ever vowed to kill. Just like how Iris is special to me, so am I special to her.

“We’re not gonna be there?” Jyrki asked.

“Sorry. This scene and this moment is mine and Iris’s. I’m only teaching Iris so that we can eventually face each other as enemies, much like how Lumia raised me.”

“That’s a pretty hair-raisin’ plan.”

“Yes. It’s as lovely as it is disgusting.”

Iris and I will fight to the death under that orange sky. The blood we draw from the other will spray through the air. We’ll laugh, or perhaps cry, as we endure injury after injury, all in an attempt to kill the other. I’m sure by this point in time, I’ll know what love is, with Iris as the recipient of my affections. In fact, I *hope* that I will fall in love with her. After all, killing the person you love the most, or dying at their hands, sounds like a most wondrous time, don’t you think?

You think I’m crazy? You act as if that’s any sort of surprise. Iris, too, will love me. She’s already starting to view me in that way. Despite our love, neither of us can compromise our ideals for the other. I want to go to war, whereas Iris wants to eliminate war from this world.

Oh dear, has my story become a bit too grandiose? But a story of such a scale would be much more fun. Besides, this is nothing more than my fantasy. You can’t blame me for getting carried away.

In any case, Iris and I can never have a happy ending together. Illuminated by the setting sun, we’ll fight, expending every last drop of energy we have. We’ll be killing each other with the same vivacious passion we live our lives with. Then at the end of it, one of us will die. If I die, then that’s the end of my story. If Iris dies, it’s the end of hers.

I’ll be sad. Perhaps I’ll even cry. I’m sure that by that point, I’ll have learned such emotions. After sobbing my eyes out, I’ll go and seek the next finale.

When Iris dies, she’ll say, “You truly were a lovely yet disgusting person.”

If I'm the one who dies, I wonder what I'll say. It'll probably be something like, "Don't cry, Iris." I'll smile at her and reach out with a bloodied hand to touch her cheek. But my hand will fall short of reaching her. I'll collapse and Iris will catch me. She'll start to weep and upon hearing that, I'll try to tell her to stop crying. The words will never make it out of my mouth. Then I'll die.

"And that's the final episode I've been dreaming about."

"That was awfully detailed!" Jyrki said, sounding a little surprised.

"Well, yes, it's a fantasy, after all," Asura replied with a small shrug. However, she was certain that something resembling this fantasy would come to pass. She and Iris would kill each other in a way very similar to how she imagined it.

No matter which one of them survived the encounter, it would signal the end of the story.

Afterword

Hello, it's Sou Hazuki. I figured that I should try talking about things *other* than food, but I can't think of anything to say. I guess that goes to show how much I think about food on a daily basis.

Last time, I hinted at going on something like a diet. However, I got lazy after losing four kilograms. I lost so little that I'm still overweight. I *am* maintaining my weight so at the very least, I don't gain any more. But by the time you're reading this, I believe I'll be back on my diet. Of course, this is just a belief and not a guarantee.

On my profile, I mentioned that my cat will come calling for me. But right now, at this very moment, as I'm writing these words, my cat came seeking my attention. Hey, I just fed you, didn't I? What could you possibly want now?!

It turned out my cat wanted affection, so I gave it a lot of pats.

"Is this enough for you, my master?" I asked.

"No, it's not enough. Love me more!"

"I should get back to work and finish what I was writing..."

"Shut up and love me!"

All right, I totally forgot what I wanted to write about. Oh well. Nothing's as important as how cute my cat is.

Now then, it's time to give thanks and acknowledgments! As usual, I'd like to thank my editor, Fujiwara! This time, there weren't any major issues and I believe the process went smoothly! Thank you very much!

Mizutametori, my illustrator, thank you for all the beautiful artwork! The cover art for this volume was especially amazing. Fujiwara and I were freaking out and going, "Oh my god! Holy crap!" the entire time.

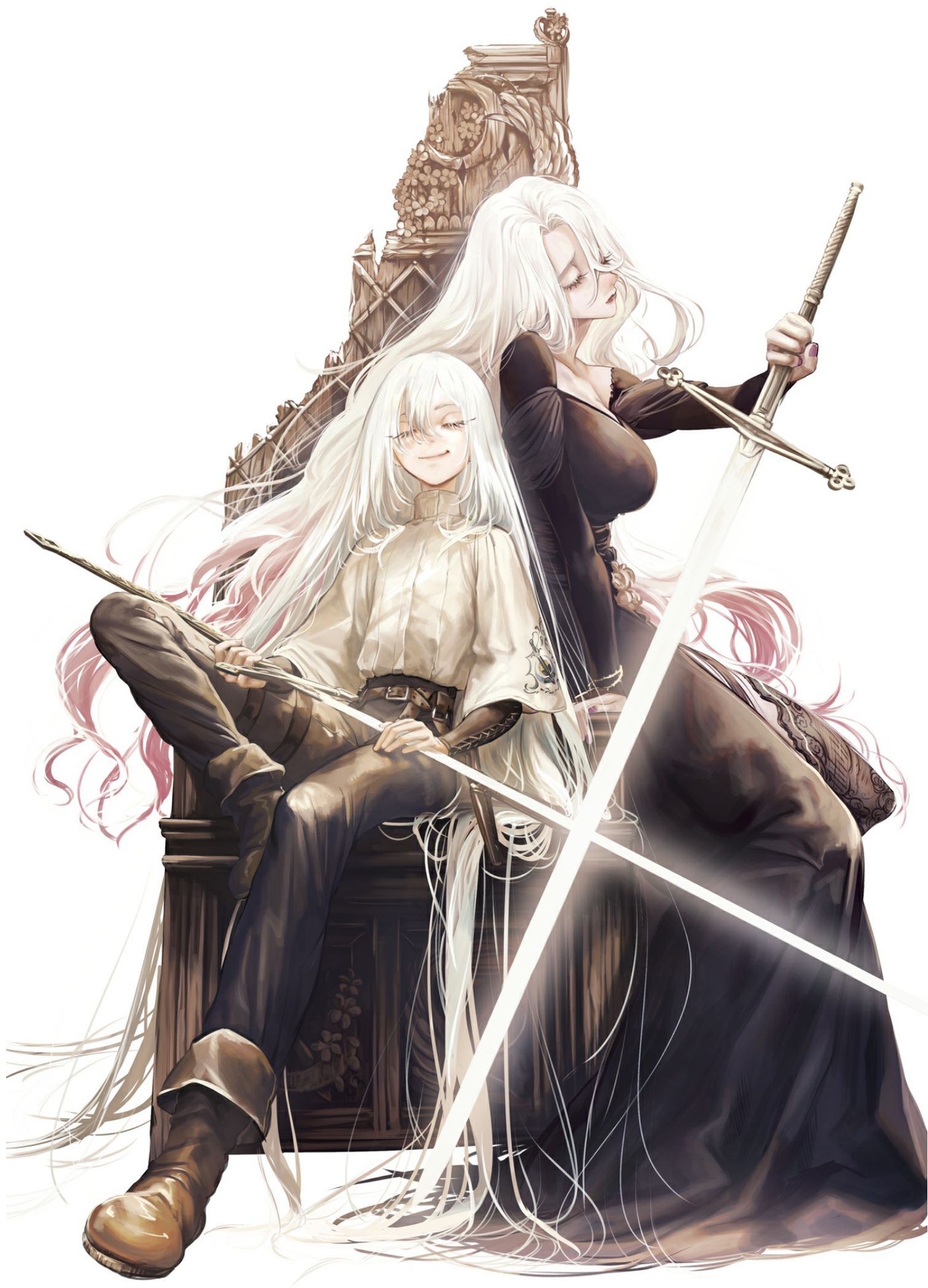
I would like to thank everyone in the editing, marketing, and PR teams as well. Ever since volume 1, I'm sure you heard me say that I wanted to ask for

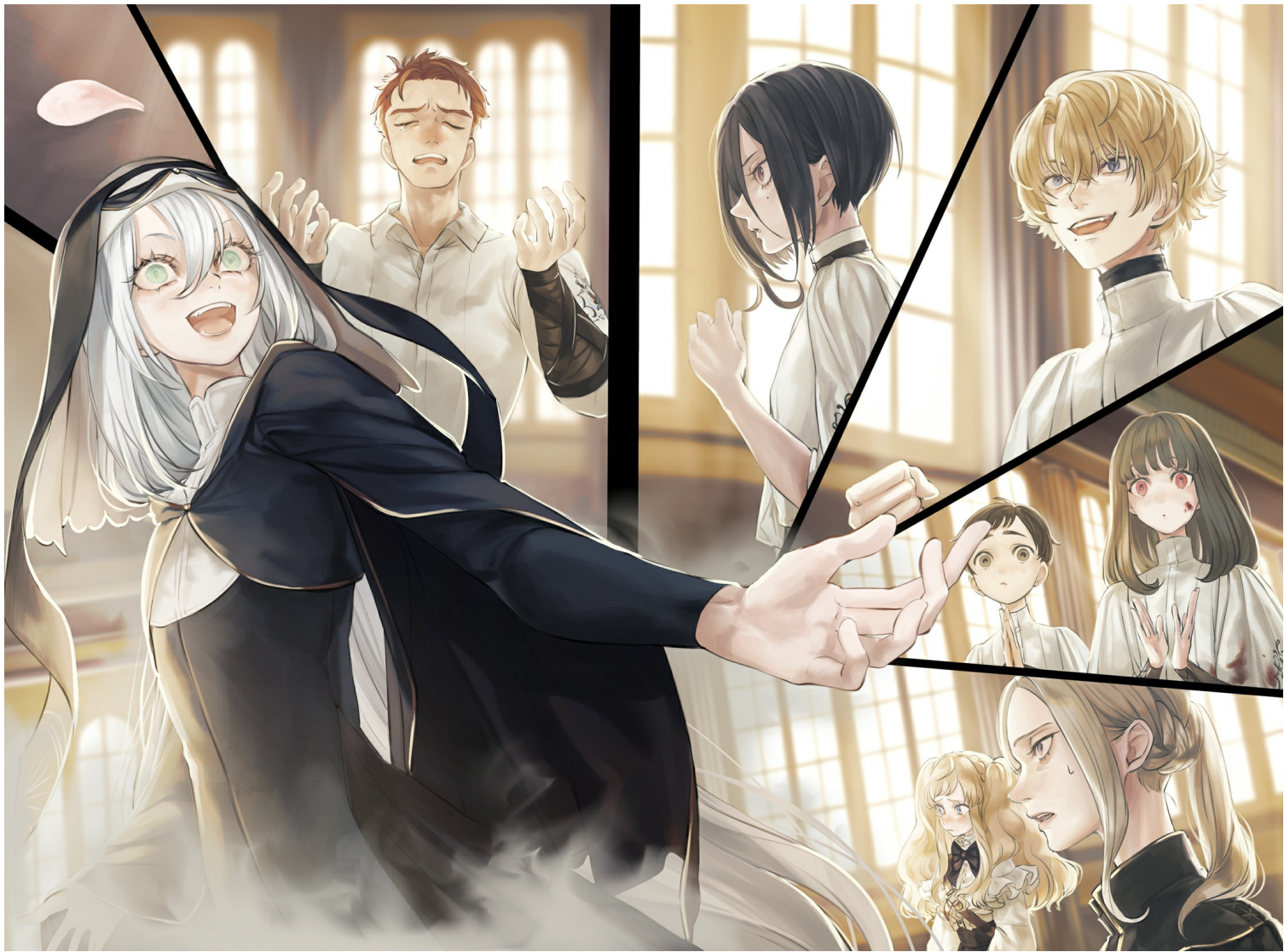
suggestions from this or that department. Thank you for all of your help and your advice was really helpful. Thank you again.

Everyone who helped with this volume, thank you so much! And finally, I'd like to thank my readers for reading all the way to volume 3. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you!

Let's meet again somewhere and some day!













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Moon Blossom Asura: The Ruthless Reincarnated Mercenary Forms the Ultimate Army: Volume 3

by Sou Hazuki

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Eric Wong

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