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Back to the Battlefield
The Veteran Heroes Return to the Fray!


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Back to the Battlefield: The Veteran Heroes Return to the Fray! Volume 1 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8


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1
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Prologue: The Legendary Heroes

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, all hell broke loose.

It all began when scores of demons invaded through a gate that had suddenly opened in the underworld. Humans united to raise a resistance, and the battle that followed thrust the world into a violent hell. The Demon Lord Allied Forces and humanity clashed unceasingly in a war that came to be called the Titanomachy.

At last, one hundred years into the war, seven young heroes appeared to put an end to the long, grueling conflict.

They were seven strong: Champion, Sage, Saint, Priest, Villainess, Gadabout, and Villager. After defeating the Seven Black Stars—the most powerful officers of the demon army—and finally restoring peace to the world, they became known as the Seven Heroes.

With the war over, the Seven Heroes each walked their own path. One of them was the man known as the Champion of Light, Alan Granger. He wished for neither wealth nor status in the aftermath of battle. Instead, he accepted an honorary noble title and returned to his hometown to start his new life as a commander in the Uniland Division of the Royal Knights.

Twenty-five years later, at the age of forty-two, Alan was still busy with his daily work as a simple knight commander on the frontier.

Chapter 1: The Hero's Current Life

Despite his seemingly prestigious title of knight commander, Alan Granger saw himself as nothing but a middle manager. The one who truly reigned over the Royal Knights was the supreme commander at headquarters. Although Alan was also a commander, he was only at the top of a humble frontier division.

"This is the fabulous, fresh training system for new recruits I've designed!"

The rustling *thunk* of a stack of documents slamming on top of Alan's desk resounded throughout the room. Marquess Ginger, feudal lord of one of the First Kingdom's domains, Uniland, was the owner of the documents. He was a slender man in his early twenties, but he could easily be mistaken for a woman because of the prissy way he spoke.

They were both in the Uniland Division knight commander's office that was more or less gifted to Alan for his personal use at work after he became a commander. Unfortunately, since this was a little division in the countryside, the building was rather small. The same was doubly true for the room. As a result, Ginger's soprano voice and the smack of papers hitting the desk made quite a racket.

"Be grateful for it!" Ginger insisted.

"Again with this, Lord Ginger?" Alan said with a sigh of frustration.

Still, he read over the documents. The feudal lord would occasionally submit proposals full of his ideas on knight business, so Alan was used to this.

"Amateurs should keep their noses out of this," was what Alan *wished* he could say, but he couldn't just dismiss Ginger—the fact was, the feudal lord far outranked him.

Formally, the Royal Knights belonged to the royal family, which was responsible for deploying them into the field to maintain public order or for national defense. In practice, the majority of their work could only be performed with the feudal lord's approval. Therefore, when comparing their positions, the feudal lord was definitely the commander's superior.

That was why, even though most of Ginger's proposals were often nothing more than nuisances with no practical application, Alan had to pretend to seriously consider them to avoid displeasing the feudal lord.

"Guess I'll take a look."

Alan knocked the documents he was in the middle of checking to the side and glanced through the proposal that was loudly slapped on his desk. Ginger made decent suggestions from time to time, so he couldn't always ignore them, but...

"Well, no. Realistically speaking, this would be very difficult," Alan said.

The proposal the marquess had brought over this time was optimistic, to say the least.

"Reducing the new recruit training time from a year to just three months is, just..."

"My, whatever seems to be the problem?" Ginger asked archly. "If we implement this, both the time taken and the cost will be reduced by three-fourths!"

The training they were discussing was the one given to new knight recruits. It took one year at present and was indeed a significant expense.

"Sure, that's true when you put it that simply, but I think it's important to slowly build a strong foundation. Hmm."

The ins and outs of training new recruits were better established compared to Alan's time, but that didn't ease his mind.

"What do you think, William?" Alan asked to the other person in the cramped room.

"You really wanna know? I think, what kind of senile, fossilized opinion is *that*? Oh wait, you're practically a fossil yourself, aren't you? Sorry, my bad."

The boy who showed no actual remorse for his back talk was William Rayfield. He was a handsome fifteen-year-old with androgynous looks who had earned top marks in the year's new recruit exam. Despite being young enough to be Alan's son, William gave him plenty of attitude.

Should I think of him as just a fool or someone with promise?

Alan sighed again. There he was, once hailed as a hero, now nothing but a bitter middle manager scorned by both his superior and subordinate. Right as that thought crossed his mind—

The door to Alan's office slammed open!

"Hey! How dare you two show Master Alan such disrespect!"

The words rang out as a seventeen-year-old dressed in a maid uniform entered the room. Alan was granted a noble title after defeating the demon lord, so he employed a maid named Rosetta. She wore her red hair styled in pigtails and carried a feisty energy that was no mere illusion. Her good looks and figure meant she was often approached by men, but she had been known to slap even a *noble* who wouldn't back off after countless rejections. She was just that kind of girl.

"Master Alan is a hero who once saved this very country! How about you show some respect and listen to him?!" Rosetta always spoke her mind, whether she was talking to the feudal lord or a young noble at the top of his peers. However, it was to no avail.

"Certainly, but... That's only a thing of the past, no?" said Marquess Ginger.

William voiced a similar opinion. "Yeah, that was, what, like, twenty-five years ago? I wasn't even born yet."

"He might have been a great man once, but he's stepped away from active duty and only does desk work now. Don't you think *you're* the stubborn one for clinging to the past?" Marquess Ginger added, his voice dripping with a belittling tone.

"Right on! We live in different times now," William said while grinning from ear to ear. "'Slowly building a strong foundation'? That's old man talk. It's the norm for fresh blood like us to rush into combat and get results, quick and easy!"

That was remarkable confidence coming from someone who had yet to start his actual training. Alan decided to think of William as someone with promise to make things easier for his mental health.

"Why, you two...!" Rosetta was shaking with rage.

Alan put a hand on his chin and spent a moment in silence.

“Very well. We’ll implement Lord Ginger’s proposal.”



“What?!”

Rosetta’s eyes widened with surprise, her appealing face suddenly in shambles from the shock. Somehow, the startled expression was so cute on her that she didn’t lose a drop of her beauty.

“Mhm, but of course. My method is the most efficient, no matter how you look at it,” Ginger said.

“Ha ha, now I can finally jump into busting some heads. Sorry in advance if the power of my youth makes a dinosaur like you jealous!”

Marquess Ginger and William left the room shortly after, both extremely satisfied with Alan’s decision.

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After Ginger and William left, Rosetta and Alan remained in the small office.

“Argh! What the hell is wrong with them?! How dare they talk to Master Alan, a legendary hero, like that?!”

Rosetta’s eyebrows were raised as she stomped on the floor like her frustration was a bug she wanted to squash. Alan tried to soothe her in a calm voice, almost as if he was a butler trying to pacify his stubborn mistress. The line between master and servant was completely blurred.

“You’re also at fault, Master! Why didn’t you defend yourself to them?!”

Rosetta turned her anger loose on Alan’s attitude as well. Her pretty face could wield a very intimidating glare. Alan was reminded of the time he fought a female red fenrir. The red fur, sharp glare, and constant yapping bore a striking resemblance.

“Well, Lord Ginger’s proposal made sense,” Alan said. “He also had the approval of William, the representative of the new recruits. Besides, it’s true—I *am* just an old man who left the front line long ago.”

Because of his abrupt promotion to knight commander, Alan had not seen actual combat since helping defeat the demon lord twenty-five years ago. That was a long enough time for a kid to grow up into an upstanding adult. Precious few of the current knights had actually seen Alan fight with their own eyes.

“I don’t think you’re that old, though,” Rosetta said with displeasure.

“I am old from my generation’s perspective. Back in the day, few got to live to this age.”

The world was different twenty-five years ago. The century-long war with the demons was at its worst during Alan’s time, so young humans were immediately sent to the front lines. It was rare for people like knights, whose lives revolved around combat, to survive past twenty. Despite growing up in such times, Alan made it to forty-two in what seemed like moments. When he thought back to all his allies who died young, Alan couldn’t help but agree when people called him old, a fossil, or senile.

Quite contrary to Alan, Rosetta bitterly gripped the skirt of her uniform as she said, “But I know that you really...”

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Rosetta Reinel was the only daughter born to an ordinary peddler couple. Her parents traveled from place to place selling their wares, so her life had been a nomadic one as long as she could remember.

Her parents always used to say: “It’s all thanks to the heroes putting an end to the war that we can safely travel between kingdoms like this.”

When the war was still waging, anyone could be attacked by the demon army the moment they took a step outside the kingdom. As if that weren’t enough, starving human raiders attacking merchants was an everyday occurrence. If anything, the kingdom itself, with its thriving logistics network, was a target for bandits. Even if merchants stayed within the country, they could be attacked wherever they went. Every journey was a matter of life and death.

Compared to those times, the demon army was now gone and peace had returned to the kingdoms. It was safe for merchants to bring their children along with them. Rosetta’s parents often expressed their gratitude to the heroes, and even though she was too young back then to properly understand what they meant, she took their words as fact.

That was, until ten years before the present, when Rosetta was swept up in an unfortunate incident. She was only seven years old.

While travel between kingdoms was much safer than before, it still carried some risk—namely, attacks from wild monsters. However, the path Rosetta and her parents were traveling along was supposed to be an area without any dangerous monsters. The worst one could encounter were monsters the size of a small animal. They were weak enough that even Rosetta's father could repel them with a weapon.

At least, that should have been the case.

In the blink of an eye, a five-meter-long wyvern came from nowhere, killing Rosetta's parents before they could even raise a weapon in defense. The young Rosetta couldn't lift a finger as she trembled before the overwhelming might of the beast approaching her. The only thing in her mind was what her parents used to say:

In the past, everything was a matter of life and death.

In other words, this used to happen all the time. She could feel the terror her parents once knew on a daily basis crawling across her vulnerable skin. All that was left was for the wyvern's enormous fangs to run her through, and then she'd be swallowed whole.

Somehow, in the next moment, a broad back stood between Rosetta and the wyvern.

"It's okay now. That must have been awful, you poor little girl."

Then, he drew the sword at this hip, and—

A flash of light.

The ferocious monster that was filling her with dread moments earlier was cut down in a single strike. Alan Granger, then thirty-two, was only a little older than her father.

The battle over, he embraced the trembling Rosetta in his arms with a gentle smile that was quite unlike the immense strength he had just displayed.

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Rosetta gripped the hem of her skirt and didn't finish her thought. She fell into silence and stood with her lips pursed. The way Rosetta often acted made

Alan think that she must put a lot of trust in him, yet he never once thought of that weight as a burden.

“Thank you for getting angry on my behalf, Rosetta.”

“It’s not like I did it for you or anything...”

Even the way she pouted when she was upset was adorable. Alan thought back to a female knight he fought alongside in the past.

She reminds me a bit of her.

“But you know, even if we put their poor manners aside, peace has made those two far too complacent,” Rosetta said, still clearly displeased.

“Complacent, huh?” Alan stood up from his chair and looked out the window behind him.

“Back in my day, because of the final war and the chaos that followed, every line of work was a struggle for survival.”

A serene townscape was visible through the window. The people lived their lives full of smiles; children played and laughed, adults worked hard with few worries, and the minstrels sang not tales of valor but of harmony and love.

“We finally have peace; what’s wrong with a little complacency? It’s proof that our hard work led to everyone having a peaceful life.”

Alan laughed proudly at the thought.

“The future era belongs to the people who will live in it! Us old folk shouldn’t meddle.”

Yes, matters of the tranquil time to come should be decided by those who inherited it. New endeavors were sure to have their fair share of failure, but even so, overcoming those trials step-by-step was how people would grow. Old soldiers’ one job was to watch over and protect them.

That was what Alan felt from the bottom of his heart.

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In no time at all, it was one year after Marquess Ginger’s proposed “Fresh Recruit Training Program” was implemented. On that day, Alan was inspecting

the Knight Training Academy— the facility where new knight recruits conducted their training—while accompanied by Rosetta.

“How are the new recruits of this term doing?” Alan asked their guide, Marquess Ginger.

“Oho ho ho, they are naturally doing excellent,” Ginger replied in his usual excessively shrill voice, the back of his hand pressed against his dainty mouth.

The recruits who had enlisted one month ago were practicing their magic in the academy training grounds.

“Water Element, Third Magic!” one of the new recruits chanted with their hand raised toward a target. Water forcefully swelled from their hand, and the ensuing burst of pressure blew the target away.

“Fire Element, Tenth Magic!” another recruit chanted from a different location. A ball of fire erupted from their fingertips accompanied by a fierce roar. The straw training dummy didn’t stand a chance.

“We start off magic training at a high grade, so most recruits are at this level a month after enlisting. Such efficiency would be unheard of in your time, right?” Ginger said, his unpleasant voice full of pride.

“You’re right. In my day, you’d need ten months to use magic of this level,” Alan answered.

“So, this is what they call Template Magic. We’re living in convenient times, aren’t we?” he murmured to himself, full of emotion.

The curriculum adopted by Ginger trimmed the fat from the previous procedures and prioritized learning magic with clear combat applications. Now, that alone wasn’t enough to shorten the time it took to learn magic by nine months; what made it possible was Template Magic.

Template Magic was powerful magic that anyone could use, built using the magic of Champions who excelled in the era of the Titanomachy as its foundation. The spells were split into six elements, and each was called by its element and a number instead of a unique name. That way, the magic the Champions had each developed over arduous years of the war could now be learned with a short amount of training.

These are good *times*, Alan thought.

The recruits might have only enlisted a month ago, but at this level, they could easily manage the monsters in the surrounding area.

“I admit I had my doubts, but I am glad we implemented your suggestion, Lord Ginger,” Alan said honestly. It had turned out to be true that the previous curriculum had superfluous parts since it was created based on the training they taught before the development of Template Magic. Not that the old training was without merit, but from an efficiency standpoint, Alan found the brand-new curriculum had plenty of merit as an initiative.

Well, we have the leeway to try it out because *we live in peaceful times*.

Ginger laughed proudly, seeming genuinely pleased to hear his plan complimented.

“Oho ho ho ho, yes, see? Dear William only graduated last year and he’s already proving himself on the front line. Now, do go on, feel free to heap more praises upon my intellect!”

The face of that blond boy surfaced in Alan’s memory.

“William, you say?”

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Around that same time, in the monster emergence zone of the Uniland domain, William Rayfield raised his sword overhead toward a large, monstrous beowulf.

“Blaze Element, Twelfth Magic!”

Fwoosh!

The sword William was holding burst into flames.

“Haah!”

He slammed the flaming sword down on the beowulf, easily cutting through its thick fur to deliver a fatal wound.

“Phew! I’m always so flawless I might get sick of it,” William said as he pushed his awfully smooth blond hair—his pride and joy—back from his forehead.

At only sixteen years old, William Rayfield was now the captain of the Fourteenth Unit of the Anti-Monster Corps, a group of forty young recruits. To the others, the youthful and successful William was an unparalleled object of admiration.

“That was insane, Captain!”

“The youngest ever captain is something else!”

William’s every action was showered with endless praise.

“Ha ha ha! I know it’s the truth, but say it too much and you’re gonna make me blush.”

Despite William’s words, he brazenly basked in the glory. In fact, his tone suggested he wanted them to keep it coming.

“Though, you know, my age’s got nothing to do with it. The talented generation has to step up and win big in place of the dried-up, crusty dinosaurs like the commander!”

“Captain, we’ve already finished patrolling the area assigned to us today,” the vice-captain, a man a little more sensible than the rest, told William.

“Really now? And here we still have time to kill.”

“It’s all because you’re so damn efficient, Captain!”

“Your skill is unrivaled!”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” William said with a peal of laughter. He showed no hint of shame no matter how much he was praised. It was actually impressive, in a certain way.

“But if we go back now, those pigheaded fossils won’t let us hear the end of it. Since we’re already out here, how about we run down the clock while we survey the area assigned to us tomorrow? You guys up for it?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Let’s freaking go!”

William’s men enthusiastically agreed with his suggestion.

“Heh, I like your attitude! Let’s do it!” William said before springing onto his

horse. He was about to dig his heels into his horse's sides when his vice-captain raised his voice.

"One moment, Captain! There is someone headed our way from that hill."

William squinted. "Huh? Is that a knight from a different unit?"

Indeed, a knight from a unit other than William's was staggering over to them. His armor and other equipment were battered, making it clear a fight had taken place. One of William's men ran up to him.

"Hey, hey, what happened?"

"M...Mon...sters..." the other knight croaked faintly.

"What about them, what kind of monsters?" he pressed.

"No...it was...dem..."

The knight suddenly collapsed, revealing to all of them that an arrow was embedded deep in his back.

"What the—Hey, are you okay?!" William shouted.

When William's squad member took a closer look, he found that the injured knight had already drawn his last breath. "It's no use. He's dead," he told William.

"What could have possibly..."

The monsters in the area weren't supposed to be particularly dangerous. Besides, the man had been killed by an arrow. With their low intelligence, it was unthinkable for monsters to use complex tools like bows and arrows. As William was searching his mind for an explanation, his vice-captain raised his voice once more.

"Captain William! Take heed!"

When William turned toward the hill the vice-captain had pointed at, he saw a band of more than seventy monsters. And as if that weren't enough, the monsters were brandishing weapons while sitting astride horses.

Most shocking of all, one of the creatures *spoke*.

"Humans spotted ahead. Assault unit, forward! Slaughter them all!"

The other monsters let out a raucous war cry in response.

“Monsters wielding weapons, riding horses, and communicating? No, this can’t be...!” the vice-captain spluttered.

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After taking a thorough look around the knights’ training grounds, Alan had just decided it was time to leave when a terribly battered knight rushed into the Knight Training Academy grounds. Alan hurried to meet the afflicted man.

“Tell me, where did you get those injuries?”

“Commander Alan! I’m George, vice-captain of the Fourteenth Unit.”

The Fourteenth Unit? That would be William’s!

“I-I have a report,” George continued. The news he delivered next nearly knocked Alan off his feet. “Demons have been sighted in the twenty-third monster emergence zone!”

“What did you say?!” Alan cried.

Astonishment filled his veins with ice and froze him to the spot. He wasn’t alone; Rosetta and Ginger next to him couldn’t stop their horrified exclamations.

“That is unfathomable! Demons were supposed to have gone extinct twenty-five years ago!”

“A-Are you sure this isn’t some sort of mistake?!”

It was only natural to think that. The soldiers of the demon army were supposed to have been completely wiped from the world twenty-five years ago.

“No, there can be no mistake. They were speaking and riding horses. They’re presently engaged with the Fourteenth Unit, but they far outnumber us. The situation is dire; immediate reinforcements are necessary, sir.”

“I’ll go!”

Alan leapt on top of a nearby horse, but he was stopped by Marquess Ginger.

“H-Hold your horses! No matter the emergency, the commander going to deal with it personally is against regulations! At times like this, you are supposed to

order a mobilization of a midsize standby unit to—”

“If we wait for them to mobilize, the Fourteenth Unit will be wiped out! What happened to your usual innovative posturing, my lord?” Alan glared at him.

“Urk!” Ginger was a little shaken when faced with such an intense look from a man who was usually so composed and unargumentative.

“Even so...rules are rules! At the very least, you must bring someone from the medical staff with you if you’re heading to a war zone.”

When she heard that, Rosetta jumped onto a horse herself. “Then I’ll accompany him. I *am* versed in medicine and healing magic.”

“Thank you, Rosetta. I’ll leave treatment of the wounded on-site to you,” Alan said.

“Hold on a moment! You are Alan’s attendant, not a member of the knights.”

“Let’s go!” Alan said to Rosetta.

They both glanced sidelong at the still-complaining Ginger. Ignoring him, they grabbed their horses’ reins and set off.

“Hey! Hold it right there! In the first place, what can someone old and powerless like you even...”

Ginger’s voice faded into the distance as Alan and Rosetta galloped toward the embattled Fourteenth Unit.

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“To think they would appear in the Fourteenth Unit’s jurisdiction of all places,” Alan muttered as he tightly gripped the reins.

“Is it especially bad if it’s that unit?” Rosetta asked as she rode beside him.

“Yes, they’re an experimental unit—made entirely of recruits who underwent the new curriculum,” he answered grimly.

At first, they had a handful of experienced knights with them for support, but thanks to William’s achievements, it was decided that they were more than capable of handling missions on their own and were left to their own devices.

“The difference between the monsters that normally appear in dangerous

areas and demons is *intelligence*. Demons are thinking monsters; they can speak to one another and have their own culture, and that's exactly what makes them so dangerous."

While demons had a basis in crude monsters like goblins or orcs, they still closely resembled humans in appearance. Before the war ended, everyone—not just knights—knew this much about demons. They had to. However, having come up in a time of peace, this was the first time Rosetta had heard it.

After she came to terms with this information, she spoke.

"You mean... With the new four-month curriculum, there's only enough time to hammer recruits with the basics like Template Magic, bare-minimum regulations, and how to do their tasks correctly?"

"Right. Template Magic and a little combat knowledge is more than enough to overwhelm unintelligent monsters. But defeating intelligent enemies with the fewest casualties possible? You need at least a year to thoroughly build the heart, body, and mind of a battlefield-ready soldier."

That was why Alan had raced to help as soon as possible.

Nothing he said explained why the demons that were supposed to have gone extinct in the human world after the Titanomachy were here.

Stay safe, everyone in the Fourteenth Unit. Don't go kicking the bucket before this geezer.

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Meanwhile, the Fourteenth Unit under attack in the monster emergence zone was faring exactly as Alan had feared. Faced with intelligent enemies for the first time, the young knights were being completely routed.

"T-Take that!"

A knight wildly swung his sword down at one of the demons.

"You think such a large swing would hit me?!"

Unlike unintelligent monsters, demons knew perfectly well that a raised sword would soon be brought down, so the attack was easily dodged.

“Off with your head!” the demon crowed.

“Argh!”

The knight’s head was cleanly cleft from his neck by the counterattack.

Not too far away, the story was much the same.

“W-Water Group, a-and this time...I’ll go with number six.”

One of the knights was trying to launch a magical attack, but with little success. It was obvious the knight was preparing an incantation. In his confusion, he wasn’t even sure what magic to use, so he was like a pig ready for spit roasting.

“As if I’m stupid enough to let you finish!”

The knight’s heart was pierced by the demon’s spear. He groaned, once, and met his untimely end.

Pathetic as they were, the ones with the will to fight were among the better ones.

“Ah...ah...”

There were some who had simply fallen down in fear.

This was different, *completely* different from any of their missions so far. It was easy to fight brainless monsters after a few scuffles. They always followed the same patterns, so anyone could defeat them the same way every time by exploiting those. It felt nothing like an exchange with lives on the line, more like a one-sided routine.

What unfolded before them proved that demons were no brainless beasts, and lives were very much on the line. The battle-savvy demons knew to switch up their tactics, and they read the inexperienced knights’ moves like open books.

This was a true struggle for survival.

“Get a load of these idiots, they’ve got no combat experience at all!” jeered one demon.

And he was exactly right. The knights had undergone a curriculum focused on

efficiently hunting monsters, not the previous curriculum, which would have knocked some sense into them. *That* curriculum devoted plenty of time to sparring matches, providing recruits with a taste of actual combat experience. Rather than efficiency, it focused on personal experience in order to prepare them to find the best course of action during real combat, or to build up the courage to avoid being paralyzed by fear.

But there was really no point in bringing that up after the fact.

“Ha ha! Die!”

A demon slashed his sword downward at the knight who had collapsed in terror.

Clang!

At the last moment, his attack was blocked by the sword that belonged to none other than William, captain of the Fourteenth Unit, who had leapt in from the side. He swiftly held up his free right hand toward the demon with no uncertainty.

“Lightning Group, Eighth Magic.”

“Graaaaargh!”

Direct hit, point-blank. The electric shock fired from William’s hand fried the demon to a crisp black char.

“Do not falter! You have me with you!” William called above the fray, in a clear voice meant to rally his panicking men. “It was only a few times, but we had sparring matches at the academy! Remember that training, calm down, and fight!”

Despite this being William’s first fight with demons, his words were confident and carried weight.

“Well, well. So there *are* guys with backbone even among lowly humans.” A deep voice rang out.

When William looked in the direction the voice had come from, he saw a demon who rose above the others push his way out from within their group.

He was Realgo: a burly, mustached, intimidating ogre demon three times the

size of the others. He was riding a massive horse and holding an equally large ax with a trident attached to its tip. The young soldiers gulped before this imposing sight. William alone readied his sword without wavering.

“Ha! The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Blaze Group, Twenty-Third Magic!”

William’s magic made the blade of his sword burst into flames.

“Haah!”

William galloped toward Realgo and swung his flame-clad sword at him.

“I will commend your spirit for coming at me with no hesitation.”

Yet, when Realgo dropped his axe—

“Still, you’re twenty years too young to mess with the great Realgo, general of this new demon army!”

William was easily blown away by that single strike.

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Considering the distance covered, it was impressive that Alan and Rosetta arrived to the battle only fifteen minutes later.

“Reinforcements are here! Status report!” Alan said.

Tragically, their hurry was in vain. The casualties were enormous. Only half of the thirty knights had survived, and among the survivors, another half were seriously injured.

“Rosetta, tend to their wounds.”

“Understood.” Rosetta dismounted her horse and rushed to the wounded.

“What’s this? I thought reinforcements were here, but it’s just some geezer and a frail little girl. You will be no match for the great Realgo,” mocked an enormous ogre demon.

Alan suspected he was their general. Judging from his appearance, he must be a high-ranking demon, and certainly not an enemy the humans in the Fourteenth Unit could handle.

When the members of that unit saw Alan and Rosetta arrive as their long-awaited reinforcements, their reactions spoke volumes:

“Come on, I thought our saviors were here, but this...”

“What help are a commander who hasn’t seen combat in years and his little attendant?! Where are the other units?!”

Those were just a few of the things they said, and their reaction was only natural. Just two people, one a middle-aged man from a management position they had never even seen fight, whose body was clearly long past its prime, while the other wasn’t even a knight, only a maid.

Their enemies shared the sentiment.

“Hmph. And here I thought someone who could provide a little more fun had finally arrived,” Realgo said. He looked at the tip of his weapon. “In the end, he was the only one who put up even a semblance of a fight. How dull.”

William was there, speared through the stomach on Realgo’s trident-tipped ax. His armor was battered, and blood dripped heavily from his wounds.

“Here, you can have him back.”

Realgo flicked his ax and tossed William through the air. His body rolled across the ground before finally stopping in front of Alan. William’s eyes were devoid of life and his usual cocky smile was warped with agony, unmoving.

“William...”

Despite the pain he had suffered, he’d never let go of his sword. He must have kept the will to fight to his last breath. Taking the Fourteenth Unit’s military strength or lack thereof into account, Alan wouldn’t have been surprised to find them wiped out long before his arrival. They didn’t stand a chance against a high-ranking demon like Realgo, yet half of them were alive. That feat was thanks to none other than William. His men escaped total annihilation only because he put his life on the line against an enormously superior opponent like Realgo.

“That’s so like you...”

Alan’s thoughts flashed over the last year and a half.

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On the day of the Knight Training Academy graduation ceremony, William met with Alan in his office. It was tradition in the academy for the commander to personally commend the top graduate.

“Congratulations, William. It’s rare for someone to remain at the top of their class from enrollment to graduation,” Alan said.

“Ha ha ha! Piece of cake for a genius like me,” William replied with his usual smug expression.

Ever since his enrollment, he’d displayed that attitude. In fact, being at the top of his class for so long might have spurred his ego on even further.

Still the braggart, I see. Coupled with this short three-month training period, his overconfidence might put him in danger.

In theory, Alan knew William wouldn’t be in too much danger against mere monsters. However, should he overestimate his strength and act rashly, he might find himself in over his head.

Maybe I should take him down a peg.

A geezer's unnecessary meddling: unpleasant thought it may be, William would have to receive it.

"Still, even as a top graduate, training is just training. I won't recognize your maturity unless you show results in actual missions, William," Alan said in a stricter tone than usual.

"Huh? What're you on about? You jealous because I'm half your age and way better than you?" William was on too much of a roll to waver for even a second. "Old man, I'm gonna be successful faster *and* better than anyone before me!"

"Is that so? I expect you to do your best. In case you don't know, I was the fastest on record to receive a medal. I was just seventeen. You're fifteen, so that only leaves you with two years."

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" William exploded in laughter, then cocked his thumb at his chest.

"Forget two years, I'll do it in one!" he said. The grin he gave showed his glistening white teeth.

He makes me worry, Alan thought with a troubled shake of his head.

However, after that, William put great effort into his daily routine. He rose earlier than everyone every morning, worked harder than anyone, and trained with his sword until late at night. His workload and amount of training were so absurd, it was a wonder he found time to rest.

At least, that's what Alan heard from the people around him. When he went for a sudden inspection to confirm it, William was there, hard at work. It was true.

A year later, all of his work paid off.

"William Rayfield. You have achieved unprecedented success above and beyond all other knights in the kingdom. You will be awarded a medal and promoted."

William stood on a platform as Alan presented him his medal in the award ceremony.

He actually kept his promise and earned this in only one year.

Alan was astonished, but he had fully bought into William by that point. In the meeting to decide whether to award William the medal or not, there were many who voiced the opinion that it was too early for someone so young, but the ones who saw the effort he put in were unanimously in favor. His drive was that undeniable.

William conducted himself in a polite and respectful manner—completely unlike his usual self—to accept his medal. As the son of a noble, he was fully capable of it when he put his mind to it.

However, as soon as he stepped down from the platform and turned to Alan, his typical smirk overtook his face.

“See? Just like I said I would,” he said to Alan, who was close in front of him.

So this is the passion of the next generation.

Rather than disliking William’s attitude, Alan saw an invigorating, fresh, and reassuring radiance in it.

What he felt that day was something like the joy of watching a son or grandson grow up. During the great war, he and his peers moved toward a new era together with the will to protect the people as knights. Now, a new kind of will was shining bright before him. Even in a peaceful world, such eagerness could still be born.

“Yes, you did a good job,” Alan murmured. “What a relief.”

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Back in the present, Alan crouched down in front of William’s remains.

“I’m sorry, William... I am responsible for this. I was sure you would go on to become a hero of the next generation.”

After defeating the demon lord, Alan stepped away from the front lines and took on a supporting role for his juniors to help foster the next generation. Even though he was hailed as a young hero at the time, he was still, ultimately, a human. He would grow old and weak, and one day pass away. That’s why he wanted to raise a generation of knights he would feel comfortable entrusting

the kingdom to.

William was a knight who met even those great expectations. Alan was so happy with the rapid growth of this impertinent yet deeply passionate boy that he gave William the freedom to fly too close to the sun. The demon army appearing once more was completely unexpected, but Alan would make no excuses. A superior's job came with that sort of responsibility, and he had to carry the burden with his own hands.

"I'm going to use this, William."

Alan gently took the sword William hadn't even let go of in death from the boy's hand and gripped it in his own. He raised his head and stared straight at the demons.

A tremendous bloodlust rippled over the battlefield.

Alan's eyes might have been framed by wrinkles, but the crowd of demons took a step back when faced by his penetrating gaze. Not just the demons—the knights of the Fourteenth Unit, his own allies, also drew back in shock. His expression was wholly unlike that of the fatherly man who always looked at them so kindly. Now, it carried the intimidating air of menace seen only in warriors who lived and breathed for the battlefield.

Alan jumped on his horse with William's sword in hand. He gripped the reins, then barreled straight into the demon forces alone.

"Don't underestimate us!" the horde of demons shouted.

Of course, he was attacked from every direction—but the demons were not prepared for him.

"Hah!"

Alan slashed relentlessly as he passed through the demons, the flow and accuracy of his blade such that they had no time to resist. One after another, they were cut down to size. To the observing knights, it seemed as if the demons' heads went flying on their own right after the horse passed them by. Thirty demons were mowed down in seconds. Alan didn't slow as he galloped as straight and piercing as a bolt from a crossbow toward Realgo.

“You’re not so bad with a sword, you senile fool!” Realgo roared as he brandished his giant ax.

In terms of size, he had the advantage. His horse, its rider, and his weapon were all more than twice the size of Alan’s. Regardless, Alan bored right for the impending ax with great certainty. He swung his sword.

A flash of light.

Realgo’s giant body, weapon, and the head of his horse were all split right across the middle.

Alan passed Realgo in the same breath he cut the demon down. Behind him, Alan pulled his horse to a stop.

Realgo’s upper half slid off and hit the ground with a wet *thud*.

“H-He killed General Realgo in a single strike!”

“Retreat! All forces, *retreat*!”

With such unimaginable power before them, the surviving demons fled at full speed.

“Did that...really happen?”

The knights of the Fourteenth Unit all thought Alan was a weak old man. After witnessing his display of skill, they could do nothing but sit dumbfounded with mouths as wide as a netful of fish gasping their last breaths.

“It very much did. You should all be well aware who that man is,” Rosetta told the knights.

“Aah...”

After seeing Alan cleave the enemy general in half with a single strike, and the way he intimidated the whole battlefield from his horse’s back, the surviving young knights finally remembered just who the superior they casually interacted with on a daily basis was.

“A hero! He’s Alan Granger, the Champion of Light of the legendary Seven Heroes!”

Yes, a bona fide hero.

It had been twenty-five years since the great war. Even though he had long since taken his leave from the vanguard, the Champion who defeated the demon lord and ended the war was still going strong.

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“I’ve really grown old,” Alan muttered as he watched the retreating demons.

It was only a little, but William’s sword was chipped. Back in his prime, Alan could have bisected a foe without leaving a single nick in his blade. Although he kept with his training whenever he found time outside his duties, he had been away from high-level combat for a long time, and his body was also getting on in years. As those ran through his mind, a voice cut him off.

“Bwa ha ha ha! I’ve heard the stories, but now I see. *That’s* who you are.”

Alan looked to the ground to find that Realgo’s upper half was somehow holding on to life after being violently parted from his lower half. Demon vitality was powerful, but avoiding instant death in this condition was nothing short of astounding.

“A hero who once annihilated the demon army, huh? No wonder you’re formidable,” Realgo said, despite the blood pouring out of his mouth. He focused his gaze on Alan.

“That’s right. I am the one who finished off the demon lord,” Alan said levelly. “And demons were supposed to have been exterminated from this world twenty-five years ago.”

“Ha ha ha, that’s right. But the demon lord was revived through someone’s power...” Realgo’s face wore a knowing smile.

“Who?”

“It’s someone I’m sure you’re all familiar with...the person who should not exist...!” Realgo coughed and vomited blood midsentence. Although his resilience helped him escape instant death, he was still cut in two; he would meet his end soon.

“Yes!” Realgo continued with a manic laugh. “The demon army has been revived! Along with the stars of despair, the Seven Black Stars!”

Alan’s brow furrowed as soon as he heard that name.

“Really—the Seven Black Stars?”

That notorious group. Including Demon Lord Beelzebub, they were a team of the seven most powerful members of the army that once drove humanity to the brink of extinction.

“The current Seven Black Stars dwarf the old ones in power. You’re strong, but...how far can you fight in that decrepit body past...its...prime...” Realgo managed to get that far but ultimately breathed his last. He died with a malicious grin plastered on his face.

“The demon army,” Alan reflected to himself as he observed Realgo’s lifeless body.

It was dreadful enough that the demon lord had revived, but with the Seven Black Stars also formed once more, this was a clear crisis for humanity. Alan looked at the collapsed knights. Young lives being lost in the midst of battle was a familiar sight more than twenty-five years ago, but it was something he thought he would never have to see again.

“Here I thought the fight was over...”

In the end, Alan returned to William’s remains.

“It seems I have unfinished business. I must take up my sword once more, William. I’m sorry for being such a meddlesome old man.”

This time, he would truly eradicate the demon lord and save humanity from the terror of the demons, once and for all.

“But not alone. Time to gather the others once more.”

If the demon army and the Seven Black Stars were the enemies, their strength was absolutely necessary:

The Godfist Saint.

History’s Strongest Sage.

The Exiled Dark Priest.

The Final Form Villainess.

The Unrivaled Gadabout.

The Villager.

“The six comrades I survived the last war with.”

With a new great war about to begin, the seven legends would gather one more time!

Chapter 2: Hero Summons!

Within three days after the newly formed demon army's attack, Alan and Rosetta were at the royal palace.

This corridor brings back memories, Alan thought as he walked through a hallway adorned with decorations that were plain, yet full of solemn history.

The kingdom Alan lived in was officially one of the seven great human kingdoms, the First Kingdom of Whitehyde, also known as the White Empire. As it was called an empire, it was a kingdom of powerful authority, and the only one among the seven with a sovereign who was allowed the title of emperor. Whether because of their three-hundred-year war with the demons or their own internal struggles, the other kingdoms constantly saw entire royal lines go extinct or fully change their members. Whitehyde was the only one that still had direct descendants of the same lineage for over two thousand years.

It was in Whitehyde that one could find the location of humanity's greatest symbol of authority: this very royal palace.

"Even with my rank as knight commander, the royal palace isn't somewhere I can just drop in at a moment's notice," Alan explained to Rosetta. "But this is a state of emergency, and I'm also old friends with her, so I was granted permission."

"Is that so?" Rosetta asked Alan as she walked by his side.

"Yeah. If anyone could get an audience with the highest authority of humanity at any time, wouldn't it lose its significance?"

Authority and influence were two different things. Unlike influence, which was tangible governing power based on actual military or economic might, authority held more symbolic implications.

"I see... It's true that despite living in this kingdom for a long time, I have only seen Her Imperial Majesty's face a few times, and it was only from far away during her speech in the end-of-year ceremony."

"So, what was your impression of her at the time?

“My impression?”

Rosetta placed a hand on her chin and dug through her memory, back to that time.

“She was incredibly beautiful.”

The kingdom’s current ruler was a woman. Despite her age of thirty-six years, only seven years younger than Alan, she was still known as an unparalleled beauty among the seven great human kingdoms.

“Above all else, the way she spoke and held herself were so very dignified. I remember thinking that’s what an empress should be like.”

“Dignity, huh? I wish I could have some too,” Alan muttered.

As he was a *commander*, Alan endeavored to earn his subordinates’ respect, but all they did for the past ten years was look down on him. In part, the issue was that newer recruits grew up never experiencing the war he had ended, so they found no reason to respect him. He also remembered one of his comrades in arms telling him, “You’re a softie and listen to your subordinates too much. That’s why they underestimate you.”

“Even without dignity, I think you’re a cool and admirable person, Master Alan.”

“Am I, now? Thank you for your kind words.”

The fact that she didn’t deny Alan’s lack of dignity was a testament to Rosetta’s honesty.

“Still, everyone has the same impression of her, don’t they?” he said to himself.

“Hmm?” Rosetta tilted her head in response to Alan’s mumbling. Was she about to witness a surprising sight?

Eventually, their walking and talking carried them to the throne room. When the guards noticed Alan, they lowered their heads.

“Uniland Division Knight Commander Alan Granger, correct? We have been told of your arrival. Her Imperial Majesty is waiting for you inside.”

The door was opened for them and Alan and Rosetta stepped inside the throne room.

“I have been waiting for you, Hero Alan Granger,” said a dignified woman’s voice.

A woman with silver hair was sitting deep inside the throne room. She was a little taller than the average woman at 170 centimeters, with long limbs and a pleasing figure. Most noticeable of all was her bosom, tightly pushed up in her purple royal garments. No man in the world could keep his eyes away from them. Despite the temptation, her gallant gaze, framed by her imploring eyebrows and long eyelashes, exuded such dignity that most viewers instinctively prostrated themselves before her. She stood at the top of the oldest royal line which had existed for over two thousand years. She was the magnificent Margaret Whitehyde, empress of the White Empire.

Alan dropped to his knees before her.

“It has been a long time, Your Imperial Majesty. I am pleased to see you in good health.”

Upon seeing Alan’s actions, Rosetta hurried and lowered her head in deference.

“You need not stand on ceremony with me. Are the two of us not old friends? Put yourself at ease, Alan.”

“All right, then I’ll do just that.”

Alan raised his head and stood up. Empress Margaret rose from her ornate and luxurious throne and slowly descended toward him.

“I appreciate you making the long journey here. Your message has already reached us. The demon army’s return is a troubling matter indeed...”

Margaret was right in front of Alan now.

“A troubling...matter indeed... Truly a...”

She paused.

“Hey, what do I do, Alan?! This is all way too muuuuuch!”

She fell to the ground, clutched Alan's legs, and started bawling her eyes out.

"The war was finally *oveeeer*," she cried, her voice dragging out the syllables in a whine. "I thought that put an eeeeeend to all those scary duties! Waaaaaaah, I'm sure every day will have me approving military operations with casualties in the hundreds *again*! It's not fair!"

"Calm down! I get how bad the situation is!"

Rosetta's mouth popped open in utter amazement.

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"Uggh...waaah," Margaret said with a miserable sniff.

After spending a good amount of time crying, Margaret finally regained her composure and started speaking calmly. "I'm sorry for losing my cool."

"Um, there—there's still some snot. Please use this, if you don't mind." Rosetta offered her a handkerchief.

"Yes, thank you."

Pbfffrt!

With the sound of Margaret blowing her nose, the prestige her lineage had passed down the last two thousand years vanished without a trace. Thanks to her juvenile looks, she couldn't even be seen as a mature woman. After tearfully laying her feelings bare, she was essentially as dignified as a little girl.

"Um, Master Alan?" Rosetta was still in a state of confusion.

"I know, I know, but she's been like this ever since she was ten."

For Alan, Margaret was a familiar old friend, as he had served as her personal bodyguard in her younger days.



Alan had fond memories of Margaret crying every day after she ascended the throne at ten years old because of the previous emperor's untimely death. Those days were a little confusing, with him unsure if he was acting as her bodyguard or her babysitter.

"So, judging from the state you're in, I take it you read over my report."

With Margaret settled, Alan cut to the chase.

"Y-Yes. I verified its contents properly," Margaret said in her original empress-like manner. Though, it was a little late for her to use that voice and put up a majestic front now. Neither of them would forget seeing her act like what could only be described as a full-grown baby.

"However, despite you coming here to report in person, I can still only partially believe the story. To think *that* demon army has returned..."

"True. Coming to the human world from the underworld should be impossible."

Demons originally lived in a different world called the underworld. It was completely disconnected from the human world in space and moving from one to another was as possible as collecting the stars in a jar. Somehow, Demon Lord Beelzebub had made the journey a reality.

One hundred twenty-five years ago, Beelzebub used his own unique teleportation magic to connect the underworld and human world, then moved the demon army to the human world to begin his invasion. The great war between humans and demons, the Titanomachy, started thanks to Demon Lord Beelzebub's power alone.

Looking at it from the opposite perspective, it should have meant that demons could no longer come to the human world—as long as the demon lord was defeated. In fact, the demon lord's presence was supposed to be necessary in the human world for the demons he transported to even remain there. As soon as he was struck down by Alan, every last demon was sent back to the underworld. Since the demon lord was the only one who could use teleportation magic, there was no one else to use it after his death.

"Our scholars concluded that the demon lord's teleportation magic was an

irregularity among irregularities, didn't they? We thought no demon would ever again be able to step foot on the human world. Yet..."

"You're right. But if the demon lord really has been revived, it all makes sense, though how exactly he came back after he was killed without question is a mystery of its own."

Whatever the means, the demons were once again attempting to conquer the human world.

"The situation is urgent, so I came here with a request for you, Your Imperial Majesty."

"I'm getting a reeeeally bad feeling about this, but—go on, speak your mind."

"Please summon the scattered seven heroes from across the world in the name of the empress. I need to hold an anti-demon army strategy meeting with them."

"Seriously...?"

Margaret grimaced terribly when she heard Alan say that.

"Excuse me, Master Alan? Why does Her Imperial Majesty look like she just saw a swarm of cockroaches crawling out of the kitchen?" Rosetta whispered to Alan.

"Well, those seven are an unruly bunch," he answered honestly. Be that as it may, working together with them was absolutely necessary.

Margaret heaved a single sigh.

"If I must! Very well. I will issue an edict for their summons."

"You have my thanks."

"No need. As much as I wish it had never happened, this is a crisis for the entirety of humanity. My authority is a tool I need to use during such times," Margaret said with resolve in her eyes. Even though she was flustered and scared only moments ago, she had the experience of someone who had ascended the throne at only ten years of age. She, too, had lived in the era of war.

“Incidentally, I have a request of my own.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“May I be excused from the meeting?” Margaret said in a dreadfully grave tone.

“No way. You can’t do that after summoning them here in your name.”

“*Seriously*?!”

Margaret made another unpleasant expression from the bottom of her heart.

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The messengers sent to each kingdom delivered the imperial decree to the heroes posthaste, so within five days they had gathered in the First Kingdom in accordance with it.

The legendary Seven Heroes sat at the round table in the very middle of the largest meeting room of the White Empire’s royal palace. The other people in the room were the ones who had sent out the imperial decree and the organizers of this meeting, Margaret and Alan; the Seven Heroes’ individual attendants, such as Alan’s Rosetta; and the ministers of each of the First Kingdom’s ministries.

“So, these are the Seven Heroes? They make for a magnificent lineup,” said the Minister of the Environment, to which the ministers around him nodded in approval.

The heroes already had an imposing presence in their youth, but with the passage of twenty-five years, they had gained even more gravitas. Moreover, the Minister of the Environment had only just turned thirty. Young people weren’t unusual in positions of power; since few humans lived to an old age during the last war, many in their late twenties or thirties were in charge of important matters in every kingdom.

From the young ministers’ perspectives, they were looking at the heroes from the generation before them, those who had ended the great war with their own hands.

To top it all off, unlike Alan, a mere commander in a backwater knight order,

most of the other heroes had prestigious positions as royalty, central figures in their kingdoms, or leaders of large organizations. They gathered with no intention of hiding their superiority. The intimidating air was almost palpable.

Amidst the tense atmosphere around them, Margaret, the organizer of this event, opened her mouth.

“Everybody. I appreciate you all gathering here in response to my summons—is what I would have liked to say, but...”

“One of us is still missing,” Alan said with a bitter smile.

Including Alan, there were *seven* heroes, and there were seven seats prepared around the round table, Margaret’s excluded. Yet one of those seats was notably empty.

“M-My sincerest apologies,” said the First Kingdom’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was clearly regretful for being unable to execute a direct order from Her Imperial Majesty.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re talking about the Gadabout here, so he probably said something along the lines of ‘What a pain, not doing it,’ and ran from the messenger, right?” Alan said to the minister.

“Er, well, yes, it is exactly as you say.”

“I am still the empress here!” Margaret held her head in her hand and sighed.

“Ha ha ha! That’s exactly something he would do,” said one of the seven with a hearty laugh.

Clad in a nun’s habit, she was the Saint, Dora Alexandra. She was forty-six years old, and unlike the dewy Margaret, her face was creased with the wrinkles characteristic of her age. Nevertheless, her entire body was overflowing with so much vigor that she would put working men in their prime to shame. She easily towered over many women and men at two meters tall, and her muscular body looked as if it was carved out of marble. Despite her rippling muscles, she still had a feminine silhouette. Such a fine specimen could only be called a miraculous balance between beauty and strength.

“Kevin hasn’t changed a bit,” said Dora. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the

Sixth Kingdom winced.

"I apologize for our idiot. I'm going to slap him for this later," said the minister with an air of deep irritation.

That the Gadabout is treated like some kind of idiot despite being the king... Alan suspected the minister must actually have a relationship of deep mutual trust with him.

"All right, time to discuss our main topic for the day: our defensive strategy."

Alan signaled with his eyes, then Rosetta poured mana into a white wall installed in the meeting room. As she did that, a map of the human world appeared on it via the power of the Canvas Phantasm. It was a device that used illusion magic. When mana was poured into it, it projected preset images on the surface of its white magicite. Incidentally, it was developed by one of the Seven Heroes sitting at that very table.

"As you all know, the demon army has returned. That means the seven great human kingdoms must focus their efforts into cooperating to fight against it. Are there any objections?" Alan said. In response, the other heroes either nodded in agreement or just listened with grins on their faces. They understood the seriousness of the current situation.

"However, this time, there is a rather troublesome matter compared to the last war. We have no idea where the enemy is going to appear from," Alan continued.

"Ah, I see what you mean."

The woman who spoke up this time wasn't Dora, but the Villainess, Isabella Stuart. She was forty-three years old and a similar height to Margaret. As a queen, her tone was both distinguished and captivating. There was no doubt she was a ruler. However, she was a little out of place next to the other heroes; she looked far too young. Margaret may have seemed fairly young for her age, but Isabella was almost abnormal. Her glossy skin was plum-smooth, and her toned, voluptuous body was as healthy as a twentysomething's. She still had a mature air befitting her age about her, thanks to her half-lidded, almond-shaped eyes and full eyelashes, but lacking those, no one would blink if you told them she was the youngest one there.

“It certainly is a problem if they can suddenly appear without using the demon lord’s castle.” Isabella had picked up on what Alan was trying to say.

“That’s exactly right, Isabella. In the previous war, we knew where to look, as the demons built their forces in the castle the demon lord transported here 125 years ago. Any new supplies or personnel from the underworld *had* to go through the castle. But now, the ruins of the demon lord’s castle are under constant strict surveillance. We would know if the demons had appeared there.”

There was no way the demon army could have snuck out of the castle and made it inside the First Kingdom without drawing attention.

“Thus, it must be the case that the teleportation magic the demons are using this time lets them appear anywhere.”

The ministers stirred when they realized what Alan was saying.

“We can intuit what places they are unlikely to appear in,” Alan continued. “In principle, teleportation magic only works in places with a high concentration of mana. The demon army recently appeared in an area that has higher mana concentration than the norm for the kingdom, a location where monsters naturally gather. The central part of each kingdom has been built in a location with low mana concentration to avoid such monster gatherings, so it is safe to assume that the possibility of direct teleportation there is low.”

Rosetta used a pen to mark the areas with low concentration of mana in red. However, just like Alan had said, those were each kingdom’s major cities and their outskirts, plus a few other places—which meant that the majority of the world was a possible location for the demon army to appear in. Upon seeing that, the ministers of the First Kingdom attending the meeting spoke louder than before. Anyone could clearly see that they would have a hard time defending that wide an area.

“Hmm, I see,” said one of the Seven Heroes who had been quietly listening up to that point. “So, where do we let our people die?”

The one who spoke was the Priest, Derek Henderson, the king of the Third Kingdom. He was a forty-one-year-old man with a permanent smile twisted across his face. Everyone besides the heroes instantly fell silent at his words,

but Derek paid them no mind and continued.

“In my opinion, the First Kingdom’s Bratley, Gansas, and Berdold sectors and their outskirts should be the first to be abandoned. They don’t have any production bases, so there’s no need to dispatch troops there.”

The ministers truly raised a commotion at that.

“Hey now, honorable ministers of the First Kingdom, what is all the fuss about? When it comes to war, certain locations are vital. For example, the Kasaland sector in the Sixth Kingdom is a food production base, while the Mildret sector in the Third Kingdom is a magic catalyst mining site. If we think of the time the demon army gathered their forces there, dispatching our troops becomes obvious, no?” Derek said.

“Besides, isn’t a strategy meeting a place for us to decide where and how people are going to die? Don’t get me wrong, if it were possible, I wouldn’t want to sacrifice a single life. War really is a deplorable affair.” Despite his words, Derek’s expression didn’t show a hint of regret. In fact, his permanent grin might have been wider when thinking about how to sacrifice thousands if not millions of lives going forward.

“Still the same as ever, huh, Derek? People are just pawns to be readily discarded to you,” Dora the Saint said.

“My oh my. Ever the idealist, my dear Saint.”

“Don’t get your back up. *I* for one am going to protect everything with my own strength,” she confidently declared, in her own take on the situation.

“Hmph, what a meathead.”

Derek glared at Dora, and a volatile tension sparked between them. In front of two powerful people’s clashing bloodlust, Margaret and many other participants gulped and turned pale.

They are as stubborn as ever...

“Calm down, you two. If you run amok here, you’ll turn the royal palace into rubble,” Alan said with a sigh. He then addressed everyone present at the meeting. “But Derek does have a point. This is war. There are some lives we will

have to forsake no matter what.”

Neither the Seven Heroes nor the few ministers who were old enough to have lived during the great war disagreed with Alan. The memory of what it meant to fight against the demon army was carved into their bones.

“Ha ha ha! Go on, think about it quickly. Who will you have die, and how?” Derek enthused.

Ignoring him, Alan declared: “This time, I intend to make that ideal into a reality, through our strength.”

“What...?” Derek furrowed his brow.

“We will make use of the seal stones and take advantage of their pride.”

The other heroes and Margaret gulped in response to Alan’s words. Those who knew, knew; everyone else stared in confusion.

Suddenly, Derek clapped his hands and threw his head back with wild laughter. “Come to think of it, you always did act the most composed, then turned around and did the craziest things, Alan!”

Alan looked around at the other heroes. Slowly, he received nods from the lot of them.

“Then it’s settled.”

They would suffer tremendous casualties should their plan fail, but Alan knew no better way to keep their losses to a minimum.

“Excuse me, Sir Alan, but what is a seal stone supposed to—” one of the ministers tried asking Alan, when a man unexpectedly burst into the meeting room.

“I would have you stop acting as you like now!”

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The new member of the meeting was an elderly man in his seventies. He was by far the eldest in the room; there was practically no one else above their forties, the ministers included. His receding hairline and ostentatious beard were both gray, and his round belly spoke of an indulgent lifestyle. Alan remembered the old man: Simon Rolek, chief of a noted organization.

“Good grief, how could you exclude me from a meeting like this one? Does no one in the seven great kingdoms have common sense anymore?” Simon orated as he took his time walking through the room. In Alan’s opinion—subjective that it may be—Simon’s actions, his manner of speech, not to mention *everything else* about him, gave off the impression of a deeply obstinate man.

“If the demon army has made an appearance, it is only natural that our Humanity Defense Coalition lead and take command, no?” Simon said.

The Humanity Defense Coalition was an organization founded eighty years ago with participants from every kingdom, and as its name implied, its sole goal was the protection of humanity from external enemies. At the time, each kingdom was in charge of its own defense, but that method proved ineffective against the arduous, nigh-endless war with the demon army. It was in such desperate times that all kingdoms joined forces against the demon army. The Humanity Defense Coalition was founded by the greatest minds of the time and central figures of each kingdom. It held tremendous power, claiming even the right to draft personnel or collect resources from any kingdom regardless of its ruler’s wishes in times of emergency. It was truly an institution meant to gather humanity’s strength in one place.

The coalition’s structure was enormously efficient during the war. With its guiding hand, it pieced together the previously disconnected military strength and enemy intel of the kingdoms both great and small like a puzzle. The finished result was an effective force against the demon army. It could be said without a shadow of a doubt that it was thanks to the coalition that the disadvantaged humanity held out for seventy-five long years against the powerful demons, up until Alan and the others’ great accomplishments shifted the favor clearly to their side.

However, in the time since the war ended twenty-five years ago, the

Humanity Defense Coalition had warped into an abhorrent special interest group.

The coalition should have lost its reason for existing with humanity's hard-fought victory. Unfortunately, working at the coalition was the most distinguished career available at the time, even more so than being a minister, so more than half of its members were made up of elites and nobles with high influence. If the organization dissolved just because the war was over, they would be out of a job. Thus, they said, "It is of utmost importance that we prepare for the eventuality of another threat to humanity like the demon army," and kept the coalition running.

The rest went without saying. The organization whose goal was prepping for a war that might never happen went rotten faster than fresh fish left under the scorching sun.

Well, it's challenging to officially strip away their authority, Alan mused. On paper, the coalition stood above *every* kingdom.

The chief of that esteemed yet irritating organization had made his way close to the center of the room, all the way over to the table the Seven Heroes were sitting at. He prefaced his words by clearing his throat loudly.

"Allow me to cut to the chase: in this war, the seven great kingdoms, Seven Heroes and all, will only provide logistical support, while direct confrontation with the demon army will be entrusted to our Humanity Defense Coalition."

The room was filled with the biggest commotion of the day. Alan, too, was deeply troubled.

As I expected. Suspicion had gnawed him from the moment Simon made his appearance, but Alan had hoped he would be proven wrong.

"Chief Simon, we are dealing with the demon army. A general mobilization with our strength included is the best course of action," Alan said, stating what he thought should be obvious.

"That decision falls under our jurisdiction."

"That...is certainly true."

Should the Humanity Defense Coalition declare a state of emergency in the event of a battle with the demon army, it could exercise full right to command. Even the highest authority of the First Kingdom couldn't defy it.

"This should all be par for the course. The Humanity Defense Coalition is an organization meant to protect humanity. That includes the seven great kingdoms and even the Seven Heroes."

"I am *truly* grateful to hear that," Alan said dryly.

"Ha ha ha! I am glad you understand. That is the mission of we who are entrusted with great power."

I was being sarcastic, Alan thought in exasperation.

Why was Chief Simon so particular about only the coalition facing off against the demon army? Anyone with sense would see it was better for the Humanity Defense Coalition, the seven great kingdoms, and the Seven Heroes to join forces in the fight. Then why?

The answer was simple: the members of the coalition wanted to protect their own interests.

With the world at peace, the people were gradually coming to question the reason for the Humanity Defense Coalition's continued existence. Of course, if it was supplied with a modest budget to earnestly prepare for another possible invasion, there would be many people in support of it. However, the way the coalition spent money was opaque—or, to put it bluntly, the amount of money that disappeared into the pockets of coalition officials far outweighed the amount spent on invasion countermeasures. As their wastefulness became apparent, it was no wonder many voiced oppositions to it.

I suppose they want every *achievement to be under their name.*

If the Humanity Defense Coalition repelled the demon army alone, those voices of dissent would likely disappear. The coalition might even end up earning a larger endowment of rights and funds. Although the probability of success was lower alone than working together, the coalition would push for it.

Alan was deep in such grim thoughts when they were suddenly interrupted.

“May I have a word with you? Your manpower alone will clearly be insufficient if you expect the seven great kingdoms to merely deliver supplies.” Isabella the Villainess cut straight to the point. “The area you need to protect is vast. Since the demon army can appear anywhere, even if you only focus your forces on the major facilities, the two hundred thousand regular soldiers of the Humanity Defense Coalition are clearly not enough. I believe you would need at least six times that number.”

“Now, our defense coalition has elite members with highly specialized training. They will deal with the situation in a flexible manner.” In response to Isabella’s perfectly sound argument, Simon gave an answer that presented no solution whatsoever.

“Bwa ha ha ha!” Derek the Priest burst into laughter when he heard that.

“What are *you* laughing at?” Simon demanded.

“Well, it’s just funny when people who’ve never been in a fight imagine they’re invincible.” Derek’s razor-sharp barb made Simon grimace.

But Derek was simply telling it like it was. Despite lofty claims of highly specialized training, most of the current members of the Humanity Defense Coalition had zero combat experience against demons. After all, most of the people who fought against the demons fell in battle; there were few survivors in the modern day. The top brass of the coalition was full of old men who received their status through seniority and had only survived this long because they never fought against the demons. Chief Simon was a prime example of that. As the second son of a great noble house, he only had a desk job in the coalition, and eventually won the position of chief because he was the eldest coalition member.

“H-Hmph! It is foolish to only treat hands-on experience as important,” Simon said. Somehow, his face grew cockier, even though he was just a man who climbed the ranks without fighting a single time in his life. “‘A fool learns from experience. A wise man learns from the experience of others.’ We have compiled extensive data on the previous war and participate in anti-demon army training day and night. We can protect all major facilities by distributing our soldiers around them!”

Simon pushed Rosetta aside and projected an image he brought himself on the white wall. It was a map of the human world just like the previous one, but with the exact locations and numbers of the Humanity Defense Coalition's dispatched forces.

Alan couldn't keep his mouth from hanging open. *That's horrible...*

There were certainly soldiers deployed to every major facility, but they were spread far too thin. Landmark sectors, in particular, had less than one soldier per kilometer positioned to stop the enemy advance. Alan swallowed down the overwhelming feeling that the *esteemed* chief should go study some basic arithmetic before history. Even those who weren't participating in the debate, like the Sage and the Villager, were visibly exasperated.

"It would seem the great heroes are doubting our strength," Simon scoffed.

And your sanity, Alan wanted to say, but he decided to keep it to himself for now.

"But you need not worry!"

Simon clapped his hands and a group of six men and women in their twenties entered the room. Every last line of their youthful bodies was honed to a fine point, and they each wielded a specialized weapon. Down to the deliberate way they carried themselves, it was evident they were well-trained individuals who were tempered for battle. Undoubtedly, these were no ordinary young adults.

"The Seven Heroes are already relics, far past their prime. *These* are the pride and joy of the Humanity Defense Coalition, and the new saviors who will carry the next era on their shoulders: the Great Six!" Chief Simon said with his arms spread wide. He watched the turmoil his announcement caused in the room with a triumphant face.

Just when did they get those guys lined up? Alan thought.

All six looked formidable, and fetching to boot. When lined up in a row like trophies on a shelf, they made a great impact. Simon had orchestrated a magnificent performance to suggest their combat strength. However, there was a man in the room who loved to spoil the atmosphere.

"So, can we have these bozos clean the barracks bathrooms or whatever?"

Derek the Priest asked.

“What the hell did you say?!”

One of the Great Six, a large man with arms as thick as logs, stepped forward in response to Derek’s words.

“Now, now, hold it right there, Strong,” Simon said, stopping him in his tracks.

“Still, I cannot overlook you calling the strongest elites of our Humanity Defense Coalition bozos, Sir Derek,” Simon added.

“Ha! An elite bozo is still a bozo. These guys wouldn’t last three seconds against the Seven Black Stars. I can’t help but laugh when you say you want them to replace us. You have more talent as a comedian than as the chief, Simon,” Derek said before bursting into raucous laughter again.

“Well then...” Simon’s voice quaked with rage at Derek’s wanton disrespect. “If you’re going to make such a bold claim, would you like to experience the strength of the Great Six firsthand? Fine! We will now hold a mock battle between the Great Six and the Seven Heroes!” His declaration rang out through the room, loud enough for the ministers to hear.

“Hold on! Please don’t go making unilateral decisions,” Alan said.

“Oh my, are you planning to run away, Sir Alan? A wise decision indeed. If you would turn tail here, I expect you to remain quiet and obedient to our command during the war.”

“So, it comes to this.”

Alan sighed. This was not the time for them to be fighting amongst themselves, but if they conceded to Simon, it was plain as day humanity would suffer many needless casualties.

“Very well, let’s hold this mock battle. In return, if we win, *please* abandon the strategy of having the Humanity Defense Coalition fight the demon army alone.”

“Ho ho, I accept your terms. Likewise, if we win, you agree to fully cooperate with us.”

Chief Simon’s smirk implied that all of this was according to plan. Alan

suspected he wanted to prove the Great Six's usefulness by beating the Seven Heroes in front of everyone.

"Don't blame me for what happens next," Alan muttered while glancing at Derek, whose grin had nearly cracked wide enough to split his cheeks as soon as the fight was agreed upon.



Chapter 3: Dora Alexandra the Godfist Saint

The mock battle was to be held in the training grounds inside the palace. Though they were referred to as training grounds, they were more akin to an arena, with over three thousand audience seats. The audience consisted of the ministers and palace staff that had gotten wind of the hullabaloo and were deeply interested in the sudden competition. After all, the legendary heroes would be fighting before their eyes, and their opponents were the best of the corrupt yet elite Humanity Defense Coalition. No one wanted to miss this, regardless of who won.

"Since one of us is absent, we can have six one-on-one matches," Alan told Chief Simon. He was the only one among the heroes sitting on the sidelines. "To confirm, if we win, you agree to withdraw your earlier strategy, yes?"

Chief Simon laughed boldly. "Oh, I shall—if, and only *if*, you manage to win despite your advanced years. Let's hope this isn't already decided by the fourth match."

He seems pretty confident in them, Alan thought as he watched Chief Simon.

Simon had never fought the demon army, so he had never seen the Seven Heroes in action. While their physical prime was in the past, just as he said, the fact still remained that they were hailed as heroes far and wide. Even though Simon was holed up deep in his office, focusing on whose pockets the people's funds would secretly end up in, he should have at least heard stories of the heroes' strength.

"Oh, our first participant is Dora, huh?"

The enormous and chiseled Dora Alexandra the Saint had marched toward the center of the arena.

"I feel sorry for her opponent. Who is she up against?" Alan asked with a wry smile.

"Heh heh heh. I wonder who should be feeling sorry for who here." Simon's craggy face twisted in a nasty smile. "Show them who you are, Master of

Strength, *Strong Garfield*!”

The hulking man who was ready to charge at Derek earlier stepped up in response.

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Strong Garfield’s heavy footsteps resounded across the arena as he stomped toward Dora. Six steps in, he took a deep breath.

“Graaaaaaaaargh!” His fierce roar reverberated through the air, the immense pressure from his lungs strong enough to rattle the windowpanes.

“Eek!” The audience shrieked in collective surprise.

“I’m going to crush you,” Strong growled as he gripped his weapon, a morning star topped with a menacing one-meter diameter iron sphere.

“H-He’s a *giant*.”

“He even dwarfs Lady Dora...”

The audience rumbled when they saw him come face-to-face with Dora in the center of the arena.

Dora’s physique easily outsized the average person’s, but Strong was bigger still. At a glance, he was likely over 230 centimeters tall, while his body was three times as thick and bulky as an ordinary man’s.

“Tsk, I’m against a woman?” Strong complained.

“Oh? Do you have a problem fighting against me?”

“Can’t brag about beating a woman. Not to mention you’re just some dried-up hag with a failing body. Talk about anticlimactic.”

Dora’s eyes sharpened in response to Strong’s words. “Is that so...? Despite your claims, you seem plenty excited.”

“L-Let the match begin.” Having been unwillingly appointed the judge by Derek and Isabella, the teary-eyed Margaret gave the signal for the match to start.

Like a shot, Strong raised his morning star.

“This is just a warning, you crone.”

Blam!

The iron sphere was a hurtling meteor, crashing into the arena floor with an explosive sound that shook the room. The startled audience might have mistaken it for an earthquake if they hadn’t seen the source of the vibrations.

“Whoa...” someone whispered.

The audience was at a loss for words. A five-meter crater was crushed into the reinforced concrete arena floor.

“The battlefield is no place for a woman. Go wash some dishes in the kitchen like a good housewife,” Strong said as he casually hoisted the iron sphere he had made such an impression with. He easily looked down on Dora with his massive frame.

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Simon snickered triumphantly at the scene before him.

“The Great Six are each the cream of the crop of the Humanity Defense Coalition when it comes to strength, speed, defense, magic energy, magic control, and special ability—all crucial factors in combat. Strong Garfield’s strength is said to be that of two hundred regular soldiers. His physical strength is unrivaled in the coalition,” he boasted.

“So those muscles aren’t just for show,” Alan mused, though he didn’t need Simon to tell him. From that single strike, Alan understood both Strong’s power and Simon’s confidence. “He certainly packs a punch.”

“He does, doesn’t he? This is the result of our constant gathering of strength, all to prepare against the demon army. That is the true power of the Humanity Defense Coalition!” Chief Simon said in a loud voice. Alan’s words had put him in a good mood, and his face was like that of a child promised a sweet treat.

“Yes, Strong is strong, without a doubt.” He was skilled enough that Alan could say that honestly.

“But, this time...he ended up with an awful matchup,” Alan muttered under his breath as he watched Strong square up against his old comrade.

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Dora the Saint quietly observed the crater Strong had created from a short distance away.

He gave a belly laugh. “What’s wrong, woman, cat got your tongue? Afraid to go up against the strongest in the Humanity Defense Coalition?” He saw her behavior and believed she was dumbfounded from the might he had displayed.

“I see now,” she muttered before picking up the extra-large halberd that rested on her shoulder, thrusting it into the ground, and letting go. “Guess I won’t be needing this.”

“What?”

Strong furrowed his brow; the audience had a similar reaction. They had all witnessed his enormous strength, yet she decided to let go of her weapon. What could she be planning?

“Your heart rate and blood pressure just jumped. Are you nervous?” she asked.

He scowled when his enemy accurately read his momentary unease at failing to see the purpose of her actions. “The hell’re you talking about?”

“My ears are just a bit better than the average person’s, that’s all. I hear such interesting little things,” she said before laughing heartily. “Come on, get over here already, boy.” She beckoned him over with her right hand in the same manner one would call a kid who’d stayed out too late.

The previously off-kilter and unenthusiastic Strong almost popped a vein when he saw her gesture with such contempt.

“You’ll regret this, hag!”

He raised his morning star. If he had ever intended to hold back, he would not now. He didn’t care if the harridan who’d made a fool of him died right then and there. As if to express that sentiment, he let out a thunderous roar as he spiked his iron sphere toward his unarmed opponent. The audience screamed in terror as they imagined the moment Dora’s body would be mercilessly broken.

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The Second Kingdom, Asch Sanctuary, also known as the Desert Orthodoxy—as the name implied, it was a kingdom in the middle of the desert, surrounded by defensive walls. There were two reasons these tall, thick walls were built about four hundred years ago. The first was to lessen the impact of frequent, intense sandstorms. The second was to shelter the citizens from the deadly high-rank monsters that lurked outside. Thanks to its defensive walls, the kingdom itself was safe; however, anyone taking one step outside was in danger of being attacked by the creatures that lived in the desert.

Although, such days were actually a thing of the past. Exactly thirty years ago, the damage caused by monsters in the region around the Desert Orthodoxy had dropped to almost nothing. Mister Lind Albert, sixty-two years old, former Bishop of National Defense of the Second Kingdom, had this to say:

“Yes, I can still clearly recall the first time I saw her fight. At the time, she was just a fourteen-year-old novice sister, but even back then, she was tall enough that I had to look up at her. She rode this giant rhino that hates humans, by all accounts; the Great Liner, it’s called. She had an enormous halberd, and headed straight for the desert centipede—the strongest monster in the desert, you see—without a hint of hesitation.”

The desert centipede was a carnivorous, venomous monster that exceeded forty meters in length. It was a deadly but seldom encountered beast, so ferocious a monster that even travelers with bodyguards would run away rather than try to defeat it. It was truly the king of the desert and synonymous with fear for the people of the Desert Orthodoxy.

“Yes, one hit, just sliced it in half with one hit. Couldn’t keep my mouth from hanging open. Fortunately, she wanted nothing more than to work for her kingdom. Has it already been thirty-two years since then? And she hasn’t stopped! Thanks to her continuing to hunt the monsters around the kingdom, the recent casualties from dangerous monsters can be counted on one hand. She is truly our Saint.”

That girl’s name was Dora Alexandra, the Godfist Saint. The strongest woman in all of humanity.

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Clang!

Dora caught the incoming iron sphere barehanded, as if catching a ball tossed in a friendly game.

“Wha—”

Strong blinked at her with complete astonishment as he tried to process the sight before him. He had swung his weapon with the superhuman strength he took great pride in. Somehow, she had blocked it head-on, not with a weapon of her own but her hand.

Strong tried to pull his weapon back with both arms. “Ugh... I can’t move it!”

What the hell is this? Is such strength even humanly possible?! All he could do was listen to the thoughts race through his head, since his weapon was trapped in Dora’s right hand.

“Do you understand why I let go of my weapon?” she asked as she clenched the fist of her open right hand. Veins thick as rope and massive muscles bulged on her brawny arm. “See, it’s easier to hold back barehanded.”

Dora landed a powerful left hook directly on Strong.



“Argh!”

A creaking sound that should not come from a human body rang out. Strong was blown out the arena floor with enough force that he flew for over twenty meters before his body cratered a deep hole into the wall. It went without saying that he didn’t stand up after that.

“You’re pretty light. You should put some more meat on your bones,” Dora said. The audience watched, dumbfounded, as she tossed away the morning star she was holding in her hand.

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Simon was at a loss for words, his jaw hanging open.

“You shouldn’t be so dejected, Chief. Your subordinate was plenty strong within the confines of common sense.” It really was a terrible matchup.

Simon spluttered. “That was absurd—yes, I’ve heard stories of the Godfist Saint, but she’s forty-six now! Has she not grown weaker with old age?!”

“She should have, you would think,” Alan replied with some honest surprise of his own. It was safe to say that Dora was as powerful as she was in her heyday, the Godfist Saint of legend still alive and kicking. “She is an abnormal case.”

“But... but that’s still only one defeat! Even if Lady Dora has shown no wear with time, that same is not necessarily true of you and the other heroes.” Simon sounded a little frantic.

“Well, yes, it would be too much to ask of *me* to be on the same level as her.”

Alan could feel his body aging like anyone’s would. The same was probably true for the rest of the Seven Heroes, excluding Dora. Perhaps Dora hadn’t grown any weaker with age because she remained active by hunting monsters in the field.

He was thinking that when the next hero contestant stepped into the arena. Alan reflexively groaned.

Entering the arena was a man with an ominous smile, and the same person who had started a quarrel in the earlier meeting: Derek Henderson the Priest.

“Chief Simon.”

“What is it, Commander Alan?”

“I am asking you for your own good, but would you consider forfeiting the next match only?”

Simon frowned in response to Alan’s question. “Of all the senseless things to ask... Are you waging psychological warfare on me now?”

“No, that’s not what I’m trying to—never mind, forget I asked.” Alan wanted to warn him that fighting Derek was simply too great a risk, but Simon would probably not listen to him anyway.

If it comes down to it, I will have to step in and stop him myself.

Alan breathed a long sigh.

Chapter 4: Derek Henderson the Exiled Dark Priest

Roughly one week before the mock battle, Empress Margaret herself issued a summons decree for the heroes of each kingdom. Messengers had to be sent to deliver them, but not just anyone would do. Not only were the recipients the heroes who'd once saved humanity, some of them were figures of authority in the seven great kingdoms. Although the empress was officially of a higher rank than them, this was an order for them to gather, so the persons delivering the inconvenient news needed sufficiently high statuses themselves.

Therefore, a distinguished individual was dispatched to meet with Derek Henderson the Priest, king of the Third Kingdom of Blue Intersection, which was also called the Mercantile Nation of Mist. The messenger, Raymon, was the First Kingdom's Minister of Religion and the highest authority with regards to religion in Whitehyde. There could be no affront in sending such an important person as a messenger.

Her Imperial Majesty entrusted me with this duty. I will see it through without flaw.

Despite being only in his thirties, Raymon had a collected and intellectual air about him. He acted as one might expect, given his appearance: gentle, thoughtful, and faithful—a man with no shortcomings, despite his status as a minister with power over the people.

When Raymon arrived at the Third Kingdom, he promptly met with the recipient of his message.

"It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Majesty Derek Henderson. My name is Raymon Almado. I have come to deliver an imperial decree from her Imperial Majesty Margaret Whitehyde."

Raymon lowered his head gracefully and respectfully. His conduct as a messenger was flawless on the surface, but his thoughts were in turmoil.

What is this? What is wrong with this man?!

“A messenger from Margaret, you say? The trip here must have been long and arduous.”

Raymon’s entire body broke out in a cold sweat. The voice coming from the throne seemed to twist around him like a chilling specter. His instincts told him to run home and pretend he never met with anyone, but he somehow shook the sensation and raised his head.

“Come on, why do you look so tense?”

A man in his forties was sitting on the throne, but to Raymon he looked like a hungry *something* in human’s clothing. When Raymon originally worked at the church, he’d met people from all walks of life and had gained an eye for reading their nature from their looks alone. A single glance at Derek told him that he was nothing short of a textbook psychopath. The first thing that stood out were Derek’s uncomfortably asymmetrical eyes and eyebrows, a physical trait commonly found in madmen, but that wasn’t the last of it. Each part of his face was unruly and serpentine in some way or another—worst of all, despite everything, his face was still handsome.

Raymon had encountered countless people during his lifetime, but this was his first time seeing someone so abhorrent. He couldn’t stop shivering at the realization that a man like Derek was a king, but he was too dedicated not to fulfill his duty, regardless. He reached for his breast pocket and took out the decree issued by Margaret.

“A decree, is it? Hey, Elise,” Derek muttered before signaling to the person next to him with his eyes.

A remarkably plump blonde woman in a revealing dress stood next to the throne. Much like Margaret, she had glossy skin and the air of someone who wasn’t as young as she appeared, so it was possible they were around the same age.

“As you command, Your Majesty.”

The woman called Elise received the decree from Raymon with a fluid motion, broke the seal, and opened it in front of Derek.

“Ah, so that’s what this is about. The demon army, is it?” Despite the decree

talking about a crisis for all humanity, Derek seemed *awfully* delighted.

He looked at Raymon and said, “I’d be more than happy to answer the summons, but I’m the king of a kingdom of merchants. You can’t expect me to do it for free.”

Negotiations were now underway, as Raymon had expected. As the name implied, the Mercantile Nation of Mist Derek ruled over was a kingdom where commerce prospered. Perhaps it was because of that mercantile disposition that many of the people of this kingdom would try to squeeze out every last drop they could whenever they negotiated official government matters. It was easy to imagine the likelihood of the king presenting his conditions even when faced with an imperial decree.

Now then, what kind of conditions will the king of a mercantile nation have for me?

Margaret had told Raymon in advance how much he could offer during the summons negotiations. He had to work within the scope he was allowed, and try to keep it to a minimum if possible.

“I’ll be satisfied with this for now. Sign here if you agree.” Derek smoothly wrote his terms on a piece of paper, then had Elise hand it over to Raymon.

“Th-These are...” Raymon mumbled.

The terms, which included money, favorable treatment in trade, and recognition of disputed territory in the name of the empress, were just *slightly* above the limit of what Raymon had been allowed—as if they had been fired with pinpoint accuracy.

“Is something wrong? I figured this is about how much Margaret is willing to offer when I wrote it.”

Derek grinned at the troubled Raymon. Troubling him had clearly been his aim; what a horrible man he was. However, these terms were obviously above what Raymon had been allowed, so he couldn’t fold without hesitation. As the representative of his kingdom, he had a duty to haggle for the best deal.

“My apologies, but would you perhaps reconsider these terms? I can’t exactly __”

“Yeah, you can relax,” Derek said, interrupting Raymon with a wave of his hand.

For a moment, Raymon thought that Derek might be a reasonable person beneath the surface.

“Because you’ve already signed.”

“Huh?”

Raymon found himself kneeling before Derek, his hands outstretched and offering the piece of paper. Thought it seemed impossible, his signature on the document was as clear as day.

A chill swept like rushing water down Raymon’s spine. He shuddered. Of course, he had been warned that Derek Henderson the Priest was proficient in black magic, a type of magic that specialized in curses or disruption. However, among such dark magic, Derek was extremely skilled at one particular type: brainwashing. It was second nature for him to brainwash people and compel them to his will. Bodies *or* minds, he could manipulate them both easily, as he had just demonstrated. If he felt like it, he could force others to act without them even realizing it, as he just had.

“I appreciate your cooperation,” Derek said as he accepted the piece of paper from Raymon.

“This will turn into a diplomatic issue, Your Majesty!” Raymon protested.

“But you signed this on your own,” Derek said with a hearty laugh, his mouth stretched wide all the while.

“Oh, *calm down*, I was just playing around with you. Honestly, you seem like an upstanding man, so I couldn’t help but scare you a little.”

“What do you mean by—”

“That’s really all it was,” Derek said, cutting him off. “Margaret can probably authorize these terms if she pushes herself, if only barely. It’s not like I’m strangers with that crybaby. I bet we’d arrive at a similar agreement if we negotiated directly. You can confirm with her yourself if it bothers you so much.”

“Th-Then you didn’t have to brainwash me,” Raymon stuttered.

“I already told you, I thought it would be funny to scare a virtuous fellow like you.”

“That was really the only reason?”

“That’s right.”

Derek wore a puzzled expression, as if to say, “Yes, that’s what I’ve been telling you this entire time. Why do you keep asking?” It would seem that he truly just felt like messing with Raymon for laughs. It was pure malice, no more, no less.

Is it wise to entrust the future to this man? Raymon wondered.

To a wicked man like him? Raymon glanced over at the woman standing next to the throne, Elise Henderson. Despite Derek treating her like a servant, her elegance and beauty betrayed her position as the queen of the Mercantile Nation of Mist. She was the previous king’s second daughter when she became engaged to Derek, and had surrendered the throne to him after their wedding. It was reputed that she was the ideal devoted wife, that her love for Derek ran deep, and that she was always supporting him by his side.

However, there was a terrible rumor known only to a select few: “Isn’t the queen just brainwashed?”

After seeing them in person, Raymon believed the same. He looked deeply into her face, using his knack for judging a person’s heart, and saw that her eyes were hollow. There was no doubt Derek was brainwashing her—how dreadful.

Derek and Elise had been married for twenty-five years, and she had lived her entire married life with fake love for Derek planted in her mind. Raymon wondered how Derek could bear to live like normal under those disgusting conditions. A normal person would be racked with guilt if they saw their closest person like that on a daily basis, but Derek was at peace. Raymon was certain that only someone who saw other people as objects could stand it.

According to other rumors he had heard, Derek was exiled from his party because of his wicked heart, so he had slaughtered his old party members as revenge and brainwashed Elise, the sole survivor, to be his possession. Raymon

could no longer consider that idle gossip.

“Heh heh heh! Everything in this kingdom belongs to me. If the demon army wants to lay hands on it, I’ll be sure to show them a wonderful time.”

Derek Henderson the Exiled Dark Priest, wielder of the vilest brainwashing magic, forty-two years old. Good or evil aside, he was a powerful asset in combat.

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That selfsame man walked toward the center of the arena where his opponent was waiting.

“I am the sorceress of justice, Master of Magical Energy, Leen Clarice!”

Leen was a fourteen-year-old girl with pigtails and a frilly pink dress. She struck a dramatic pose, pointing her red-magicite-tipped staff at Derek.

He looked her up and down. “Oh, are we playing knights and demons?”

“This isn’t a game!” Leen puffed her cheeks like a squirrel in frustration. “Leen is a real sorceress of justice.”

No two ways about it, her clothes and pose were the spitting image of the heroine of a recent popular play in which an ordinary girl forms a contract with an angel and becomes a powerful sorceress who defeats monsters.

“Justice, you say,” Derek muttered. He regarded her as if she was the most suspicious of criminals.

“I know about you, mister. You’re an evil man who has brainwashed an innocent woman. I will punish you in the name of the heavens!”

“Is that so?” Unbothered, Derek scratched at his head. “I’d like to see you try, kiddo.”

He flashed Leen a malicious grin.

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

“Let the match begin!” Margaret announced.

Right after Margaret’s signal, Leen started chanting with her staff pointed at Derek. “All-consuming hellfire, cleanse the stain of sin from this world. Flame

Tornado!” As she finished her incantation, flames burst from the tip of her magic staff.

“Impressive!” Derek said before leaping to the side and evading the powerful spell. A tremendous spiral of flames blasted through his previous location.

“Whoaaa!” the audience shouted.

The spell must have been set to avoid hitting the audience, as it changed trajectory halfway and went for the sky. Even though it never touched them, the speed and heat burning off of it spoke volumes about its enormous power.

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“Wow, Chanted Magic? And a rather elaborate spell to boot.”

Alan admired Leen’s magic from the audience seats. Chanted Magic could be called the advanced form of the Template Magic taught at the Knight Training Academy. Unlike Template Magic that could be used by anyone without an incantation, Chanted Magic required specific spoken words and was relatively difficult to learn. In exchange, it boasted higher power than Template Magic. If trainees learned the Chanted Magic appropriate for them and perfected its use, they could extend its power a great degree.

If Template Magic was the first of three stages of mastery, then Chanted Magic was the second. Individuals needed to break the mold of Template Magic and learn the way to use magic best suited for them to grain strength. In that respect, the Chanted Magic used by Leen held magnificent potential, and she certainly lived up to her title of Master of Magical Energy. She could raze the demon army’s common soldiers from a distance with such magic.

“You see, don’t you?!” Chief Simon said as he laughed loudly. “Leen is a genius, adept in the most powerful long-range offensive magic in the entire Humanity Defense Coalition, despite her tender age! Is the talent of youth not blinding for you waning heroes?”

The instant Simon heard a compliment, he got carried away and started belittling his opposition.

“Still, Chief Simon, it’s not too late yet. Would you give another thought to forfeiting?” Alan asked.

“What are you talking about? Didn’t you just see how powerful she is?” Simon asked.

Not one to listen, is he?

Alan let out a long sigh. Leen was no doubt a powerful sorceress, but she was in a similar position to Strong: her matchup was awful. Alan wasn’t discriminating against her ability based on age or gender. Rather, he sincerely didn’t want to witness such a naive girl suffer the horrible fate that awaited her.

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“Hmm.” Derek examined the aftermath of the area hit directly by Leen’s spell. “That’s some impressive power! I couldn’t brush off a direct hit from that.” He had some unexpected words of praise for his opponent.

“But of course! I have the highest magical energy among the Great Six. You’re in trouble if you underestimate me,” Leen said with a smug chuckle.

“Yes, yes, you’re very strong. So strong, in fact, that I’m in kind of a bind here,” Derek said as he took a step toward Leen.

“Not so fast!” Leen backed away from Derek, despite a distance of more than thirty meters laying between them.

“Come now, my strong and sweet sorceress of justice. What are you so afraid of?” Derek asked Leen.

“I *know* your specialty! That brainwashing magic! It’s over for me if I get hit, so—Fire Element, Seventh Magic!”

Leen fired incantation-free Template Magic at Derek over and over again. Her magic was weaker than earlier but still plenty strong, and there was an advantage to speed. “Take *this*, and *that*!”

Derek attempted to close the distance between himself and Leen while dodging the incessant torrent of fire headed his way, but she it turned into a dance of one step forward, two steps back. She used her flames to keep him in check while she steadily maintained a distance of thirty meters between them.

“Your brainwashing magic should have limited range, or it would just be invincible. I’ll take you down with my long-range magic without letting you gain

an inch!” Leen declared.

Oh? She might dress and talk like a moron, but she’s surprisingly cautious, Derek observed.

Leen was right. Naturally, Derek’s brainwashing magic had limited range; if he could brainwash people from any distance, everything in this world would already belong to him. His maximum range to take control of someone was twenty meters. That range increased after he had them under his spell, but he had to get within twenty meters to apply it in the first place. It was the same limit many other types of support magic had—such as healing or power ups—so Leen anticipated it and kept a healthy distance to give herself some leeway. Despite her childish manner, she had an eye for strategy and magical knowledge, as well as the strength to put her strategy into practice.

“Whoa there.” The barrage of long-range magic had driven Derek to the edge of the arena before he even noticed. He’d been on the defensive since the fight started. “Man, I’m in quite the pickle here. And when a villain like me is in trouble, they do whatever it takes to win, my dear sorceress of justice!”

Leen’s eyes widened as she tried to anticipate his next move.

“Brainwashing, activate,” Derek said.

However, Derek and Leen were thirty-two meters apart, leaving her well outside the range of his brainwashing magic. What could his plan be?

The very next moment, ten members of the audience behind Derek jumped down into the arena at once. Since he couldn’t brainwash Leen, he’d brainwashed the audience members that *were* within twenty meters of him.

“Go.”

Following Derek’s order, they rushed at Leen with their teeth bared like feral beasts.

“What the—” Leen was astonished but turned her staff on them right away.

“Are you sure about that? Your magic is so powerful, a direct hit will probably kill them. These guys are but innocent civilians,” Derek said in a truly spiteful voice.

“Tsk!” Leen reflexively yanked her staff back.

In truth, Leen was probably skilled enough to fire a direct hit that would only knock them out, but a righteous girl like her hesitated at the chance of harming the innocent audience. They took advantage of that opening to jump her.

“Dammit!” Leen was forcefully held down by the ten adults and had her staff wrenched away from her. “Ugh, stay away! Let me go!”

Since Leen had focused on training her innate magical energy, she was nothing more than an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl without her staff. It was only natural she couldn’t break free from the adults restraining her.

“Now then,” Derek said after he confirmed that Leen was completely immobilized, “let us have a nice little chat. Earlier, you fought while keeping your distance from me, but that was actually unnecessary.” He slowly advanced toward Leen. “The range of brainwashing magic is twenty meters, true enough, but that range is shorter based on the target’s mana, physical strength, or force of will. Some people are strong enough that brainwashing doesn’t work on them, even point-blank, unless they’re weakened first.”

Brainwashing magic was rare and powerful, but it was far from omnipotent.

“You have high mana and a strong will, so as long as you have stamina and composure to spare, there is no need for you to worry about being brainwashed. That’s why, against people like you, I start by torturing you physically and mentally with a painful neurotoxin, then brainwash you once you’re weak enough!” Derek said as he retrieved a knife from his breast pocket that dripped with venomous purple liquid. His entire face was slashed by a wicked grin.

“Eeeek!”

The intense fear was terrible enough that Leen wet herself.

Pinch!

It started with a little prick.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo!!!” The girl’s scream ricocheted around the arena.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!” Derek’s delighted laughter echoed just as loud.

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Alan held his head in his hands. “I warned you...”

Now a fourteen-year-old girl was being held down by a group of adults as a devilish man slowly stabbed a knife deeper into her, like a scene from some kind of grotesque spectacle performed for leering spectators.

Chief Simon was so shocked by the cruelty on display that he stared dumbfounded for a long moment. Finally, he cried, “Oh no, no, we forfeit! The match is over! Stop!”

Even this vain old man could imagine how much more horrible the situation would turn if he didn’t interfere.

“Tsk, I was only at the hors d’oeuvre,” Derek muttered with dissatisfaction before he left the arena.

If that was the hors d’oeuvre, it was terrifying to imagine what the main course would be like.

“It was a wise decision to throw in the towel without being stubborn about it, Chief Simon.” Alan praised Simon with an honest heart for the first time that day.

“Ugh, this marks two consecutive defeats,” Chief Simon said with the air of a man who was almost cornered.

It was more accurate to say that he was already cornered. The Humanity Defense Coalition held zero wins and two losses. If they lost the next match as well, victory for the team of six would become impossible. The Seven Heroes needed to win another two matches for their victory to be set in stone, but if they won even one more match, the best the coalition could hope for was a tie. Since the coalition wanted to secure their victory at any cost to justify their selfish tactics, their backs were already against the wall.

“Let’s see who’s up next,” Alan said as he looked at the arena.

The one who stepped inside was a bewitching woman.

“So, it’s Isabella’s turn.”

Chapter 5: Isabella Stuart the Final Form Villainess

It was time for the third match between the Seven Heroes and the Humanity Defense Coalition. The uncannily youthful yet middle-aged Isabella Stuart took her time sauntering to the center of the arena. Her walk alone exuded enough sex appeal to make people dizzy; anyone who glanced her way knew she was no ordinary person.

Final Form Villainess: that's what Isabella was most commonly called. The reason behind that overblown nickname was widely known, at least to those involved in politics. The term villainess was a part of it because of the Lightwise family Isabella was born into. They were a powerful noble family that schemed against the Fourth Kingdom's royal family for generations in the hopes that they would eventually seize power for themselves. From the royal family's perspective, the Lightwise family were true villains. Even at a young age, the other children at the academy for noble children called her Villainess.

And why 'Final Form'? It was no secret. *She* was the one to finally take control of the kingdom.

After the end of the previous war, Isabella emerged victorious from among the palace's internal politics—a hive of trickery and betrayal—and eventually had her husband, the king, executed. With that act, she became the head of the state. Obviously, the other nobles didn't take this lying down, but for some mysterious reason, they kept losing their positions one after the other. There was no evidence that Isabella was responsible; their downfalls were their own fault. It goes without saying that such convenient coincidences were guided by someone's hand, yet no matter how many investigations were conducted, no proof that Isabella had been pulling the strings arose.

Therefore, within five years of the king's death, there no longer existed anyone in the Fourth Kingdom who could stand against her. Some nobles or royals called her a monster of politics.

Undoubtedly, she was no common woman, and her intellect was a valuable weapon against the demon army. Still, the chatter about Isabella all related to her intelligence. The upcoming match was a one-on-one with no advance preparations. Would she have a chance to make use of her resourcefulness?

“Phew! Good, looks like we’ve secured a win for now,” Simon said while looking down at—or perhaps *on*—Isabella from the audience seats.

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Alan inquired. Simon was making bold claims before the match had even started.

“Lady Isabella is a woman who made a name for herself in the world of domestic affairs. Nothing indicates that she’s a powerful combatant. We yielded the previous two matches, but this one will be but a breeze.”

Alan listened to Simon without saying a word.

“Besides, the one fighting next is our queen of mobility, Master of Speed, Stephan Goldeagle! She’s the most powerful fighter in the Humanity Defense Coalition.”

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“Nice to meet you, well-preserved miss,” Stephan Goldeagle said, unprompted, as she stood face-to-face with Isabella in the middle of the arena.

“My, don’t you think that’s a tad rude?” Isabella replied pleasantly, not showing a hint of anger in the face of such discourtesy from a junior.

“But you’re already in your forties. That makes you an old woman,” Stephan said guilelessly.

Stephan was nineteen years old, young and well-proportioned. Her hair was a patchwork rainbow, and she had suns and stars drawn under her eyes, marking her as a quirky and easygoing adolescent. When lined up next to such a youth, Isabella’s uncanniness was further highlighted. Though her bearing was that of an adult, her body was youthful enough to compete with a healthy nineteen-year-old’s.

“But man, I sure am lucky to get you as my opponent,” Stephan said.

“Are you, now?” Isabella asked.

“Let the match begin!” Margaret announced. It was unclear whether the energy she put into it was because she had gotten used to it or because she was getting desperate.

“Rainbow Wing.”

As soon as the match started, wings in the same kaleidoscopic color as Stephan’s hair sprouted from her back. The next second, she disappeared with a gust of wind. Margaret the referee and the audience completely lost sight of her.

“Over here.”

The voice came from behind Isabella. The two of them had been twenty meters apart before, but Stephan had carried herself and her rainbows to Isabella in the blink of an eye. Her speed was astounding.

“Ha ha, I knew you wouldn’t react in time,” Stephan said brightly. “I know all about you, miss! You’re a remarkable politician, right? But even if you’re one of the Seven Heroes, someone who’s all about politics can’t possibly be a fighter too, huh?”

“I guess you’re right. My combat ability is rather low when compared to the other Seven Heroes,” Isabella admitted.

“Damn, I’m so lucky to get an easy opponent.” Stephan’s eyes grew sharper. “Not that I would lose if I were to fight anyone else.”

Stephan bent her legs and gathered her strength, then flapped her wings hard.

“Silent Flight.”

She vanished once more—and instead of appearing in a different location like before, this time she was simply gone.

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Simon chuckled.

“What do you think, Sir Alan? That’s Stephan Goldeagle’s Silent Flight. She’s not called the strongest in the Humanity Defense Coalition in straight one-on-one combat for nothing.” Simon bragged from the audience seats as if he were

on the battlefield.

“It allows for completely silent high-speed flight; there’s not even a whisper of flapping. Her opponents can’t attack what they cannot see, so it becomes a one-sided match. This was a dreadful matchup for Lady Isabella, a non-combatant among the Seven Heroes.”

He kept flapping his gums without a care in the world.

“I’m sorry to bring this up so abruptly, but you might have misunderstood some things,” Alan interrupted.

“And what would I be misunderstanding?” Chief Simon asked with a puzzled expression.

“That Isabella is a non-combatant.”

“But that’s a fact, is it not? Lady Isabella is a prominent political figure. Unlike the rest of you, she’s unsuited for combat.”

“Have you ever heard anyone actually say that?”

“I beg your pardon?”

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I think it’s time I put an end to this, Stephan thought.

She set her sights on Isabella as she was soared around the arena at a speed imperceptible to the naked eye. Just as Chief Simon had said, she used Silent Flight to fully escape her opponent’s notice, then struck at their vitals with falcon-like speed to end the fight. Her aim was the source of mana, the heart. Without that organ, it was impossible for anyone to bring themselves back through recovery magic and the like. The royal palace had a medical team on standby, so Isabella would *probably* survive.

She drew her thin rapier and flew at Isabella like an assassin in the night. Her aim was to pierce straight through Isabella’s heart from her back, but as she approached, Isabella turned around. The most shocking part was that her eyes were perfectly trained on Stephan.

“What the—”

Clunk!

Before the rapier could pierce Isabella's heart, she grabbed hold of Stephan's face with her right hand.

"I am used to being misconstrued," Isabella said as she put enough strength into her grip to make Stephan's skull creak. "You'll find I can hold my own, even in conventional combat."

"Argh...!"

"Roar, thunder. Thunder Nail."

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzttttt!

A powerful current of electricity ran through Stephan's face. She pulsed and spluttered, making garbled noises as the shock hit.

"We Seven Heroes *earned* that title by each doing our part in defeating the Seven Black Stars. Why would you ever think one of us would be weak?"

Ten seconds of electric shock later, Isabella opened her right hand and Stephan's charred body collapsed on the ground with a thud.

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Simon gasped in complete disbelief of the events that had transpired before him. "Th-That can't be!"

That is how you'd react when the subordinate you were most confident in loses against the foe you considered the weakest, Alan thought.

"Who would think that the Villainess would possess such combat strength?" Simon muttered.

"As I said, you may have miscalculated or had the wrong impression of her. Though, it is true that Isabella is weak among the Seven Heroes. Her combat strength is second from the bottom; her expertise lies in politics," Alan said.

Simon was left blinking like an owl in direct sunlight at Alan's words.

"With our three consecutive wins, it's now impossible for you to win. Let me be straight with you: your six are no match for us seven. You should realize this, but to be clear, if they were to stand against the Seven Black Stars we once fought to the death, they would be defeated in a heartbeat."

Alan did not mean to say the Great Six were weak. They would have no trouble fighting against the rank-and-file soldiers of the demon army, but they would never be a substitute for the Seven Heroes.

"If you'd experienced even a little of the fierceness of the front lines in the previous war, you would have known the measure of their might without these mock battles. It seems you lived in a cozy world completely disconnected from war, Chief Simon."

Simon choked on his words. Regardless of his earlier objections, he couldn't say anything now that the gap in their strength had been shown firsthand.

"Now then, maybe I should take the last match. We cannot entrust the fate of humanity to someone like you. As promised, once our victory is confirmed, you will withdraw your proposed strategy," Alan said as he stood up. He made to head for the arena, but he was interrupted.

"W-We have an emergency!"

A panicked, out-of-breath knight rushed into the arena.

"What has you in such a hurry?" Margaret asked.

"The...the demon army..." As soon as those words came out of the knight's mouth, the heroes twitched in response. The knight gulped for breath, then cried in a loud voice:

"The demon army is launching an attack on the First Kingdom's Mildret sector *as we speak*!"

"What was that?!" Margaret's yelp rang out like a bell in the arena.

Chapter 6: Emergency Situation

When the report of the demon army's attack arrived, the mock battle was naturally called off, and Margaret, the Seven Heroes, and the ministers that were in the previous meeting gathered in the same meeting room once more.

This is absurd... It's far too soon. That was Alan's first thought when he heard the knight's report.

Experience had taught him that Evil Gate—the teleportation magic used by the demon army—could only be used so often. At least thirty days had to pass between uses, yet it had only been half that since their previous attack. Unfortunately, it would then be safe to assume that the current demon army used a different means of transportation from the previous one.

Those thoughts aside, the situation at hand had priority.

"Let us hear your report, Second-Class Knight Arias."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

The knight who had earlier rushed into the arena stood in the meeting room and gave his report in a loud, clear voice.

"At approximately 1515, the Twelfth Unit spotted a group of monsters on horseback around the southern border of the Mildret sector during their patrol. They number approximately five thousand and are headed our way in formation. We believe they will engage the border security knights within two hours."

"Five thousand, you say?" The First Kingdom's Minister of Defense wore a grim expression.

Demons were far more formidable than regular humans. It was estimated that a single demon soldier was worth more than two human soldiers in terms of combat strength. The Mildret sector was a valuable magicite mining site, so it had more troops and better defenses than the average—but this would be the first battle against the demon army for most knights. In truth, the situation was dire. The ministers simmered with anxiety, but the Seven Heroes had cooler

heads about the matter.

“Well, if that’s the extent of their forces, I should be able to handle it alone,” said Dora the Godfist Saint. The ministers concerned voices rose to a rolling boil.

Isabella’s spoke above the ruckus. “If we consider the aftermath, wouldn’t it be more appropriate for Alan to go, since they appeared within the First Kingdom’s territory?” She wasn’t contradicting Dora’s earlier words; any single hero in their group, other than the Villager, would be able to deal with an army of this scale.

“Isabella is right. Rather than the queen of the Second Kingdom fighting, it would be more appropriate for me, a knight commander of the First Kingdom, to go.” Alan paused for a moment. “But, just to be on the safe side and avoid any unnecessary casualties, I’d like two of us to head there. It should be me and... Sage, can I count on your backup?”

“Oh? You are requesting my help, Mister Alan?”

The one Alan called on was a forty-four-year-old bespectacled man dressed in the garb of a priest. He was one of the Seven Heroes, Norman Lockwood, History’s Strongest Sage. He was a reedy man with a gentle, wrinkled face, very unlike the strength displayed by the other heroes. Nevertheless, every aspect of his calm behavior evoked a feeling of power and intimidation, much like his companions did.

Norman adjusted the position of his round-lensed glasses with his right finger and said, “Well, unlike the others present, I am no royalty. I shall lend you my aid.”

“Thank you, Norman. I can’t say I’m used to you speaking like that, though. You can talk to me like the old times,” Alan said.

“Oh, ha ha, please refrain from bringing that up, Sir Champion. Remembering my past self is still a cause for embarrassment.”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t make decisions without my input!” Alan and Norman’s conversation was interrupted by none other than Chief Simon.

“Since the demon army’s march has been confirmed, according to coalition

regulations, we are in a special state of emergency. In other words, full authority of command falls to us, the Humanity Defense Coalition. By my right as commander, I order all forces present in the First Kingdom, the Seven Heroes included, to stand by!”

“Hold on a moment, Chief Simon. Wasn’t it agreed that you would withdraw that strategy if you lost the mock battle?” Alan asked.

“We have only lost three matches so far, not the entire mock battle,” Simon said confidently.

“If you look at the initial matches, you can predict the outcome of the other matches without actually going through with them. But, if you are so inclined, we can hold the fourth match right now.”

“You ask the impossible, Sir Alan. The three members of the Great Six who weren’t called on to fight are already en route to the front lines as part of the Humanity Defense Coalition Elite Anti-Demon Corps.”

Chief Simon was on top of his game only at inconvenient times like this.

“You little...”

As Alan started moving toward Simon, Norman the Sage grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Now now, let us remain calm, Mister Alan. Going against coalition regulations is bound to cause problems down the line. Why don’t we entrust the Humanity Defense Coalition with the current situation for the moment?”

“But, Norman—”

“It would indeed be best for us to take the field here. However, from what I saw in the mock battle, the Humanity Defense Coalition’s strength is in better condition than we had anticipated. Do you not think it important to let them experience combat against the demon army while still possible?” Norman asked.

“You do have a point,” Alan admitted. He then turned to Simon and said, “Understood. We will obediently follow the order to stand by, Commander.”

“Ha ha! You can leave it all to us. We might have suffered an embarrassing

defeat in the mock battle against humans, but our specialty *is* anti-demon warfare," Simon replied.

"But I want you to promise me one thing. If your troops find themselves in danger, recall your command to have us stand by."

"Fine. But only *if* that happens."

Rosetta approached Alan's side.

"The preparations are complete, Master Alan."

"Thank you, Rosetta. Turn it on."

She nodded and poured mana into the white wall in the meeting room just as she had during the first meeting, but unlike the still image of last time, the Mildret sector now displayed in real time. This was another application of the Canvas Phantasm developed by Norman the Sage. Having a distant location projected on the white magicite wall was the magic of dreams, but it wasn't possible to project any location at will, only those connected by ley lines—underground flow of mana. The Mildret sector mines happened to have a ley line connection with the royal palace, so it had magical equipment for recording its current state installed. Such magical equipment was incredibly expensive, so it was only used in special circumstances. Regardless, both Margaret and the Minister of Finance had approved its use without the slightest hesitation Who would question that the current situation was a state of emergency?

"So the Humanity Defense Coalition has about six thousand troops," Alan mused while watching the projection.

One thousand more than the demon army. For their first fight against demons, it wasn't much of an advantage.

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The demon army arrived at the magicite mines of the Mildret sector, whether Alan liked it or not.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! Slaughter them aaaaaaaaall!"

Armored demons riding equine monsters rushed to attack, a cloud of kicked-up dust following in their wake. With all five thousand of them approaching at

once, the impact was tremendous. The Humanity Defense Coalition standing against them consisted entirely of infantry. Demons were already physically superior to humans, but the gap in their strength further widened by pitting cavalry against infantry—or so one would think.

"Despicable demons, bear witness to the proud Humanity Defense Coalition's strength," the commander muttered, before raising his voice, "All turrets, fire!"

Kaboom!

A thunderous roar pealed through the battlefield. The demon soldiers and their mounts were blown away, and even many who weren't fell off their horses when struck by the impact. This was the magicite artillery developed thanks to the Humanity Defense Coalition's vast wealth. By replacing gunpowder with volatile magicite as the triggering explosive, it had several times the destructive power of previously used weapons. The downside was a several tenfold increase to the operating cost, since magicite was vastly more expensive than gunpowder. Only the bloated Humanity Defense Coalition, with its seemingly endless defense budget, could manufacture and use such weapons.

"Magicite Gun Unit, advance!"

Soldiers holding guns gave chase to the enemies, but they approached the demons with a hint of hesitation—a symptom of their lack of combat experience, perhaps.

"Fire!"

At their commander's signal, the soldiers fired upon the demon army. The demons made no move to dodge, knowing from the previous war that human guns were unable to pierce their armor.

"Grargh!"

"Ugh!"

Things were different this time.

The bullets fired by the Humanity Defense Coalition soldiers cut through the demons' armor like a hot knife through butter. These magicite guns were also

the fruit of the funds the Humanity Defense Coalition collected from each kingdom. They had close to twice the penetrative power of gunpowder guns, though they had the same high-cost drawback of using magicite as the artillery. Be that as it may, they were proving to be effective weapons. Twenty minutes had elapsed since combat began, yet there were almost zero casualties on the humans' side. The demon army was at a loss before the new anti-demon weapons. Unexpectedly, the tide was in humanity's favor.

"Fire! Keep them coming!"

The Humanity Defense Coalition soldiers took heart and fired onward.

***

"Oh, they're doing rather well," Derek enthused as he followed the state of the battle projected on the meeting room's wall.

"Yes, it's just as you say," Alan agreed. "I didn't think they could put up such a good fight."

Hearing that, Chief Simon chuckled and said in a smug tone, "See? That's why I told you to leave this to the experts."

"Although the cost performance looks like shit. That's why you kept squeezing that absurd defense budget out of us, even though you never fought at all," Derek said; Simon's smirk fell in response.

It was concerning that the magicite artillery and guns consumed close to the budget of a small kingdom in the blink of an eye. The First Kingdom wasn't flowing with wealth despite its authority. Margaret and her subjects were pale as they watched, despite their superior position on the battlefield.

Even so, seem they'll manage thanks to those weapons, Alan thought.

Ideally, the demon army would retreat right away. They weren't mindless beasts; that option was always open to them. As Alan was thinking that, something unusual happened at the battlefield they were looking at.

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"Go on, fire! Make it rain!"

The Humanity Defense Coalition commander was ordering his men to keep

firing their pricy magicite artillery and guns with abandon, when one of the turrets was suddenly destroyed by a burning rock falling from the sky.

“What just happened?!”

The commander squinted at the enemies, then saw the two new demons who had appeared on the scene.

“Man, why do we have to go to the trouble of fighting ourselves?”

“Don’t. Say that. This is also. For our. Objective.”

At first, every human present, the commander included, didn’t realize the two were demons. They looked nothing like the demons the humans had been fighting prior. Generally, ordinary demons had some type of monster as a basis, but their size was similar to a human’s own. In contrast, the two new demons were clearly much bigger than that; at five meters tall, they were both taller than a house.

“Oh! Mistress Heavy Rain and Master Volcano are going to fight.”

“Fall back now! Don’t get caught up in their fight!”

The demon soldiers rushed to the sides with a mix of healthy caution and delight at their assured victory, clearing a path for the two bigger demons.

“Every last one of you is useless.”

The one who spoke in a high feminine voice was the demon called Heavy Rain. She was likely a mermaid demon, but she had a sinister appearance—the exact opposite of the beauty mermaids were renowned for. Wriggling sea snakes comprised her hair, and the entirety of her body was armored in thick scales. Malice radiated from her wicked grin and single black eye. She rode on top of a thick cloud while smaller clouds floated around her.

“You all. Stand. Down.”

The demon called Volcano spoke next. He was based on a fire golem, a type of monster that typically lived near craters. Thick magma discharged nonstop from the gaps in the rocks that made up his enormous body. He was an active, living, *walking* volcano.

“Be grateful, inferior humans. We have no choice but to show you our

power," Heavy Rain said, her voice dripping with her contempt for humans. "The power of the Seven Black Stars."

"Th-The Seven Black Stars...?"

Every member of the Humanity Defense Coalition gulped as soon as they heard Heavy Rain say that. This army had never fought them directly, but of course they knew about the Seven Black Stars through the past war's intel: the strongest officers of the demon army that had once put humanity through hell. Before they were taken down by the Seven Heroes, they had destroyed more than one hundred kingdoms in total, both big and small.



“Don’t...don’t falter! The Seven Black Stars were defeated by the Seven Heroes in the previous war. Those two are not the selfsame demons that wreaked havoc in that war! There’s no proof they are as strong as them!” the commander shouted.

The soldiers came to their senses at their commander’s words, aimed at the two demons, then fired their artillery at the same time.

“What naive reasoning.” Heavy Rain sneered at them. “Wall Rain.”

The moment Heavy Rain spoke those words, a cascade of water gushed out of the clouds floating around her. While swirling at a rapid speed, the water formed a pillar around her and Volcano, until it spouted toward the sky and deflected the barrage of incoming artillery fire like a hand swatting away a pest.

“What the—”

The members of the Humanity Defense Coalition watched in horror as the new weapons they took such pride were batted away. But it didn’t stop there. Next, the fire golem Volcano raised his hand toward the coalition forces.

“Charging...”

Volcano’s arm grew swollen and lopsided, just like it was about to blow.

“Great Explosion.”

Babooooooom!

Volcano’s right hand erupted with a deafening sound. Countless large boulders heated by searing lava rained down on the Humanity Defense Coalition soldiers.

“Graaah!”

“Whoaaaaa!”

The damage caused by such an attack was catastrophic. The downpour of heated rock and lava took out fifty turrets at once, while the ensuing shock wave blew away the surrounding soldiers. The attack hit the turrets with pinpoint accuracy—perhaps intentionally—so none of the soldiers were dead, but over two hundred had been injured.

“I-It’s like we’re from two different worlds...”

The commander was dumbfounded and could only gawk at the disaster that had befallen his army. A single attack had done this much.

“How feeble!” Heavy Rain shrieked before bursting into laughter.

Volcano lowered his arm as if his job were done and told the demon soldiers: “The annoying. Weapons. Are now. Destroyed. The rest. Is your. Job.”

“Yes, sir! Off we go, numbskulls! Time for the slaughter!”

The demons that had retreated before began their advance once more while shouting in exhilaration.

“Eek!”

The Humanity Defense Coalition forces had lost their earlier vigor. Their formation was pure chaos, as more than half of the long-range weapons they relied on had been destroyed. They were still armed with their single-shot magicite guns, but the dominance the weapons provided earlier was only thanks to their formation and the artillery covering fire. The demons would close the gap between them in the time it took to reload after firing. They would then have to fight in close quarters. Once that happened, their inexperience fighting against demons would make itself painfully apparent. Without the peace of mind afforded to them by distance, the fear of a fight to the death would grip the hearts of the up-to-now sheltered elites of the Humanity Defense Coalition. They would soon be at the complete mercy of the demons—or would they?

“Haah!”

“Take that!”

“Graaaaah!”

Among the disoriented Humanity Defense Coalition troops who could barely move, three people went above and beyond.

“Don’t take the Great Six lightly!”

The three members of the Great Six who hadn’t participated in the mock battle, the Masters of Defense, Magical Control, and Special Ability, had arrived.

The three young warriors rushed through the battlefield. One after another, they mowed down demons. The Great Six might have lost in the mock battle, but just as Alan had said, they were quite strong.

“A-All right, soldiers. Follow the lead of the Great Six!”

The other coalition soldiers composed themselves and went for the counterattack. The tide swung in humanity’s favor once more! But it was no more than an illusion, for the fundamental issue remained unresolved. The powerful members of the Seven Black Stars were still unchecked.

“*Ugh*, this actually hurts to watch. The inferior life-forms are still squirming like maggots.”

“I. Bear you. No grudge. But if. You get. In our way. You will be. Eliminated.”

Upon seeing humanity rally, the Seven Black Stars sprang into action once more.

“You can sit back and watch, Volcano.”

Heavy Rain stopped Volcano with one hand as he was about to proceed.

“Are. You. Sure?”

“Yes. These insects are so unsightly I feel like stomping them myself,” Heavy Rain said as she blocked the path of the three Great Six.

“Oh, here she comes,” said one of the Great Six as Heavy Rain approached.

“If I’m being honest, I don’t see us winning this.”

“But we have no choice but to fight.”

The three of the Great Six all pointed their weapons at Heavy Rain, though cold sweat sprang to their skin. Now that they were face-to-face with her, they could instinctively feel the gap between their opponent and themselves. The mana of the mermaid demon riding on her cloud was an order of magnitude higher in both density and quantity than their own. While they outnumbered her three to one, the probability of their victory was low.

Even so, they had no choice but to stand against her.

The Humanity Defense Coalition was an organization with more than a few

bad apples, and the people below them were also infected with rot. Their creed of daily training in preparation for a future battle against the enemies of humanity was nothing but a formality. In actuality, they simply drained an enormous defense budget from each kingdom and enjoyed the affluent lifestyles their greed afforded them.

Yes, the bushel was full of mealy, rotten apples, but there were still a few good ones—like the chosen Great Six.

“We always believed a day like this would come, didn’t we?”

“That it would be our time to protect the peace of humanity.”

“We kept training no matter how putrid the people around us were.”

And they did. Those six were much more powerful than any other member of the Humanity Defense Coalition because they believed in protecting humanity and training daily, without becoming tainted by the people around them.

Their foe was powerful, but their only choice was to stand and fight.

“How irritating. Not like you will survive more than a second,” Heavy Rain spat.

***

“No, don’t fight her!” Alan shouted at the image on the meeting room wall, once he realized the Great Six were truly going to fight against Heavy Rain. “Chief Simon! Please call off the order to have us stand by right this instant!”

Alan had remained calm no matter what egotistical things Simon had done up to that point, so when he suddenly raised his voice, everyone in the room reared back in astonishment.

“I-I can’t do that. This battle is for the Humanity Defense Coalition to—”

“This is no time for that nonsense!”

Bang!

Alan slammed his hands against the desk. Surprised, Simon ducked his head.

“They’re up against a member of the Seven Black Stars! Those three might be far from weak, but that’s not an enemy they can defeat, not yet. We’ll be

leaving them for dead if we just watch!”

Not only those three. The delicate balance maintained by the efforts of the Great Six would collapse, and the battle would soon be in the demons’ favor. What lay beyond that was a one-sided slaughter with countless casualties. Anyone with working eyes could see that much.

“No! I refuse, I refuse, I tell you! You are to stand by. This fight is for our proud Humanity Defense Coalition. We have ample forces left. The fight isn’t over yet!”

Chief Simon refused to accept the truth. Was he optimistic because he had never experienced combat, or was he simply driven by his hunger for wealth and status? It didn’t change the outcome.

Stop messing around.

Alan stepped up to Chief Simon and hoisted him by the collar.

“Agh! What are you doing, Sir Alan?”

“Are you actually this incompetent?!”

Alan’s rebuke shook the entire meeting room.

“Take a close look! People are *losing their lives* over there, and not people like me or you with one foot in the grave, but young people with endless potential in front of them! Can you not grasp the gravity of the situation?!”

“Urk... Th-The soldiers of the respected Humanity Defense Coalition don’t care about any of that. In fact, they would welcome an honorable death in combat.”

“Then take up your sword and go fight on the front lines yourself!”

Alan threw Chief Simon on the floor.

“Argh!” Simon rolled across the floor and groaned in pain.

“*I’m* going to the front lines.”

Alan turned his back to the disgusting old man and moved to leave the meeting room, sword in hand.

“Are you really going, Alan?!” Margaret spluttered. “Violation of coalition

regulations is a serious crime. You could be sentenced to prison for life."

"I know. But I don't want to have any regrets. Not like last time."

The scene from ten days ago was fresh in Alan's mind: young knights who were pinning their hopes on him, lifeless on the ground after he failed to make it in time. Even now, young lives on the other side of the screen were falling to the demon army.

"It is the job of the old to protect the young. I am only going there to carry out that duty. Nothing more, nothing less," Alan said as he was about to leave the room.

"Wait one moment, Alan," Isabella the Villainess interrupted.

"I didn't expect you to try and stop me, Isabella. I'm sorry, this isn't a discussion."

"Oh, I don't really mind if you go. I know very well that once your switch is flipped, you won't hear anyone out. However, please wait one teensy moment longer."

"Hmm?" Alan raised an eyebrow in confusion, then the door he was about to leave through opened from the other side.

"My apologies for the delay, Mistress Isabella," said Cecilia, Isabella's attendant.

"You certainly took your time!"

"I have no excuse for myself. They were unreasonably stubborn individuals."

Cecilia handed over a piece of paper to Isabella. She held it up for Simon to see clearly.

"As you can read, my dear Chief, you have lost command rights in the First Kingdom."

"What, what is that?!"

Once Simon understood the paper in Isabella's hand, his eyes almost jumped out of their sockets. The paper was a proclamation that stated the First Kingdom's right to command in case of emergency was restored. A

proclamation in Article 22 of the coalition regulations could return command rights to individual kingdoms *if* the Humanity Defense Coalition was unable to assume full command for whatever reason.

Theoretically, a kingdom just had to make a formal request with the Humanity Defense Coalition to activate it. In reality, it was close to impossible to actually put the proclamation into effect. The requester would need the signature of the coalition's chief, or three out of five of the vice-chiefs. Since the right to command during an emergency was vital to the coalition, none of its members wanted sign it away. The regulation should have existed on paper only.

"This can't be... How did you gather these three signatures?!"

Lo and behold, the proclamation in Isabella's hand held signatures from three vice-chiefs in handwriting that was well-known to Chief Simon.

"Isabella, you wretch, you must have blackmailed them!"

"My, how could you accuse me of something like that? I only had my subordinate mention some old stories the vice-chiefs would like to keep secret in front of them."

"Why, that's—that's the *textbook definition* of blackmail!"

Alan nodded at Isabella. "Thank you. But that raises the question, how did you know we would need this proclamation?"

This proclamation must have been prepared in advance to have three of the vice-chiefs sign it.

"Hmm? If you look at things like the state of the Humanity Defense Coalition's funds, it's easy to predict this development."

No, that's not something your average person could do, Alan thought. It was child's play for Isabella, a true monster of politics.

Whatever the method, the First Kingdom was now back under the command of Empress Margaret. This command only extended to someone like Alan, a subordinate of the First Kingdom, but it was all they needed. He would be able to head to the battlefield.

"Now then, Chief Simon, would you mind signing here? 'Should the

proclamation be approved, the chief must sign and formally recognize it without delay.' That's in the regulations, no?" Isabella asked before leaving a pen and the piece of paper with the proclamation on the table.

"Grr..."

Simon gritted his teeth as his face reddened from frustration.

"I suppose I must," he admitted, then got up and started slowly walking to the table the paper was on.

Slooowly.

He sluggishly moved at a lazy turtle's, or perhaps a tired snail's, pace.

"What are you doing? Hurry up!" Alan barked.

"My apologies. I would like nothing more than to immediately sign according to the coalition's absolute regulations, but I've been getting on in years. I can't move as fast as I used to," Chief Simon said with a sinister grin on his face.

"You're going to deliberately delay us at this point? Just how low are you willing to go?" Alan said.

"Heavens no, that was not my intention in the slightest. But my entire body hurts, *probably* because *someone* tossed me across the room, so I have to take it easy. Oh dear, this is so hard." The grin on Simon's face told the real story.

That son of a bitch...

"Very well. I have an idea of my own," Alan said.

"Hmm?" Simon asked.

Alan looked at Derek the Priest who had been observing their exchange with a grin.

"What's up? Do you have some source of anguish you'd like to discuss with me, Alan?" Derek asked.

"If memory serves, you are quite fond of the wine from the Uniland lord's plantation, right, Derek?"

"That I am. Its superb tartness is one of a kind."

“The one you can find in the market is of pretty high quality, but did you know that the finest batch is only shared among the lord’s family and close friends?”

“You don’t say...”

“It’s called Uniland Ruby. I could ask Marquess Ginger to prepare four casks.”

“I’m a lucky man, to be blessed with such wonderful comrades,” Derek said with dangerous glee before he fixed his eyes on Chief Simon.

“What is it? What have you two been talking ab—”

“Thank you for the signature,” Derek said, then Simon finally realized.

“What the... When did that happen?!” He had signed the proclamation without even realizing it. “Derek Henderson, you beast! Did you brainwash me?!”

“Thank you, Derek. Please give me the order to depart, Your Imperial Majesty!” Alan said.

Margaret responded to Alan’s request in a voice befitting an empress:

“Knight Commander Alan Granger, join the battle in the Mildret sector posthaste!”

“As you command!”

Alan rushed out of the meeting room like a hurricane. He left the royal palace in a flash, climbed on his horse, and was about to leave before he was stopped by Norman the Sage.

“You must be in a hurry, Mister Alan,” said Norman, who had somehow followed Alan all the way there. “I can send you to the Mildret sector with transport magic.”

“Hold on, we’re so far away. Is there really magic that can send me all the way there?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I only finished developing it recently. It comes with a few flaws, as it can only transport two people at a time, and the locations need to be connected through ley lines.”

“Ha ha! You just brought up the most amazing thing as if it was natural. You

never change, Norman.”

Such feats were all in a day’s work for the person who developed the Template Magic currently used by most people in the military.

“The location you will be transported to is a little further from the battlefield, so you must move the rest of the way on your own.”

“Then how about you send me along with him?” said Dora the Saint, who had joined them. “Once we arrive at the Mildret sector, I will throw Alan to the battlefield.”

“Oh yes. We did often do that in the past, didn’t we?”

It was a magnificent method of high-speed movement. Alan, his entire body covered in protective magic, and Dora, throwing him like a javelin wherever he wanted to go. It was certainly much faster than running on his own two feet.

Images of his comrades popped into Alan’s mind—Norman and Dora who were next to him, as well as Derek and Isabella in the meeting room—as he said, “This brings me back to the time the seven of us stormed the demon lord’s castle... You are the most reliable allies I could ask for.”

“It is time to transport you two now. Take care to remember the protective magic,” Norman said.

***

In an unexpected turn of events, the Humanity Defense Coalition had suffered almost negligible damage against Heavy Rain of the Seven Black Stars.

That was solely the result of the efforts of Griffith Maxwell of the Great Six. His signature protective magic, Onion Shell, formed a barrier by layering thousands upon thousands of mana walls that consumed almost no mana. While individually weak, the layers were strong together. Thanks to him keeping Heavy Rain’s attacks at bay, the coalition had avoided any devastating injuries, and the other two of the Great Six were safe. However, it was only a matter of time until the situation worsened.

“Haah, haah, haah...”

As Griffith created barriers one after the other and took the brunt of the

Seven Black Stars' attacks, he was close to running run out of mana. The effort was so much, his entire body was covered in wounds.

"What ugly creatures. Why do you keep squirming when victory is impossible?" Heavy Rain said.

There was not a single scratch on her.

"Damn youuuuu!!!"

"Haaaaah!!!"

The Masters of Magical Control and Special Ability—both excellent at offense—tried to retaliate, but it was no use.

"Give it up. Wall Rain."

The pillar of water created from the cloud Heavy Rain was riding on repelled their attacks with no trouble. They couldn't break through the absolute defense offered by its current no matter how many times they tried. Even though Heavy Rain was using a defensive wall just like Griffith, her wall was the clear victor. No matter how many times she used it, she showed no sign of fatigue.

"Why won't you bugs just die already? Hammer Rain."

Heavy Rain pointed a finger at the two, and water from the clouds that flanked her sprouted at them with tremendous force.

"Ugh!"

"Not on my watch!"

As the water was about to hit them, Griffith protected them by activating his Onion Shell, blocking the intense current.

"Whoaaa!"

During their mock battles in training, Griffith's barrier didn't break a single time, even when he was bombarded by magicite artillery from all sides. Now, the thousands of layers making up his barrier were breaking in rapid succession.

"Don't push yourself any further, Griffith! That's suicide!" cried one of his companions.

"I don't care! I'll protect you even if it kills me!" Griffith replied. "Do you

remember when we were fresh recruits? I enlisted in the Humanity Defense Coalition because the only thing I wanted was to protect humanity, to be a hero. Then I saw the other recruits, the senior recruits, our instructors, even the top brass were nothing but a bunch of cheats who wanted nothing but money and status."

"Stop talking and get squashed, worms," Heavy Rain said before she increased the power of her water hammer.

Griffith cried out in pain, but he kept speaking. "That's why I was so happy to meet you all, people with the same resolve as mine even in that awful place. With you there, I thought we could be great, even greater than the Seven Heroes!"

"I don't care if you're the Seven Black Stars or the demon lord himself, I'm not letting you kill my precious allies, you hear meeeeeeeee?!"

Griffith's barrier expanded together with his shout and knocked away the water hammer.

"Haah... You see that, Seven Black Stars? We're the Great Six, the strongest in the entire Humanity Defense Coalition, and the heroes of this era!" Griffith declared, even as his body was in tatters.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Ha ha, you tell her!"

His companions stood up straight upon seeing Griffith's resolve. There was fire burning in the eyes of the three proud defenders of humanity as they prepared to face their powerful foe once more.

"Man, you're such nuisances."

The demon before them expressed only bored displeasure in the face of humanity's determination.

"You are so, *so* annoying! I'll get a little bit serious," Heavy Rain said before raising her hand in the air and starting to gather water on it. The orb she created dwarfed them; its immense diameter was a little over one hundred meters, and the speed at which it rotated could crush anything that touched it.

The scale of what she was doing now was on a whole different level from her previous attacks.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

Even Griffith could do nothing but stare blankly at it.

“This is incredibly vexing. Having to use my full strength against inferior creatures like you makes me sick. Now, die.” Heavy Rain swung her arm downward. “Meteor Rain.”

The enormous mass of water descended on all three of the Great Six at once.

Kablooooow!

The sound was terribly loud yet deafening, like getting caught next to a lightning strike. The attack had such destructive power that both the demon and coalition forces fighting were blasted back by the aftermath.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!”

Heavy Rain burst into joyous laughter as she saw the enormous crater formed by her attack.

“Looks like they vanished without a trace. Aah, I feel so refreshed now.”

It was true that Griffith and the others were nowhere to be seen in the crater, but she was wrong about the reason.

“Thank god, I wasn’t late this time.”

Heavy Rain heard a voice behind her. When she turned around, the three people she wanted to obliterate were sitting safely, *un*obliterated, on the ground. And there was another person standing next to them, a middle-aged man who hadn’t been there seconds ago.

Chapter 7: Disasters versus Humanity

“Thank god, I wasn’t late this time,” Alan murmured reflexively. Somehow, he had moved the three of the Great Six to safety right before they were hit by Heavy Rain’s attack.

“Y-You are...” Griffith mumbled as he blearily peered at Alan.

“I was watching your fight through projection magic. Your bravery was outstanding.”

Without a doubt, the three of them were gallant soldiers with promising futures fighting for the people. He didn’t want William’s tragedy to be repeated—what a relief it was to make it in time to save them.

“Can you stand?” Alan asked Griffith.

“Um, yes, sir.”

Griffith started addressing Alan with respect before he even realized why.

“You three should go help your other comrades. I can handle these two,” Alan said while looking straight at Heavy Rain and Volcano. The two demons remained still, though the tremendous amount of mana seething around them was an open threat.

“A-Are you certain you’ll be okay?” Griffith stuttered.

“Trust me. I’ve defeated the Seven Black Stars before,” Alan said without hesitation.

Griffith gulped. He understood fully well now that the person standing before him was one of the Seven Heroes.

“But forget about me. I will leave the others in your care, brave warriors of the Humanity Defense Coalition.”

“Uh, yes, sir! Let’s go, you guys!”

No sooner had Griffith finished his sentence than his friends hurried to two join him. Together, they returned to the conflict between the rank-and-file

demons and the soldiers of the Humanity Defense Coalition.

“Now then...”

Alan watched over his shoulder as the three warriors left, then refocused on the demons ahead of him. He drew the ornate straight sword at his waist. The one-meter sword was far from ordinary; its ornate section had been manufactured with magic, making it easier for his mana to flow through the sword. During the previous war, it was always Alan’s favorite when he had to fight in earnest.

“You are Alan Granger, then?” Heavy Rain asked.

“Oh, you know who I am?”

“There is no one in the underworld who doesn’t know your name. You are none other than the Champion of Light, the man who once took down the demon lord, after all,” Heavy Rain said while looking down at Alan. “Yet humans are such pitiful creatures.”

“Why do you say ‘pitiful’?”

“Twenty-five years go by in a flash for us ageless demons, but that’s more than enough time for a human to lose their strength and luster. Once you’re past your prime, you become mere husks of your former selves, growing feebler and feebler every year. What would you call this, if not pitiful?”

“Guess you’re right. We humans grow old and die before we even notice.”

“That’s why I’m going to wipe you off the face of this world while I have the chance.”

“Will you. Be fine. Without me?” Volcano asked from behind Heavy Rain.

“Don’t trouble yourself. He’s just a frail old hero. I’ll swat him like a pesky fly.”

Fwoosh!

Mana and menace overflowed from Heavy Rain’s frame in a colossal wave. The next moment, flumes of water poured out from the clouds floating around her.

Here she comes!

Alan readied his sword.

“Hammer Rain.”

A crushing tsunami rocketed toward him.

***

Water could be said to be the most integral substance in people’s lives. It was usually perceived as soft and pliable, fitting into containers of any shape and able to rinse away all kinds of filth. However, that was only true when one came into contact with it slowly. Should a person try to slap the surface of the water with their open hand, they would feel the rigidity of the water firsthand. At a high enough speed, lifegiving water would become a lethal weapon that could even cut through iron.

Fired at a speed of one thousand kilometers per hour, the water in Heavy Rain’s Hammer Rain was a horrific weaponization of nature itself, strong enough to gouge the very earth.

“Whoa!”

Alan leapt across the ground with the timing of an experienced warrior, evading the attack. He had seen enough on the battlefield to predict where and when she would attack.

Kablam!

An unlucky magicite turret in the attack’s path took a direct hit and was blown to smithereens.

“Quite an attack to destroy a metal turret like that,” Alan said.

“Naturally,” she retorted as she gathered more mana in the clouds around her. “We are the Disasters. Each one of us represents a natural disaster, and I am the queen of floods that wash away everything, Heavy Rain. I will show you that mere humans couldn’t possibly win against disaster itself.”

She launched her attack again, but Alan once again dodged with little effort.

Its speed and destructive power are impressive, but it takes a long time to fire. I can take advantage of that, he thought.

“Are you perhaps thinking that my attacks are easy to dodge?” Heavy Rain asked.

The next moment, she fired another Hammer Rain at him.

“Support Magic, Basic Warp!” Alan chanted hurriedly.

The spell was one that could instantly move him no further than a single meter. It was originally taught as practice to help students work up to higher-level movement magic, but Alan had polished its use to the point where he could deploy it almost instantaneously as an emergency evasive maneuver in combat. One meter was a short distance, but it was enough. He managed to dodge the water current by a hair’s breadth, until the next attack came right after. And when he dodged *that*, another one followed. The barrage rained down on him again, and again, and again.

“These are normal attacks for me, so it goes without saying I can repeat them quickly,” Heavy Rain said.

Normal or not, each of Heavy Rain’s attacks was powerful enough to furrow the ground, smash through bedrock, and pulverize trees.

“I guess the title of Disaster isn’t for show,” Alan said.

“Naturally. My mana output is on a different level from an inferior creature like you.”

Nonetheless, Alan rushed into the rampaging waves without fear. He slipped through her torrent of attacks with flawless movements, almost as fluid as Heavy Rain’s weaving water. When he was only a few steps away from her, he jumped to avoid an incoming water hammer and dived to attack her in the same motion.

“Big mistake.”

It was impossible to dodge midair. She fired at Alan and hit him point-blank, only to see him vanish in a puff of smoke the next moment.

“What the—”

Heavy Rain was completely dumbfounded.

“Basic Mirage. The spell can create an image of me for two seconds,” Alan

explained from behind her.

Like Basic Warp, Basic Mirage was a beginner-level spell intended for practice. Alan had also perfected its use until he could use it in a split second.

“Ugh!”

Heavy Rain finally understood the strength of the man standing against her from that brief exchange.

He is a master *of combat*, she thought.

Alan had slipped through her attacks and gotten behind her in such a short time, without using any special magic or a particularly impressive physique. She turned around and tried to counterattack, but she was one step too late. Alan had already mercilessly swung his sword down at her defenseless back—

When a pillar of water suddenly sprouted from under Heavy Rain and repelled his attack, cutting off any cry of triumph he would have given.

“Heh heh heh, you were *so* close. Hammer Rain!”

Alan switched to the defensive and swung out of the way of her attack.

“That defensive wall is a real problem,” he said.

“Oh, what’s this? Was that attack the best you can do?” Heavy Rain asked in her most condescending tone. “Then you can never win against me. Wall Rain is an absolute shield that will automatically block any attack against me. If you aren’t strong enough to break through it, you won’t even scratch me.”

***

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Heavy Rain’s loud laughter pealed above the sounds of the battlefield. The fight had become entirely in her favor since her opponent had no means to break through her defense. She could play with her prey as much as she wanted, so to speak. She blasted water attacks at Alan one after the other. Though he dodged them brilliantly and tried to strike back, it was to no avail.

“I told you, it’s pointless. Wall Rain!”

No matter how many times Alan tried, his sword was blocked by her water

pillar's defense.

"Hammer Rain!"

Again, he evaded.

"You're not bad at dodging. Or should I say that you have no *option* but to dodge?"

"What do you mean?"

From the several minutes of their fight, Heavy Rain had arrived at some kind of hypothesis, which she shared with Alan.

"You might be Alan Granger, the champion who defeated the demon lord, but age has degraded both your muscles and your mana. You're near the ability of an ordinary soldier."

Alan didn't confirm, but he didn't deny it either. Judging from his reaction, Heavy Rain concluded that her hypothesis was correct.

"Since we began, you've been using beginner magic that consumes very little mana. While your movements are polished, your physical ability is nothing to write home about. I think those Great Six, or whatever they called themselves, are stronger than you."

"How troublesome," Alan said while heaving a sigh. "I thought you were an egotist who only sees her own strength, but you're strangely perceptive. I admit, you're correct. Both my current mana capacity and physical strength are average. I've managed to make up for them with my skill, to a certain extent."

"So, you can't break through my wall, not to mention a single hit from my attacks would take you out, hence all your wriggling away. Am I wrong?"

Alan's skill in combat was noticeably higher than Heavy Rain's. He dodged her calamitous attacks with practiced ease, then moved to counterattack without fear. Unfortunately, the gap between their mana and muscles was so great, he couldn't break through her Wall Rain, and when he was on the defensive, he couldn't block or parry her attacks. Dodging was his only option.

"Your silence speaks volumes! Humans truly *are* pitiful, and you grow so feeble and ugly with age," Heavy Rain sneered. "Not that I mind tormenting the

weak.”

If he couldn’t harm her, the fight was already decided in her favor. She could enjoy launching her one-sided assault until her opponent inevitably failed to evade her.

“Is that so?” he asked.

Even in the face of unavoidable defeat, Alan pointed his sword at her without wavering.

“What you say may be true, but I have no intention of going down. I’ve battled countless foes who were stronger than me. I will pull through one way or another.”

“Ha! I wonder how long your bravado will last.”

***

An elemental aptitude test was used to determine what elements a person was suited for. Participants simply poured their mana into six different crystals, each made from special minerals that reacted to a different element: fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, and ether. A crystal would shine when a person with the appropriate aptitude poured their mana into it. Ninety percent of the population had an aptitude for one element. In rare cases, that last ten percent possessed an aptitude for two elements. If someone had an aptitude for three or more elements, they would no doubt be called a prodigy.

Twenty-eight years ago, in the elemental aptitude test held for the First Kingdom’s knight recruits, during the second month of their enlistment, one boy achieved a shocking result.

Did he have an aptitude for four elements? No.

Then was it five? No.

Then was he some kind of heaven-sent prodigy with an aptitude for every element? Still no. In fact, it was the exact opposite.

That boy had an aptitude for no elements at all. Such a lack of talent was completely unprecedented.

The examiner and instructors present looked at him with pity and were at a

loss for words. Who could blame them? The results of people's elemental aptitude tests influenced the rest of their lives, because elemental magic was significantly more powerful than nonelemental magic. Once their aptitude was made clear, people had to follow the path decided by it. Even if someone aspired to fight on the front lines, if they had an aptitude for the ether element that was best suited for logistical support, they had no choice but to tearfully choose a job in logistics. Every year, an endless stream of new recruits broke down once they found out they didn't have an aptitude for their desired element.

Here was a boy who had no aptitude at all. Even if it was different from the desired result, it was still preferable to have an aptitude for something, anything at all; he didn't even have that. In spite of that, when the boy saw his results, he only briefly muttered, "I see. Thank you."

***

Twenty minutes into the fight between Heavy Rain and Alan, the odds were extremely favorable for her. She hadn't gotten a scratch and was able to attack Alan relentlessly, but she was still restless and irritated.

Why? Why can't I kill this man?!

Just one of her attacks was powerful enough to send Alan to the grave. A single hit! But she couldn't achieve that simple thing. No matter how much she bombarded him with water, he sidestepped every last attack.

The difference between our mana and physical strength is like night and day. How can he still be standing?!

Alan slipped between Heavy Rain's attacks and swung at her.

"You still can't break through my absolute defense!"

Right before Alan landed a hit on Heavy Rain, her Wall Rain kicked in and enveloped her in a pillar of water.

"Nothing is absolute," Alan said.

His sword pierced the Wall Rain and dug into Heavy Rain's body.

"What?!" She yelped as blood gushed out of the diagonal cut on her body.

“Ugh...!”

The mere flesh wound didn’t put her life in danger, but that wasn’t the issue. Heavy Rain glared at Alan.

“You seem to want to ask how I broke through your wall of water, Black Star,” Alan said. “Think about it. Your wall of water goes from bottom to top. If I insert my sword from below, it’s propelled upward and cuts into you on its own.”

“That’s absurd! If it was that simple to break through, it wouldn’t be called an absolute defense.”

Wall Rain was a technique that spouted swift-moving water from the clouds under Heavy Rain to block attacks against her. His claim was possible, in theory, but the water moved with such force it could knock away incoming bullets. It was ridiculous to imagine Alan—an ordinary middle-aged man, not some superhuman person—managed to thrust his sword into *that*.

“A waterfall doesn’t have uniform force and thickness. It’s possible if I find a spot where the water is thin.”

Alan stated that he could pinpoint the thinnest part of a wall of water rising with enough speed to deflect bullets like it was nothing. He then readied his sword as if his next attack would be the last.

“Damn you, lowly human!” Heavy Rain screamed.

Alan leapt up toward her, but—

“Great Explosion.”

The sounds of a volcanic eruption resounded around them, accompanied by a low, rumbling voice. Countless boulders heated to steaming temperatures crashed down on Alan.

“Basic Warp!”

Alan activated his evasive magic to save his skin.

“My name. Is. Volcano. The personification. Of lava. Which sears. Everything,” the giant made of rock said as he stepped forward.

“Volcano! You stay out of this!” Heavy Rain hissed.

“Don’t. Say that. We can’t. Loiter. Around here. If we want. To fulfill. Our dearest. Wish.”

Heavy Rain clicked her tongue in annoyance; she wanted to prove her strength by killing Alan herself.

“You know, this would be so much easier if you only came one at a time,” Alan said as he hoisted his sword.

***

Over time, the battle had shifted to a location filled with ruins, far away from where the demon army and the Humanity Defense Coalition were fighting. Alan had led them there during their fight to avoid unnecessary casualties, but he was also entirely on his own. He had already been disadvantaged in terms of magical and physical strength, but the second act of his battle against the Black Stars had turned into a two-on-one, widening the gap between them.

“Hammer Rain!”

Alan was first pelted by a series of torrential attacks from Heavy Rain—each powerful and fast enough to alter the terrain itself—but he slipped past them as he had before. However, though his evasion was magnificent, it created an opening in his defenses.

“Ooooooh!”

Volcano rushed at Alan while shooting explosive flames from his back. The miniature eruption rocketed his boulder-covered body at Alan with the force of a cannonball. Alan whirled to block the attack with his sword, but realized it was pointless.

There’s no way I can defend against that.

He gave up on completely blocking the attack, relaxed his body, and jumped.

He escaped the worst of it with his jump, and his sword absorbed some of the impact as well. As a result, he was blown away without feeling the brunt of the attack.

Volcano didn’t give him a moment to pat himself on the back.

“Volcanic Shot.”

Small nozzles in his palms fired heated rocks like bullets.

“Basic Warp!”

Alan dropped one meter while midair, under the attack.

“You’re wide open!”

A water hammer from the persistent Heavy Rain hit him head-on—or so it seemed.

“Air Walk!”

Immediately, Alan used a high-level skill that hardened the air with mana and allowed him to change his course midair. The attack grazed his clothes, but no more than that.

“You can even dodge that?!” Heavy Rain shouted in pure shock.

Alan stepped forward, seeing a chance to counter, but Volcano wasn’t having it.

“Great Explosion!”

Alan grunted in frustration as he stopped dead in his tracks and rolled on the ground to avoid the incoming attack. A rain of blazing boulders landed on the spot he had just occupied, followed by an explosion of flames.

“Phew...”

After somehow making it through the barrage of attacks, Alan tiredly gazed at the enemy before him and waited for his next move. “I have no room to go on the offensive when you keep firing such stupidly powerful wide-area attacks,” he said.

“I wouldn’t. Wait for us. To run out. Of mana. If I. Were you. Both of us. Can fire. Another thousand. Of these. Attacks.”

“If I used even one of those, I would instantly run out of mana.” The vast difference in their amounts of mana was once again made painfully obvious to Alan. “And I even have to face two of them,” he grumbled.

“You have nothing. To be. Ashamed of. You are. Doing fine. Despite your lack. Of Aptitude.”

“Oh, my lack of aptitude, huh?”

“Yes. You are. Unable to use. Elemental magic. No?”

Alan fell silent.

“I thought that might be the case,” Heavy Rain said when she saw how Alan was acting. “You’ve only used nonelemental magic the entire fight. There is no other reason to avoid using elemental magic when its efficiency and output are strictly better.”

“You two are correct. I have no aptitude for any of the six elements. It even earned me the disgraceful nickname ‘Incompetent of the Century,’” Alan replied.

Elemental magic was an indispensable asset for those fighting in the front lines. Being unable to use it would be the equivalent of being the only one fighting with one arm tied behind their back.

“It’s an especially fatal flaw when facing off against demons like us! Look at our powerful defensive magic and sturdy bodies. Your attacks lack the punch needed to defeat us in a single hit,” Heavy Rain pointed out.

“True, and I already barely have any openings to counterattack. I’d need to get tens of slashes in to defeat you. This is quite the conundrum,” Alan responded honestly.

“Would you say your back’s against the wall?” Heavy Rain asked with a chuckle.

“Maybe it is,” Alan offered. “However, I’m used to fighting with my back against the wall thanks to the previous war. I’ll figure something out.”

“You damn inferior life-form. How far will your arrogance go?” Heavy Rain ground her teeth in frustration.

“Here I come!” Alan picked up his feet and charged at them once more, just as he had before.

“How dull. Hammer Rain!”

Heavy Rain responded in kind, using her usual attack, but Alan didn’t dodge this time. He lowered his posture and instead accelerated as he ran straight at

the water hammer.

“Have you gone mad?” she asked.

“No, just figured out how to defeat you two,” Alan replied as he raised his right hand above his head.

“Basic Barrier.” A fundamental defensive spell.

Such a basic defensive magic will break in one hit if it tries to weather the attack head-on, so I need to get creative.

Alan formed the barrier in a gentle curve from bottom to top—similar to a playground slide—so it would divert the water rather than block it. Her attack hit the barrier but turned away from him as if guided by the curved surface.

The unconventional defense stunned Heavy Rain. Alan had struggled to close the distance between them so far because he had to perfectly dodge every attack, but it was a different story if he could deflect her attacks instead. As a result, he was next to her in the blink of an eye.

“Ugh! But I’m not done yet.” The usual wall of water gushed from under Heavy Rain.

“That’s an old trick.” Alan slid his sword like a silver fish into a shallow part of the wall and sliced upward.

“Argh!” she shouted in pain.

Alan’s sword swam through the wall and bit into Heavy Rain’s body, but because of his weakness, he couldn’t deliver a serious injury just like that. He had to go for a second strike, or a third, maybe more. Regrettably, he wasn’t against dimwits who would lay down and die.

Volcano again used eruptions from his back to charge at Alan.

“Sorry, but I have a countermeasure for that too.” Alan neither dodged nor faced the charge head-on. Instead, he moved his sword gently and applied strength to the side of Volcano’s body as if he were ladling hot soup. In a shocking turn of events, the trajectory of Volcano’s destructive onslaught was diverted upward.

“What?!” Volcano cried.

“Don’t you see? I can’t face you head-on, and the odds of avoiding damage are low. Therefore, diverting the strength behind your attack is the most effective strategy,” Alan said.

“Urgh... Volcanic Shot.” Still in midair, Volcano pointed his palms at Alan.

“Basic Warp.”

Alan cast the spell he normally used for dodging to move forward this time. By also utilizing shukuchi—a rapid-movement technique that harnessed gravity—he closed the distance between them in an instant.

“What’s true for waterfalls is true for rock. Even hard bedrock has weak joints.” Alan thrust his sword into one of the mineral veins of Volcano’s tough body.

Volcano grunted in pain as magma flowed out of his wound instead of blood. He seemed to have received some damage, at least.

“Good, I can fight like this,” Alan told himself.

Throughout their series of back-and-forth attacks, Alan was the only one to land a hit, yet Volcano appeared calm.

“Hmm. Well. Done,” he said as he studied the wound on his body.

“Awfully casual of you. You do realize I just slipped through your coordinated attack and injured you, right?” Alan said.

“No matter. Your attack. Was weak.”

“Then I’ll hit you as many times as it takes.”

“Can you? Continuously evading. Our attacks. Heavily drains. Your stamina. No?”

It was true—Alan was already breathing heavily.

“Man, I hate growing old,” Alan said with a sigh. His physical abilities had all declined since his prime, but the effects of aging were most apparent in his lowered stamina.

“Curse you, inferior life-fooooooorm!” Heavy Rain howled in a rage. “You won’t make a mockery of the Seven Black Stars!”

Whenever she failed to land a clean hit on Alan, her pride as one of the strongest in the demon army had taken the hit instead. Fueled by fury, she gathered a terrible amount of mana into a single cloud.

“That will. Hurt you. As well.”

“I know. But I *need* to kill him before it’s too late.” The cloud swelled to an enormous size, then soared up to the sky where it hung over the battlefield like an angry thunderstorm.

“Watch and tremble, worm: Mother Rain!”

A monstrously powerful attack descended from the cloud. It resembled Hammer Rain, but the speed was an order of magnitude higher.

Fast as it was, the attack was still linear, so Alan easily avoided it.

“You’re wasting your time. Water washes everything away,” Heavy Rain said.

The storm cloud burst. Tightly packed water spears rained down on Alan in a merciless typhoon. Attacks fell everywhere, leaving no room for escape. A thunderous rumble similar to thousands of explosives going off at once clamored around them. The deadly rain pierced through and crushed everyone in its area. It was an ultimate technique worthy of her name.

Despite that, Alan was somehow alive when the air cleared.

“Annoying creature! How could you survive that?!” Heavy Rain shrieked.

“Haah, haah...”

Alan had located the spot where the downpour had been thinnest and used a barrier to deflect the attack. Weathering the storm had taken a huge toll on his stamina, but that didn’t matter to the enraged Heavy Rain. She was incandescent with rage at the sole fact that Alan had endured yet again.

“I’ll kill you!!!” With murderous intent practically dripping from her, Heavy Rain gathered more mana in the cloud.

“Ha. Ha. Ha! She gets. Really nasty. When she’s pushed. That far. Let’s see. How long. You can last,” Volcano told Alan.

“I’ll figure something out,” Alan declared again as he returned to an offensive

stance.

"I put giving up behind me before I was even born," he whispered to himself.

***

Before he was born into this world, Alan Granger had lived in a different one, in a flourishing country on a planet called Earth. That's right—he was reincarnated.

Even as a baby, Alan had carried that other person's memories inside him, though any scientific knowledge he might have taken advantage of was absent. Amid his past memories, there was a scene that stuck out most clearly: that of an old man lying on a white bed, staring at a white ceiling, with transparent tubes everywhere on his body. Those were his dying moments.

Is this the end?

The old man could sense death approaching as the beep of his electrocardiogram grew fainter. As his consciousness faded, the old man looked back on his life. It had been an exceptionally ordinary one. He was born to two somewhat wealthy parents, went to a normal school, and worked a typical job. He grew old like everyone else. He got sick like everyone else too. Now, he was quietly and uneventfully drawing his last breath at the age of eighty-two. He was just an average human.

"Aah..."

A hoarse gasp escaped his lips. His next words would probably be his last. What would a man who had lived a perfectly run-of-the-mill life think about and say to himself in his final moments? Would he be satisfied with his milquetoast life, say "I did well in my own way," and pass away with a smile on his face?

No, that wasn't it.

"I have...so many...regrets..."

The old man had a mountain of things he wanted to do. In middle school, he had dreamed of becoming a professional baseball player. In high school and university, he had wanted to be a manga artist. After becoming a working adult, he had wanted to try starting his own business. Instead, he had run away from everything.

His parents had asked him if he wanted to go to a prestigious school for baseball. His manga had won an award, albeit a minor one. A coworker had asked him if he wanted to quit their company and start their own business

together. He had been given many choices throughout his life, but he'd always chosen the safe path. He had lived his life avoiding every difficulty and challenge. That was undoubtedly the reason he had lived such a long and peaceful life. The price he paid for walking the smoother path was a wave of regret washing over him on his deathbed.

Why did I always run away? I only have...one life...so why?

Tears ran from the old man's eyes. After all this time, thoughts of things he should have done differently flooded out of him like water from a broken dam. He hated it. He didn't want to die filled with regret, but no matter how pathetically his heart struggled, his limbs wouldn't move. The cruel reality that it was too late for everything pressed like a boulder on his chest.

I don't care who it is: God, angel, or demon. The old man prayed from the bottom of his heart. *I don't need anything else. Please, give me the strength to freely move my body once more.*

He swore he would face the hardest challenges in the world head-on in his next life if that wish was granted.

Did his plea reach anyone?

He woke up in an unknown world, reborn as a baby named Alan. He learned that humanity was fighting the demon army, and the demon lord's defeat was humanity's dearest wish. He had found his goal.

"I'll defeat the demon lord and become a hero. I'll use my second life to do something great," Alan decided.

However, Alan had been born in the slums, without any kind of natural talent; his circumstances couldn't be worse. As soon as he expressed his goal, the people around him told him he would never defeat the demon lord.

I don't care what you say. This time, I will live without regrets.

Alan somehow survived in the slums, taught himself how to read, then joined the knights. After enlisting, he put so much effort into his training that even their spartan instructor grew concerned and stopped him. That was, until the unprecedented event during the elemental aptitude test, when Alan learned he had no aptitude at all.

“I see.”

In a way, the result was good news to Alan. He finally understood why his previous self had run away from everything: he had been fairly blessed. Born in a prosperous country and raised by decent parents, he had lived a plentiful life by doing the bare minimum. With the warm cocoon of a comfortable life around him, he had been unable to break through his fear and challenge himself.

His current self had nothing. He was born into poverty with average abilities, and he was the first person in the world with no elemental aptitude at all.

That was why Alan muttered, “Thank you.” He was thanking his new life. If he started at the bottom, he had nowhere to go but up. With nothing to lose, he could chase his goal without hesitation.

And so, Alan disregarded others’ worries and went to extremes to defeat the demon lord. He was a straight shooter in everything he did, from relentless and intense training to throwing himself into battle after battle, despite the odds not being in his favor. When he survived and grew stronger from fighting, he dived into even more dangerous battles. Most people would take a break for a while after improving, then face tougher challenges once they had secured a degree of safety, but *safety* was the last thing on Alan’s mind. Those around him thought he had a death wish, but their concern rolled off him. The only way for a talentless person like him to defeat the demon lord was to learn by repeatedly risking his life. If that led to his death, so be it. He had vowed to use this life to defeat the demon lord.

Strangely enough, his recklessness earned him victory after victory thanks to his cockroach-like persistence. Training by fighting on the front lines more than anyone else helped him develop his strength as a fighter at a frightening speed.

He still aimed for more. He needed to get stronger, go to more dangerous battlefields, and reach greater heights than anyone, all until his sword could reach the neck of the strongest demon: the demon lord. After witnessing his ghastly dedication, people naturally started to call him a Champion, a fighter with boundless courage. His bravery and bottomless tenacity led to him acquiring unmatched combat skill and, in the end, he reached his goal.

He defeated the demon lord with his own hands and brought the curtain down on the Titanomachy.

Alan Granger was the man with the least natural talent among the Seven Heroes, yet that egoistic bunch recognized him as their leader; he was truly a hero among heroes.

***

Back on the battlefield, Heavy Rain screeched as she launched spear after spear from her cloud. “Die already!”

“Great Explosion!” In the intervals between Heavy Rain’s attacks, Volcano covered a wide area with his own.

“Haah!”

Alan still faced them head-on. He deflected the water, dodged the lava, and closed the distance between them with impeccable timing.

The two demons shouted in pain. Unfortunately for Alan, his attacks weren’t strong enough to deliver fatal wounds, but cut after cut against the demons’ bodies had accumulated into a healthy amount of damage. He had yet to take a direct hit himself, as he made use of his dodging skills to avoid each attack one way or the other.

“Haah, haah...”

Alan was panting heavily; his constant defense was draining his stamina at a rapid pace. This fight was now a matter of whether he would be able to defeat the two demons before he dropped from exhaustion. Such a close fight against two walking natural disasters was nothing short of dreadful.

“Pushing us. This far. When you’re. Only average. Is a notable. Feat,” Volcano said.

“I wonder who the *real* monster here is,” Heavy Rain added.

It may seem monstrous, but what Alan was doing was straightforward. He used his battle-worn eyes to read his opponents’ actions, moved as water without a single wasted motion, and utilized his swift fundamental spells—like Basic Warp or Basic Mirage—to utterly bewilder his opponents. Once he had an

opening, he stepped in and went on the offensive. Everything about him was focused. He'd polished this close-quarter fighting style to a diamond-like shine. By doggedly sticking to the basics, he could directly challenge two monsters who governed natural disasters. He was a formidable combatant. It could even be said that he had reached the breaking point of human ability, which was only possible thanks to his nerves of steel.

What would things be like if this man could actually use elemental magic? What if he still had the mana capacity and physical strength of his prime? The thought sent shivers down the demons' spines.

"Have to clear up a misunderstanding," Alan said to the demons between heavy breaths. "Even in my youth, my mana and physical abilities were average. Gotten worse with age, but that's all I ever had to work with."

The efficient footwork Alan used to dodge the demons' attacks in that moment was pure art.

"I took the basics as far as humanly possible, had no choice but to pull through the war with these mediocre abilities." He swung his sword with steadfast focus, erasing all stray thoughts.

"Humans can grow incredibly strong with knowledge, training, and experience. Don't underestimate our potential, demons."

Alan's precise strikes carved the demons' bodies with a growing number of wounds. The only problem was his stamina; his breath was running ragged.

"Phew... Hang in there, body."

As Alan was muttering to himself, a single yellow feather drifted to the ground at his feet.

"Charge, Thunder Emperor. Feather Bolt!"

A thunderbolt struck Alan from a completely unexpected direction.

"Argh!"

Even he couldn't dodge in time. However, thanks to a split-second decision, he wrapped his entire body in the strongest defensive magic he could and lessened the blow. Alan was forced to his knees by the brutal attack, as his

defensive magic was far from strong enough to deflect all of it.

"Ugh..."

That thunderbolt was powerful—about the same level as Heavy Rain and Volcano's attacks.

He had certainly made the right choice.

"Wah ha ha ha ha! You two took much longer than expected."

A jovial voice unsuited to the battlefield echoed around them. It belonged to a four-meter-tall avian demon with piercing sanpaku eyes and an enormous beak. The demon, which had a monstrous thunder eagle as a basis, was covered in yellow feathers that constantly crackled with electricity.

"I'm the Lightning-Fast Emperor, Thunderbolt of the Seven Black Stars. You two need a hand?"

Despite the situation, Thunderbolt laughed merrily.

***

"A-A third member of the Seven Black Stars?!" Chief Simon shouted in the meeting room as he continued to watch the fight.

No one imagined the situation would turn to this. The ministers in the room followed Simon in verbalizing their dismay.

"Would you look at that? They managed to send over that many demons *that* quickly."

"Yeah, seems the new demon army's teleportation magic is fundamentally different from the one they used last time."

"Worrying. I hope we won't end up needing to visit the underworld to wipe out the demons completely."

"Yes, I do wish they wouldn't take such extreme measures."

Dora, Derek, Isabella, and even the nervous-tempered Margaret gave their respective opinions with perfect composure. The remaining two heroes didn't look particularly nervous either.

"You sure are calm when your comrade is caught in a deadly crisis!" Simon

told those who'd spoken, voicing the thought shared by many in the room.

"There's no problem. Master Alan will win." The reply came from neither the Seven Heroes nor Margaret, but from Alan's maid, Rosetta.

"Who are you? I don't remember giving some maid permission to speak."

"I am Master Alan's maid, so I don't remember needing *your* permission to speak."

Rosetta spoke her mind with her usual candor, causing Simon's brow to twitch.

"Y-You insolent little..."

However, Simon realized that it would count as his defeat if he gave in to anger when dealing with a girl of such low social standing, so he cleared his throat and regained his composure before saying, "I wouldn't expect a servant who knows nothing of war to make a realistic assessment of this battle's progress. Someone of my experience can see that he was managing against two opponents, but adding a third will get out of hand."

"No, the little girl is completely right," said Derek. "Alan will win anyway."

"Oh? And what grounds are you basing that claim on, Sir Derek?" Simon asked archly.

For his part, Simon was making an honest assessment of the current battle. It was true that, until Alan headed to battle, Simon was using self-deluded sophistry to assure that only the Humanity Defense Coalition participated in the fight. This was different. It pained him to admit it, but Alan wasn't part of the Seven Heroes for nothing. That he could stand against two of the Seven Black Stars despite his average abilities was astounding. Regardless, how could he take on three of them at once?

"'On what grounds'? Isn't it obvious?" Derek's next words were simply unbelievable. "He'll win because he's the Champion."

"Huh?" Simon asked in a witless tone at Derek's ambiguous reply; the ministers shared the sentiment.

Derek paid them no mind. "No matter how much a Champion is cornered,

he'll rely on courage and win out in the end. That's how every story goes, right? So he'll win no matter what happens."

"Wh-What kind of circular logic is that?!"

"You're right, I also find it ridiculous." Derek didn't argue with Simon's objection; far from it, he wholeheartedly agreed.

"No other human is worse at giving up than him," Isabella said.

"I agree. He's an absurd man," Dora said.

"I believe that is precisely the reason Mister Alan was the one to defeat the demon lord," Norman concluded.

The other heroes agreed with both Derek's reasoning, but they also agreed with Simon calling it ridiculous.

Derek spoke again blithely, but with a tinge of exasperation mixed in. "Just watch. When Alan is battered and hopelessly cornered, he'll stand up, shout something heroic, and the demons will be done for."

"In a nutshell, doesn't it ultimately come down to feelings?" Derek summarized in a rather haphazard manner.

***

While the conversation in the meeting room was taking place, the battle was unfolding in the one-sided manner Chief Simon and the ministers were anticipating.

"Hammer Rain!" A water hammer.

"Great Explosion!" Blazing-hot boulders.

"Lightning Feather!" Feathers covered in lightning.

The three demons' powerful, expansive attacks assaulted Alan one after the other.

"Ugh!"

Alan had to focus everything he had on evasion, so he couldn't find any openings to counterattack. The graver matter was the damage he had received from Thunderbolt's surprise lightning attack. His already average abilities had

declined, which meant that moving around while injured was an even bigger drain on his stamina.

“Gaining such a large advantage takes the fun away, doesn’t it?” Contrary to her words, Heavy Rain was cackling loudly and enjoying herself a great deal.

“Wow! That old man is moving pretty well for a human,” the new Black Star, Thunderbolt, said in a casual tone, as if this was a stroll around a festival.

“The mere fact. That he’s. Still alive. Against. The three. Of us. Is worthy. Of significant. Praise.”

Volcano was correct. While Alan couldn’t fight back, he was still standing against the barrage of natural disasters.

“Didn’t we talk about this? I’m used to having my back against the wall,” Alan said as he gripped onto life in the face of certain death.

A water hammer rushed at him; he dodged beautifully.

A lump of magma came crashing down; he avoided it with warp magic.

A thunderbolt flew at him at the speed of light; he had a mirage get hit in his place.

Alan persevered, like a man possessed. The three-on-one fight he thought would be over in a handful of minutes had gone on for ten minutes in the blink of an eye.

“Haah, haah, haah...”

Alan was clearly on his last legs, but he still stood.

“Hey, even tenacity has its limits! What the hell is wrong with you?!” Heavy Rain screamed.

“Yeah, this man is absolutely crazy,” Thunderbolt agreed.

The demons were getting impatient. From their perspective, they had an overwhelming advantage, yet Alan was stubborn. They understood that his combat skill was unrivaled, but it was downright bizarre for a slightly above-average knight to survive this long. He couldn’t fight back, only dodge, but despite all that, he continued a fight that demanded absolute focus from him.

By this point, he should have slipped up somewhere, let his mind wander for even a moment. If he did, he would lose focus and fall prey to the demons' attacks.

Alan defied them. His eyes were full of life, burning right into the demons.

"We can't. Keep taking. This much. Time. Heavy Rain. Thunderbolt. We'll use. Our trump card," Volcano told his two comrades.

"Oh, *that*? You're pretty funky, dude," Thunderbolt replied.

"If we have no other choice," Heavy Rain said as she raised her hand to the sky. A large ball of water formed in the air; it was the same attack she had used in her attempt to finish off the Great Six.

"Take that, inferior life-form." She shot the mass of water toward the sky, then Volcano and Thunderbolt fired their own strongest lava and lightning attacks at it.

"Disaster Fusion: Steam Explosion!" the three of them called in unison.

The next moment, the battlefield was covered by a heavy impact and intense heat. The force came from the blast of lava and electricity superheating the water into instantaneous evaporation. The explosion of steam had such tremendous power that the ground hollowed out, buildings collapsed, trees snapped, and bedrock shattered. The only blessing was that the casualties among the other troops fighting were small thanks to Alan guiding their fight to a different location.

"Argh!"

Alan took the brunt of the attack and was blown away. He hadn't defended against this one; rather, it was impossible for him to defend in the first place. He careened through the air and crashed into a ruined building many meters away.

Kablow!

An unnatural crunch and loud crashing noise accompanied Alan's impact with the building, which collapsed further as rubble started falling on him.

"Hah! See that, inferior creature? You—Ouch!"

Heavy Rain was assured of their victory after seeing the building topple on top of Alan, but she had taken plenty of damage herself, as had her two comrades.

“Unfortunately. A perfect. Omnidirectional. Attack. Doesn’t discriminate. Between friend. Or foe.”

“Practically suicide to use it! But our bodies are sturdier than his, so we can take it.”

Volcano and Thunderbolt were both dripping body fluids from cracks and tears on their bodies caused by the impact.

“But that’s why no one can deflect or evade it,” Heavy Rain stated.

Steam Explosion was an attack that spread scorching water vapor across the entire area with ruthless force. It was impossible to defend against no matter how skilled someone was. The three demons wanted to avoid taking more damage than necessary considering they had an entire invasion ahead of them, but they couldn’t make an omelet without cracking a few eggs.

“Let us. Return. We took. Much longer. Than we. Expected.”

Alan was only an average knight. There was no surviving after landing at that speed, of course. All three of them understood that.

They were about to turn and leave, when the rubble of the ruins rattled with movement.

“There’s no way...”

The three demons stared at the ruins in utter disbelief. Though his body was bruised and battered, Alan crawled out of the rubble.

“How are you still alive after getting hit with that?!” Heavy Rain shouted.

“Calm. Down.”

“Volcano’s right. He must’ve used his strongest defensive magic, but take a close look at him,” Thunderbolt said while pointing at Alan with a sharp talon. “He doesn’t even have the strength to get on his knees! He’s totally busted up; the attack worked.”

“I-I see. Then, I’ll *personally* finish him off,” Heavy Rain said before she began

to gather mana in one of her clouds.

Suddenly, Alan glared at the Black Stars with a sharp glint in his eyes. He was on the ground, bleeding from head to toe, and so weakened that even a child could knock him over, yet the disaster-wielding demons themselves lost their composure before him. A shiver ran down all of their spines.

“I can’t...let you leave here,” Alan said between gasps.

“You’re persistent to the bitter end, human! Learn when to give up!” Heavy Rain shouted at Alan.

“Give up, you say? If I was alone...that might not be such a bad idea. My dream has already been fulfilled; I have no regrets. However, if I let you leave, you will join the fight with the Humanity Defense Coalition. I know you’ll mercilessly slaughter every last one of them.” With icy calm, Alan drew his sword while still on his knees. “I can’t...let that happen. It’s an old man’s duty to protect the young people. At least, that’s what I believe.”

The moment Derek Henderson the Priest had predicted only ten minutes ago was finally here. Alan stood up, pointed his sword at his enemies, and shouted, “Come at me, demons! I won’t let you steal the future and potential of the next generation!”

“Shut up, you disgusting walking corpse! Just die already!!!” Heavy Rain shrieked at Alan.

The three demons launched yet another volley of their powerful attacks at Alan. Resolutely, he bid his creaking body onward through determination alone and rushed back into battle with the three calamities.

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It was the day of the parade celebrating the heroes' triumphant return to the First Kingdom. Alan Granger was gazing at the crowd in the castle town from a balcony in the royal palace, when Margaret called out to him from behind.

"Everyone seems rather disappointed at the absence of the man who played the leading role in the demon lord's defeat, Sir Champion." She was eleven years old at the time. Her dignified manner of speech was at complete odds with her childish voice and appearance.

"That's fine, Your Imperial Majesty. I don't really like standing out. Besides, I can look over everything I've accomplished from here."

The people were celebrating peace with great joy, and Alan was content, proudly gazing over that very accomplishment. He couldn't feel a trace of his previous self, who had run from so many challenges. His heart brimmed with genuine pride.

"So, what do you intend to do in the future?" Margaret asked him.

"In the future?" Alan gazed at the sky for a moment. "I've told you about my previous life before, haven't I, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"Indeed you have. I cannot say I am fully convinced, but I see no reason for you to lie to me."

"My past self was a coward who didn't believe in his own potential. After being reborn, when I started believing in myself and pushed forward, I was able to accomplish great things." Alan's eyes fell back to the castle town. "I've come to realize how amazing human potential is. Young people, especially, have infinite potential. The old me died before realizing that."

He turned to Margaret this time and said, "That's why, I'd like to do something that supports the youth from now on. I want to create an environment where passionate youngsters can grow in strength, even a little, without fear."

Alan handed the sword at his hip to Margaret. It was the beloved sword he'd received from her, and the one that had cut the demon lord down. Letting go of it was a gesture that expressed his intention to step back from active combat.

“That’s my next dream, since I’ve fulfilled the last one,” Alan said. He flashed a bright smile.

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“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

Alan’s bellow shook the battlefield. The courageous will welling up in his heart was almost palpable, radiating into the air around him. It seemed to quake with intensity.

Carried by momentum, he zealously swung his sword. The three demons screamed in pain as they were struck.

Before they knew it, they were forced into a corner—but none of this made any sense! They’d had a crushing advantage only moments ago. They were superior to him in terms of strength, and they even far outnumbered him. Nothing had changed about that situation.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“Ugh!”

They were being overpowered, forced back step by step. Heavy Rain was absolutely perplexed.

How is he alive after continuously diving headfirst into our attacks? He should be growing weaker from his exhaustion and wounds, yet I can feel his strikes getting heavier and heavier. What is wrong with this man?!

Heavy Rain’d had her doubts when the fight started. She knew well the immense power the demon lord possessed, so she didn’t think Alan was strong enough to defeat him, despite his formidable combat abilities. Surely, there had been some kind of mistake, or perhaps Alan had fought beside another powerful knight. However, that had changed. After fighting him herself, she felt it in her bones. This man could have pulled it off.

Courage and determination. She feared that absurd idealism would break through their defenses, no matter what was thrown at him. He was bad news. The underworld was packed with powerful, fiendish monsters, but this man was the most terrifying thing she had ever encountered. For the first time, Heavy

Rain felt unadulterated fear in the face of a human opponent.

The other two demons seemed to share the sentiment.

“Don’t! We mustn’t. Fight. This man. Directly!”

“Yeah, no kidding! We can’t let this crazy guy survive! Hey, let’s do our big move one more time!” Thunderbolt said.

The terror the three demons felt in Alan’s presence was probably what turned them into a well-oiled machine. Heavy Rain smoothly formed an enormous sphere of water, followed by Volcano and Thunderbolt hitting it with lava and electricity in quick succession.

“Disaster Fusion: Steam Explosion!”

Alan’s boundless tenacity, born of his absurd force of will, was meaningless before an inescapable all-out attack that blasted friend and foe alike. He could neither dodge nor deflect, and in his weakened state, his defense wasn’t strong enough to prevent a lethal blow.

“This time, it’s the end for you!” Heavy Rain shouted.

“No, not yet.”

It happened in an instant: the water sphere was cleaved in half by a sudden ray of light. Instead of the two halves bursting into steam, they were both snuffed out like a weak flame. The energy of the explosion dissipated into nothing.

“It’s finally time.”

With a deafening roar, dazzling light covered Alan’s surroundings. It raced to the sky with amazing force before slowly converging at one point on the ground. Alan Granger emerged clad from head to toe in blinding light.

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“What...what the hell is that?” Heavy Rain felt like she was swimming the wrong way upstream. “What kind of magic is that?! I’ve neither seen nor heard of anything like it!”

This was elemental magic, clear as day. Undeniable, from the sheer output of

mana that had created this pillar of light that stretched to the heavens. However, she couldn't place it under any of the six elements. Humans should only be able to use magic of the six elements, or a combination of them, at most.

"You wouldn't have, no. This is my own creation: the seventh element, mana of light."

"A new element...called mana of light?"

"After learning that I had no aptitude for any of the six elements, I researched magic and mana. If no element suited me, I thought I could make one. I used what I found to experiment, until I finally found the element my body had an aptitude for: light," Alan declared, confident in his entirely unconventional thought process.

"Truth is, it's a pain to use since it's something I created myself. It only works in a fight against demons, but you'd been gone from the human world for twenty-five years. The necessary circuits had gotten rusty, so it took me a while to get them back in working order."



Alan squeezed his empty left hand into a grip, gathering light that formed into a shining sword.

“I can finally fight in earnest.”

He held his physical sword in his right hand and the sword of light in his left hand, then took a fighting stance. The man clad in light with a sword in each hand was truly the Champion of Light. The true strength of the most powerful hero, the one who’d defeated the demon lord and put an end to the Titanomachy, had been restored.

Wordless groans escaped Heavy Rain’s mouth. She—along with the other two demons—couldn’t suppress the dread she felt from the mana flowing from Alan’s body. It was a beautiful, dazzling golden light, but for them, it was a scourge.

“Here I come.”

Alan braced himself, then charged with a speed incomparable to before.

“He’s. Fast!”

Volcano couldn’t help but watch in astonishment. He had grown complacent, because Alan could only use magic that was inferior to his in terms of both power and efficiency. No more; the mana of light Alan used *felt* like elemental magic. It would be fair to say that the power of his magic had grown in every way possible.

Alan was still not blindingly fast, since his mana capacity and physical abilities were only average. Even so, he had the skills to go toe to toe with three of the Seven Black Stars when he was weaker, so what would happen if his mana output improved? The answer was obvious. He slipped through the counterattack mustered by the struggling demons drew within reach of Heavy Rain.

“Damn! Wall Rain!”

Heavy Rain sensed the attack and activated her trusty water barrier, but Alan ignored it and swung with the physical sword in his right hand. He cut through the water barrier like butter and swung his light-clad sword at Heavy Rain. As the blade made contact, the single strike sliced off her arm and sent it flying.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!!” Heavy Rain screamed in agony, not from the pain of the cut, but from the intense pain in the stump it left behind. The light that seeped into the wound was eating away at her body.

“Damn it aaaaaaaaall!”

“Ooooooooooh!”

Thunderbolt and Volcano fired electricity and blazing boulders at Alan, who made no attempt to dodge this time. He deftly swung the sword of light in his left hand, emitting a light that erased both attacks the moment it touched them.

“What the—”

“Im. Possible!”

Alan swiftly closed the distance between them by diving into the opening created when he negated their attacks. He slashed each with his swords, Thunderbolt in the left arm, and Volcano in the left leg.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“Mrrrrrrrrgggggghhh!!!”

The two of them screamed in anguish, much like Heavy Rain had.

“Every element has its own property,” Alan said. Fire had power; water had adaptability; earth had endurance; wind had staying power; lightning had speed; ether had support. “The property of light is its devastating effectiveness on demons, tens of times more than other types of mana.”

The moment mana of light touched either a part of a demon’s body or their mana, it erased them from existence. With that ability, Alan could easily slice through the demons’ sturdy bodies, and any part he cut hurt like hell. It didn’t matter if their mana was a water barrier, blazing boulders, lightning, or even a steam explosion; the mana of light would mercilessly extinguish any magic used by a demon. The only way to fight against the light would be with an attack that surpassed its tenfold advantage in both quantity and density. Even the Seven Black Stars didn’t possess mana powerful enough to face off against that.

Heavy Rain could only gasp in a shaky voice as she stared at Alan’s light-clad

figure. That light was like a crystallization of his tenacity. A man blessed with neither a good life nor talent had the determination to defeat the demon lord, because he had made it his sole goal in life. He gave up everything in pursuit of that dream, not caring about anything else as long as he could accomplish it. What he found at the end of that arduous path was the strength needed to defeat the demon lord.

“The Champion...of Light...” Heavy Rain uttered Alan’s alias without thinking.

They were worlds apart. He wasn’t a foe they could take on. Alan was gently floating in the air before the dumbfounded demons; he could even levitate now that he was using elemental magic. He hoisted the sword of light in his left hand toward the sky, and the blade rumbled as it started to glow an even more dazzling gold.

This was the ultimate move of the Champion of Light, a man who had slain countless demons.

“Bravelight Excalibur.”

As Alan swung his sword down, the light stretched to the end of the horizon and enveloped the three demons.

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“I didn’t defeat all of them, huh? I’ve really lost my edge,” Alan said as he inspected the ground after the attack, which had been mere child’s play for him.

Heavy Rain was alone now, collapsed and panting with her right arm and tail cut off.

The other two demons had tried to escape the area of the attack, but they couldn’t dodge in time. Their lower halves had been blown off, and though they were alive, it was just barely.

A demon’s vitality is impressive indeed.

Demons’ toughness never ceased to amaze him, although it was clear those two didn’t have strength left to fight.

“Dammit! Shit! Go to heeeeell!!!” Heavy Rain screamed and writhed like a

flailing infant. “Why?! Just why?! It’s because of you... Because of people like you! It’s your fault that we...we...”



“I’m not sure exactly what you mean, but the knights you killed earlier probably thought something similar,” Alan said.

“As if an inferior life-form like you could ever understand!” Heavy Rain turned a deaf ear to his words.

“If you say so. Goodbye.”

Alan casually swung his sword and sent another wave of light at Heavy Rain, enveloping her body in its merciless glow. When the light faded, she would be gone without a trace—or maybe not?

Suddenly, a man appeared in front of Heavy Rain and repelled the light heading for her. Alan instantly recognized the man, and not only because he knew his face. Only one demon could face off against his magic by hitting it directly with mana of tens of times its density.

“So you really *are* back, Demon Lord Beelzebub.”

“Your mana of light brings back memories, Champion Alan Granger.”

Demon Lord Beelzebub was over two meters tall and looked to be in his twenties, at least from a human’s perspective. His long hair swayed beautifully in the wind, and his physique was statuesque and imposing. His face was even handsome, dignified, and masculine, as if it had been crafted from marble. He resembled a human a great deal, unlike the monstrous Heavy Rain and the other demons. However, his inhuman nature was apparent from the partially obscured third eye on his foreheads, the two black horns growing out of his head, and above all else, from his impenetrable mana and sheer *presence* that seemed to distort the air itself.

“Ah...aah...”

Heavy Rain was shaking in fear before Beelzebub, the strongest demon and unequivocal symbol of the demon army. But why would she be afraid of the arrival of such a powerful ally?

“You used the Character Gate and started the attack on the human world on your own, yet I seem to recall ordering you to remain on standby,” Beelzebub said.

“W-Well, you see...” Heavy Rain stuttered but then fell silent. It would appear that the demons had taken unsanctioned action.

“Sorry, Beelzebub, but I just defeated two of your Seven Black Stars,” Alan said.

“Hah, you’re the same as usual. It’s fine.” Beelzebub had a composed smile despite the defeat of two of his strongest soldiers. “They weren’t part of the Seven Black Stars anyway.”

“What did you just say?” Alan’s eyes widened.

“To be more precise, they are former Seven Black Stars. You must be aware that demons are split into three classes, right, Alan?”

“Yes, I am.”



Demons could be classified into three classes based on their appearance and strength.

The third class was called renmo. They were essentially bipedal monsters with intelligence and powerful mana. Their appearance was indistinguishable from ordinary monsters. Most demons fell under this category.

The second class was called guaimo. Their numbers were significantly lower than renmo. They had large and sturdy bodies, sinister, beastly appearances, and powerful mana.

The vast majority of demons fell under the aforementioned two classes. However, in extremely rare cases, abnormal individuals were born. Beelzebub fell under that category. They were the first class, called shenmo because their power resembled that of divinity. They nearly looked human, the opposite of guaimo. They only expressed a handful of the traits of the monster they had as a foundation, like Beelzebub's horns or third eye. Their combat strength was in a league of its own: they were at least ten times stronger than guaimo.

"I reorganized my officers in preparation for the second invasion of the human world. I gathered the strongest among the underworld on merit alone. The seven demons that emerged at the top once again formed the stars of despair, the New Seven Black Stars!"

"Did you say the *New* Seven Black Stars?"

"I'll tell you one thing to commemorate our reunion." Beelzebub held up a finger and delivered a frightening truth. "All of the New Seven Black Stars are shenmo."

"What?!"

Even Alan couldn't help but be taken aback at this revelation. In the previous war, only two shenmo were part of the Seven Black Stars, including Beelzebub. Despite that, humanity was pushed to the brink of extinction.

And there are seven of them this time? That's outrageous.

"Anyway," Beelzebub said while looking down at Heavy Rain, "they were defeated in the contest of strength and lost their positions in the Seven Black Stars. They are but insignificant insects who only held the positions temporarily

after you Seven Heroes defeated the previous stars.”

Beelzebub tossed the three demons aside that easily. They each boasted the name of a disaster and were by no means weak, but he called them insects.

“Then that’s it. They wanted to succeed in the invasion on their own so that you would reinstate them as your officers,” Alan said.

Heavy Rain lowered her head in response to his words; he had hit the bull’s-eye. Beelzebub noticed her reaction and said, “So that’s why. I was wondering why you would take such pointless action on your own. I can never understand how the weak think.”

“So that part of you hasn’t changed, demon lord.”

“Hmph. Don’t think I’m not reflecting on my actions and analyzing what went wrong after losing to you humans the last time.”

“What now?” Alan said with his sword at the ready. “Are we going to fight? To be honest, fighting you in this state will be hard, but I can still beat you.”

“Oh?” Beelzebub said. The air grew tense between them.

“No, I’ll have to pass. There’s hardly a point in defeating you when you’re half-beaten anyway. Revenge won’t taste sweet unless you’re at your best.”

“Yeah, that sounds like you, doesn’t it? You’re that type of guy.”

Alan knew very well what kind of person Beelzebub was after so desperately fighting against him: a demon born with great power and the arrogance to match it. That was precisely why they had a chance against him.

“I’ll also tell you one thing in return, Beelzebub. The seal stones are under the palaces of each of the seven great human kingdoms.”

“You don’t say.” Beelzebub’s mood visibly improved at those words. He chuckled.

“I see now. You want to avoid any unnecessary casualties. Very well, I will fall for your provocation,” he replied. “Let’s hope your decision doesn’t bring about the downfall of humanity, Champion.”

“I won’t let that happen. My comrades and I will defeat you.”

“I would expect no less from the man who defeated me twenty-five years ago,” Beelzebub said before emitting black mana at his feet. The darkness enveloped him and Heavy Rain, and they soon vanished into thin air—but not before he left Alan with some parting words:

“I look forward to our rematch.”

“Phew.” Alan lowered his sword after he confirmed they’d left. “Those New Seven Black Stars, though...”

Alan spoke the name of the new enemies, weighing the new knowledge on his tongue. He was sure they had a much tougher fight ahead of them this time, so he had to return and relay that information to the rest of the Seven Heroes.

As he was lost in thought, loud cheering filtered into his thoughts. It was coming from nearby, where the Humanity Defense Coalition had been fighting the demon army. The cheers belonged to the humans who seemed to have emerged victorious thanks to the help of the Great Six.

“Guess I can enjoy this victory for now,” Alan said to himself before sheathing his sword.

Epilogue: The New Seven Black Stars

The demon lord's castle was the largest building in the underworld, constructed in a location with an intimidatingly thick miasma that weak demons couldn't even approach. When Heavy Rain came to, she was in the castle's reception hall with Beelzebub standing next to her. The two of them had teleported there through the demon lord's own magic.

"L-Lord Beelzebub..." Heavy Rain was trying to come up with some kind of excuse.

"Enough, Heavy Rain. I honestly couldn't care less about you."

True to his words, Beelzebub walked further into the reception hall without paying her another drop of attention.

"Sup, Beelzebub?"

A demon appeared from behind Beelzebub. He was tall, although not as tall as the demon lord, and quite human-like. He had a wild, sharp gaze and dragon scales in a mottled pattern across his skin. Despite his demonic nature, he could be mistaken for a human at first glance. He was a shenmo, of a higher standing than Heavy Rain.

"Hello, Georgios." Beelzebub turned to face him, undisturbed by the casual way he'd been addressed.

"Sure took yer sweet time after calling us here. I was so bored I killed time by crushing some guys who picked a fight when we bumped into each other," Georgios said, before tossing four freshly severed demon heads on the floor.

"Th-Those are..." Heavy Rain stammered. The heads belonged to her former comrades in the Seven Black Stars.

"But they're such trash, it barely took any time at all," the unscathed Georgios said with a sadistic grin.

"That's fine. It's their fault for being weak."

Beelzebub and Georgios coldly turned their backs to the dumbfounded Heavy

Rain and walked deeper into the reception hall.

They arrived at a long table with three seats on each side, and one at the head. Georgios sank into the empty seat on the right side.

“Looks like we’re all accounted for,” Beelzebub said.

Seven shenmo with tremendous mana had assembled at the table.

Georgios the Tyrant Dragon.

Adek the God of Games.

Master Unicorn the Aloof Holy Beast of the Sword.

Atlantis the Ultimate Slime.

Grave the Wicked Bone King.

Loki the Mythical Creature.

And last but not least, Demon Lord Beelzebub.

The sight of such monstrous individuals gathered together, each powerful enough to wipe out an entire nation on their own, was both miserable and thrilling. Beelzebub elegantly lowered himself into his seat and said in a dignified tone, “Now, let us go to war.”



Afterword

I'd like to begin by expressing my gratitude to everyone involved in the publishing of this novel. The first volume was safely completed thanks to all of your efforts. Thank you all very much.

To my first-time readers, it's nice to meet you. I'm the author, Kiraku Kishima. Did you enjoy the first volume of *Back to the Battlefield: The Veteran Heroes Return to the Fray!*? The majority of the main characters of this story are in their late thirties to forties, making this a somewhat unconventional work boasting a huge percentage of middle-aged characters.

As I aged more and more across the years, I increasingly began to think that people with experience are pretty cool. Thus, this story was born. Rather, as I grew older, these young protagonists overflowing with talent and naivete became so dazzling, it's gotten too difficult to self-insert (*despair*). In exchange, I can finally appreciate the mature flavor of middle-aged characters. I don't know how many older people there are among manga, anime, and light novel fans nowadays, but I *have* seen people post stuff like "stories with cooler older characters are masterpieces" in forums or social media. That was how I arrived at one of the truths of this world.

Kishima: "That's it! If I write a story with a full cast of middle-aged characters, it will be a true masterpiece!"

Now that I think back on it, there are all sorts of things wrong with that sentence, but once I actually started writing the story, I created some amazing characters in both the protagonist and other heroes. In addition, peroshi's high-quality illustrations elevated the Seven Heroes and Seven Black Stars to a whole new level. I loved both illustrations where their members were all assembled together; I stared at them for hours.

This book has a cool middle-aged protagonist who practically oozes life experience, which, in a sense, is doing something different from my other work, *Novice Middle-Aged Adventurer*. Rick, the main character of that series, is written as a middle-aged man with the youthful passion of a teenager, so I think

there is some contrast between them. While Alan makes you go, “Damn, he rocks!” Rick is more like, “Yeah, I get him.” I love both characters. As a novelist, I would be happy if my readers feel the same.

Anyway, the manga adaptation for this novel has been confirmed. The art will be by Yasunari Toda, a veteran manga artist, who also drew the manga version of one of my favorite must-watch anime for every man out there. And yes, Toda is also getting on in years. In fact, that probably applies to most people involved in this work, myself included. Both the novel and manga are brimming with the power of middle-aged characters who are giving their utmost despite their age, so I’d be glad if you enjoy them.

Lastly, I’d like to mention that the sale of the second *Veteran Heroes* volume has been decided! As for what happens in it, I think that the answer is fairly obvious to everyone who’s already read this volume, but the fight between the Seven Heroes and Seven Black Stars begins. An amazing manuscript has already been finished, so please look forward to it.

Goodbye for now. Let’s meet again in the second volume!