Author: Kurone Kanzaki
Illustrator: Makoto Iino



10

Demon Lord, Retry!

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DEMON LORD, RETRY!

10




Maria
Akane Fujisaki
Swein Camual Leon
Aku
Mimi
Cake
Bitchlet
Hakuto Kunai
Hummer
Ren Miyaoji


Luna Elegant
Eagle



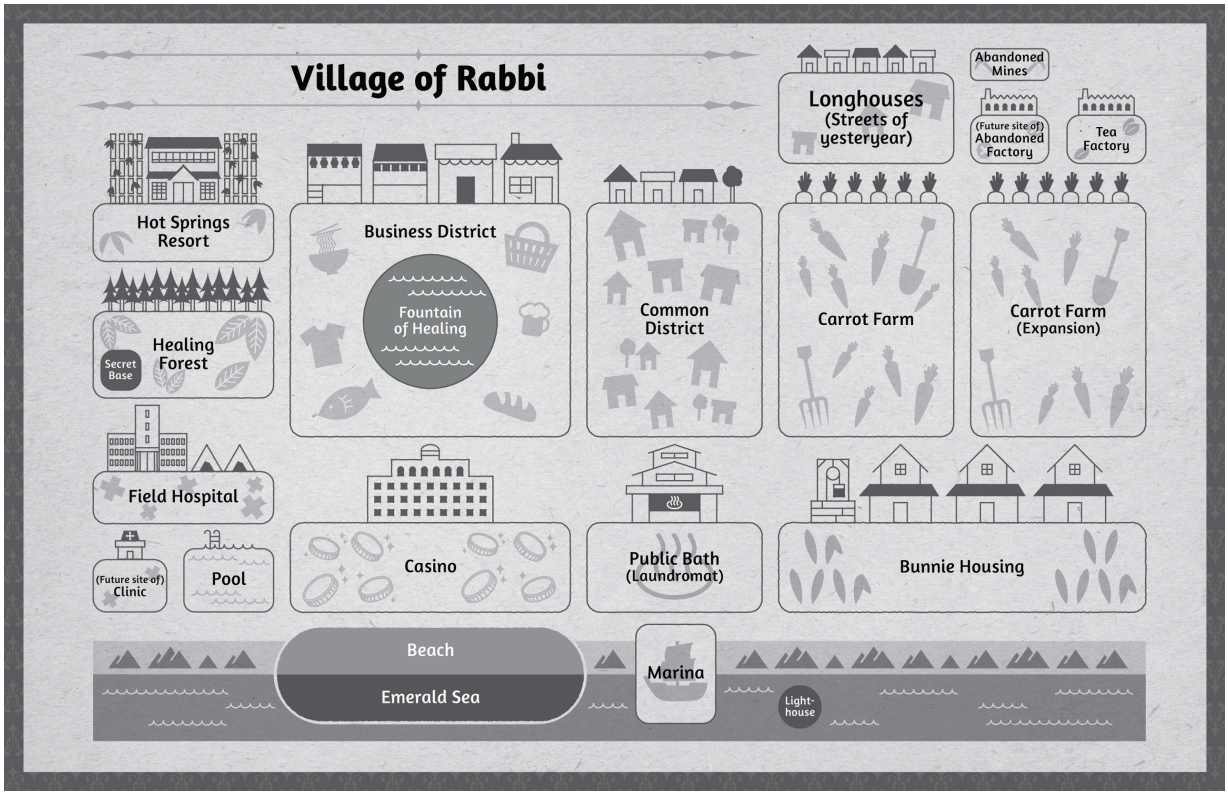

Village of Rabbi
Hot Springs Resort
Healing Forest
Secret Base
Field Hospital
(Future site of) Clinic
Pool
Business District
Fountain of Healing
Casino
Common District
Public Bath (Laundromat)
Longhouses (Streets of yesteryear)
Abandoned Mines
(Future site of) Abandoned Factory
Tea Factory
Carrot Farm
Carrot Farm (Expansion)
Bunnie Housing
Beach
Emerald Sea
Marina
Light-house

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Chapter 12: The Night Before the Rumble

The Defeated

——The Holy City of Holylight.

A few days had passed since the civil war; already, efforts were underway to restore the Holy City. While the streets were being cleared of bodies and debris, mass funerals took place throughout the city. White and Gran, as representatives of the Holy Church, were kept busy during the fallout. Queen recovered as Holylight did, starting to patrol the streets with her goons in tow.

Whenever she did, passersby greeted her enthusiastically and without fail.

"Lady Queen! Thank you for everything you do for us!"

"Lady Queen, please take these fresh fruits! We got them in this morning."

"Lady Queen, thank you for the other day! Please enjoy this bottle of wine tonight."

As long as there were people in the streets, it seemed that Queen wouldn't find a moment of peace in the city. Even though she always replied to her adoring subjects with a curt "Uh-huh," the people only seemed to fawn over the brutal Holy Maiden. Despite her brutish demeanor, the citizens loved to see her mow down threats to their livelihood. She was a dreadful force to her enemies, but a bona fide hero to those she protected. Even her gruff goons crinkled their grisly mugs when handed bottles of liquor or packs of meat with words of thanks.

Fuji, who followed closely behind Queen, grinned at the bottle in his hand. "You'll have us spoiled on good wine, my Queen."

She clicked her tongue. "Spoiled is right."

"These gifts alone could keep all of us fed if we patrolled every day," Fuji teased.

"With what time, dumbass?" Queen spat.

Showered with roaring cheers and adoring looks, Queen and her entourage finally stopped their march at the entrance to the Holy City's dungeons.

"You're all dismissed. Get lost," Queen commanded with a wave of her hand. Her goons immediately obeyed, breaking formation and dispersing into the city. It never even crossed their mind to question Queen's orders; if she told them to run straight into an inferno, they'd do it without a second thought—they'd been conditioned that way.

Queen jerked her chin and the dungeon guards rushed to pull the gate open. She walked inside and descended the stairs, down to the soot-coated corridor that stunk of burning fish oil. She clicked her tongue again. "This place always smells like dead fish."

On this continent, while the rich—the nobles and merchants—lit their homes with bright and odorless Light Spell Stones, the poor were forced to burn oil pressed from boiled-then-dried herrings or sardines, leaving the leftover husks to be turned into fertilizer. While fish oil was affordable to the poor, they had to contend with the stench and smoke that clung to the ceiling and walls.

Queen marched through the corridor until she came to a cell where a Satanist sat in a chair, reading a book by the light of another oil lamp—Warlkin, who'd saved Queen's life in the recent battle.

"Nice book nook, Satanist. Whatcha reading about? How to kill a god?" Queen taunted.

Warlkin answered after a moment. "Took you long enough. Did you finally decide on my date of execution?"

"Something like that. Get out." Queen ripped Warlkin's cell door clean off, sending the bent and broken lock clanging onto the floor. She began walking back the way she came, Warlkin obediently following behind her.

They quickly made it to the surface, where Warlkin shielded his eyes from the bright daylight he hadn't seen in days. He cast a look toward the city center bustling with people hard at work rebuilding the city. A series of new rules and regulations had been announced since the battle ended—it would be a significant adjustment for the citizens of the Holy City, but they seemed to be taking it in stride, confident that no ruler could serve them worse than the nobles had. Already, White had been distributing, for free, the vast store of

Water Spell Stones Tahara had passed on to her. Tahara had successfully demonstrated what kind of ruler they could expect.

"People are resilient, aren't they? No matter how many times they're beaten down, they get back up and fight again," Warlkin muttered—the Satanist in him was dead and gone. For Warlkin, this was also an admission of how fragile his past self had been.

With no regard for his comment, Queen chucked a leather bag at Warlkin's feet. "Special exception. I hereby absolve you in the name of Sir Zero."

"Absolve...? What's your agenda?!"

Holy Maidens had the authority to pardon criminals in the form of absolution. Queen had invoked this authority, just as she had once done for Fuji. "I won't say it again. It's for Sir Zero," Queen said, avoiding Warlkin's gaze.

The former Satanist warily reached for the bag—it was stuffed with silver coins, along with official documentation of his absolution. This seemed like a generous offer, especially after Queen's claim that it was only for Zero's sake. Levelheaded or not, Warlkin was still a terrorist who had plotted to assassinate the Holy Maidens. "What is this supposed to be? Don't tell me this is your thanks for helping you in that battle."

"No one needed your help, numbnuts. Thank Sir Zero," Queen said. Clearly, Warlkin's statement had hit the mark. In part, her generosity might have been caused by the butterflies that still danced in her stomach after seeing Zero, but she also liked to face worthy adversaries. She must have held Warlkin in some high regard after he'd used Tartarus to nearly end her life and even squared off against Jack without any sign of fear. At any rate, common sense played no part in her decision-making—she was a hundred-percent driven by impulse and emotion.

"I never expected a pardon from the Holy Maiden I tried to kill, much less charity..." Warlkin said.

"Take the cash and beat it. Go die in a pile of shit for all I care." Queen turned on her heels and strode off—a dry goodbye, just like she preferred.

Warlkin watched her leave for some time before making for the

castle gates, where Fuji awaited him as if he'd expected the pardoned prisoner. "Did you put that into her head?" Warlkin muttered, eyeing the document in his hand.

Fuji scoffed. "My Queen doesn't take well to *suggestions*. You should know that better than most."

For a professional assassin and terrorist, their target became their obsession. They needed intimate knowledge of their target's likes and dislikes, commutes, favorite foods, sleep schedule, and anything else that could possibly affect their mission. Ironically, Warlkin knew not just Queen, but all three Holy Maidens better than just about anyone.

Fuji leaned back against the castle gates, arms crossed, and lazily asked, "So? Where are you going now, ex-Satanist?"

"I have a second chance at life... I think I'll head East."

"To Lady Luna's territory?"

"I want to see what kind of ruler the so-called Demon Lord turns out to be."

Fuji nodded, for he shared Warlkin's curiosity—where was the Demon Lord, or the Fallen Angel Lucifer, taking this country? "Take this. Keep me updated on the happenings over there." He handed Warlkin a shoulder bag.

"You want me to *write* you?" Warlkin asked, inspecting the shoulder bag that contained a magic quill, a stack of stationery, and more silver coins—presumably for his troubles. "Your mistress already left me coin. I don't need more."

"Just take it. Starting a new life can be more expensive than you think," Fuji insisted. He, too, had begun a new life when he turned from bandit leader to Holy Maiden's guard. Satisfied, Fuji stomped back into the Holy Castle, his signature hairdo bouncing with each step.

"Tell your mistress—" Warlkin called. "Strangely, she and the dragonborn seemed a good match."

Fuji guffawed. "That'll make my Queen blush." He waved, disappearing into the castle.

With one last look at the Holy Castle, Warlkin began his journey to the village of Rabbi, his steady march underscored with

determination.

——The Rift, Northern Holylight.

Satanists were moving about an expansive underground facility, especially large compared to Warlkin's cell. Everyone's hands were piled high with some sort of cargo, as they had been forced to vacate their headquarters. They had been tipped off that the entirety of Northern Holylight was going to be made a fortress, with several underground facilities slated for construction.

Utopia sat at his throne, biting his lip and muttering bitter curses. As if to mock him, a bat flew over his head and perched upside down from the extravagant chandelier. It spoke, "I told you once before. If you truly long for something, you need to move your own feet and get your own hands dirty for it."

"Did you come all this way to offer a cheap platitude, Allit?" Utopia spat.

"I also told you—the Dragonborn is mine," Allit added.

"As if I would seek out the monster on purpose!" Utopia shouted, springing to his feet in an outrage. The Satanist grunts jolted as if they had been hit by a shock wave, quickly scurrying from the throne room. Truthfully, Utopia had no interest in the Dragonborn. He had only been plotting to destroy the Holy Castle, and the Dragonborn was simply an obstacle that had appeared in his path—an insurmountable obstacle, at that.

"On purpose or not, you'll never slay the Dragon," Allit said.

"And you can? When you've had two chances and failed both times?" Utopia challenged.

"I am advancing my plan. You are merely playing with cheap marionettes."

A long spell of silence fell between them.

Finally, Utopia glanced up at the bat. "I heard you devoured one of the Sins—Gluttony. Is it true?"

"Why would I owe you an answer?" Allit dismissed.

Yet, Utopia saw a ray of hope in the bat's reply. "I am glad that you finally decided to stop your play fighting and take this seriously."

"I see you'll still take every opportunity to try and manipulate

those superior to you."

"Don't write me off yet. There is a downpour of flesh and blood upon this land." Utopia shifted his gaze forward. Among the cargo the Satanists carried were corpses: Xenobian soldiers, Central warriors, Fire Salamanders, and even other Satanists. The countless dead from the civil war were being hauled underground and tossed into the Northern Rift.

"Giving the Satanic Cross another try?" Allit asked.

"No. I'm using the Northern Nations to mobilize Tartarus itself. By feeding it more death and great lamentation, it shall stain the very continent dark," said Utopia.

"Ah... Then I will neither support nor interfere."

"Oh, you don't mind if I hunt the Dragon down?"

"Don't concern yourself with that. No matter what scheme you hatch, you won't kill that beautiful beast. In fact, you won't so much as scratch his scales." The bat released itself from the chandelier and flew out of the throne room.

With a bitter sneer on his face, Utopia watched Allit fly off before turning to his Satanist subjects. "Bring all the dead to me! Our grand vision is moments away from fruition!"

They responded with grave acquiescence and resumed trudging, carrying carrion like insects upon the ground.

Deep underground, unseen and unheard by humans, something thrummed, thrummed, thrummed...

——The Royal Palace, the New Kingdom of Xenobia.

An aged commander knelt before the throne with his head lowered—Barrus the Unsinkable. Beatrice, the first queen of Xenobia, looked down upon him from her throne.

"All responsibility lies with me. Please, have mercy on my men," Barrus implored. He had been commanded to form an alliance with Jack in Euritheis. On the surface, his mission had been a complete failure—not only had he failed to gain Jack's trust, but when Barrus lost the duel against Ren, he had admitted his defeat with dignity and retreated. In truth, Barrus had prevented the Xenobian army from suffering mass casualties. If someone more rash had

commanded those troops in his place, Ren would have annihilated every Xenobian there—several thousand in all, including those stationed outside the capital.

Beatrice graciously motioned to the commander. “No general wins every battle. And I wouldn’t have generals left if I made them pay the price of every battle they lost. Now leave—and rest well.”

“Thank you for your boundless generosity, Your Majesty,” Barrus said, and left the throne room.

Once Beatrice and Kongming were alone, the regal queen broke her flawless posture, slumping into the throne. “That’s another L, Senpai. General Barrus too? What are we going to do?”

“Keep your mouth shut and sit up,” Kongming commanded.

“Check the scoreboard, Senpai. This Demon Lord’s taken down Barrus and Jack... We’re out of our depths here. Let’s just toss in the towel,” Beatrice whined.

“Keep talking nonsense like that and I’ll feed you crickets for every meal!”

“That’s an abuse of power! How could you be so heartless, Senpai?! Well, I guess when you don’t have a soul to begin with—”

“Can it!”

As the pair began to wrestle atop the throne, Hanzo entered the room, bearing more bad news—the outcome of Holylight’s civil war.

“The central nobles lost...?” Kongming repeated with a drawn face. “Their forces were massive.” The central nobles had no reason to have lost this war. They had completely outnumbered the Militants, even before reinforcements from Xenobia and the Tzardom arrived, not to mention the mutiny of the Holy Knights’ Order.

“Our battalion led by Zorm was also decimated by Harts and his Militants,” Hanzo continued.

“Who cares?! What about Leon?!” Kongming demanded.

“Unfortunately, there was no way to infiltrate the fortress,” Hanzo said. “At this point, we can only say that he has not been found...”

“Leon did not lose! There’s no way! He’s an unkillable monster!” Kongming shrieked. Still, Leon was presumed dead or missing, and there was nothing she could do from her palace, nations away from the battleground. “Mobilize all units! Tell the Eight Flags to ready

their troops!”

“Seven Flags now, Senpai. General Leon’s gone,” Beatrice interjected.

“Shut up and stay out of it!” Kongming barked.

“I’m waving my white flag, Senpai. Off the record, this Demon Lord is terrifying. You can keep fighting alone and— Hrmmm!”

Kongming shoved handfuls of ice into the queen’s mouth, forcibly silencing her. While their uproar over the Demon Lord seemed to shake the whole royal palace, the only impression the Demon Lord had of Xenobia was that it was “a weird little country of ninjas.”



——Grand Citadel, City of Fire, Tzardom of Light.

A message had been delivered to one of the five Grand Citadels the Tzardom was famous for, a message for a man called Bardo Hannes Luxembourg Eugen, whose tall stature complemented his long name. He was the older brother of Flay, the former captain of the Salamander Knights. Even though Eugen had pursued a career in clergy and not battle like his brother, he shared Flay's astonishing looks and scarlet hair. On the inside, however, the brother could not have been any more different.

With ambitions to become the next Pope, Eugen steadily accumulated supporters by making connections in all fields, sharing his vast wealth under the table, assassinating his competition, and garnering favors from powerful people. He'd moved up in the Church from clergyman, rector, friar, archbishop, to finally cardinal—one step away from Popedom—all by the age of thirty. While this prodigy did not shy away from any tactic that furthered his position, he also served the people of the Tzardom so fiercely that he would give up his life for their salvation. He cried for the deaths of nameless beggars, shared his food with the starving, and even gave the clothes off of his back to the freezing. Bizarrely, Eugen poured his heart and soul into guiding people to a facade of salvation. Even Eugen couldn't tell if his faith was real or fake.

He was in his bedroom now, where handpicked portraits of historical paladins lined the wall, as if Eugen wanted to advertise his allegiance with the common man.

The steward who'd fearfully delivered the message of Flay's death bowed his head, mixed emotions clouding his face.

"That complete fool and failure...finally did something useful," Eugen said.

"I don't believe Master Flay was a...fool," the steward stammered.

Eugen showed no sign of emotion, and certainly no indication that he cared for his brother. "And father?" he asked.

"He is distraught. Locked in his bedroom," the steward answered.

Eugen nodded. "My father always spoiled him. Perhaps because he was an utter imbecile. But I suspect my father's sorrow will soon turn to anger."

“D-Do you think he would risk his relationship with the Pope...?”

“The Pope was the one who approved the fool to go out there. Naturally, the blame lies with His Holiness,” Eugen said.

The master of House Luxembourg, one of the most prominent families in the Tzardom, had just lost his beloved son. The tidal wave of his wrath was rising on the horizon, and the Pope who’d sent his son on that dangerous mission was standing on the shore.

“What’s my schedule for the afternoon? I remember a funeral in the slums and a farmer’s wedding.”

“Uh, sir... Considering the circumstances, shouldn’t you, uh, take the day off...?”

“Nonsense. When the common people are racked with sorrow, I cry with them. When they are filled with joy, I sing and dance with them. As their Cardinal, I am their servant! I shall not rest until every soul in the Tzardom is saved!” Eugen knelt before one of the portraits that depicted a particularly ravishing man with silky black hair and golden eyes that threatened to entrance him. “Oh, great hero Loganhill... Lend me your strength to bring salvation to the common man!” Eugen shouted, and sauntered off to the stinking slums of the city. Whether he was a saint or a villain, the world might never know.

The Thing You Need Most in Life

——Icarus, the Demilitarized City, Northern Nations.

In the midst of the war-torn Northern Nations, one city remained neutral—Icarus, also known as the city of evil, home to brazen human trafficking and arms dealing, where every drug imaginable flooded the streets alongside prostitutes of both sexes. Many a criminal had sought sanctuary in Icarus over the years, as there were no laws nor extradition there. Naturally, the likes of crooked merchants and drifting mercenaries found their homes there.

Even in the early morning, the people openly drank moonshine and indulged in dangerous drugs on the streets. Dubious shops and booths lined the alleys where prostitutes called at passersby. At the center of a crowd, one might have found a drunken brawl or a game of knife throwing with an unwilling participant as a target.

A woman known as Big Mama strode through those chaotic streets, wearing an outfit of full mourning. Wherever she walked, the crowd recognized her and parted to let her through. She was one of the powerful crime lords and ladies of Icarus, in charge of the bars and brothels. She held as much power here as a royal did in their own kingdom. As the crowd made way, the rabble were careful to avoid her gaze—no good would come from making an impression on a woman like Big Mama.

Behind her, a knight in full, golden armor followed, crimson cape fluttering in the wind off his shoulder—a remarkably gaudy getup.

Gruff mercenaries whispered behind their backs as they went.

"Th-That's King... I thought he was missing..."

"Tsk. The monster's come home from his playground. We're gonna see some clashes in the city."

"Who's Heaven's Ward gonna side with, Roses or Xenobia?"

"Look at that flashy armor... He must have made a fortune in this war."

Without stopping or acknowledging the whispers, Big Mama and King walked to a large tavern—the hangout of Heaven's Ward,

rumored to be the fiercest mercenary company around. There was a raucous atmosphere inside, with mercenaries engaged in drinking competitions, high-stakes arm wrestling, or maintaining their armor. As soon as Big Mama stepped through the door, the tavern froze.

"Mama...and King! You're back!"

"What's going on, Mama? Last I heard King was missing. How'd he end up with you?"

From the back of the tavern, a hulking man strode through the whispering crowd, his muscles threatening to burst the fabric of his clothes. With a giant sword in his hand, a bandana around his head, and a gnarly scar on his face, he was the picture of a hardened mercenary.

"Varkas. Glad to see you're still a piece of eye candy," Big Mama greeted.

"I know you've been taking care of King, but you crossed the line this time."

"How so?"

Varkas stared Mama down, his voice as cold as ice. "You sicked King on Jack in some grand standoff. King would have never done something that reckless. It had to be your idea."

"Speak for yourself, big boy. What do I have to gain from throwing hands at Jack?" Big Mama asked.

"So you're going to make me spell it out? You're pining to be the next don, and Daedalus was a thorn in your side. He and Jack were as tight as brothers—taking Jack down means stopping Daedalus in his tracks. If you're gonna start spewing excuses, you'll talk to the sword." Varkas lifted his enormous blade like it was a twig and slapped its side with his palm—a visual aid to his threat.

"That's quite the conspiracy theory. Did you strain your little brain connecting all those dots?"

"You can talk the talk, Mama, but it's time to pay up. How are you gonna settle the score for this mess?"

"Settle the score? Do you have any idea who you're threatening?" Mama asked, her voice ringing deep and hard, shaking the mercenaries in their boots.

Those in the room sensed an incoming explosion and rushed to

bring Varkas back from the edge—Heaven's Ward might have been the most notorious mercenary company in the Northern Nations, but even they knew who not to mess with.

"That's enough, Varkas! There's nothing to gain from pissing Big Mama off in this city!"

"I know you're pissed, but you gotta pick your battles..."

"Take a deep breath, man. King made it back safe and sound. Let's call it a win, huh?"

The other members were treating Varkas like a raging horse ready to buck and run, consequences be damned.

Of course, Varkas's accusations were completely off the mark. There was only one person they could blame for the mess they were in, and it was the Demon Lord who'd stolen King's identity. However, the Don of Icarus and its crime lords were in constant conflict under the surface. Alliances were formed and broken in a matter of days, and no one knew when a turf war would erupt in the city. So, Varkas's accusations weren't entirely groundless—it was all too easy for residents of Icarus to believe every word of them.

The way the Demon Lord could cause mass confusion from across the continent was an impressive feat that practically elevated his status to that of a global pollutant, like greenhouse gas, acid rain, or a garbage island.

Varkas finally relented, shifting his gaze to King, who stood silently behind Big Mama. "You and I haven't known each other for long, but I know enough about you to say that you've never shared your identity or so much as taken off your armor around others. And you've never said a word. Maybe you've been cursed to silence, or your face was burnt to hell by some fire..." Varkas said with sincere understanding. Some of his mercenary brethren had lost limbs or had been disfigured by a monster's stomach acid—Varkas had seen enough of it through his career. That's why he'd never interfered in King's business until now, until King had left the battalion for an extended period of time. "You only have to nod, King. You're one of us, aren't you? Not some goon who serves *her* whims. This shrew doesn't own you—we'll make sure she can't touch you. Don't leave us again...not without a note, at least."

A long silence hung in the tavern. All the mercenaries seemed to hold their breath as they focused their attention on King's helmet—would it nod or shake? The answer was neither. Suddenly, King's helmet hit the floor. "Okey dokey!" Akane said, standing in King's armor.

"What...?" The tavern gasped in unison.

"I've been watching you. You're not such a bad guy," Akane added.

Even Big Mama had turned to her, speechless. This wasn't how they'd planned this meeting. Originally, Big Mama was going to keep King's death a secret from Heaven's Ward for the time being. It was a significant blow to Heaven's Ward's forces, which was a net loss for the city of Icarus. This was precisely why Big Mama had paraded Akane in King's armor through the streets, and it had all been ruined thanks to Akane's brain-dead play.

"K-King...! You're a girl?!"

"You can talk?!"

"King's kinda cute..."

"No way... King's been a petite girl all along?"

How else could Heaven's Ward have reacted?

While the men cooed and cawed, Big Mama palmed her forehead and gazed up at the ceiling—how was she going to explain this one?

Akane stripped out of her armor in an instant and stashed it all in her Backup Backpack, going back to wearing only her school uniform. "Hey hey! It's King, aka Superstar Akane!" she said with a wink.

The tavern erupted in the cheers of grown men who'd never seen an attractive girl in a schoolgirl uniform before. Through her long career as an idol, Akane had mastered how to play men like fiddles.

Varkas alone did not join in with the other mercenaries. Watching Akane, he walked up next to Big Mama and said, "I didn't think you had a sense of humor in you. That was one hell of a reveal." So much so that his anger for the matriarch had faded.

Big Mama seemed to have run out of steam too. "If only it were a joke..."

"So, where's the real King?" Varkas asked.

"Sorry to tell you, but a devil got her. High-rank, probably."

"How?! King was in Euritheis, wasn't she?!"

Big Mama chose her words carefully and told Varkas what had happened: her chance encounter with Akane, Akane being there for King's last moments, and how King had left her keepsake with Akane. Finally, she handed Varkas King's ID.

"So King's really gone..."

"Ran into the wrong person at the wrong time—that's all there is to it. This world can be cruel sometimes, can't it?"

"She was one of the few people I'd trust to have my back in battle..." Full of unspoken emotion, Varkas sighed. "I'm sorry to hear that..." He slumped into a chair, and Big Mama took the chair opposite him. In contrast to the whirlwind of commotion around Akane, the pair were as quiet as funeral goers. "A high-rank devil, huh... You know anything about it?"

"Not much, but Akane seemed to recognize the devil... But don't you go thinking about revenge. She wouldn't want you to do anything like that," Big Mama said.

Wordlessly, Varkas tugged over a bottle from the table and chugged its contents.

Big Mama watched him for a moment before glancing over at Akane. "You know, King smiled in the end, after it all... Now that's not a bad way to go for us, is it?"

"Smiled... I wonder how many of us in Icarus could do the same when the time comes." Death and danger constantly loomed above Icarus. That was doubly true for mercenaries like those of Heaven's Ward. Varkas stared up at the ceiling, perhaps thinking of his own end that would come sooner or later. Would he wear a smile on his face when his time finally came?

"So, Big Mama. What's the play?" Varkas asked.

"No one else is going to find out that King is dead. Lucky for us, her armor survived." And also lucky for them, no one else had ever seen King unmasked—none would question that someone other than King was wearing her armor. Akane just had to be seen walking the streets to convince the whole city that King was still alive.

"Fighting without King is like keeping one hand tied behind our

back. How long are you going to keep that secret?"

"Until we find someone to fill her shoes," Big Mama answered.

Varkas scoffed, almost sneering at the idea. "That's rich. You think someone who can fill her shoes is gonna walk in off the street or something?"

Big Mama's features twisted. King had been known as a terrible menace to her enemies on the battlefield.

In contrast to that somber conversation, the rest of Heaven's Ward was enthralled by what Akane had called a "Polaroid party."

"Special discount for my new fans!" Akane crooned. "Get a selfie with me for just three silver coins!"

"Wh-What the...?! That thing just spat out a portrait!"

"What kind of magical item is that?!"

"Out of the way! I'm not going home tonight without a portrait with King—I mean, Akane!"

It didn't take long for the mercenaries to devolve into a frenzy.

Big Mama stood up with a tired look on her face. "At this point, I'll let you tell the story to the boys. You'd better come up with a good one."

"Wait a minute... You haven't told me who showed up in Euritheis telling everyone he was King from Heaven's Ward," Varkas said.

"I haven't got a clue. All I can say is that I had nothing to do with it," Big Mama said truthfully. Varkas believed her after hearing the whole story. "Whoever it was used King's name to shift power in that city. No one had more enemies than Jack."

"At least her name lives on," Varkas snarled before reaching for another bottle, taking a swig in King's honor. For mercenaries like them, there was some honor in achieving the sort of infamy that King had—especially if it played a part in taking out a mad dog like Jack.

Big Mama stepped into the frenzy of Akane's party and dragged her out by the scruff like she was a wandering stray.

"I may be adorable as a kitten, but I'm not a real one!" Akane protested.

"Save your jibber jabber, you spoiled girl..." Big Mama nagged as she pulled her out of the tavern, leaving the members of Heaven's

Ward to admire their photos.

"L-Look how cute she is in this one!"

"Your face is in the way, though... I'm gonna cut that part out."

"You lookin' to die?!"

"Dammit! I would have gotten a photo of my own if it wasn't for Big Mama!"

"Please, I'll pay you five silver coins for that portrait—er, photo!"

Akane took after the Demon Lord and caused commotion wherever she went, much to the chagrin of Big Mama.

"Thanks for making this even more complicated than it has to be. What's that weird magical item, anyway?" she asked.

"Weird? Every idol nowadays needs an instant camera." Akane snapped a selfie, winking at the camera as she did. In an instant, an incredibly detailed portrait came out of it.

Big Mama stared at the item with an intense curiosity that lacked the mercenaries' giddy enthusiasm. She shuddered to imagine its military applications—all it took was one person on the inside of a fortress to capture and leak its weaknesses with immaculate precision. "Is that a trend among the nobles of Holylight?"

"Nope, this camera's a limited edition of one. And I *make* trends —not follow them," Akane said.

"I don't even know what to say to that..." Big Mama quietly sighed in relief that the item was one-of-a-kind. Military intelligence, at large, would still continue as she knew it.

"Climb out of the stone age, Mama. You know they call people like me influencers?"

"There's some truth to that. You are like influenza."

"Influen-*cer*. I may go viral, but I'm not a viral disease!" Akane whined as they walked down the street, passersby giving them a wide berth. "Hey, hey, Mama? Everyone's staring at me. Don't you think they're stunned by my beauty?"

"It's because you're weird. How is it that you manage to draw attention with and without the suit of armor?" Big Mama sighed, refusing to give Akane the validation, even if the crowds seemed to take keen interest in Akane's looks on top of the regular reverence they gave Big Mama. "I shouldn't have to tell you to never wander

this city alone. You'll get snatched before you can even say 'influencer.'"

"I'm failing from success... I'm an idol, after all—the ultimate rizzler."

"What are you even saying...?" Big Mama grumbled. "Is this what you call your 'lingo'?"

The two soon returned to Big Mama's house. If she thought Akane would heed her advice and show any form of self-restraint, she was sorely mistaken.

In the dead of night, Akane slipped out into the city like she'd been doing it for years; her skill set in espionage made it difficult for her to even be seen. Combined with her speed—superior to that of most other Advisors—she often left her targets a pile of corpses before they ever laid eyes on her.

Leaping from rooftop to rooftop, Akane systematically memorized Icarus's layout as a force of habit. Several areas in Icarus, the City of Evil, were dubbed things like "the Dark Quarter" or "Forbidden Zone." Of course, those were not so much of a deterrent for Akane. No matter the security or lock, there was no place Akane could not infiltrate.

Having scanned the city once over, Akane sent a Communication, paying no mind that it was nearly midnight. "Ren? Wakey, wakey! It's your favorite idol Akane calling!"

"Akane. Explain why you've been ignoring my Communications."

"Come on, didn't you miss me? All work and no play is gonna make Ren a dull girly!" Silence followed. "My B!"

"It's always this way with you. You are too self-centered to even explain yourself—"

"Okay, okay. You can chew me out later. I gotta drop a bunch of updates on you first," Akane said.

Ren seemed to table her scorn at this. As Kunai's secretary, it wasn't in her nature to ignore new intel, no matter how insignificant it seemed. Akane had taken advantage of Ren's nature on more than one occasion to dodge a scolding from her.

"Where are you, anyway? Have you obtained Master's permission to be there?" Ren asked.

“I’m in the city of... Ick-R-Us?”

“Icarus, you mean. Exercise precision when you’re making a report,” Ren reminded.

“Yeah, that. A city full of big bads. Hey, hey. Are you worried? I bet you’re worried.”

“If I let myself worry about you, I would get nothing done in my life.”

“Come on, at least play along...” Akane whined. “What would you do if I got kidnapped by some bad guys?!”

“Pity them.”

These two were—almost comically—the opposite of each other. While Akane derailed their conversation at every turn, Ren made sure to reel it back in.

“Icarus, Heaven’s Ward, King...” Ren recounted, taking mental notes.

Akane laughed villainously. “I’m gonna wreak havoc without Hakuto even knowing about it! Don’t go snitching on me, Ren!”

“Master already predicted what you would do.”

“No way! Even Hakuto can’t be that smart.”

“You spoke of this ‘King’ who appeared in Euritheis. That was Master.”

“I-I’m shook... He made me his dancing monkey again.”

“It would appear so. This could have been avoided if you had kept up regular correspondence,” Ren said. “In the future, you need to stop ignoring my—”

“Oh, there’s a knock at my door! I’ll call you back in three years!” Akane ended the Communication to dodge Ren’s nagging once again and leaped onto the roof of the city’s cathedral—an eye-catching landmark in the city center. From there, Akane could see how brightly Icarus shined, despite the late hour—a truly sleepless city.

“Hakuto does it again,” she grumbled. “How am I ever going to outsmart him?” She shifted her gaze downward. Considering that the Demon Lord had no idea who King was, this was a tragic waste of her time and brainpower. “A city full of bad guys... If this is the church, what’s the man upstairs doing about all this?”

A voice came from the darkness to answer. “There is no god in

this city. Can't you tell? Even in this supposed house of worship, there isn't a drop of holiness." The tip of a long lance shone in midair.

"I remember that lance," Akane said. "I didn't know it was a talking one."

The weapon had once belonged to a grand devil that dealt with the undead—Count Impaler. The One-of-a-Kind weapon drained the life force of anyone who touched it. Anyone impaled with it would be mummified on the spot.

"Although my body is no more, my affliction still lingers in this lance," the weapon explained.

"You did tell me you'd never die... I thought you were joking," Akane said.

This was a bizarre conversation to have on the roof of a cathedral. Perhaps there really was no god who watched over Icarus.

"After centuries on this earth, my body has fallen. Before I knew it, my king had been slain. Nothing of this magnitude has happened in the long history of the Hellions. You and your master have left your mark on history, indeed," the Count said.

"What? Hakuto did all of that! It's not my fault! Pretty much everything bad that happens in this world is because of Hakuto anyway." Akane's outrageous claim was almost warranted, seeing how much chaos the Demon Lord had brought down upon the continent.

Count Impaler—or his echo, at least—said, "Life had become rather tedious after so many moons... But I am intrigued by how history will shape up in the near future. If it can be achieved, I want to watch this new era unfold—one that not even a god could foretell."

"Okay? Your words are kinda confusing," Akane said.

"Ah. Allow me to set subtlety aside. I am asking for you to spare this poor soul a few drops of your blood," the lance said.

"Okie dokie."

"For a considerable price, of course— Wait, what?" Count Impaler had made an outlandish demand by both human and Hellion

standards, and Akane's response was even more unthinkable. The Count certainly hadn't expected an unconditional yes. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but... Are you sure you don't want to think this over? Let me be clear. Right now, it will take me several centuries to regenerate. During that time, I pose no threat to humans or any other creatures," he explained. He wasn't certain that Akane had heard him right—she hadn't hesitated to give strength to someone who wouldn't be a threat otherwise. This was akin to reinvigorating a hurricane just as it was about to die out and expecting the storm not to ravish the land all over again.

"That's too complicated. Whatever you want sounds fun." Akane grabbed the lance and guided its tip to her palm.

It was such an audacious move that even Count Impaler began protesting. "A-Are you sure you understand the implications of this?! Even a few drops of blood from someone as powerful as you will bring me back to full strength!"

"I'm a dum-dum, so I always do what sounds fun. My mama always said life was like a box of chocolates... You never know what you'll find inside!" Akane shouted.

"Wait—"

She slammed her hand through the tip of the lance without hesitation. Blood gushed from her palm and seeped into the lance, emitting black affliction in exchange. The plume of dark gas began to take shape and settled in the form of Count Impaler—just as he had been when Akane faced off against him in Hellion Territory.

"What...powerful blood! Easily worth a thousand years of rest...!" the Count exclaimed.

"Hey, dude. What's up? Wait, were you dead or something?"

"Incredible... I know not if I should thank you or warn you against your thoughtlessness first." Count Impaler was meant to be an unavoidable disaster, intent on destroying everything in his path. It astounded him that Akane had shown no sign of fear.

In reality, Akane's good fortune would let her ride out any disaster. "Now that you're alive again, what do you want? A rematch?" With narrowed eyes, Akane began shadowboxing.

"Thank you for the offer, but I must respectfully decline. As

tempting as it may be to lose my body all over again," said the Count.

Akane let her arms flop. "Boo. That's no fun."

Count Impaler's lips curled up at how Akane's attitude flickered. From the moment he first saw her in Hellion Territory, he'd been intrigued by her—by the dark sludge that pooled deep in her soul in the shadow of her brilliant, sunshine demeanor. The Count had once been an ordinary Skeleton Warrior. He'd survived long, long years at the bottom of the pecking order. Something told him that he and Akane had something in common. *Besides, there's no telling what she'll do next,* he mused. *Just like the late king...* This girl wasn't governed by logic or reason, but completely by emotion. After centuries of existence, he treasured any encounter that kept him entertained.

He stared at Akane and made his offer anyway. "The price I was going to offer is this: I am currently without a master. I shall be your servant, if you'll have me."

"Me? Not Hakuto?"

"My lance will only serve those who intrigue me. Forgive me for saying so, but you remind me of my former king," Count Impaler said.

"Wait, there was a gorgeous girl hiding in that golden armor?!"

"Your character, I mean. Not your appearance," Count Impaler clarified. *Especially that cold cruelty of yours,* he added silently.

Akane groaned for a while as if she were staring down a math exam she hadn't studied for. Eventually, she stopped thinking. "Okay! I think I can surprise Hakuto with you, somehow. You're gonna be my on-site manager!"

"Management is my forte. I thank you for this assignment, Mistress."

"But you can't go killing people without my *explicit* orders. If you do, I'll make sure you can never come back." Light disappeared from Akane's eyes—they pierced the count with a glare that seemed to freeze his veins, seizing the heart that he had lost long ago.

Exquisite...! This girl is exquisite! This is what I have been waiting for all these years! Count Impaler relished the sensation. Once

ordinary pleasures had started to bore him, he'd begun seeking excitement in peculiar places. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sought to serve Akane.

"You're too bony for an idol's manager, though," Akane said. "You're gonna scare my fans unless you put on some cute costume."

"Yes, walking into town with this appearance would draw too much attention. In that case, I shall borrow the likeness of someone who left quite the impression on me."

"Impression?"

Black affliction stemmed from the Count, wrapping around his skin-and-bone anatomy. Sheen black hair—the same color as Akane's—spilled out under his top hat. Count Impaler now resembled a stunning young man. Combined with his outfit—extravagant enough to put the richest nobles to shame—and pitch-black cape that draped off of his shoulder, he'd entrance every pair of female eyes on the street...and make them swoon with his golden eyes.



"Hey! Now you look like a chillaxed bard!" Akane said.

Count Impaler laughed. "A 'chillaxed' bard... I doubt anyone else would describe the great hero of yore, Loganhill, like that." He took out a handheld mirror, taking in the reflection with nostalgic recognition. Loganhill had been the only paladin to ever invade Hellion Territory. Count Impaler had apparently encountered the legendary hero at some point in his prolonged existence.

"Great hero?! That's a job?! I can moonlight as one! Can I sign up at Dharma Temple?"

"That is no temple I have heard of. Besides, such a job seems too rigid for you, Mistress. A tornado that roams wherever it pleases...would be more like it."

"When I look like this?" Akane said. "You should get your eyes checked."

The count cackled. "I am a skeleton, after all." His lips curled into a smile. "Mistress, what is the thing you need most in life?" he asked, putting more weight onto the question than he let on.

"Huh? Excitement, of course!" Akane said without a second thought.

Count Impaler's smile grew wider, and he bowed low to his mistress. Gone were the days of monotony and tedium. In their place, an uncertain future full of excitement seemed to shimmer in front of his eyes.

While Big Mama and Varkas were concerned with the lessened forces of Heaven's Ward, bringing Akane to Icarus had resulted in a dangerous, dark force that could annihilate the human race—like a tornado inadvertently carrying something on the wind to a place it didn't belong.

——The Ape Forest, Animania.

The apes partied day in and day out. Celebratory libations, courtesy of the tribes around Animania, flowed freely. The apes drank from dawn until they passed out, then rose after dusk and kept the party going. Perhaps the debauchery was warranted after they'd taken down Belphegor's legion, especially when the devil had posed such a dreadful threat to the Anima. The ape tribe were

relishing their fifteen minutes of fame.

This was another night in their endless feast. Bonfires blazed as if to scorch the starry sky, and the apes encircled them, dancing and drinking and boasting.

"Ooh-ah! I was the first one to the fortress!"

"I ate a Flame Eater! That's what you call manly!"

"Boss fighting the monster was something else! So manly!"

The apes were simple creatures. They told the same stories with careless zeal night after night. Despite their drunken behavior, no one in Animania would laugh at them after they'd fulfilled the Grand Priestess's direct order and slain an enemy to their nation. In fact, the whole of Animania was drunk in celebration.

Surrounded by a cornucopia of fruit, meat, and booze, the leader of the apes—Monkey Magic—lay on the ground with his hands for a pillow, staring at a bonfire with a sober expression.

His advisor Xiaoshou sauntered over, bottle in hand. "Something ain't right with a party when you're quiet like this, Boss."

"I'm meditating..."

"Boss... You don't meditate lying down. Here, have some ape wine and join the party!" The advisor brought the bottle to his mouth for a swig and splashed some more onto the dish on his head. At least his method would get him drunk fast. "Ooh! Ape wine hits differently on a dried dish..." Xiaoshou screamed in ecstasy.

"That's why you're bald," Monkey Magic said.

"I'm not bald! It's a dish!" Xiaoshou countered like he always did, but quickly let go of his outrage and sat down next to his boss. A palpable silence hung around them in the midst of the blazing party. "So, why the long face, Boss?"

"I'm tired of parties," said Monkey Magic.

"Tired of them...? You were partying harder than any of us. You couldn't get enough of the other tribes hyping you up."

"But N-N-N-N-Nagee hasn't hyped me up."

"You're still dreaming about her?" Xiaoshou asked. "That snake couldn't care less about you. No matter how much you brood, it's like farting underwater."

"How dare you call the gorgeous Nagee a fart!"

"I'm calling *you* a fart, Boss..."

Nagee had treated Monkey Magic like he was an insect, but even she had to deliver her congratulations to the ape tribe. She'd walked in on Monkey Magic at the height of the night's drunken debauchery, given him an icy glare, and simply said, "Looks like the last shred of your brain has rotted away."

Indeed, she had not "hyped him up." If love was a test, she'd snatched the paper away from Monkey Magic before he could so much as write his name on it.

To distract himself from the bitter memory, the leader of the apes thought of someone else. "What is the false god getting up to nowadays...?" he muttered.

"As long as he's not coming near us, I couldn't care less. I'm always on edge when he's around."

"He saw the awesomeness of my power... He'll come find me for the next job!" Monkey Magic exclaimed.

"Next job? That smells like trouble, Boss."

"Baldibald. Our days have never been the same since that false god came around."

"My name isn't Baldibald, it's Xiaoshou!" the advisor protested as he relived his extraordinary days with the false god. He'd been nothing but trouble at first, but he was the reason the apes had caught the attention of the Grand Priestess and set out on a great charge the likes of which Hellion Territory had never seen. They'd torn up their nemesis Belphegor's territory, brought all the slave markets to the ground, and eliminated every legion under the devil's control. It had been so much more than satisfying. Like never before, the apes had felt...alive. It didn't hurt that they'd received a hero's welcome after Belphegor's death. Their humdrum lives had been turned upside down overnight, and the false god was the unmistakable catalyst. "You mean it's thanks to him that we get to enjoy time like this," Xiaoshou said.

"Every time I close my eyes... I see those flowers that bloomed in the night sky," Monkey Magic breathed.

Xiaoshou, too, remembered that night that had flown by like a burst of light—when they shouted and roared all night like a gang of

children set free. “All right... I’ll admit those were good times.”

“We did the job. We won. But now, it’s not enough,” the leader simply said.

Xiaoshou couldn’t respond. He had to admit that, deep down, he felt the same way. He wanted Monkey Magic to live out the dream one more time. “Boss... The Grand Priestess and the false god formed some sort of agreement.”

“Hmm? What’s an agreement?”

“Take a look at this, Boss.” Xiaoshou had visited the Grand Priestess and discovered the details of said agreement. He held out a piece of charred paper that read “Stay away from the fortress on the border.”

Monkey Magic stared at the paper, not comprehending it in the slightest. “What is that, Baldibald?!”

Xiaoshou cackled with oily satisfaction. “It reads like a pact of nonaggression on a surface level... But I can read between the lines.”

“Stop talking in riddles, Baldibald! Spit it out!” Monkey Magic demanded.

“Stay away from the fortress on the border... In other words, everywhere else is fair game.” Xiaoshou grinned.

“Bro...!” Monkey Magic sat up, the pieces finally falling into place in his mind.

As it was written, this made for a terrible pact of nonaggression. In fact, Tahara was convinced this was another trick the Demon Lord had planted—a ploy to send the Anima pouring into everywhere but the fortress.

The Republic—or the Kid Company, to be precise—had relinquished the border fortress and city of Rookie, perfectly aware of the situation. They saw no future left in the Republic and had decided to move their entire business to Holylight. The only ones left unaware were the Four Pillars, who owned the majority of land in the Republic.

As soon as Xiaoshou explained all this, Monkey Magic leaped up, Jingu Bang in hand, and bellowed at his tribe. “Party’s over! We’re going to charge the human kingdom and drag that false god out of

hiding!”

Xiaoshou cackled again. “That’s what I’m talking about, Boss! I’m gonna go and ask the Grand Priestess, just in case!” The advisor ran off.

The other apes responded to their leader’s call.

“The human kingdom? That’s far out!”

“Invading the humans... It’s so hot right now.”

“You better watch out... You better watch out...!”

Crass cheers rang out through the woods as the apes hurried into action.

Fire danced in Monkey Magic’s eyes—he was going into battle mode. “Just you wait, false god... I’m gonna be the star of the next storm!” The leader of the apes dreamed again of the spectacular fireworks. No matter how many times he thought of that night, the excitement, praise, and adoration felt as fresh as they had then.

The apes moved out in search of glory. If one were to ask Tahara, things were unfolding exactly as his boss had planned. Yet again, Animania was about to plunge the continent into unprecedented unrest, unbeknownst only to the man who had started it all.

——Northern Holylight.

As restoration efforts continued throughout Holylight, those in the North especially had their hands full. In addition to restoring the devastated villages, they had to deal with the fallen Xenobians, as well as transporting the gold medallions Yu had given them. Even the hardened workhorses trained by the Militant warriors of the North struggled to carry their allotted loads of practically pure gold. No matter how many carriages they prepared, it seemed, there were more medallions to carry. As grateful as they were for the aid, this remained a logistical roadblock.

“My horse can’t go on any farther...”

“Mine’s gotta rest too. Hey, someone bring over all the pails and feed we got!”

Hauling massive loads like this was a great strain on the resources of the impoverished North, considering the water and feed they needed to provide the horses. This time, though, there was no

question that it was worth it: Each gold medallion was worth more than the average salary of the working class.

"If you told me a month ago that we'd be hauling crates full of gold medallions..."

"Sometimes I think I'm dreaming or I've lost my mind."

It was a long haul from Dona's manor in the west to their headquarters in the North. At every stop they made, whispers spread about the caravan's contents. Through the grapevine, word got out that they were hauling crates of immeasurable wealth, signifying the defeat of the central nobles. People greeted the caravan with uproarious enthusiasm and curiosity, just as Tahara had calculated.

While they rested their horses, young members of the Militants spoke merrily.

"We're getting a hero's welcome everywhere we go."

"Don't let it get to your head. We merely followed Sir Harts's orders."

"Ma's gonna be so impressed when I tell her I helped bring these gold medallions."

"Sounds like it's already gone to your head."

All the soldiers in the caravan looked worn from the hard labor, but their eyes shone with endless energy. Victory could change the looks and minds of soldiers.

"We'd better carry it to our lords as quickly as possible."

"Our comrades are waiting."

As the sunset began to stain the sky red, Harts stood on the walls of Gatekeeper, looking over their territory as it erupted with cheers. He was still in shock after the meeting with the other major players in Holylight. The North in its entirety had been seized by the government...and then promised a payout of fifty thousand gold medallions a year. Imagine being slapped in the face, only to have a billion dollars stacked in front of you. Harts had no idea if he should be mad, sad, or happy about this situation.

Below the walls, carriages from Suneo packed the streets, each of them piled high with cargo. With ferocious battle cries, the caravans

poured into Holylight while wagons from the Kid Company came rushing into Gatekeeper. This was an unimaginable turn of fortune for the desolate region.

Suneo... I never thought we'd be dealing with them, Harts thought. Suneo was a nation of merchants who produced all manners of luxury brand items popular with nobles throughout the continent. Many nations imposed heavy tariffs on Suneo just so their domestic products and merchants would stand a chance, just as Japan tariffed foreign rice products to protect the livelihood of rice farmers in the country. Most countries around the world used tariffs to some degree to protect their national culture and products.

What did they say about Suneo? That they were only going to be taxed a tenth of their revenue? Harts recalled. It was easy to imagine how all domestic high-end merchants would go out of business. Suneo's products had only been unattainably expensive because of those tariffs. *On the surface, it seems like a benefit that these well-made products are going to be available for less.* Until now, merchants in Holylight had formed a tight circle to create a sort of monopoly so there was no room for any new business. Tahara, ever the pragmatist, claimed that there could be no innovation or even improvement where there was no competition. In a sense, he was restoring a healthy market where only the brands that created popular, well-made items would survive. Of course, that left some brands winners and others losers—such was the consequence of the free market.

A tall and slender man stepped up beside Harts. It was Kid, the leader of the Kid Company himself. "Did you see how many carriages were down there? Suneo is taking full advantage of this new opportunity, it seems."

"You're... I must thank you for those supplies you provided us," Harts said.

"Merely a little greeting from us," Kid said.

Quietly, Harts assessed that Kid was readying to take full advantage of the North's circumstances. Kid, the de facto leader of the Republic, showing up all the way out here was proof enough.

With a hand on his chin, he watched the caravans flow out of

Gatekeeper. “That was like a military parade. Well, they are heading to a certain kind of battlefield.”

“A social battleground, you mean?” Harts asked humorlessly. Even though the Militants were nobles by birth, they had been caught up in war long enough to know that the demeanor and dress expected of typical nobles were completely worthless on a real battlefield. According to Harts, so were luxury items, especially foreign ones being imported from Suneo.

“Every noble in Holylight will flock to those products like moths to a flame. No matter how much demand the Company creates here, we can’t afford to play too many favorites, considering the future relationships we want to uphold in Holylight,” Kid explained.

Harts wondered if business, too, was a sort of diplomacy. Supply was always finite, so merchants could refuse to sell their product no matter how good the offer was. On the other hand, they could take a temporary loss to build a relationship with a buyer. In Holylight, some nobles might have drawn their sword at this, trying to defend their honor. Harts figured that Kid was trying to convey the nature of business. “It seems you’re trying to enlighten me.”

“I wouldn’t dare. I only wish for you to understand that we, too, are fighting on battlegrounds of a different sort. Just like nobles, when we lose a battle, we go down.”

Harts thought of Dona and Noodle. Countless nobles had lost their positions after the devastating loss of Central. At the same time, every one of their personalized merchants had gone down with them. That being said, the fact that Kid himself had come all this way suggested that he had something else in mind. “In fact, *I* want to form a firm relationship with the militant nobles,” he explained.

“How bizarre. None of us are interested in the extravagant fare you deal.”

“I’m sure. Perhaps you have piles of money you have no idea what to do with.”

Harts grunted—ten thousand gold medallions sat quietly in the fortress, labeled celebratory funds for winning the war. It was the equivalent of a whopping one hundred billion yen. Worse yet, the Demon Lord had suggested they blow money on parties while

Tahara had only stipulated the Militants make a splash when they spent. Both of them urging Harts to use the funds was as good as a direct command.

"Where did you hear— Well, to tell you the truth, we do..." Harts ground out.

Kid didn't laugh. He knew his business in this new world would have to be different, just as Holylight was evolving into a vastly different country than it had been. "To be frank, we don't think we can outsell Suneo's merchants. It's time for us to take a leap and change our business model."

"I heard you deal with the richest class," Harts said.

"Indeed, we used to. This is an opportunity for our business to be reborn. Once Holylight unites, it will be as vast as the Northern Nations combined. So, how will you use your ten thousand gold medallions, Sir Harts?"

"I've been tasked...with using it for parties," Harts said.

Kid burst out laughing. "What an idea! Your new king has no problem spending his coin, does he?"

"It is no laughing matter...! It would be nothing more than a colossal waste," Harts said bitterly.

Kid grinned—the more generous the new leader of Holylight was, the better. Kid saw an opportunity and took it. "Surely, you must host some form of celebration of your victory. Besides, there's no need to spend all of that money solely on the party."

"What do you mean?"

"Even I can see that your soldiers' armaments have seen better days. Their armor has been patched up over and over... How much of it is really as effective as it should be?"

"You certainly don't beat around the bush..." Harts turned his back on Kid. He might have had no idea what to do with the gold medallions, but that didn't mean he had to stand there and let a merchant mock him.

"If you'll allow us, we can provide all new gear for your soldiers: chain mail, scale armor, lamellar armor, leather armor... Whatever you need," Kid said, finally getting to the heart of his visit.

Harts returned his gaze to Kid, having been baited hook, line, and

sinker. New equipment was the thing Harts had wanted more than anything. He had no interest in items nobles traditionally longed for, but this offer had certainly grabbed his attention. “In that case, I want all the gambesons we can get. And new saddles, horse armor, stocks of arrows... Lumber and good iron. Durable rope from the City States and oil. Not to mention...” Harts went on, rattling off his wish list.

A gambeson was a sort of protective jacket that absorbed impact, meant to be worn under a suit of armor. The poorer Militant soldiers had only worn street clothes under their armor, and Harts had dreamed of providing better protection for his army. Once this can of worms had been opened, Harts showed no sign of stopping. After fighting for so long without the funds, his wish list had had plenty of time to grow.

Satisfied with his response, Kid nodded along. “You can leave it all to the Kid Company. To be honest, we have an overstock of weapons we acquired during the peaceful seasons, and other military supplies we seized to settle loans.”

“B-But I’m not sure I could use those precious gold medallions for my personal wants...” Harts muttered, sobering from his excitement.

Alas, Kid had already squeezed his foot in the door. “My guess is that this Tahara’s goal is only to pour money into the economy of the North. There are plenty of ways to achieve that.”

“He did mention a concern for our economy...” Harts admitted.

Kid was right. As long as most of the region relied on bartering because there wasn’t enough currency to go around, there was no hope for economic prosperity. In fact, Tahara was looking to shock all economies in Holylight by injecting them with copious amounts of gold.

“In that case, you should source the food and libations for the party from around the North,” Kid said. “If that is too time-consuming for your people, we shall scrounge in your stead.”

“Your offers are very generous. I can’t help but think you have an ulterior motive beyond this deal.”

“I merely speculate that Holylight will soon decide to march northward. It seems inevitable that once the fractured Holylight is

unified, it will storm its neighbors with furious vigor," Kid said.

Harts felt something cold run down his spine. Kid spoke as if he had sat in on the leadership meeting himself. "March north..." Harts repeated. "Until a few days ago, I never would have dreamed of it." It had been impossible to turn his attention outward while Holylight's factions had remained at war.

Kid, an elite merchant, could foresee a good deal of what was going to happen next. "And when Holylight marches north, the militant nobles will be the core of that invasion. You may feel like a small fish in this vast continent, but you will soon become a whale that will require all the weapons and supplies you can get."

"You need to practice the art of subtlety, sir," Harts said, even though he found Kid's bluntness refreshing. He had long found conversations in high society tedious when they were stuffed full of pleasantries and innuendoes that left him clueless as to their point.

"Trite, surface-level pleasantries aren't your style. And my company likes making friends with the little fish of this world so we can reap the rewards when they grow into whales."

"At least you're straightforward..." Harts said. Even though his brain was geared toward military applications, he was able to understand Kid's strategy—giving up on competing with Suneo when it came to selling to the rich to focus on military deals that Suneo did not take part in. *He's quite a strategist... He's willing to give up the battle before him to flank another front.* It couldn't have been easy to leave the business against the rich when that had been the Kid Company's bread and butter for so long. Kid seemed more like a decisive battle strategist than a merchant.

"We have been ordered to expand our forces. To ten thousand," Harts said, putting some trust in Kid.

"Ten thousand...! Now that smells of battles to come!" Kid said, making mental calculations. Even the Tzardom's army, the largest in the continent, only reached twenty thousand members. The new king of Holylight wasn't wasting time reaching half of that. Kid could hardly imagine how large Holylight's army would grow in the end. Naturally, an enormous army needed an endless supply, which meant an endless source of revenue for Kid. He smiled, dreaming of

the exciting days ahead. “My company will use every resource available to us to help pave a path for the new king of the world.”

“King of the world... No, you’re right. I just hadn’t realized our nation had gotten to this state.” Harts gazed northward from where he stood atop the castle wall. The vast Northern Nations lay before him. His battleground was really expanding...to the entire world.

The Gold Parade

An endless expanse of blue stretched overhead. Under the cloudless sky, uncountable people crowded the travel road, waiting for something to pass with bated breath. All manner of street food stalls lined the street as if a festival was about to break out.

"D-Do you hear that?! That music?!"

"You're right! I hear it too!"

The crowd fell silent, holding its breath for the approaching march. Rumors were circulating around Holylight—garnering more fervor and anticipation because there was no TV or internet—that the fallen angel was on a victory tour after vanquishing the central nobles.

Finally, confirming the rumor, a massive band marched down the travel road, playing a tune that could have made flowers break out in song. There were no fewer than a hundred musicians in the band—whom Shrimp had recruited from around the country.

A towering white elephant followed the band, stunning the onlookers with every thundering step. When they saw who rode on the elephant's back, electricity pulsed through the crowd. Atop the elephant's square saddle, in a gigantic throne, the fallen angel with pitch-black wings sat cross-legged. With a scornful gaze toward the horizon, he was stunning enough to ensnare the souls of those who beheld him—the embodiment of dark allure.

The crowd broke out in murmurs as he rode by.

"Is that Lord Lucifer...?!"

"He's breathtaking...!"

"The angel...! H-He's the one who wiped out the central nobles..."

Ordinarily, the populace would have regarded the Demon Lord only with fearful reverence, considering he had taken out an invading army and Central overnight. They might have bowed to his overwhelming power, but they would have never felt closeness or adoration like this. Not for the mythical rebel—how else would he rule than by an iron fist? As if to quell the onlookers' doubt, nine

children emerged from where they had been hiding. The children waved to the crowd, beaming.

"Are those the children...?!"

"The ones Dona abducted?!"

"They're alive! Lord Lucifer saved them!"

The children kept smiling and waving to the music underscored by the crowd's whispers. Yu had already instructed them to be the most vibrant flowers to bedeck this show. This was the moment the parade truly began, as Tahara had orchestrated it. The rescued children snatched the hearts of those who watched, sending their excitement through the roof.

Thunderous applause and deafening cheers rumbled through the fallen angel—the greatest con man this world had ever known. *Dammit! What is this, a parade at a world-famous theme park?!* Nowadays, this much excitement could not be found in even the house of mouse. Tahara had planned for a while how to transport their newly acquired treasure and art, and ultimately concocted this victory parade. The Demon Lord glowered at the advisor behind him; Tahara was leading the caravan of wagons as if he had had no part in orchestrating this whole affair.

Catching his gaze, Tahara nodded conspicuously. "The Secretary gave us the green light. Let's make it rain!"

What?! What are you going to do?! the Demon Lord wanted to shout.

From the snaking caravan, the end of which the Demon Lord couldn't even see, quarter-bronze and half-bronze coins were tossed into the crowd like beads from a Mardi Gras float. The shower of sparkling currency hushed the crowd for a moment—until they realized what had been tossed at their feet. Naturally, they swarmed the cash in a frenzy.

As those in the parade, everyone from the staff of House Butterfly to the Militant soldiers, scattered coins with every step of their horses, the caravan rolled down the travel road. Later, the people of Holylight would call this unprecedented spectacle "the Gold Parade."

"Th-They're coins! These are half bronzes!"

"No way! Gimme that!"

"Easy, boys, easy..."

"Knock it off! There's piles of them everywhere!"

Then, the wagons began throwing small leather pouches to the crowd—most were stuffed with bronze coins, and some even included bronze medallions. Anyone who caught one of these bags would be overjoyed. Funny that all of this cash had been rotting in Dona's fortress. The central nobles never had the need to use small change like quarter-or half-bronze coins. Of course, that didn't mean they would have returned anything they tithed from their people.

Tahara had ordered the money to be scattered to the masses like he was clearing out dead inventory. This was part of his idea to revive Holylight's economy, and those on the receiving end definitely felt like they could breathe again.

As those in the crowd inspected the contents of the leather bags, their excitement reached a new height.

"B-Bronze coins?! This bag's full of them!"

"Look at this! Mine has bronze medallions too!"

"Reeeeeee!"

"Shut up!"

They scrambled for coins and pouches like they'd lost their minds, and cheered their heads off for the Gold Parade and the Fallen Angel Lucifer at the center of it. The image of the Demon Lord, which should have been nothing other than catastrophe, had been transformed by this grandiose performance—one hell of a PR campaign.

Having watched the crowd change their tune so quickly, Tahara sent a Communication, silently guffawing. *"Steal from the rich and give to the poor, am I right, Chief? How ironic is that?"*

I didn't sign up for this! How did we get here?! the Demon Lord wondered as he always did. In this case, a quick conversation between him and Tahara was to blame.

"What do you wanna do with this pile of stagnation?" Tahara had asked in regards to the unutilized hoard.

Hearing the word "stagnation," the Demon Lord had decided that he had no need for a trash heap and thoughtlessly replied, "If

anyone wants it, give it to them."

Tahara had inferred the cunning Secretary's intentions and orchestrated this whole spectacle. After all this time, the Demon Lord had not learned the virtue of keeping his mouth shut.

Now he wanted nothing more than to escape this ridiculous display, but there was no way to weasel out of it when he was the star of the show. *This is getting out of control... Did Tahara say this parade was going to the other travel roads?*

He had. The Gold Parade was a massive undertaking that went through every major travel route of Holylight as caravans traveled from the west through the north, center, and south, until they finally reached the village of Rabbi. By the time the parade concluded, there would be no one in Holylight who would doubt that the Fallen Angel had returned—or that the old ruling class was dead and a brand new era was dawning on Holylight.

Amid the cacophonous festivities, a red-haired boy quietly spoke to the Demon Lord. "You're amazing, Lord Lucifer. No noble has ever done anything like this." He was one of the nine surviving Numbered children, and the only boy. As such, the Demon Lord had given particular attention to him through their march.

"I simply have no need for it," the Demon Lord said. It wasn't a lie. Like a tourist being handed a stack of unfamiliar currency, he had no grasp of the value of what he was giving away.

"The lords only ever took from us..." the boy continued.

"There will be no room in this country for self-serving lords," the Demon Lord said. "Now, about your names—"

"Yes, Lord Lucifer. Please call me Ten!" the red-haired boy proudly declared with a hand on his heart.

The Demon Lord resisted the urge to groan aloud. For whatever reason, the Numbered children had begun addressing themselves with numbers: One, Two, Three, *etc.* Because Nine was their collective name, Ten had claimed the next number up.

The other Numbered must have been listening in, because they began speaking to Demon Lord all at once.

"We have overcome our past and are now reborn!"

"...Every part of my being belongs to Lord Lucifer."

"Stop hogging Lord Lucifer!"

"Yes, we have to share him!"

"Stay out of it, women!"

As the children barked at each other, the Demon Lord let out a quiet sigh. Clearly, Yu had indoctrinated them with certain aspects of the Nine—the Hakuto Kunai fan club from back in the game. Ironically, these children, who had been deemed unworthy of names and were addressed only as numbers, had reclaimed those numbers...as their names.

Children in the crowd seemed to share their excitement, scrounging for bronze coins and running around to food and toy stalls. Sweet pastries, like the ones sold here, were a rare treat for these children. The adults, too, reached for drinks, skewered meats, and honey buns, breaking out into picnics all around.

Stall owners bellowed over the bustling parade.

"We have the best prices! Come get your corn on the cob!"

"Over here we have great deals on ale!"

"How about some apples, cherries, and nuts!"

Liquor flew off the shelves. Soon enough, street performers, dancers, and fortune tellers began popping up along the parade route, turning this chaotic march into the party of the century.

The Demon Lord watched this all unfold, a bitterness growing in his chest. *Bastards! I'm the one who should be chugging booze right now!* The mascot of the parade couldn't very well down a bottle of liquor—he was well and truly out of options.

The Gold Parade dragged on for days and nights. At times, the Demon Lord used his Charge skill to fly off from the parade—a bit he'd concocted just so he could take a break from mascot duty. Although he loathed every minute of it, the Gold Parade restored smiles to faces throughout Holylight, breaking through the sense of isolation and despair that had clouded the nation. Just as Tahara had intended, the parade showed, rather than told, the populace that the central nobles had been defeated.

Of course, this wasn't Tahara's only scheme. The Gold Parade just happened to be the flashiest means of grabbing the people of Holylight by their heartstrings. In the shadows, Tahara had enacted

several welfare programs like disaster aid and bereavement aid using Holylight's civil registry, which had been maintained solely for tax purposes by the former nobles.

The Holy Maidens had also announced a disbursement of a celebratory payment for Holylight's unification, as well as plans to distribute Water Spell Stones free of charge, but Holylight's citizens had taken those decrees with a large grain of salt. It was a natural reaction, after generation after generation of nobles extorting them. With the Gold Parade, when the ruling class finally paid them something back, a spark of hope was ignited in them—maybe this time, it could be different.

Tahara had also decreed that the Holy Church would pay to repair houses and infrastructure destroyed in the war, restoring the people's faith in the church as well as the Holy Maidens. These were well-calculated moves that, naturally, the Demon Lord had no part in. He was cruising through life garnering goodwill on the backs of his advisors—the king of freeloading.

Never thought they'd cheer for a little cosplay like this. This angel worship stuff is weird... the Demon Lord thought throughout the tour. After everything he'd done, this was little more than a costume parade for him. The defeated central nobles must have been rolling in their graves like a proton in a particle collider.

No thanks to the Demon Lord, the Gold Parade weaved through the nation, dropping coins wherever it went, while celebratory sums and Spell Stones were delivered to every household. Perhaps it was inevitable that the populace began to have faith in their new leadership.

By the time the Gold Parade reached eastern Holylight, the people's excitement was at an all-time high, packing every travel road with crowds dying to lay their eyes on Lord Lucifer.

"Lord Lucifer! Thank you for saving our country!"

"Oh, merciful angel...!"

"Look at those children smile! I knew Lord Lucifer was on our side!"

"You said it! Who believes in myths, anyway?"

Surrounded by passionate cheers, Tahara sent a Communication.

"Back in the day, the streets were pin-drop silent anywhere we went. Just hatred glowing in their eyes." The advisors had been regularly sent to occupied territory to represent the Empire that had conquered nations by force, not to mention host vicious Games to strip the people of their will to fight back. Wherever they went, all they'd heard from the crowds were hateful whispers—never cheers. *"You once told Yu that we wouldn't go down the same path. Is this what you had in mind?"*

How should I know when it was all your doing?! the Demon Lord shouted on the inside. *I just drank and slept in my room!* All he'd done lately was a little bit of dress-up, so being treated like a spearhead forging a path for Holylight's tomorrow felt a tad extreme. Eager for a change of subject, the Demon Lord replied, *"The economy is more active compared to when we started."*

"We gotta start off on the right foot," Tahara Communicated. *"That's why we made it rain so hard."*

By this time, various programs had paid off by getting gold to the hands of the people, indeed stirring up a powerful economy out of nowhere. However, it had not boomed this quickly just because of the wealth redistribution. Crucially, almost no one saved the money they received—the people of Holylight were both wary and weary of their ruler. The fear that the money might soon be taken from them again by a new tax or fee—or whatever other tricks the central nobles used to pull—drove them to spend the money while they still had a chance to. Years of oppressive rule had indirectly stimulated their spending.

People toasted endlessly to the new golden era in taverns around the country. Droves of men were hired for restoration jobs, creating more work for those who would keep the crews fed during those jobs. Lumber and stone merchants all over Holylight were overjoyed at the skyrocketing demand that cleared out their wares as soon as they were restocked. Under the oversight of the central nobles, who had always found an excuse to underpay, the foremen had had to hedge their bets in every project. Thanks to the Holy Church's guarantee to pay for their labor and supplies in a lump sum, the foremen felt safe to order supplies and hire the labor they needed.

Holylight was being revitalized in other ways too. For one, new lords and ladies—who'd won the gambit of a lifetime—took charge. The Butterfly sisters and their High Society had been stationed in the south, lined with valuable mountain mines and cotton fields. Most of the other happy winners of lordship and ladyship were moved to the luxurious center. At the height of their excitement for their new lives, they hosted extravagant balls, which drove the sales of dresses, jewels, and flowers, lining the pockets of everyone in those industries. Musicians, gardeners, and jesters were all booked solid for weeks to come. As Suneo's merchants came into the mix, business was booming on all fronts. Lords and ladies who'd been appointed to rule in one of the central districts were practically lottery winners, with guaranteed revenue year after year.

While Holylight's civil war had caused significant damage and casualties in certain parts of the country, the benefits of unification were more than enough to make up for the losses.

"We're almost at the Village of Rabbi, Chief," Tahara Communicated.

"Mm-hmm."

The Demon Lord, atop his white elephant, was greeted by all the Bunnies as they wholeheartedly celebrated his return. Kyon and Momo had always theorized that the Demon Lord was Lucifer, and this was enough to confirm it.

"Look at that, Momo. Those black wings..."

"I knew it. He was the black angel, hippity."

The workers of the village saw him and let out murmurs of surprise, both at the towering pachyderm and the Fallen Angel atop it. The Demon Lord's transformation was particularly jarring to them because they had grown so familiar with him.

"Yo, that really is Lord Lucifer!"

"I don't believe it. The Angel has graced us with his presence..."

"So what? He's always been the one giving us jobs. Nothing's gonna change."

"D-Doesn't he look so much younger?!"

Amid the mixed reactions in the crowd, Hummer and the bitchlet were staring at the Demon Lord.

“A-Am I dreaming...?” Hummer muttered. “The mythical Lord Lucifer...”

“Huh? Are you shaking?” the aforementioned bitchlet taunted as usual. “Is micro daddy wetting his pants?”

“B-But the Fallen Angel is right there, as if he’s come alive from the legends themselves...”

“Aww, you’re all shriveled up. Poor little worm. Worm daddy.”

The Demon Lord heard these comments and leaped off the elephant, causing a stir in the crowd.

“Oh?” Tahara titled his head.

Hummer froze, watching the Demon Lord approach him without a word. As for the bitchlet, her bravado melted away as she fell flat on her rear end.

“Hummer, wasn’t it? Did he contact you?” the Demon Lord asked.

“Y-Yes, sir! H-He’s on his way here...!” Hummer answered.

“Hm. The time has finally come! We’d better give him a grand welcome.” The Demon Lord cackled with glee—evil incarnate.

Tahara sauntered over. “Who’s got you laughin’ like that, Chief? Must be one funny guy.”

“Akane picked him up in Hellion Territory. He has a connection with the Paladin,” the Demon Lord said.

“With that square? Small world, huh...? Speaking of, where’s Akane wandering around without giving us key intel like that?” Tahara grumbled.

“You’d have better luck training a frog to do tricks than Akane to properly communicate,” the Demon Lord remarked.

Tahara guffawed. “True that! That’s as hopeless as it gets.”

Hummer quaked in his boots as this conversation continued before him. He didn’t comprehend what they meant, but he barely dared to breathe, let alone interject. The bitchlet lay on the ground, eyes rolled back, seemingly unconscious.

“I’m going to make my next move. I’m leaving you to handle the rest here,” the Demon Lord ordered.

“Aye aye,” Tahara answered, watching the Demon Lord head to the casino. He returned his attention to Hummer, paying no mind to the passed out bitchlet beside him. “Akane picked you up, huh...?

So, ya gonna rise to the Secretary's expectations, or what?"

"I-I could never! I'm just a middle-aged guy with no skills..."

"All right. Then tuck your tail and get out while you can. Our Secretary isn't kind enough to keep useless lugs around," Tahara warned, his joking tone not reflected in his eyes. He didn't warn Hummer out of malice, though, but his own form of kindness. In the old Empire, Tahara was the go-to man for dirty work. Ally or not, he never turned down a command to eliminate a useless liability. Drawing the Demon Lord's attention could be a blessing or a curse: a blessing if they were talented like the Madam; a curse if they were useless, only shaving years off their life.

Hummer dredged up words through his clamping throat, Tahara's suggestion having triggered something. "As you might have guessed, I've always lived my life running from challenges. But after meeting some people, it finally hit me... I can't go on like this. No matter how miserable things get, I need to see it through. So I can change." Few had lived a more tumultuous life than Hummer had in recent days. He'd gone out to sea, been enslaved, and come face-to-face with the likes of Mynk, Cake, the hero, and the Demon Lord—any one of them had been impactful enough to overhaul his outlook on life.

Smoke coiling from a cigarette in his mouth, Tahara simply said, "All right. Then hold your ground." He left without another word.

Hummer finally saw that the bitchlet had fainted and rushed over. "Are you all right, miss?! Oh, I don't even know your name..." Despite the daily insults she hurled at him, he hadn't even considered that. At this rate, he'd probably never learn it.

Meanwhile, the Numbered children had lapped the village atop the elephant, mesmerized by everything they saw: a grand, golden casino; a spring of crisp, clear water; a mystical forest; the hot springs resort. Anyone in their place would have been entranced by the incredible world within this village. The village of Rabbi, which changed its form drastically every time the Demon Lord returned, was almost like a theme park. Presently, the children gazed up at the enormous temple—the casino—and sighed in awe.

Azur stood beside them with narrowed eyes. There was no telling

how he felt at that moment, except a hint of relief that they had finally made it to safety.

"Hey, Azur? Lord Lucifer lives at the top of this temple, doesn't he?" one of the Numbered asked.

"That is what I have been told." Azur had been fed all sorts of information about the village from Tahara, and had memorized it down to every last detail. Tahara had pegged him for an intelligent, capable man, and Azur was more than capable of meeting that expectation.

"I want to live in Lord Lucifer's room," another Numbered said.

"The penthouse is off-limits, even to Master Tahara and Mistress Yu," Azur relayed.

"No fair...!"

"There is only one other person allowed to access the penthouse freely." Azur said, and all Numbered eyes flicked to him—who had been granted access above Yu? "Someone Lord Lucifer holds very dear... Let us go introduce ourselves. On our best behavior."

"Okay!" the children answered.

Poor Aku would probably be more confused than anything if these children came to introduce themselves with such enthusiasm.

While the Numbered marched on to meet Aku, Cake and Leon were reuniting, for the first time in years, in the Healing Forest.

Cake was stunned for a few seconds as she watched her loyal general kneel in the grass. Then, she ran to him. "Leon!"

"It has been too long, Princess. I failed to protect you from...protect you from..." Leon couldn't lift his head. He only stared at the ground. He'd dreamed of this reunion for so long, but now the shame and regret was unbearable.

"Where have you been?! All this time, I've been...!" Tears trickled down Cake's face as she held Leon's head to her chest. These were genuine tears, unlike the ones she so frequently wielded to survive.



The days she'd spent enslaved by Kale in Hellion Territory came back to her. Her spirit had remained unbroken, even in that grim place, because she had always held on to a kernel of hope—that Leon would one day rescue her. If he had only known where she was, Leon would not have hesitated to plunge into Hellion Territory to do exactly that. He might not have vanquished Belphegor or Count Impaler on his own, but he could have easily rescued Cake.

Blaming himself for everything that had happened, Leon vowed with a shaking voice, "Princess. I will retake our homeland. After that, I will accept any punishment you may see fit..."

"Punishment? Don't be ridiculous... I finally get to see you again..." Cake tightened her grip, as if to prove to Leon that she'd never let him go.

His head still bowed, Leon shed tears of his own. "I do not deserve such compassion..." No matter how much he wanted to promise, he hadn't accomplished any of it yet.

After embracing for some time, they quickly stood up straight when they saw people approaching—Azur and the children. "Forgive me for interrupting this reunion," Azur said, genuflecting from several steps away, in a proper display of respect for royalty.

"Yu has told me about you, Azur," Cake said with a beaming smile. "Please, come closer."

Azur glanced at Leon. Seeing the general nod, he slightly closed his distance with Cake.

"You are very reserved," Cake said. "Then I shall come to you." Cake strutted over to Azur, who showed rare signs of dismay.

Leon grinned in sympathy and pride. He recognized the brilliant princess who treated everyone fairly—he was too blinded by his loyalty to see that Cake had a black void where her soul should have been.

Cake extended her hand, and Azur obediently kissed it. Cake was the picture of a fairy-tale princess, with a war hero general and impeccable butler both kneeling before her.

"Having introduced myself to Mistress Aku, I came straight to you," Azur said crisply.

"Just to say hello to a princess who lost her kingdom? You're too

kind!” Cake replied.

In this world, the order of introductions could impact even the future of a noble house. In high society, it was a clear declaration of allegiances. One wrong move could lead to political warfare or even a duel.

Now that Holylight was united, there were many powerful figures on equal footing: the Holy Maidens, the Madam, Harts... Yet, Azur had chosen Cake. Perhaps he considered that with Yu and Leon, it was very likely that the kingdom of Parma would one day rise again. That would allow Azur to divide his eggs between two baskets.

Cake had picked up on Azur’s calculation. “Those children must be the Nine,” she said.

“Thanks to Mistress Yu, we made it out of the fortress alive.”

“Leon, I’m going to show these kids around the village. I’ll give you men a chance to get to know each other.”

“Yes, Princess!”

Cake put on a perfect smile and took the children back into the village.

The two men watched them depart, then remained silent for some time, until Leon spoke. “We are both lucky to be alive.”

“Indeed...”

They both thought of how forty thousand people had been annihilated at Dona’s fortress. No matter how many times they replayed them in their heads, memories of that night seemed otherworldly. Even more bizarre was how bright and bustling this village was. Light Spellstones lit the buildings that the early sunset was beginning to color, and many carriages went up and down the streets between them. Before the golden temple, a series of fountains put on a dazzling show to a crowd of cheering villagers enjoying their ale.

“How did we survive...?” Leon breathed, somber remembrance in his voice. “Perhaps it doesn’t matter now.” He thought of all the nobles who had been destroyed without mercy.

“We can only call it a miracle,” Azur said.

They had faced off against the Demon Lord and Tahara. Surviving a fight against them was a miracle in its own right. Leon and Azur

both held people dear to their hearts, enough to protect them at all cost. Perhaps that had allowed them to live.

"Of course, Parma will protect those children if it ever comes to that," Leon promised.

Azur nodded. He had long opposed Xenobia himself, so his interests aligned with Leon's. If the Xenobia-protected Iga were to be defeated, Azur would finally be free.

While important players around Rabbi progressed their own agendas, the Demon Lord, who was supposed to be in the center of it all, was shouting in the empty pantry in the basement of the casino. He'd begun creating the Buckets requested by Tahara—a task that seemed endless. "Dammit! A thousand Buckets?! Does he want to conjure up Sadako or something?!"

Beside him, Aku watched with concern, the divine beast on her shoulder. "S-Sadako...? I'm not sure what that is, Master Demon Lord, but you've got this!"

The divine beast squeaked as if to say, "Get back to work, slacker!"

"What's he saying, Aku?" the Demon Lord asked. No matter how many Buckets he made, his quota loomed insurmountably.

"I-It's just a feeling, but something like 'get back to work,' I think...?" Aku said.

"You stupid squirrel! Do you even comprehend how many a thousand is?!"

"Master Demon Lord! He isn't a squirrel! His name is Mimi!" Aku said.

Mimi swished his tail pridefully—spitefully, even.

"No need to give that thing a real name. Call it 'rodent' or 'tree rat' or even 'ice pack,' for all I care."

"W-We can't call him that!" Aku and Mimi protested.

Despite everything, the Demon Lord made progress with the Buckets. By dawn, one thousand didn't seem unattainable anymore...even if the Demon Lord's eyes were devoid of life, thanks to the all-nighter he'd pulled performing the same simple task over and over.

Somehow, Aku seemed to be having fun just being by the Demon

Lord's side. "Everyone was so amazed by this Bucket! I still remember what it was like back then."

"When we first came here... We've come far since then," the Demon Lord said. In a way, that first Bucket had been a catalyst to change everything. The simple Novice item had revived this village.

For Aku, the Bucket represented the connection between her, Luna, and the Bunnies. "And, Master Demon Lord? Those children, the Nine, came to see me..."

"Oh, they came to introduce themselves? Well, you should play with them sometime. You deserve friends your own age," the Demon Lord said casually.

Aku, however, didn't know how to handle an entourage of children treating her like a princess. "B-But they think that I'm a princess or something... Please tell them, Master Demon Lord," Aku pleaded. The Nine must have thought that Aku was Lucifer's daughter. Not even Tahara or Yu could give them a straight answer about Aku.

"They're new. They must be nervous," the Demon Lord muttered. "997... 998..." While Holylight was abuzz from the Gold Parade, the root of all that hullabaloo was in a basement, soullessly locked in repetition like a minimum-wage line worker.

Aku took one of the Buckets off the pile. "But everyone who gets one of these Buckets will be so happy..." In this world, an item that generated infinite water was tantamount to a divine relic.

"I guess it's like sending water tanks to disaster areas," the Demon Lord said. "999... 1000...!" He crafted the last Bucket and collapsed. While Aku rushed over in concern, Mimi bounced on his chest as if he'd taken down the Demon Lord himself. "What is he so happy about...?"

"It's like he's saying... 'You finally kicked it,' or something," Aku said.

"Damn ice pack... I'm gonna grill you up one day...!"

"No! Mimi is a friend, not food!" Aku said.

The Demon Lord promptly Quick Traveled to his bed in the penthouse with the last of his strength and closed his eyes. Aku curled up next to him and fell asleep shortly afterward, a smile

broadening her face as she dreamed of those Buckets being delivered to villages all over Holylight.

Remaining SP: 12,554p

Two Jewels

——The Village of Rabbi.

In the early morning, before dawn had fully broken, children were working at the public bath, taking clothes to wash within. Until the after-work hours when laborers flooded the public bath, it was kept open for the children. There was no better place to do laundry than a place where hot water flowed infinitely at the push of a button and soap—which would cost a pretty penny elsewhere—never ran out. Under Yu and Tahara's strict demands for personal hygiene, those who didn't bathe didn't work. It wasn't a tyrannical culture by any means, or even an unreasonable one, considering the threat of disease and infection that came from lack of washing. Those who complied were happy for the daily cash payments, and even the children tasked with laundry were ecstatic at the unexpected income—a true win-win.

In addition to children, women were finding new work in this golden age. Dealings with Suneo had brought in massive amounts of tea leaves that would have otherwise been discarded. By and large, tea could be separated into three categories: green, oolong, and black. Black tea, the variation highly celebrated on this continent, had to be completely oxidized by fermenting and massaging the leaves before drying them out. It was all the rage among wealthy nobles and merchants to drink black tea with sugar. A cup of Suneo black tea, in particular, was treated like a cup of melted gold, reserved only for the chosen few.

Tahara saw a gap in the market and angled to popularize other forms of tea for the commoners—namely green tea, which he was very familiar with. New factories had been built, lined with rows and rows of furnaces, each topped with a slanted metal pot in a setup that almost looked dystopian. Each pot was attended by a female worker who'd volunteered for the shift and some extra cash.

Tahara walked up and down the factory, grumbling about the quality of tea leaves. "These are all shriveled up...and this batch is

bone-dry already." Since these tea leaves were all slated to be discarded, none of them were fresh-picked. Leave it to Tahara to complain about free material. "Let's fire 'em up!" At Tahara's command, the Spell Stones within each furnace ignited—the Fire Spell Stones Tahara had confiscated from the central nobles. If Tahara were not so busy conducting all sorts of business for the Demon Lord, he would have made a magnificent bandit. Unlike black tea, green tea needed to be steamed or roasted—Tahara had opted to roast it in the heated pots. Tea leaves were thrown in, and the women began stirring.

After half an hour or so, the entire factory floor had been engulfed in thick steam. Sweat dripping down their faces like waterfalls, many of the women began swaying on their feet. Notably, dizziness was the first sign of a heatstroke, and would soon be followed by headache, vomiting, and muscle cramps if left untreated. This was no cushy job by any means. In factories run in other countries, several overseers stalked the floor, whips at the ready. Constant whip cracks and shouts rang through those torturous factories.

Tahara, however, knew how inefficient such brutal practices were. "Hey, you," he called to one of the women. "Tag out before you pass out."

"Y-Yes, sir..."

Under Tahara's supervision, he made sure that workers were switched off stations before the heat became unbearable, allowing them to take breaks in a room stocked with ice and cold water. Once again, factory overseers anywhere else would not have cared one bit if their workers collapsed or even died from heatstroke.

Tron floated inside out of curiosity, but her eyes went wide as they met the rising steam. She hadn't expected such a blast of heat in the village's newest building. "Hot. Like a sauna."

"Sounds about right," Tahara said. "But now we can drink some good ol' fashioned tea whenever we want."

"Black tea? Sweet...delicious," Tron said.

"Nah, this one's for grown-ups with grown-up palates," Tahara teased.

"I am a proper lady. You are blind, Tahara. So is Demon Lord."

Even as they bantered, work in the factory continued, workers hauling the roasted leaves to the adjoining facility. There, the leaves were hand-squeezed and carefully packed into crates—all by women. Men were needed for heavy lifting, but Tahara had decided that this kind of delicate work would be best handled by women.

Once the work was done for the day, the women cheered as they received their day's pay—a whopping seven bronze medallions each. When compared to the five bronze medallions the male construction apprentices were paid daily, it showed how much importance Tahara placed in their work. In fact, there was no other day-labor job around that paid that much. It didn't take long for women from the neighboring villages to flock to the factory, hoping to work this lucrative job.

While the women were hard at work in the steaming factory of Rabbi's new business, the Demon Lord snored away in the penthouse where the AC was kept on full blast. He had slept for three whole days, probably breaking some kind of record. Considering how the tea makers were constantly battling heatstroke, his mere existence in the same village was an insult. Aku had finally gotten too worried and notified Kondo. Now they and Tron were taking shifts to watch the Demon Lord sleep.

"Demon Lord sleeps too long. I'll wake him up," Tron reached out her hand to do just that.

"Noooo! Abort! Abort!" Kondo swiftly grabbed her wrist before she touched the Demon Lord, moving too fast for someone who was terrified of leaving his room. "Waking the slumbering Secretary...?! Keep me out of your suicide mission!"

"Calm down, Kondo," Tron said.

"Y-You don't understand... Imagine the Secretary all sleepy and grumpy from being woken up," Kondo said.

"I imagined it."

"What if he demands a glass of virgin blood instead of morning wine?!" Kondo demanded.

"Give him a splash of my blood," Tron said.

"What?! The Secretary has trained a young, innocent girl like

you? He really is the king of depravity—”

“Are you having fun, Kondo?” The Demon Lord sat up, still in his Fallen Angel form, giving Kondo a glare that made him shake in his boots.

“G-G-Good morning, sir! Wh-What a beautiful d-d-d-day we’re having! As beautiful as those dark, ominous wings that make you look like the MC of a hentai game in which you corrupt goddesses and warrior princesses!” Kondo rambled.

“It’s too early for your nonsense. I’m thirsty. Is there something to—”

Kondo shrieked again. “T-Tron! Give him your blood! The blood of a virgin! The Secretary can sniff out any drop of blood from damaged goods like a hound dog!”

“Calm down, Kondo,” the Demon Lord tried again, only for his advisor to yelp in terror.

As raucous as the penthouse had become, it was nothing compared to the big changes shaking up Holylight. Using Propaganda, Tahara and Yu had injected all sorts of rumors throughout the country, backing them up by sending out decrees from the Holy Castle and showcasing caravans piled high with their spoils of victory.

The rumor mill of Holylight was abuzz with several whispers: The central nobles had been smited; the Fallen Angel had returned; Holylight would be once again ruled by the Holy Maidens; a ritual to summon a great angel would soon be held; travel roads would be carved out throughout Holylight, connecting major regions; the golden temple would be opened to the public. And these rumors reached regions that the parades had not gone through—every major city down to every little settlement was fraught with excitement over these rumors, and particularly so regarding rumors about the village of Rabbi—home of the Fallen Angel.

“So many rumors. Buzzing. While you slept,” Tron said.

“I see...” the Demon Lord said noncommittally.

“Thirsty for my blood?”

“Why would I want to drink blood first thing in the morning...? Hand me a beer. What I was drinking before,” the Demon Lord said.

When Tron brought over a can from the fridge, he cracked it open. The Fallen Angel was a bona fide deadbeat. "You two are always a funny tag team." Amusement sparkled in the Demon Lord. Tron and Kondo each had a special pair of eyes, and something about their similarity reminded him of the old arena.

His comment triggered something in Kondo—suddenly, a screen materialized before the advisor, depicting a young girl narrowing her eyes. *"Konkon-kun... You said I was your one and only,"* she said.

"Y-You are! Come on, Mister Secretary! Do you have any idea how difficult she gets when she thinks I'm cheating?! You've gone too far, sir, even for you!"

"A-All right...?" the Demon Lord said, taken aback by Kondo's intensity.

But then, more screens popped up all around Kondo, each of them showing a different angry girl.

"After everything we've been through... You disappoint me, Kondo."

"Are you cheating on me? Wanna get blasted?"

"Phoenix, indeed... I smell blood."

"Shigrey, YuuVee, Kyo Kyo! It's a misunderstanding! I love all of you equally!" Kondo pleaded with the floating screens.

"What are you doing...?" The Demon Lord chugged the rest of his beer.

Tron, meanwhile, was unaffected. Zero was the one who'd stolen her heart, and that motorcycling antihero was the polar opposite of the professional bedrotter Kondo.

"Well, catch me up on what's happened."

"Y-Yesh, shir!"

He's lisping again... the Demon Lord noted as Kondo stammered out updates, Tron chiming in about the latest rumors in the village. Many of those updates were a natural extension of the last meeting the Demon Lord had, but some of them came as a total surprise.

"Summoning a Grand Angel...?" the Demon Lord repeated.

"Tahara's been spreading that rumor like crazy... He's talking about Manami, isn't he, Mister Secretary?" Kondo said excitedly.

They're acting like Manami's a literal angel...? This has gone too

far! the Demon Lord thought.

"He's like, totally trolling... As if anyone but Shigrey could be the Grand Angel. Tahara's out of his mind."

You're no better...! The Demon Lord was stumped; he couldn't tell if this rumor was sincere or one of Tahara's tactics to manipulate the angel-worshipping population of Holylight.

Kondo kept muttering, his brows pinched in confusion. "He's in love with his sister IRL, which is super cringe. It's called fantasy for a reason, amirite? If he's actually down bad for his IRL sister, dude needs to dedicate himself to the blade or something. If you ask me, the sister is an archetype that..." Kondo went on, a million words a minute, speaking exclusively of sister characters from harem and hentai games, so not a single word he uttered was useful. Tron was already blinking her eyes sleepily, her head on the Demon Lord's lap.

"Let's table that..." the Demon Lord finally said. "We're going to set up the Shoreline Beach area today. Kondo, you must be getting rusty. Go for a little swim when you get the chance."

"Wha—?! Did you hear that, everyone?! It's a fan service episode!" Kondo cheered as screens appeared around him again, an attractively drawn girl in each of them reacting in different ways. Kondo spoke with them as if they were the only real people he'd interacted with.

I feel like he's becoming worse... Feeling a headache starting to form, the Demon Lord rose from the bed and quickly got dressed. He headed for the elevator, Kondo hurriedly following.

On the elevator, Tron asked sleepily, "Demon Lord, what is Shoreline Beach? I hope it's delicious."

"It's an area modeled after Waikiki," the Demon Lord answered. "You can swim, but more importantly, it's rife with treasures of the sea. I've long been craving Empire seafood."

"I like delicious," Tron said.

"You won't be disappointed. Fresh tuna, sea urchin, salmon roe, oysters, saury, sardines, mackerel, calamari, flounder, rockfish, shrimp, crab...! It doesn't get better than that!" The Demon Lord was beaming, as if he could taste each and every one of them as he listed them off.

When he reached the ground floor, he found Aku gazing up at the stars projected on the atrium ceiling. The stars were ever-shifting, highlighting various constellations. The Demon Lord could have charged admission just for this atrium—the one and only planetarium in this world.

"Good morning, Master Demon Lord! You're finally awake!" Aku said.

"Mm-hmm. We're going to set up the Shoreline Beach now. Let's go."

"O-Okay! Shoreline...what?" Clueless to what the Demon Lord meant, Aku still happily clutched his sleeve. She trusted him so absolutely that she knew whatever change he was going to make to the village would be a positive one.

When the group stepped out of the golden temple, they were met with deafening cheers from a crowd that had formed.

"Th-There's the Fallen Angel!"

"Wow! The rumors were true!"

"That's why he calls himself the Demon Lord..."

"He's beautiful..."

"And look at those three cute girls!"

"Wait a minute, Konkon-kun is a boy. Haven't you heard?"

"N-No way... Isn't that a snow fennec?!"

"He really rescued a divine beast!"

Their excitement crescendoed as the rumored, legendary Fallen Angel Lucifer approached them. His wings spread elegantly behind him, pulsing with dark energy. It left a striking impression on the crowd, entrancing them. The Demon Lord was secretly sweating bullets in the face of the crowd's fervor, but managed to maintain an almost menacing glimmer in his eyes. Was it any wonder that the poor populace had fallen for him, with his long, mysteriously dark hair and beguiling eyes, and his avant-garde costume and wings as dark as night? He was mystique personified.

"They adore you, Master Demon Lord!" Aku said excitedly.

"S-Sure..."

The crowd hushed as a woman appeared—an elegant lady wearing an emerald ball gown and matching *capeline* hat.

Unmistakable class showed in her every step, as she walked through the self-parting crowd. She was distinguished—in birth, in status, in every way that mattered. The Madam, ruler of the entirety of southern Holylight, spoke. “Mister Demon Lord. Allow me to celebrate your victory and safe return.”

“Well... No reward of victory could be better than compliments from a stunning lady,” the Demon Lord said.

The Madam laughed, covering her mouth with her fan. “My, my... You flatter me, as always.” Her face was as flawless as polished diamond, and her waist was as snatched as a supermodel’s.

The Demon Lord felt nearly blinded by the Madam’s grace and beauty. *What are they doing in that sauna, genetic splicing?!*

“Good morning, Madam!” Aku said.

“Madam. Morning,” said Tron.

“G-Good morning...” Kondo finally joined.

The Demon Lord mulled this over. He knew the effects of the Hot Springs Resort better than anyone, but the Madam’s transformation went far beyond his expectations. Of course, the Madam’s determination and dedication to her self-improvement was what had brought about her new image, allowing her mortal self to defeat the curse of an Ancient Devil. In different times, bards would have written songs about her feat.

So, the Demon Lord afforded his sincerest praise to her endless drive and dignity. “Your transformation always surprises me in the most unexpected ways.”

“Don’t tease me when you’ve decided to show yourself like that.” The Madam laughed, convinced that she had finally gotten to see the Demon Lord’s true form.

A collective sigh seemed to leave the crowd. The Madam’s metamorphosis with the aid of the Fallen Angel seemed too romantic to be real—like a fairy tale.

What is this sentimental feeling in the air...? I need to set up that area and bail! As if to shake off the expectant eyes of the villagers, the Demon Lord gestured to the Madam. “I shall prepare a jewel worthy of your dedication.”

“A jewel...?” she repeated.

The Demon Lord led her behind the casino, the crowd following. From there, they could only see the steep mountain range that blocked off the sea from Holylight. The sight of those towering slopes that seemed an impenetrable wall to all humans reminded the villagers that Holylight was practically a prison enclosed by mountains.

Unburdened by the dampened mood of the crowd, the Demon Lord casually began the Area Modification process. "Perhaps we'll call this Rabbit Beach, or something... **Area Modification: Shoreline Beach**." With a grin, he flourished with his right hand.

In an instant, the mountains burst into black dust, an expansive shoreline right out of Waikiki *overwriting* their existence. Palm trees, white lounge chairs, and beach umbrellas lined the sparkling sands. What's more, the expanse of the crystal blue sea stretched over the horizon, taking away the breath of all who beheld it.

"This place was always full of people fishing..." Kondo reminisced, excited to visit the stunning area for the first time in this world.

"Mm-hmm. Let us look forward to the delicacies that will line our table," the Demon Lord said. As he and Kondo had mentioned, this had once been an area where passionate anglers congregated to show off their fishing skills and catches. As with everything else in the game, Akira had programmed a variety of fishing rods and all manner of bait and lures. When fishing became quite a popular aspect of the game, he added spearfishing, net fishing, diving... One dedicated Player had even decoded the complex programming to calculate the tides and currents of the fictional beach. Seafood from this beach could either be used for healing or sold off, so Players who worked as Supporters for their party had also frequented it, making it quite a unique location among the usually dog-eat-dog world of the Games.

While the villagers could only stare at the beach with their mouths agape, the Demon Lord relished his cigarette as he puffed a cloud of smoke. "This place never gets old. Perhaps this is what 'masterpiece' means." Something about a beach stretching outside a casino created a luxurious, tropical feel. Another burst of shock rolled through the crowd as they gazed out to sea—where flying fish

and a pod of dolphins broke the surface. They could only describe what they witnessed as a miracle.

Gradually, the initial shock faded from the villagers as they came alive with excitement—the beach had been programmed to excite its visitors and make them happier, to mirror Akira's experience with the place. While the Demon Lord regularly performed Area Modifications, the crowd was naturally overcome with emotion.

"Wow! Look at that, is that the ocean?!"

"The mountains...disappeared."

"Look at that water! The waves!"

"See the line where the sky meets the sea? It calls me!"

"Woo-hoo!"

Finally, some of the villagers broke off and began running toward the water, which was a natural reaction, considering that most people in Holylight had never seen the ocean before, not to mention the added effect of the Area.

The Demon Lord laughed heartily. "This Area will be our pathway to other kingdoms... **Area Modification: Marina**."

The mountains that towered next to the beach disappeared into black particles, a massive set of docks taking their place—a marina that could accommodate anything from gigantic yachts to small fishing boats. Back in the game, plenty of anglers had rented boats and taken to the open seas to try their luck.

"M-Master Demon Lord... This is incredible! So incredible!" Aku practically jumped for joy while the divine beast restlessly scurried between Aku's shoulder and head.

Even Tron seemed shocked as she stared at the Demon Lord's profile. She had borne witness to powerful high-rank and grand devils throughout her life, and she had even been forced to survive in a treacherous region filled with dangerous monsters...yet, she had never seen anything capable of turning mountains into sea.

"Demon Lord does Demon Lord things," she said.

"What is that supposed to mean...?" the Demon Lord muttered as he prepared to set up another seaside Area. Again, what was a mere chore to the Demon Lord would generate another burst of shock and awe in the crowd. "This tower will be the jewel that lights the sea...

Area Modification: Lighthouse.” Dramatically, the Demon Lord snapped his fingers.

Suddenly, a strip of earth rose from the sea to form a peninsula, a giant lighthouse materializing at its end. If that wasn’t awe-inspiring enough, the lighthouse began emitting beams of various colors at regular intervals—this drew sighs from the crowd. The lighthouse had been programmed to calm those who saw it. After all, it was meant to be a ray of hope in the ruthless sea, built with the desire that all who sailed would return home safe. Yet another one of Akira’s useless designs had proven useful again.

“It’s such a gentle ray of light...!” A single tear dropped from the Madam’s eye. To her, the lighthouse seemed to glow with compassion for humanity. And the Demon Lord had dedicated this jewel to her.

Some sobs broke out in the crowd as they remembered the hardships they’d been through, and knew that those days were in the past.

That’s an extreme reaction... It’s like I’m running a cult or something. The Demon Lord felt a cold chill run down his back. Although he’d anticipated it, the dramatic effect of his creation was too severe. Sensing an annoying situation, the Demon Lord quickly made his next move. “Kondo, the Area locations in the north?”

“Y-Yes, sir! I have them all on this tablet!”

The Demon Lord took the tablet displaying the plans for Tahara’s fortification of northern Holylight—his ticket out of this mess. “Kondo. Tron. Keep an eye on this place. Madam...until we meet again.” He scooped up Aku in his arm and vanished via Quick Travel, leaving a plume of black feathers behind.

The Madam and the rest of the villagers could only stare at the aftermath of his dazzling escape.

——Northern Holylight.

“Phew, that was close...”

“M-Master Demon Lord, where are we?!”

“Huh? We’re in northern Holylight. Tahara wanted things done around here.”

If nothing had changed since the meeting, Tahara wanted ten Mid-size Bases established here. Mid-size Bases were made by applying Reinforcement Materials to a Base, then Combining a Fireproof Wall to it—this mitigated damage from all elements by 20%.

The exterior of a Mid-size Base was postapocalyptic. It also had room to hold several turrets that could defend the Base with overwhelming firepower. In addition to machine gun and shotgun turrets, the Base was also defended by land mines on the interior.

To request ten of these bases, Tahara must have foreseen something big coming to northern Holylight. *Now, let's get this party started...* Humming to himself, the Demon Lord called up the Admin Screen...and froze. *Where'd all that SP go?!* He'd spent 5,000 on all the Buckets, 5,000 more on Marina, and 800 on Shoreline Beach and Lighthouse. Realizing that 10,800 SP had vanished over such a short time, the Demon Lord began to tremble. His remaining SP was a measly 6,754...

He felt like a high roller in Vegas who'd squandered his life savings overnight. Still, if the Demon Lord didn't follow Tahara's plan, he was worried that he would take a huge bite out of his ass—he certainly had no foresight whatsoever. *I just have to do it...!* he finally decided.

"Master Demon Lord, are you going to build more things here?!" Aku asked.

"Y-Yes..." he stammered, not daring to meet Aku's expectant gaze. He only had a handful of chips left to lay on the table. *Hang on, my Skill Points... Just a while longer!* The Demon Lord's grueling battle began. *10 Bases, 30 Reinforcement Materials, 10 Fireproof Walls... I'm melting! Melting!* That alone burned through 700 SP. The Demon Lord was writhing on the barren ground of the harsh north, feeling like his stock profile was plummeting. In contrast to his blasé attitude toward the physical currency of this world, the Demon Lord was very miserly about his SP in the most pathetic way.

"Master Demon Lord, are you all right?! You look like you're in pain... Mimi! Don't jump on him!" Aku said. Mimi had been gleefully stomping on the Demon Lord.

To make matters worse for the Demon Lord, Tahara had also requested that Training Grounds be set up next to the Bases. *Does he have any idea how much SP Training Grounds cost?! He's gonna give me gray hairs!* the Demon Lord protested silently. Yet, as he had no alternative plan, he ultimately had no choice but to do as Tahara requested. Training Grounds were created by powering up a Base to Secret Base, then using an item called Questing Mantra through a Unique Evolution. Fighting in the Training Grounds granted extra EXP and Skill Levels. Players who couldn't get enough fighting often set them up during a Game.

"Dammit!" the Demon Lord bellowed. "**Mid-size Base**! **Training Grounds**!"

Aku took a step back from the brutal fortress that materialized. "Wh-What is that...? It looks scary..."

"It's a defensive Base. Hole up in here and you'll survive anything," the Demon Lord explained. He paused its defensive mechanisms and stepped inside.

Aku followed, carefully eyeing the countless turrets that followed them. "Are those for...attacking people?"

"They're turrets to defend the Base. They can turn an intruder into Swiss cheese... Even though I feel like Swiss cheese right now..." Teetering, the Demon Lord inspected the Mid-size Base—it was a fine fortress, down to every detail and modern amenity. As long as there was enough food stocked up, this fortress could allow for a very long siege.

"That's amazing! There's a shower here too!" Aku said.

"Mm-hmm. It has all the basics: beds, hammocks, fridge, stove..."

The Demon Lord went on to inspect the Training Grounds, and he found it satisfactory. The Training Grounds included a Barracks, as well as armed dummies, archery ranges, and even a simple medical facility. It had everything soldiers needed to train for war.

The Demon Lord then used Quick Travel to set up these facilities all over the North, but since the Training Grounds cost 900 SP...he looked as energetic as a ghost when it was all said and done. "My SP... I worked so hard for it..." the Demon Lord muttered, collapsing into a hammock within the first Mid-size Base he had set up.

Mimi jumped onto the Demon Lord, and Aku mischievously followed, straddling him. “Wake up, Master Demon Lord! You can’t sleep on a net!”

“It’s a hammock... Whatever. I have something for you, Aku. That ice pack gave it to me.” The Demon Lord produced a Snow Crystal—a rare jewel often called nevermelt ice. It was questionable if anyone else on the continent wore a jewel like this.

“Th-This is for me...?” Aku asked.

“The squirrel made it.”

“Mimi... You made this?” Aku asked. Mimi squeaked proudly. Aku had been ready to turn down the expensive-looking jewel, but knowing that Mimi crafted it seemed to reassure her. “Thank you, Master Demon Lord! And thank you, Mimi!”

Mimi glowed as if in response to Aku’s smile. A crystalline chain wrapped around the Snow Crystal, making it into a necklace.

“Good idea. You could adjust the length and wear it around your head too,” the Demon Lord pointed out. He placed the crystal around her neck and let it glow at her neckline. A girl wearing a Snow Crystal could pass as a bona fide princess. Little did Aku know, as she innocently celebrated, that this would invite plenty of misunderstandings in the future. In that way, the Demon Lord and Aku were very similar. “Did you see the white elephant?” the Demon Lord asked, remembering.

“Yes! Tahara let me ride on its back once!”

“That’s a gift for you too,” the Demon Lord said. “You can ride it anywhere.”

“What?!”

This was more a burden than a gift, to be sure. While Aku reeled at the responsibility the elephant entailed, the Demon Lord closed his eyes as if his job was done, ready to snooze away and not work for as long as he could. Every time this man so much as tossed and turned, turmoil tore through Holylight. With the Paladin approaching the country, he had another scheme hatching.

What Is a Miracle Worth?

——Eastern Holylight.

Refugees from the slums had passed Yahooo and were traveling south toward the village of Rabbi. Now that they were in Holylight, they caught wind of the various rumors circulating in the country.

Weeb and his Trinary were discussing the Fallen Angel once again.

"Light has returned to their faces," he said, watching the refugees.

"Indeed. Something has changed," Kaiya, leader of the Trinary, agreed.

The Fallen Angel Lucifer had reappeared after tens of thousands of years... That should have instilled fear and hopelessness in humanity as a whole. Yet the people of Holylight seemed anything but afraid. They were smiling—a bounce in their steps, even.

"The market seemed very active as well," said Weeb.

"From what we've heard, there have been continuous, large-scale buyouts," Kaiya added.

With increased labor came exponential demand for supplies like food, clothes, building materials, even the likes of drinks and tobacco. Every shop around was frantically filling constant orders from Rabbi. With restoration and infrastructure projects beginning throughout the country, labor and supplies flowed in a constant current. Some shopkeepers had gone as far as traveling to more remote parts of the country, seeking the means to supplement their stock in order to fill these orders. On top of these developments, Water Spell Stones and celebratory sums were being distributed to each household—the people of Holylight had no reason to be dispirited at all.

"Hope is loosening their purses..." Weeb muttered, and the Trinary only listened—they were war generals, not economic advisors. "Water Spell Stones, which had been a burden on their coffers, are now given freely. The central nobles and their oppressive

taxes are gone. Every product flies off the shelf, and there is plenty of work to go around...” Weeb had to admit that it was pretty obvious why life had returned to the faces of these people, especially when Holylight was due to be reunified under the three Holy Maidens. The people were basking in the dawn of a new era, welcoming it with open arms.

“They seem a bit too trusting to me... There’s no telling what scheme he is hatching behind these policies,” Kaiya said.

“To them, the central nobles were the true demons,” Weeb countered.

“Sir Weeb, what do you make of the Demon Lord—I mean, Fallen Angel?” Kaiya asked.

Weeb pondered the question. The Fallen Angel depicted in all the myths and legends seemed at odds with the Demon Lord. While the Demon Lord did resemble the mythical Fallen Angel in some ways, he was the complete opposite in others.

“As far as the people of Holylight are concerned, at least, the Fallen Angel is still an angel.” Weeb could have laughed at the absurdity of it all—the notorious, mythical rebel was being revered like a hero of the ages. Weeb almost felt like he’d tumbled into a different world than his own, especially when he’d heard the heroic tales of the Demon Lord rescuing tortured children and a divine beast at tavern after tavern. Some people of Holylight were already fanatics, praising the Fallen Angel who’d obliterated their oppressors, the ones who’d treated Holylight like a playground and even brought in external forces to wreak havoc on the working class. The Demon Lord was fast approaching the point of deification.

Kaiya scoffed. “Some tales were downright outrageous—that he wiped out an entire mountain range and performed acts of pure creation.”

“Creation...” Weeb couldn’t laugh it off. *What if it’s true?* he kept wondering. If the Demon Lord could create matter from nothing, he would surpass the powers of the Fallen Angel in the myths. Weeb’s gaze drifted once again to the girl holding the reins—her divine aura contrasted by the devastating lance she carried. Even if he were to unleash every weapon in his arsenal, Weeb doubted he could win a

battle against her. *Legends claim the Fallen Angel summoned numerous kin...* Weeb had closely observed Ren throughout their journey and seen that she had a noble mind, treating the refugees with utmost compassion—so much so that he found Ren more valiant than any ruler on the continent. With her serving as chancellor, he could believe that Holylight might transform into a perfect kingdom.

Suddenly, Ren pulled on the reins, her composure cracking for once. Weeb and the refugees watched carefully, wondering what could have affected the ever-stoic Ren in this way. "Master is welcoming us in the flesh." She was beaming, much to Weeb's astonishment—he'd seldom seen so much as a smirk on her face until now. Ren dismounted, and the knights around her naturally followed suit. Black feathers rained down before her as the Fallen Angel appeared, making a simple Quick Travel look like a divine manifestation—as if he'd descended from the heavens themselves.

"You look regal in any form, Master," Ren greeted.

"It's a long story..." the Demon Lord said, wishing for a hole in the ground to hide himself and his cringey costume in.

Ren, who'd been Communicating with Tahara, didn't think the attire was peculiar at all. She even found it to be a brilliant twist on the Fallen Angel myth. The Demon Lord with his shadowy wings standing with Ren in her black schoolgirl uniform made for a perfect tableau of a dark reunion. All who witnessed it knew that Ren truly belonged to the Fallen Angel.

"Minister of Eurithеis. Thank you for coming all this way," the Demon Lord said.

"Th-Thank you, sir...!"

"Last time we met, we were in your Colosseum..." the Demon Lord said.

Reading violent intent in his eyes, the minister nearly pissed himself. The realization hit him—the new hero of the Colosseum, King, who'd defeated the tyrant Jack, had been the Fallen Angel all along. He'd heard of some calling King the Demon Lord... He hadn't dared to imagine that they'd meant *the* Demon Lord.

"Ren, why don't you show the minister to the hot springs?" the

Fallen Angel said. “I’ll prepare the new quarters.”

“Of course, Master.” Ren turned to the minister. “This way, please.”

“V-Very well...”

Ren made her way into the village, the lightheaded minister and ghastly knights in tow. Kondo meekly waved from the village entrance. She never interacted with Kondo, so there was no animosity between them. Of course, there was no friendship either.

After watching Ren enter the village, the Demon Lord shot his gaze at Weeb. “Good to see you, Hero. I have been long awaiting your arrival...”

“Apparently, you even have control over your appearance,” Weeb said. He had encountered the Demon Lord in various situations in the past. Upon their first encounter, the Demon Lord had been invisible—utterly without form. Then he had been middle-aged—the miraculous embodiment of violence and wisdom. Now, he had taken the form of the fearsome Fallen Angel, wings and all.

Even the Trinary looked pale, and the refugees were slack-jawed. They had only expected to find King, the hero who had vanquished Jack, at the end of their journey...not a mythical calamity.

“I-Is that King...?”

“You idiot! That’s the Fallen Angel!”

“W-Wait a minute! King is an angel?!”

“Isn’t he so much younger than he was?”

“But his eyes and hair are still black. Ren even called him Master...”

“What is it? What are you saying, boy?”

“My brain hurts...”

Amid the chaotic whispers of the refugees, Eyze and the newbie watched with shock. Eyze still beheld the massive aura of death on the Demon Lord, but he had never expected him to be the Fallen Angel Lucifer...this information, however, explained a lot. “His aura finally makes sense... He’s the Fallen Angel,” Eyze said.

“Th-The dangerous one who ruled the night... Just look how scary he is!” the newbie chimed in.

The death aura Eyze saw on the Demon Lord was hellish—an

amalgamation of tens of thousands of grudges left behind by the fallen. No mortal could have maintained their sanity amid such a torrent of death wails.

While chaos born of whispers and mistaken identities continued to ratchet up, the Demon Lord alone remained elated. Finally, he had an opportunity to lure the hero onto his home field. He was already hyped to the max. He glanced over to the refugees, eager to set up their lodgings, since he could hardly have the conversations he needed to have with two thousand of them roaming the streets.

With a dramatic flourish, the Demon Lord whipped out a Holy Coin from his pocket, holding it out to the hero as if to show it off. Yu, eager not to be outdone by Ren, had collected twenty-one Holy Coins from Central. It was easy to imagine what kind of *questioning* she had employed in order to scrounge up so many of them from the war-torn territory.

Oblivious to the atrocities that took place behind the scenes, the Demon Lord struck a pose like a Shakespearean actor. "I am the ruler of all! My world comes to life! **Area Modification: Longhouses**." He lobbed the Holy Coin into the air and swiped his other hand as if to cleave the air in two. Suddenly, the falling coin, high in the air, exploded with blinding light.

An expansive patch of barren dirt was overwritten in an instant by rows and rows of longhouses. The refugees stared at the settlement, awestruck. Soon, small voices came from them in pitter-patters until their emotions exploded in a deluge of shouts and cheers.

"A town just...sprouted up! Right there!"

"It's a miracle... It's the angel's miracle!"

"Th-That wasteland turned into a village... I don't believe it."

"Well, believe it!"

In their amazement, the refugees fell to their knees, lowering their heads before the Demon Lord.

Even Weeb and his Trinary watched speechlessly, until he began to quake, his glasses sliding off. "Impossible...!" Weeb had once witnessed the Demon Lord unleashing an enormous blast of magic that had obliterated an Invasion, silencing the entire Bastille Dungeon with it. That, too, had been nothing like any magic spell

Weeb had ever seen, and neither had this...*miracle*. Weeb had no other way of describing it.

Seeing Weeb's reaction, the Demon Lord suppressed a smirk. *That was cringey as hell, but it got the job done... Good.* He had mentally rehearsed the effect with the Holy Coin, all the way down to his corny line. His acting chops as a professional con man had really come in clutch. And setting up the Longhouses was merely a prelude for the Demon Lord, who was itching to set up the Abandoned Mines. If he was being honest, he could hardly be proud of the Longhouses—a cluster of old-fashioned apartments, townhouses, and shacks.

"Now, Hero," he began dramatically. "Behold the Abandoned—"

"I-I need to see the interior!" Weeb blurted, bolting for the Longhouses. His Trinary quickly followed.

"What?" the Demon Lord said. *Wait a minute! If he takes a look inside, he'll see the shoddy construction!* He wanted to grab Weeb by the scruff and keep the hero from going in, but it was too late.

Weeb had already approached one of the dusty, two-story apartments that were common in Japan half a century ago. Knickknacks and rusty propane tanks sat by the apartment door, accentuating the *Showa* aesthetic of yesteryear. The hero's eyes were darting all around, eyeing every detail with curiosity. "What is that red thing...?"

"That's like... A mailbox," the Demon Lord said.

A traditional red mailbox stood in a patch of weeds, rusted all over. There was even a sort of *wabi-sabi* to it all, suggesting decades of unuse. Akira Ono had created this particular area as a kind of museum, a memorial that combined the charm of a bygone era and the beauty of the Japanese countryside. Someone in modern-day Japan might have felt nostalgic, but there was no guessing what the hero took away from it.

Dammit, I screwed up the order! This isn't what I wanted to show you! The Demon Lord gritted his teeth. Watching Weeb inspect his creation so closely, he couldn't help but feel embarrassed by how run-down the place was... As if Weeb was going to turn to him and ask "You call this a miracle?"

In reality, Weeb reacted in a completely different way. “Even commoners sent letters in ancient times...?!” In this world, letters were reserved mainly for nobles and merchants. Postage was too expensive for letters to be sent frivolously. Besides, most of the working class was illiterate to begin with, with no prospect of receiving education.

“H-Hero. The mines would be much more—”

“I need to go inside,” Weeb said again.

“Hey, wait—”

Weeb opened the old wooden door to a simple tatami-floored room lit by a dim fluorescent light. A typical tea table sat in the middle of the room; an old wardrobe and thin futon bedding sat by the wall. The attached kitchen, while small, still held some appliances like a refrigerator.

“What is that circular, turquoise object?” Weeb asked, pointing.

“That’s, uh, a fan,” the Demon Lord said, looking at the bare-bones standing fan with nothing but three buttons—High, Medium, and Low—and not so much as a timer or oscillating function. Weeb’s eyes were demanding an explanation, so the Demon Lord pushed one of the fan’s buttons like he was disgusted by the outdated technology.

“W-Wind...! Does it use a Spell Stone?! No, I sense no magic in it... How?!” Weeb demanded.

“It’s powered by electricity— Well, this one isn’t, exactly, but...” the Demon Lord stammered.

“An ancient magical item...” Weeb breathed. “That must be a delight in this scorching country. Oh? What is that white box over there?”

“L-Let’s get of here and move on to the—”

Weeb seemed not to hear the Demon Lord as he rushed over to the one-door refrigerator—an old model where the only freezer was the top shelf, and it didn’t even have an ice maker. The Demon Lord could have burst into flames from the embarrassment he felt standing in the middle of a quintessential ’70s apartment.

“This cold air must be generated by an Ice Spell Stone—”

“There’s no magic!” the Demon Lord shouted, breaking character.

Weeb's genuine curiosity felt like backhanded comments to him, especially when these appliances were far from impressive by modern standards.

"What is that thing the pot is resting on...?!" Weeb breathed in amazement.

"It's just a stovetop." Resigned, the Demon Lord callously twisted the knob, lighting a circle of blue flame on the burner.

Weeb and the Trinary gasped, awestruck. The Demon Lord wondered if they were mocking the meager kitchen.

"It must use a Fire Spell Stone— No, e-lek-tree-city, did you call it?" Weeb asked.

"That's propane— Enough of this! We're going! Get out!" The Demon Lord shoved Weeb and his Trinary—who still longingly eyed the appliances—out of the apartment. He wouldn't have survived them gushing over an old vacuum or rotary phone. Since these houses didn't even have running water, the Demon Lord considered them unfit for polite company, if he was being honest.

"Don't tell me every housing unit has all of those...?!" Weeb asked.

"What if they do? Hate to break it to you," the Demon Lord said gruffly, lighting his cigarette and practically spitting out a trail of smoke. Whatever Weeb made of his reaction, the hero didn't say. "Forget this Area! We're moving on!" The Demon Lord strode away, followed by Weeb and his trinary.

Weeb watched the man before him with intensity. Fallen Angel wings, darker than the abyss, draped down his back. Those were supposed to be the sign of pure evil—an object of fear. *Are there any truths to the legends?* Weeb wondered, his core shaken by what he'd witnessed today, cracks running through the foundation of his belief system that had been built by religious study.

The same could be said for the Trinary, who kept uncharacteristically quiet, like they were trying desperately to contain something threatening to spill over from within them. Behind the holy men, the refugees obediently followed.

Keeping one eye on the refugees, Weeb replayed the Demon Lord's words over and over: *"I am the ruler of all! My world comes*

to life!" With each refrain, something cold dripped down his back. Those were the words of a god, and the Demon Lord had said them with true conviction. As if to prove his divinity, the Fallen Angel had performed a miracle using a Holy Coin, rumored to contain the power of the Wise Angel. *How could an evil being use the potential power in a Holy Coin?* Weeb considered.

Despite the doubt he now had about the legends regarding Lucifer, Weeb was staring down the one true takeaway—something so obvious no one seemed to consider it. He had been once described as a mythical rebel who had fought against the Great Light. In other words, he possessed enough power to square off against the Great Light. The phrasing that always followed that particular legend was that the Fallen Angel "ruled the night." *It must mean they fought over the continent, literally splitting it in two,* Weeb concluded. If the battle hadn't been close, the world would not have been divided between day and night. *Why does no legend tell how the battle ended?* Weeb had never asked himself before. The only thing he'd ever been told about the Fallen Angel, since his childhood, was that he had revolted against the Great Light and had been banished from Heaven. Yet, no document ever mentioned the end of the grand battle.

Without question, Weeb had accepted the vague description all the clergy had fed him all his life—that the Great Light had illuminated the continent. *It's even possible the Great Light lost that battle,* Weeb thought. *Considering the stranglehold of censorship in the Tzardom, they would have tried to erase any detail in history that didn't fit their narrative.* No one alive had ever seen the Great Light, but here the Fallen Angel was, walking a few feet before him. *No, it's still too early to decide that the Great Light is gone. Perhaps it only needs time to recover from a grave injury.* Weeb's mind spiraled, boring deeper and deeper into this conundrum—there was no way to verify the validity of myths that had been passed down for so long.

The Demon Lord certainly couldn't give Weeb a firsthand account—he was just a con man playing the role of the Fallen Angel. To complicate matters, he wielded powers that gave his claim validity—

no one doubted his status now. Even if the real Fallen Angel were to appear right now, they would be cast away as an imitation of the Demon Lord.

Akira Ono, when he set his mind to something, always saw it through. What's more, he was extremely self-centered and driven by a unique set of values. He felt no need to conform to others' expectations either. He alone was the center of his universe, and he never doubted his values even as he judged the actions of others by them. If he felt it was necessary, he could delete an entire world of his creation with the push of a button and trample through a world of someone else's design. On the surface, it was really difficult for anyone to discern just how troubling the Demon Lord was at his core.

"That was just a relic of an old era, Hero. I will show you another miracle..." the Demon Lord said.

Weeb grimaced behind his glasses. How many millenia had it been since the Fallen Angel last roamed this world? That was a past so distant that it was nearly forgotten by humanity. *As excavated Ancient Fragments show, there was highly advanced technology and magic in the olden times. Funnily enough, the select few members of academia and archaeology were right—and they'd been considered lunatics.* Weeb glanced back at the white box he carried on his back. It was an Ancient Fragment called the Holy Garb Box. The day he'd been chosen by the box, he was destined to live out the rest of his life as the Paladin.

The Demon Lord smirked. "Let's begin." Clearly, he was more confident in this performance than his last. In rapid succession, the Demon Lord flicked Holy Coin after Holy Coin into the air.

Weeb, with his excellent vision, counted five coins in all.

"Spark the primal flame, forevermore! **Area Modification: Abandoned Mines**." The Demon Lord spread his arms wide, gesturing as if he fancied himself a grand orator. As always, his Fallen Angel wings fluttered at the perfect time, adding a cascade of dark feathers to the effect.

While all watched on, entranced by the grandiose performance, the Holy Coins shone in a chain reaction that lit up the entire patch

of land. Soon, the pure-white brilliance transformed the empty land into the Abandoned Mines—a cavern so expansive that the bottom could not be seen from the surface, with a network of minecart tracks lacing it. Various switches and buttons lined the walls of the cavern, illuminated by lanterns hanging at equal intervals.

"What are you— What is this place?!" Weeb bellowed like he wanted to reject reality.

"Mines that produce black stones, as you call them. I'll give you the tour personally," the Demon Lord said.

"Black stones?! Those have been long spent up..."

"Oh, I should pause all damaging events. Don't want anyone twisting an ankle in a mole hole, getting trapped in a collapsed cave, poisoned by gas... Oh, and definitely no explosions," the Demon Lord muttered as he moved his hand restlessly along the admin screen that no one else could see. Weeb couldn't make heads or tails of the Demon Lord's behavior. "Done. Let's go in." The Demon Lord marched into the cavern, paying no mind to Weeb's confusion.

The mines were dim, but there were enough lanterns on the walls to provide visibility. It also had all the equipment it needed for mining to begin: pickaxes, rope baskets, and wheelbarrows.

Taking in each facility as he passed it, the Demon Lord muttered, "It's been a long time since I came here. This place used to be packed..."

Weeb quietly watched. He sensed mixed emotions behind the Demon Lord's comment.

The Demon Lord reached for a pickaxe and struck the wall with it. "Look, Hero. This one's a plain rock—a dud."

"Dud...?"

The Demon Lord held a rock that, beyond throwing it as a primitive projectile, had no discernible application. Continuing to wield the pickaxe, the Demon Lord tossed Weeb stone after stone, rattling off their names as if he were a jaded professor. "Blacksea, Granite, Bluestone, Whiterock, Asama Volcanic Rock, Matsuba Gravel, Ise Gravel, Shirakawa Sand, Pinkstone, Canyon Rock in red, pink, white..."

"H-How can so many different rocks be hewn from the same

mine...?" Weeb asked.

"So they'll fill up players' inventories. Just a way to make them waste resources." The Demon Lord guffawed.

"Player...? What are you going on about?" Weeb asked.

"These stones were never worth much, but even gravel can be used for irrigation or a little curb appeal. We'd need gravel of all sizes for the railroads," the Demon Lord continued, lost in a juvenile bragging spree over his own world. "I haven't excavated in a while. We're not stopping now!" Several more swings of the pickaxe produced more rocks...and something incredible, which the Demon Lord carelessly tossed to Weeb. "Another dud, but at least this one can be used as fuel."

"This...is incomprehensible!" Weeb shouted. "How do you get Charcoal from a mine?!"

"This place is for obtaining fuel," the Demon Lord said plainly.

Weeb felt a sense of dread at the object in his hand. Even though it looked like Charcoal, he was careful enough to pass it to the Trinary for inspection.

"This is...Charcoal, indeed."

"How does a piece of wood come out of a rock wall..."

"Impossible! Utterly impossible! 'Tis but an illusion!"

The Demon Lord ignored the commotion as he kept swinging the pickaxe until he found another Charcoal to throw at them—this time, a rarer white Charcoal. Proudly, he explained the difference. "Black charcoal is quick to catch fire and quick to burn out. White charcoal is a little hard to start, but burns longer and has no odor. Both of them are useful, depending on the situation."

Fire had different uses: cooking, staying warm, blacksmithing... Akira Ono had designed a huge variety of fuel for no reason. Some players had loved his attention to detail, while other players had found it tedious.

"Hmm. This one's the worst hit, but it could be useful in this world." The Demon Lord chucked a piece of bamboo charcoal at Weeb. In the arena, there was literally no use for it—it burned too fast to use for fuel, and it couldn't even be thrown like the array of rocks that could be hewn from the mines. "If you bake it into bread,

it could help with stomachaches and diarrhea." It could also prevent hangovers and soak up extra sugar and fat when ingested, so the bamboo charcoal had a lot of uses.

Weeb and his Trinary caught one item after another, staring at them blankly, until a black stone finally came flying at them.

"That's the black stone you've been waiting for," the Demon Lord said. "Of course, that's still not the best thing you can get here."

"Is it really...?!" Weeb breathed, staring at the treasure in his hand—one that had been exhausted in ancient times. Goose bumps coated his arms as Weeb felt the hair on his neck stand up. "You can really mine black stones from this mine...?!"

"It's just a fuel from a bygone era," the Demon Lord said. He thought of "fuel" as natural gas or electricity—as far as nuclear or solar. Coal wasn't even close to his first option for energy, beyond a vague thought of battleships and steam engine trains using them.

"Finally!" he announced. "This is the real hit—Smokeless Coal." In the game, this had been the most powerful and longest-burning fuel, not to mention that its minimal smoke meant the user didn't risk detection while burning it. Unlike normal coal, Smokeless Coal shone with a metallic sheen.

Weeb shuddered, realizing that this mine produced ancient treasures left and right. "You can recreate the ancient times...? The ancient world?" he asked.

The Demon Lord shook his head. "Not exactly." To him, everything about these mines, from its tools to fuel it produced, was much more tangible than some abstract concept of a bygone era. "This is the very world I have created and ruled..."

"Wh-What does that mean...?" Weeb asked, seeing in the Demon Lord's eyes that the Fallen Angel meant every word he said.

The Demon Lord did mean it, of course. Satisfied with how the mine functioned, he started mumbling to himself again. "For starters, the refugees will start digging for fuel here. We can sell anything they dredge up to Gorgon. Charcoal will be spread throughout the country. Fire Spell Stones, or whatever they're called... Those should sell for a pretty penny to foreign countries."

Weeb and the Trinary just stood there, minds reeling. They

couldn’t discern if this new development would prove beneficial or detrimental to the common people. Still, Weeb had to make one thing clear. “Wait! Do you mean to work those people without compensation...? Or in exchange for housing them in that ancient town?”

“Watch your mouth...” the Demon Lord spat. “What do you think I’m running here, a black company?!”

Weeb had no way of comprehending the term describing a predatory employer in Japanese work culture, but he could see that the Fallen Angel was pitch-black from his dress to his wings.

“We’ll work out the details when it comes to housing, pay, work hours, and days off,” the Demon Lord said. “No one will come work for me if rumors go around that I’m running a black company.”

“May I sit in on that meeting...?” Weeb asked.

“Wonderful idea. They’ll be relieved if you’re there to bear witness.”

Weeb had requested to attend the negotiations as a means to check the Demon Lord and his potentially inhumane demands, but the Demon Lord could not have asked for more. The Paladin was more popular than just about anyone on the continent. His seal of approval would be a huge boost to the Demon Lord’s PR. Ironically, the more Weeb tried to fight it, the more he slipped into the Fallen Angel’s grasp.

“Let’s call it a day. Kondo can show you around the village. Lots of things to see. You won’t be bored.” The Demon Lord vanished with Quick Travel, leaving behind nothing but deafening silence...and ancient treasures strewn about the ground.

An Angel Approaching

——Hot Springs Resort, the Village of Rabbi.

The minister of Euritheis and his guards were losing their minds in this magical place where there was more hot water than any of them knew what to do with. A male Bunnie had given them a tour of the facility and how to use all its amenities, but the guards, regardless of age, were shouting in excitement like a group of boys who'd been served all the candy they could eat.

"Yo, this 'shower' thing gushes all the hot water you want!"

"Look at this 'soap'! It's turning every part of me fresh as a baby's bottom!"

"Something about this bath... It's melting away the years of strain on my muscles..."

"This yellow bath gives me chills... It's multiplying—electrifying!"

"Shower, was it? Incredible. Watch the sweat and dirt roll off my skin."

"Slap this 'conditioner' in your hair! It turns every tangled strand to silk!"

"Cannonbaaaaall!"

While his guards acted as off-the-wall as schoolkids on a field trip, the minister soaked in the stargazing bath he had been shown to—an experience so relaxing that it brought tears to his eyes. The effect programmed into the hot springs—to relieve the user of all stress—overcame him. Looking back on it now, the minister realized he had never had a moment to rest since Jack had made Euritheis his playground.

"I never knew such bliss was possible..." The minister breathed. He had just marched across several borders to reach here, after all. Crossing the continent always meant putting one's life on the line, whether one was military or merchant, since the threat of a highway robbery always loomed. For the defenseless refugees, the danger and stress of the journey was compounded. But all that was left in the dirt outside of Rabbi as the guards continued exploring the baths

with unbridled joy.

Then, like adding fuel to the fire, a line of Bunnies came filing in with trays of small bites and alcohol—not only wine from the continent, but also all sorts of booze that came from the casino.

"Daaaaamn! What's this 'IPA' stuff?!"

"This 'Champagne of Beers' is something else... It hits the spot!"

"Try this Calpicow! It'll send you over the moon!"

The minister and his guards sat their bare selves down on the tables stationed around the outdoor bath and raved over the drinks they'd been served. In some cultures, even those of high status had no qualms showing their nakedness to the working class—apparently Euritheis was one of them. Unwound from the long and strenuous journey, the guards devoured an assortment of snacks like they were a pack of wild beasts: grilled lamb, white bread, honey-dipped apples, fried almonds, salted cheese, even carrots—a delicacy in this world...

In oral ecstasy, the minister bellowed, "How divine! I never imagined I could shove so many carrots in my mouth!"

The chef responsible for the feast was none other than the apprentice to Sammie, who ran Kanpai's second location. Sammie certainly had an eye for talent.

Food and wine vanished from the serving trays and tables, lifting the weight of a hard journey from the minister's entourage. Once he'd eaten his fill, the minister sank into the bath, looking as if he'd finally returned home after years away at war. "Who knew such paradise awaited us at the end of the journey..." In the back of his blissful mind, the minister considered the abilities of the Fallen Angel. When the mythical being first appeared to him, he had accepted death—half expecting Lucifer to swallow him whole. A luxury treatment like this was certainly the last thing he had envisioned. "Every bone in my body... All the aches and pains... It's melting... I'm melting..."

No human could have created this place, the minister thought over and over again. Creating several facilities like this that dispensed—and wasted—infinite water was no mortal feat. When the minister had entered the Gem Chamber, where sparkling stars

sprawled across the ceiling, he had been so awestruck that he thought he could leave this life without regret. One look at those stars and he knew—the Ruler of Night was real.

"I never want to leave..." The minister sighed, and his guards seemed to agree. No one seemed interested in giving up a life of coming to the hot springs day after day. The bustling streets had lifted their spirits, and the golden temple that stood in the distance was dumbfoundingly beautiful.

This place is going to change my life. Every guard there seemed convinced of that thought, even though they were all elite knights handpicked by the royal family.

The captain of the guards, soaking next to the minister, asked, "Why did Sir King—I mean, the Fallen Angel rescue those refugees from the slums?"

"To dig up black stone, according to Mistress Ren," the minister answered.

"Black stone? There isn't even a handful of it left unmined..."

"There must be," the minister said with conviction. "Look at this place." The minister was thinking several steps ahead of the captain. "I don't wanna go home," he whined. He might have been somewhat sheepish, but the minister was no fool—he understood how difficult rebuilding Euritheis would be now that Jack was gone. He also knew that there was a real chance Euritheis wouldn't survive the rebuilding. "In any case, I must ask to have an outfit that matches Mistress Ren's."

"Minister, if you could ask for another on my behalf..."

"I want one too!"

Guard after guard raised his hand, entranced by Ren's schoolgirl uniform.

Buzzed and steamed, the minister's entourage left the Hot Springs Resort and ran into its mistress—the Madam. All male eyes were glued to her mature allure and perfect physique. It took every drop of the guards' willpower not to stare into her intoxicating eyes or to reach out and stroke her shimmering, supple skin.

"Gentlemen," she greeted them. "How did you like your taste of his world...?"

“Booby much— I mean, very much!” the minister stammered.

With the gentlest finger, the Madam brushed up his chin. “Wonderful. Come back soon...” She sauntered off, the men ogling her as she went.

They had never seen such unworldly beauty, and had no idea how she’d attained nor how she maintained it. “So beautiful...” they breathed together.

While the men from Euritheis resolved to make Rabbi their new home, Ren had gone to the Longhouses to assign its quarters. Some refugees were single and others had come with their whole family, so each needed to be placed in appropriate lodging. Single men were placed in townhouses, single women were clustered together in taller apartment buildings, and families were given one-story houses.

Ren had gathered volunteers from each family or building to explain how to use the stovetop, refrigerator, and fan. “Please double-check that the stove is off when it’s not in use,” she said. “And water comes from the well right here.” An iron pump had been affixed to this well, allowing for water to be pumped with the simple motion of moving the lever up and down. Unlike with the rope-and-bucket wells, even a child could easily dredge up water from this.

“M-Mistress Ren... How much will water from the well cost? And how much to use that...stovetop?” one of the refugees asked.

On their journey, the refugees had been told that water was free and unlimited in the village of Rabbi, but none of them had put much stock in that. After all, the refugees had always been tricked and scammed and financially oppressed. They had just escaped a quagmire of predatory loans, making the long trek to Holylight with the humble hope of living their lives, knowing at least where their next meal was coming from.

“I have asked Master about this. First of all, you may live in your assigned quarters here free of rent. He also gave you permission to use any electronic appliances preinstalled in your housing,” Ren announced.

“Free... To live in those wonderful houses and use those incredible magical items?!”

"However, anyone who takes any water, salt, or electronic device out of this village will be forever banished from Rabbi."

Her voice sobered the refugees like a douse of liquid nitrogen. By now, they had learned that the girl had an exceptionally kind and generous heart. They also knew that Ren had another face she only showed to those who stepped out of line—the face of a wrathful goddess. A gang, the worst of the worst in the slums, had completely been reformed under her influence...so much so that none of their parents would recognize them. If these gang members had been steel rods so bent out of shape that no amount of hammering could have made them straight again, Ren had thrown them into the furnace, melted them down, and poured them into a new mold altogether, as if she had given them all entirely new personalities.

Ren's treatment of them might have been far from humane, but each advisor dealt with their subjects in their own way: Yu wore a mask of benevolence to deceive and enthrall her subjects without mercy; Tahara was a trusty leader to allies but absolutely ruthless against his enemies; Akane, despite her personality beaming like the sun, annihilated anyone who crossed her or Hakuto by any means necessary; Kondo simply wasn't interested in the real world; Ren showed compassion to those who did good deeds and severely punished those who acted with malicious intent.

None of them were perfect, but Ren had to be the most sane when it came to doling out justice. If any advisor were to discover a violation of their Secretary's rule, their reaction would be unhinged: Yu would turn the violator into a lab rat, Tahara would shoot them on sight, Kondo would make them disappear to dodge the headache and paperwork, Akane would snap their neck so quickly that the violator wouldn't even know they had died.

With full knowledge of her fellow advisors' characters, Ren added mechanically, "If anyone else finds you smuggling those items out, you most likely will not survive the encounter."

Fear snaked through the refugees as it registered with them that Ren wasn't making a threat, but only a statement. If they were caught violating her command, no excuse would change their

gruesome fate.

"Now, I will show you to the public bath. For three bronze coins..." Ren continued, her voice flowing like a serene creek.

Meanwhile, Kondo had made his acquaintance with the paladin and his Trinary. For once, Kondo seemed interested in interacting with someone outside of a screen. Something about Weeb must have given Kondo a sense of familiarity—as if they were kindred spirits.

"Look, Weeb. That's the popular Hot Springs Resort!"

"Hot springs..." Weeb cast his gaze over the bizarre construction that represented a completely foreign culture and architectural philosophy, as if the building had been frozen in time for eons.

"There are all sorts of baths in there, but you have to be naked. With strangers. Couldn't be me. I barely want to leave my room as is," Kondo muttered.

At the word "naked," the ears of the Trinary perked up.

"H-How interesting..."

"These facilities were widely accepted in the times of old?"

"Sir Weeb, why don't we cleanse ourselves of all this dirt from our travels? Right now."

Hot springs did exist in the continent, but those were naturally occurring pools in nature. Unlike the Demon Lord's baths, they didn't have any magical health benefits either. Some nobles had taken to building baths in their homes that required piles and piles of Fire Spell Stones, but taking a hot bath was not a concept commoners were familiar with. If they were lucky, they had the luxury of washing themselves with cold water every now and again.

"Wh-What is this...? A forest?! How could that be...?" Weeb muttered, ignoring his Trinary altogether, staring at the Healing Forest—which hadn't been there on his last visit. Then he spotted the Field Hospital and golden temple beyond, darting toward it. Immediately, the Trinary followed.

Kondo laughed. "This is just like a convention!" He, too, gleefully followed.

Weeb came up to the forest and audibly gulped. Divine energy crackled from the branches and leaves themselves. Under the

canopy of them, the injured and elderly lay on the grass or against tree trunks, all looking perfectly at peace. “This is no ordinary forest,” he breathed. “I feel something extremely powerful—like pure Holy element.”

The Trinary nodded their agreement. The Holy element, an upgrade of Light, repelled evil and fostered healing.

Kondo replied, as if discussing tomorrow’s weather, “This place heals injuries over time. These nongamers are so stupid. You wouldn’t get hurt if you never left your room, amirite?”

Weeb didn’t comment on Kondo’s assumption that Weeb would also be holed up in his room if he had the choice. He was preoccupied with the absurdity of a forest that emitted Holy magic and healed those who rested within it. At last, a broken laugh escaped Weeb’s lips. Not too long ago, this place had been nothing more than a wasteland. Now, an ancient city had materialized, complete with unbelievable wonders, including a mine full of lost treasure. If Weeb could have believed that it was all some illusion, if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, the world might have still made sense to him. “I don’t understand the legends anymore...” he muttered.

In the forest lay a clearly working-class old man next to a noble lying on a red rug. Within the sacred bounds of the forest, even the pettiest of nobles seemed content not to flaunt their titles.

Sure enough, Akira Ono had programmed a sort of aromatherapy into the Healing Forest. No noble in the Madam’s social circle was crass enough to boast about their worldly title or possessions in a space where all stress melted away into the sunlit green.

“I can hardly believe my eyes...” As if the series of miracles had parched him, Weeb reached for a plastic bottle in his pack—the same one that the Demon Lord had tossed at him long ago. Weeb had kept the bottle with the picture of a girl plastered on its wrapper, using it as a refillable waterskin.

“Wait— Is that Scallion Girl?! I knew you had good taste!” Kondo exclaimed.

“What? I-I just thought it was a masterful portrait—”

“You have to come to my room! There’s this rhythm game called

Project Negi."

"Rhythm...game?" Weeb repeated, but his curiosity was overwritten by alarm when a strange screen materialized before Kondo, showing a cutesy girl that somehow seemed to have a sinister gleam in her eyes.

"I thought I was the only one who could help you, Kon Kon," the girl said. *"Why do you always look at other girls? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? I'm going to make that whore swim with—"*

"I-It's not like that!" Kondo protested. "I'm only reaching out to a comrade in arms, who stands at the precipice of—"

"Then who's this Grand Angel you were talking about?!"

"O-Okay, but you'll be my Mommy-cakes," Kondo declared, somehow proud rather than mortified.

"Grand Angel...?" Weeb repeated, the phrase having snagged his attention. Anyone on this continent would have recognized it for what it was—a being of solemn divinity.

Unbeknownst to the Demon Lord, another treacherous situation was being set up right under his nose.

——Holy Castle, Holylight.

Out of all the advisors who put in the work in all departments, Tahara had been particularly impactful: He'd orchestrated the extraction of art and treasure from central Holylight, begun the massive expansion of the travel road infrastructure, and allocated payments to each household... Among these, the travel roads were on the top of his priority list; he knew both people and cargo would furiously crisscross the map as the golden age dawned.

"We gotta get highways running first—nothing's gonna get off the ground without them," Tahara said. The travel roads that webbed the continent were unpaved, most of them overgrown and derelict. When it came to the Northern Nations, they liked their roads to be left treacherous for the sake of keeping out enemies. Naturally, that didn't do much to increase internal traffic of people or goods.

"Let's slice through the middle, all the way across. That oughta be a good start." Tahara ran a red pen across the map of Holylight, from west to east. Then, he drew a line from Gatekeeper in the

north, through the Holy Castle, and down south. A red cross shone on the map of Holylight.

The two Holy Maidens and Gran blinked as Tahara drew the cross, expecting some sort of ritual to begin. Gran bristled at Tahara's intention to do...*something* to Holylight. From her perspective, Tahara had come in like a whirlwind, slaughtering the central nobles in the blink of an eye. Tahara might have looked like a man, Gran thought, but he had to be a demon under the skin.

Queen was in the room with her sisters, but she only gazed up at the ceiling with boredom, feet kicked up on the table.

White was the only one who truly studied the map. "What does that signet mean, Tahara?"

"They're highways. Can't move goods on dirt roads."

"Dirt roads..." White repeated.

"Not just goods either. You can move people fast on highways too."

The ability to transport people and cargo at high speeds was an invaluable asset to Holylight's economy—or even its military, if it came to that. Stagnant commerce was as damaging to a country as poor circulation was to the human body. Tahara grabbed a black pen and drew a circle around Holylight before drawing another cross—markings for a future railroad.

White watched black lines grow and multiply with glee. "Will that be another display of Lord Lucifer's power?"

"Somethin' like that. The Secretary's gonna use black stones to power ancient locomotives," Tahara explained. Steam engine trains were, indeed, ancient to Tahara. Antique, even.

"Locomo... Really?! Blackstones?!" White squealed.

"White!" Gran bellowed. "What do you mean to do about our alliance with the Tzardom?!"

Allowing the Fallen Angel, of all beings, to rule Holylight was akin to throwing a gauntlet in the face of the Tzardom, to say the least—a declaration of war.

"Lord Lucifer is wonderfully kind," White said dreamily. "In Dona's castle, the first thing he did was save those children. He is not at all as he has been described in Tzardom legends."

"Silence, you child! I am talking of war!" Gran had thought this over, again and again since the Civil War had ended. She had no issues with the elimination of the central nobles—she'd celebrated it. Thanked the Demon Lord, even. But when it came to putting the Demon Lord at the helm of the country, she shuddered to imagine how every other nation on the continent would react. It gave them too good of an excuse to invade Holylight in the name of vanquishing the Demon Lord. The Tzardom would certainly lead the charge of such an invasion with their deep coffers and military might.

Tahara said lazily, "Take it easy, granny. Keep shouting like that, and you're gonna give yourself a heart attack." He was completely unaffected by the rage that deepened on Gran's face, nor by any threat the Tzardom posed. "Tzardom this, big light that... Whatever it is, it's gonna end in a quick bang."

"Wh-What are you, anyway?! A kin of the Fallen Angel's?!" Gran shrieked.

"Kin? I am one of his advisors," Tahara answered. "Listen up. First of all, the Grand Angel is..." he began bragging about his sister, the apple of his eye.

To the others in the room, his bragging was a mystical tale. Even Queen stole glances now and again, betraying her curiosity. Angels were long gone from this world; the summoning of a Grand Angel was sure to be a momentous occasion that would be sung about for ages to come. If a certain Demon Lord had overheard this conversation, he might have keeled over.

"You mentioned this in the meeting the other day... Will Lord Lucifer really summon the Angel?" White asked.

"Every word the Secretary utters becomes reality... Now I'm just quoting the Madam." Tahara grinned, as if all this weren't outlandish.

"But when it comes to summoning the Angel—"

"*Grand* Angel, White," Tahara deadpanned. "That's twice now you've messed up her title." His eyes were steely.

"I-I'm sorry," White said quickly.

Queen closed her eyes without comment, seemingly withholding judgment on the Grand Angel until she'd seen the deity in person.

Even Gran couldn't object to the summoning of the Angel—a divine ritual. Denounce that, and she'd be going against Holylight's foundation of angel worship.

While tension rose in the Holy Castle as the summoning approached, the Holy City beyond the castle gates was being rocked by the series of declarations being published.

At Kanpai, crowds were in heated discussion while the sun was still high, swinging their ale in hand.

"Look at these Water Spell Stones. All free. We won't have to worry about water for a while."

"That notice was legit?!"

"Did you hear? There was some kind of battle in the west. All the nobles there are gone."

"I saw Lord Lucifer with my own two eyes. Just like the myth, his wings were wide and..."

Rumors and tall tales jumped from table to table, growing uncontrollably. It was all a natural chain reaction, considering the power structure of the country had been uprooted overnight.

"My husband didn't make it through the war, but the Holy Maidens sent me such generous condolence money..."

"What a time to live in. With those nobles gone, the kind and generous Holy Maidens are going to lead us."

"I got this thing called a *celebratory sum*... With a whole bunch of Water Spell Stones."

"The bastard Dona had jacked up the prices so bad, I was rationing every drop and that still wasn't enough."

Technically, Holylight was in chaos, but with a healthy dose of shock and joy. This was mostly thanks to stacks of Water Spell Stones—essential for survival—being distributed to the masses for free. People were focusing on tangible, financial improvements to their livelihoods, rather than the chaos of the big-picture power structure.

"They're going to be building these crazy roads."

"I've seen ads all over. Did anyone actually go to the job?"

"Five bronze medallions is great pay...if it's real."

"Free salt too."

"You think I was born yesterday? That's too good to be true."

"No, everyone who's been to Rabbi said you can drink all the water you want there."

"Women can work by processing tea leaves."

By setting up one public project after another, Tahara was spreading jobs and cash throughout Holylight. Just as some tyrants on Earth had done, this was a quick and easy way to gain popularity and stimulate the economy...all with the money the central nobles had hoarded. Perhaps this was the correct way to use the moment.

The Demon Lord's black wings spread all over Holylight, their effects even reaching the far east.

——The Great Canyon, on the border between Holylight and Animania.

A group of about fifty Anima were hiking across a steep mountain under the protection of two female Animadmirals. These were the Bunnies who felt like they had no choice but to leave the village of Rabbi and migrate to Animania. Rumors were circulating that a portion of the Bunnie population had returned to their homeland following the freeing of slaves in Hellion Territory, and now many more were setting out to see for themselves. Animania hadn't treated them unkindly, but it certainly wasn't home.

Dangerous animals and monsters roamed the Great Canyon that divided Holylight and Animania, making it far too dangerous to cross on foot. Yet not one of those ferocious beasts had shown themselves, or even so much as made a sound within earshot of the hiking party...for fear of the Black Jaglion that led the hike.

Ordinary Jaglions were the offspring of a male jaguar and female lion, but this specimen had eaten its way up the food chain, elevating itself to a monster in the process. Behind them, as if they were walking their pet chihuahuas, an Animania head-to-toe in tiger stripes and another wearing lamb fur walked leisurely. They had left Animania with the excuse of bringing the Bunnies home, but these ladies had another goal in mind.

"Do you think we'll see the Dragonborn? I hope we will," muttered the tiger.

The sheep-hybrid Anima bleated, “There is no Dragonborn. Lolz.”

They had been ordered to investigate the false dragonborn who’d repeatedly appeared in Holylight. One rumor and they might have laughed it off, but now that they’d heard tales of the Dragonborn twice and thrice, there was no ignoring it.

“I’m fine with going and all, but why do we have to follow the snake’s orders?” the tiger grumbled.

The sheep hybrid bleated again. “Nagee’s too sensitive and never gives up. The best thing we can do is get it over with.” She chewed on something.

“You’re chewing on more grass? How can you stomach that green stuff? It looks so gross and horrible for your digestion.”

“Says the tiger who only eats meat all the time. That’s why you’re such a meathead,” the sheep countered.

While the Anima were making the treacherous crossing, the village of Rabbi welcomed two of its prominent members: Luna, the lady of the land, and her servant Eagle.

The Holy Maiden and Her Servant

Luna's elaborately decorated carriage thundered down the travel road, headed straight for the village of Rabbi. Inside it, Luna and Eagle sat across from each other, the latter looking out the window with narrowed eyes.

"Now that's what I call a parade... Worthy of my homecoming," Luna said.

"Apparently he's put on other parades that were even more extravagant," Eagle said.

"Without telling me... I'm going to make him pay when I get back."

Originally, Luna had been making for Rabbi at a leisurely pace...until spectacular parades had broken out along the travel road behind her carriage. She'd jumped on the opportunity to make herself look like the star of the parade—naturally, everyone could only go along with the whim of this Holy Maiden.

While Luna grumbled about missing out on the bigger celebration, Eagle noticed something outside the window. "Luna, don't freak out... There's some sort of town that wasn't there before."

"What are you talking about? We're coming into Rabbi—there's nothing else out here."

The dust cloud from the carriage prevented Luna from seeing what Eagle saw with her hawk-hybrid vision.

Eagle squinted again, trying to make sense of the Longhouses the Demon Lord had set up. "Homes like I've never seen before. And are those...chimneys?" She opened the carriage door and leaped out, spreading her wings and flying into the sky. In a breath, she was out of sight.

Luna snapped at her coachman. "You're letting Eagle beat us! Go faster!"

"We can't catch up with her...!"

"Shut up and go! I'm not going to lose! Not to her, not to

anybody!" Luna demanded outrageously.

Regardless of how much pride and expectation she put on her carriage, designed and maintained for speed as well as flashiness, it was never going to catch up to the soaring Eagle.

By the time Luna made it to the doorstep of the mysterious new quarters of Rabbi, Eagle had already finished her assessment.

"Wh-What is this place...?" Luna asked.

"A cluster of houses. There are plazas and parks in there, and *eight* public baths," Eagle answered.

"He built a *town* without telling me? How dare he do something cool while I'm away!"

Sagely, Eagle refrained from pointing out that her friend's surprise and outrage was misguided, as usual.

Ren approached them. "Welcome home, Holy Maiden Luna. And you must be her servant, Eagle."

"Wh-Who are you?!" Luna demanded.

Eagle remained silent, tensely watching Ren.

"My name is Ren. I serve as Master's secretary. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Master? You mean the Demon Lord?! He's got another woman under his thumb, like Yu isn't enough...!" Luna bit out. One could only imagine the conniption when she eventually found out about Akane.

"Please come in. Allow me to give you a tour." Ren led them into the Longhouses, unbothered by Luna's reaction.

Luna whispered to Eagle as they followed behind, "D-Doesn't she seem...dangerous? Even more than Queen?" She had noticed how Ren flawlessly carried herself—like a hardened warrior.

"Your sister is scary, but this girl is on another level. Don't get on her bad side. Ever." Eagle had lived through enough danger to recognize the dark depths of Ren's power.

Luna imagined that Ren was a combination of Queen and White—two of the very few people in this world who could keep Luna in check. That didn't stop the feisty Holy Maiden from puffing her nonexistent chest with unearned arrogance. "What is this place, anyway? I've never seen houses like these."

"A very old settlement. Master used to particularly adore this Area," Ren said.

"He adored...?!" Luna blurted, before attempting to regain her composure. "Mm, mm-hmm."

"But now, he seems ashamed of it."

"Why? It's another thing he can brag about, with all these rarities," Luna said.

"Because of someone called 'the Paladin' staying in the village. I'm afraid Master wanted to show off state-of-the-art facilities, rather than these," Ren explained.

"The Paladin's here?! He's a puppet of the Tzardom!" Luna huffed.

"He's different," Eagle said. In his correspondence with Hummer, Weeb had frequently asked about Eagle's welfare. "Even when I was drifting all over, I never once heard a bad word spoken about him."

Luna huffed. "Fine... We'll see what my verdict will be..."

"He's not on trial, you know."

"He's from the Tzardom! No doubt he's a pompous, self-righteous megalomaniac!" Luna exclaimed.

"Then you two would have a lot in common..." Eagle said.

"Except I *deserve* to be, because I'm the Holy Maiden!"

Ren ignored Luna's lunacy and led the pair to one of the townhouses.

The Longhouses had been modeled after a suburban town with a population of five thousand—leaving room for three thousand more after the refugees from Euritheis moved in. Ren was in the middle of allocating those vacancies to orphans and widows. She took the pair into the townhouse and walked them through how to use each appliance. Just like Weeb had been, Luna and Eagle were thoroughly shocked and amazed by each display.

Once she'd gone through the appliances, Ren turned and started for another Area.

As she and Eagle followed, Luna whispered to her friend, "What does she mean that this town is old? It was filled with magical items I've never even heard of."

"Those items can be new to us and old to them," Eagle suggested.

"Well! That Paladin must have been slack-jawed! I win!"

"You haven't done anything, Luna..."

"Nonsense! What's in my village is mine! I'm the Golden Holy Maiden Princess! From this day on, you will address me as 'Your Holy Golden Royal Highness'!"

"If I do, everyone's going to think you're stupid," Eagle said ruthlessly. Now that her tormentor was gone, she seemed to be able to speak her mind again.

"You're calling me stupid?!"

As the best friends bickered on, Ren walked ahead of them with the slightest curl on the corner of her lips, appreciating their pure friendship.

Naturally, Ren took them next to the Abandoned Mines. Luna and Eagle seemed to have run out of astonishment, because they gazed upon the Area with nothing but exasperation.

"This is called the Abandoned Mines," Ren began. "It mainly produces coal—or blackstones, as they are called in this world."

"Blackstone? There hasn't been any of that mined in—"

"Nothing is impossible in the world of Master's creation," Ren declared, leaving no room for doubt.

Luna wasn't particularly interested in blackstones, though, only things that directly made her life easier or gave her something to brag about. Then again, few women would have been very intrigued by an ancient fuel source they'd only ever read about.

"The one you were speaking about is working inside, despite my advice against it," Ren said.

"The hero's in there? All right, he's about to get an audience with me!" Luna stomped into the mines, but Eagle didn't follow—she had somewhere else to be.

"Are you not going?" Ren asked.

"I wanted to thank Miss Kirino first. It's thanks to her that I have my wings again."

"I see..." Ren said, showing a rare sign of hesitation. She and Yu still hadn't seen each other, despite both being in this village. Clearly, they had been avoiding each other. "I hear Yu has been hard at work here."

"Yes. I see so many people thanking her for healing them," Eagle said.

"How wonderful. Please give her my regards," Ren said.

"I will. Thank you for the tour." Eagle began walking away.

Then, Ren muttered something so quietly that Eagle only heard because of her excellent hawk hearing. "Yu... One step out of line, and your head will leave your body."

Somehow, Eagle restrained herself from showing any reaction as she left out of sight. Ren, too, returned her attention to the mines as if she hadn't said anything at all.

Luna had marched into the mines with her shoulders pulled back...but a cloud of dust knocked some wind out of her sails. The mines were currently being tested by teams of miners taking shifts. Now that they were active, they were filled with cacophonous chaos: minecarts screeching, wheelbarrows rolling, gears clunking away to bring up rocks from the depths of the shafts. What's worse, Luna felt like she was going to suffocate on the clouds of dust that came from all sorts of minerals.

"Wh-What is this place?!" Luna screamed.

Meanwhile the miners toiled away with gritted teeth, their faces marred by coal dust and their bodies muddied from head to toe. Even the inside of their ears and nose looked black, their hairs as coarse as wires. Miners in the real world also faced the threat of toxic gas and even the mine itself collapsing—these men really put their lives on the line.

Amid the clamor of the mines, the men dug and dug and dug, exchanging jokes and encouragement in the dark, illuminated only by the string of gas lamps. It was grueling work with a payout that made it all worth it.

Tahara, who'd been calling out orders as needed, turned. "Hey, Little Luna. Took you long enough."

"What is this place?! The dust is ruining my elegant outfit!" Luna shrieked.

"What'd you expect from a coal mine? If you don't like it, go check out the beach the Secretary laid out," Tahara said.

"What do you mean 'beach'?! What did he do to my village while

I was away?!”

“I’d save your complaints for another day, if I were you. Chief’s been in a real mood these past few days...” Tahara shook his head in resignation—even this genius didn’t have a solution to the Demon Lord’s temper, it seemed.

“What kind of mood? Oh, he must have been depressed that I’ve been away. Aww, that’s kind of cute,” Luna said.

“Your optimism scares me sometimes. Hate to break it to you, but that’s not why. The Open Sea looks great and all, but nothing’s been biting.”

“None of that made any sense...” Luna grumbled.

The brilliant Open Sea that stretched beyond Shoreline Beach was supposed to yield seafood of all kinds, regardless of the season. However, no one had been able to fish up anything from the Open Sea in Rabbi—not a single fish. The Demon Lord, who’d been yearning for the Empire’s seafood like an alcoholic yearned for his next drink, became irritated with every day that passed with fishermen bringing in nothing but empty nets. Now he was visibly pissed off. Tahara and Yu were taking the wrath of their creator particularly harshly, as if every little swing in his mood threatened to stop their hearts.

“Idiot. If you want fish, make fisherman fish for them,” Luna said.

“We tried, of course. We got a hundred fishermen we brought over from the Island Legion.”

People of the Island Legion lived in harmony with the sea. All of its residents—men, women, and children—fished. They also had more knowledge about and experience with the sea than anyone else on the continent. When they could yield no results after trying every method in their arsenal, there was nothing more that could be done. Naturally, none of the advisors were designed with any fishing skills, since they had been kept too busy defending the Sleepless Castle with their lives.

Tahara had recruited the Bunnies, on top of all the laborers, and still had nothing to show for it. “Manami’s going to be here soon and I can’t even serve her a decent fish dish. I’m the worst older brother... I don’t deserve her... Forgive me, Manami! Forgive meeee!”

Tahara fell to his knees, hands thrown to the heavens in a pathetic gesture unbecoming of the genius advisor who'd solved problem after problem that the Demon Lord had faced so far.

"Where's that hero, anyway?!" Luna demanded, ruthlessly changing the subject. "On behalf of all Holy Maidens, I will see what he's made of!"

Curled up on the ground, Tahara grunted and pointed. Luna followed the trajectory of his finger and saw a short man devoutly swinging a pickaxe as if it were an act of worship. Even in that simple act, something about his presence screamed that he was far from ordinary. While the miners worked in shifts and took frequent breaks, Weeb worked from dusk until dawn. "Stubborn" didn't begin to describe his drive—his obsession—like that of a monk flogging himself.

"So, you're the hero," Luna said by way of greeting. "I am the lady of this village, Luna Elegant!" Her voice was filled with the utmost self-imposed authority.

Weeb soberly turned to her, his face and body completely covered in coal dust. Luna's fire was snuffed out—he looked just like any other miner. "I am Weeb," the paladin said. "From the bottom of my heart, I apologize for the behavior of the Salamander Knights during the civil war."

"Hmph. What's the point of that? Make the Pope apologize, if you want it to mean anything."

"That will be an ordeal, but I will do everything in my power to try."

"Well, it doesn't matter how many times you start a fight with us! You're never going to stand a chance against me!"

Weeb could only lower his head in gratitude. The barbarism of the Salamander Knights during the war was beyond inexcusable. Their mission had been to wipe out the Satanists; instead, they had turned to hedonistic massacre. Anyone in Weeb's shoes would have had no defense for them. "I'm sure anyone from the Tzardom would be the last person you want to see here, but I would greatly appreciate your permission to stay in this village for a while."

"Ah ha! So *you* can't get enough of my village either. Very well.

I'll make an exception! When you return to the Tzardom, you'd better brag all about this place!"

"I will try my best," Weeb simply said before returning to his pickaxe.

Luna watched him for a few strokes, then turned on her heels, already bored. In her eyes, the Paladin seemed like the biggest stick in the mud she'd ever seen. She carried on past Tahara—still curled up on the ground—and quickly escaped the dusty mines. There, Ren was standing in the same spot she had left her. "Huh? Where'd my servant go?" Luna asked.

"She went to see Yu. To thank her for healing her wings."

"At least that's a good reason. I'd better thank her too..." Luna said. Her towering self-centeredness seemed to waver only when it came to Eagle. For her best friend, Luna would actually express gratitude or even plead.

"Yu seems to have found her place in this village," Ren said.

"Huh? Yeah, and she's saved a lot of people since she's been here," Luna remarked.

"Is that so...?"

"Oh? I think I smell something between you two." Luna smirked, bringing herself nose-to-nose with Ren, pink and onyx converging. "You and...Yu, aren't friends, are you? Spill it!"

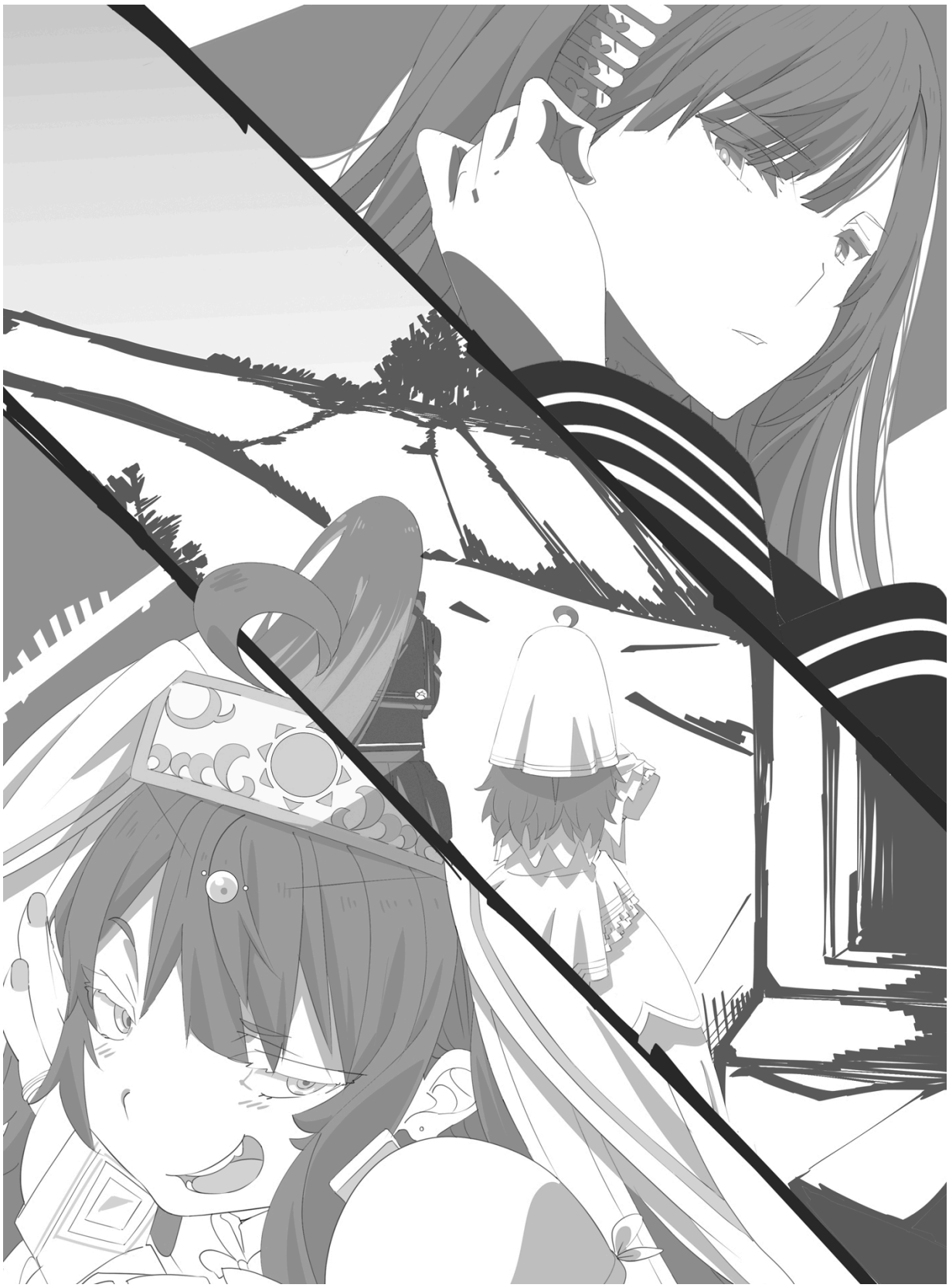
"What makes you say that?" Ren asked.

"I have two older sisters who are the biggest thorns in my side. I can sense these things," Luna said confidently.

With an elegant sweep of her hand, Ren brushed back her hair. She seemed to assess that nothing she could say would convince Luna otherwise. And Ren and Yu had had no contact, beyond the point of liking or not liking each other. "My standing with Yu aside, do you intend to eliminate the other two Holy Maidens?"

"That's not what I mean... I'm saying I should be in charge of them!"

"You remind me a lot of my friend. You're innocent and bright. If I may make a suggestion with that in mind, you should keep yourself free, rather than climb to the top of any system."



Ren was comparing Luna to Akane, of course, and just like her, Luna wasn't the type to be content being locked up in the Holy Castle. Actually, she should have been thanking White for taking that burden onto herself. Ren explained this logic to Luna and watched recognition dawn on the youngest Holy Maiden's face. "Every duty that befalls the leading Holy Maiden, from remaining in the Holy Castle and filing paperwork to seeing petitioners and overseeing trials, must all seem terribly tedious to you. Do you still want the job?"

"What?! Wh-When you put it that way, I..." Luna only wanted the title for title's sake. If she had been thrown into the job, she would have quit after a single day.

"Your true talents will shine when you have the freedom to act as you wish. Now, let's go to the next Area." That was all Ren said before she began walking toward Shoreline Beach.

"H-Hey... Why are you talking like you're in charge of my life?!" Luna stammered, reluctantly following the advisor who—apparently—deployed flawless logic at all times.

Whatever Luna had expected to see at Shoreline Beach, it wasn't this. The entirety of the towering mountain range that once walled in Holylight had vanished without a trace. "What is this...?" Luna breathed, staring at the brilliant white sand and endless turquoise sea. There was even a strange marina close to where they stood. To top it all off, a lighthouse seemed to tower out of the sea, magically flashing at a regular interval.

"Master said he erected that lighthouse in honor of the Madam's contributions."

"He did what?! Why wasn't it built in *my* honor?!" Luna demanded.

"I heard you were given the casino."

"Y-Yeah...! But that lighthouse looks cool. I want it!"

"You are as greedy as Akane. How odd for a Holy Maiden," Ren said.

"Don't you come out of nowhere and start lecturing me! I have enough big sisters doing that as it is!" Luna barked.

"Let's go back to the resort."

“Hey, did you hear what I said?!”

Ren continued to ignore Luna’s yapping like branches in the breeze. To her, the Holy Maiden must have seemed like a child in a teenager’s body.

That night, Eagle glided around the lighthouse, aiming to land on it. Even in the arena, this had been a secluded area accessible only by boat. Unfortunately for Eagle, who was looking for a place to be alone, the Demon Lord was leaning his back against the lighthouse, enjoying a smoke.

“It’s you. Late night?” he asked.

“So that is your true form... I’d heard rumors,” Eagle said, taking in the Fallen Angel with his pitch-black wings in stark contrast to Eagle’s own silver wings.

“I have an array of forms, each of them as true as the next,” the Demon Lord said cryptically, but without lying.

To try and make sense of all of his appearances—the original form of Hakuto Kunai, his final battle form when his HP was lowered, his current Fallen Angel cosplay, his Zero Kirisame persona, and his past as Akira Ono—was an exercise in futility. Perhaps this man was more easily categorized as a calamitous transformer who shifted into various forms, each more ridiculous than the last.

The Demon Lord blew out a cloud of smoke at the moon. “I hear you finally accomplished what you’d always wanted to in the Holy City. Should I congratulate you?”

“That fight was my revenge,” Eagle said.

“Revenge, huh...? It’s bittersweet, isn’t it?” the Demon Lord said, more to himself than to her.

Eagle had been pondering her future since the battle. Even though she’d finally defeated Flay, the thought of his brother hung heavy in her mind, as did the worsened relationship she felt she had with the Salamander Knights and the Tzardom at large. “Was there any point to my revenge...? I keep thinking that all I’ve done is start a chain of violence.”

“Who knows? Some say revenge is never the answer, but once word spreads that you’re the kind of woman who returns any insult or injury a hundredfold, it will protect you in the future,” the Demon

Lord said, his gaze focused on something in the distance.

Revenge, no matter how satisfying, was merely a successful counterattack—the damage was already done. With a reputation that she was not to be messed with, any potential enemies would hesitate to attack Eagle at all. Then there would be no need for revenge.

This concept was demonstrated well in modern-day warfare. Any nation that did not have a significant military presence was constantly at the mercy of a bigger, badder nation.

A rare, mischievous smirk curled Eagle's lips. "A hundredfold... Is that what you do?"

"I return mine a thousandfold. No matter how many times I face defeat, my motto is to retry until I win," the Demon Lord said, his silhouette glowing with moonlight and destiny.

Like a masterpiece painting, the image of the Demon Lord at this very moment would linger in Eagle's mind for years to come. Encouraged by a strange sense of elation, Eagle blurted out, "I might have just started a war between Holylight and the Tzardom."

"It's not your fault. I've been meaning to conscript that hero to my legion. Anyone who has a problem with that—the Tzardom of Light, or whatever—I'll wipe off the face of the earth." The Demon Lord had always been obsessed with Weeb, and he seemed ready to obliterate anything that stood in his way, even the sun itself.

"And what answer will you give Luna?" Eagle asked.

"Huh?" Ash fell from the Demon Lord's cigarette. After everything that happened since, he'd completely forgotten about Luna's confession of love. "What answer? She said what she had to say and left..."

"I'm asking you how you feel about her," Eagle demanded, closing in on the Demon Lord.

The Fallen Angel staggered back, wringing his brain like an empty tube of toothpaste for a way out of this. He also remembered that Tron had asked to be Zero's bride. Even this professional con man couldn't spin his way out of this one with nonsense. "Think of the age difference. She's practically a child."

"Now, maybe. But Luna won't be a child forever. Just like I won't,"

Eagle huffed.

The Demon Lord did see that Eagle had matured—through the battle in the Holy City, he imagined. “Then I’ll give an answer when she grows up.” He tossed his cigarette into his ashtray and moved to flee the scene.

Eagle called out to him, “Luna and I are one and the same.”

“Hmm?”

“Wherever she goes, I go. Where I go, Luna goes.”

“What is that, some kind of riddle?” the Demon Lord asked.

“Just remember that.” Eagle smiled with a sort of beauty that struck the Demon Lord like an arrow. He wasted no time in vanishing with Quick Travel, if only to prevent this conversation from going any further.

With silence restored, Eagle gazed up at the strange, blinking light. “The Ruler of Night... Do you think you can change him, Luna? I’ve always thought you are like the sun.” She leaned against the lighthouse, exactly where the Demon Lord had. Unlike the village of Rabbi that bustled from dawn to dusk, the lighthouse was shrouded in serenity. Eagle closed her eyes and allowed herself to enjoy it.

A Tron-quil Respite

A new morning trend had boomed in the village of Rabbi—visiting the Lighthouse, which stood as if to split the expansive sea. Bizarre as this new custom might have seemed, everyone who participated looked as solemn as monks on a pilgrimage.

The trendsetter stood staring at the Lighthouse now: the Madam. Since the Demon Lord had erected this tower of light, the Madam had come to gaze upon it each morning. Sometimes, she came at night, swirling wine in one hand and picking from a tray of charcuterie she'd placed on one of the beach's permanent tables...all because of what the Fallen Angel had said.

"I shall prepare a jewel worthy of your dedication."

Yes, the enormous tower—the mystical beacon of the sea—had been constructed for her, as most of the gathered masses knew. The Madam still drifted in the twilight dream that was the miracle of the Lighthouse's creation, filled with elation and indescribable reverence. At the very least, she had been shaken to the core like she never had before.

One snap of the fingers—that was all it took for the mythical being to split the sea and raise this tower of brilliant white. That scene alone had been worthy of songs and legends, but the creation also emitted beams of radiance that gently warmed the hearts of onlookers like a glittering jewel. Perhaps it was only natural for the Madam to make visiting the tower a part of her daily routine. Others, too, gazed at its protective light and prayed. Many of them were laborers wishing for safety and health during their grueling work: construction, mining, tea roasting...

After offering their faith, the Lighthouse pilgrims praised the Madam as the butterfly blessed by the Fallen Angel. Even those common folk, who barely knew the Madam, revered her that much. The nobles who had actually known the old Madam had taken the news—that such incredible miracles befell those chosen by the Fallen Angel—like someone had thrown a wasp's nest into their bed.

It all started with the great regime change when the central nobles disappeared overnight. Every socialite flocked to the Madam in search of accurate news...only to find a butterfly who'd emerged from her cocoon, utterly transformed. No news reached their brains —in fact, their minds were blown.

The ladies, who'd been a sort of fan club for the Madam, lost their minds—rushing to buy up the stock of moisturizers Yu had created from hot springs water. What's worse, the moisturizer immediately produced results, leading to the ladies placing bulk orders and driving up the price to the point that one could have made a fortune day-trading it. In scorching Holylight, the effect of a moisturizer was particularly noticeable. It was priced to rip off nobles like them from the get-go at an outrageous five silver coins per jar. The entire stock sold out in the blink of an eye, and there were still countless inquiries—domestic and international—constantly flooding Rabbi's distribution center.

Regardless of the chaos she caused in her wake, the Madam's routine didn't change. Each morning began with a walk to the Lighthouse where she renewed her resolve. "You are telling me to strive for beauty like that tower's..." the Madam breathed. Her obsessive desire for beauty knew no bounds. To her, the Lighthouse was not a reward for what she had accomplished, but encouragement to continue her quest. "I shall never waver again," she said to herself. After all, a lighthouse was meant to guide wayward ships to their destination. With a hand on her wide-brimmed hat that fluttered in the wind, the Madam strode toward the Hot Springs Resort.

The other pilgrims took their cue from her and set out to begin the day's work, exchanging words of encouragement. From the balcony of the penthouse, two figures watched over this bizarre ritual—a sort of morning meeting for the workforce of Rabbi.

"The Madam's pretty... Shimmering like always," said Tron the Firebrand.

"Like always..." the Fallen Angel repeated. Tron's unique vision allowed her to identify others by the color and brightness of their souls. To the Firebrand, the Madam had always been proud and

noble, her soul unchanged despite her physical transformation. "It's too much... No one's going to recognize her anymore..." With a hand covering his face, he gazed up at the sky. Although he recalled every minute detail he'd designed for the Hot Springs Resort, the Madam's extreme makeover had made him consider that he'd pushed those features too far.

"Demon Lord okay?" Tron asked. "Drink virgin blood?"

"Drop it, already! If anyone hears, they're going to think I have some kind of kink!"

"Zero like virgins?"

"Listen..." the Fallen Angel sighed. "He's a *bosozoku*. He'd rather go to a rumble than talk to a girl."

"I can make him rumble," Tron said, holding the edges of her skirt and twirling in place. As precious as she looked, if Zero—especially in his *bosozoku* getup—were to walk hand in hand with her, no one would believe that he wasn't a kidnapper.

The silver Dragonborn, huh? The Demon Lord considered Zero—a persona of his own creation. If he could survive on fistfights and attention alone, he wouldn't eat or sleep. At the same time, he was the embodiment of small town heroism—someone who couldn't turn a blind eye to anyone who couldn't help themselves. If a kitten was standing on the streets in the rain, he wouldn't have thought twice about shielding the kitten with his own body. In every way, he was the polar opposite of what a Demon Lord was supposed to be.

"Maybe I'll live on my own for a while, once the dust settles...free and carefree." When he lived in Hakuto Kunai's body, Akira Ono felt comfortable, like he was where he belonged. Hakuto Kunai was the first character he'd created—someone he'd played longer than anyone else. On the other hand, there was no freedom when staying in one's comfort zone. As Zero, he could act freely, and go wherever the wind blew. After everything he'd accomplished since coming to this world, Akira Ono craved some liberation for once.

The Demon Lord was scanning each area of the village with the binoculars attached to the balcony...and spotted something irritating. "He's still sleeping in the Longhouses?!" He had repeatedly told Weeb to take a suite in the casino, only to be rejected every time.

The Paladin insisted on living meagerly with the refugees...as if to rub it in the Demon Lord's face. "Damn that hero... He's silently challenging me—demanding how long I'm going to keep those refugees crammed in shacks and hovels! Dammit!"

"Demon Lord... Overthinking," Tron offered, but it fell on deaf ears.

The Demon Lord wanted to shout into the binoculars—his world could be so much better. When it came to the world of his creation—one he had poured years of blood, sweat, and tears into—he couldn't keep his calm. At times, he acted like a child whose treasured possession had been insulted.

Presently, he writhed on his balcony. "Damn! Damn! Damn! How am I going to unlock the Luxury Resort area?! If I keep them in those crappy houses, my world's going to be a laughingstock!"

"Demon Lord. Calm down. Weeb likes it," Tron said.

In truth, Weeb had grown attached to the Longhouses. Every part of its detailed design spoke to him. In his original description, Akira had written that the Longhouses were where the working class lived a frugal life, helping each other survive their hardships. Quiet simplicity met the cheerful disposition of the common man; time flowed slowly there. Despite the Demon Lord's paranoia, the hero—who'd always lived a life free of extravagance—had practically dreamed of this place. If the Demon Lord had shown him the Luxury Resort—decked out in its money-hungry regalia—Weeb would have solidified his suspicions about him. Once again, Lady Luck seemed to be on the Demon Lord's side.

"He likes the Longhouses. Don't worry," Tron repeated.

"Don't be ridiculous. Who wouldn't want to stay in a suite over some shack? The suite has an all-marble master bath and a bed that costs five million," the Demon Lord continued, feverishly.

When designing that ridiculous bed, Akira Ono had taken inspiration from one that existed in real life—a wasteful monstrosity made with 107 kilograms of 24-carat gold. Of course, Weeb would have sooner slept on the floor.

"Gates open now," Tron said, gazing toward the village's entrance.

"Hmm..." the Demon Lord grumbled, still stewing about Weeb,

but followed her gaze to see nobles from all over Holylight flocking outside Rabbi.

Eyze and the rookie flanked the gates, casually assessing everyone who passed through. After the nobles, business partners and day laborers that resided beyond the village came flooding in, followed by customers of the village's facilities. Just as one of the customers passed Eyze, he snatched him by the arm—the guard must have detected malintent.

Confused, he whirled toward Eyze. "What the hell do you want—Whoa!" An arrow pierced the ground between his feet, causing the customer to fall on his ass. That was a warning shot fired by Kondo's military drones that patrolled the village—a fruit of his desperate labor to stay in his room at all cost. "Wh-What is that magical item?!" the visitor stammered. "I haven't done anything! I'm just here to buy—"

"Now, now. You can tell me your side of the story over there," the rookie said placatingly while tying the visitor's hands behind his back.

Technically speaking, he hadn't yet committed any crimes...but it wouldn't take long for him to spill his guts in the interrogation room—where Ren awaited with a glare that could freeze anyone's heart on the spot. Not even a high-rank devil could lie with a straight face before her.

Seeing the village's security system was working as intended, the Demon Lord finally smirked. "Not bad. Those two guards are impressive on their own, but Ren really brings it together."

Although Ren was as permissive as a Gen Z parent when it came to the Demon Lord, with others she was the stereotype of a class president. She didn't tolerate any disturbances of the peace. A squadron of enforcers who cleared her extensive interview process patrolled the village to maintain order by any means necessary.

Tron stared at Ren like she was an extraterrestrial organism. "Cold and scary. But kind."

"That's one way to put it..." the Demon Lord said, sympathizing with Tron's paradoxical assessment. Ren seemed to him like a mixture of biting cold and sunlit cherry blossoms. "We've got a big

crowd today... Too big."

"Tahara said big audience for angel reveal," Tron said.

"Angel... Ridiculous," the Demon Lord spat.

In fact, the booming economy and marvelous facilities weren't the only things drawing visitors to Rabbi. Many had come chasing the rumor that the Grand Angel was going to be summoned.

"Demon Lord summon angel?" Tron asked. "Friends?"

"Of course not! Is there anything more sleazy than an angel?!" the Demon Lord—the sleaziest of them all—shouted.

"Demon Lord friends with furry Anima. Demon Lord furry?"

"Don't phrase it like that," the Demon Lord said, casting his gaze downward again.

Many of the village's visitors headed straight for the beach. Rumors must have already spread about the pristine white sand and endless turquoise sea. Beachgoers ran up and down the sandy shore or played in the water.

"Not to mention some are already swimming..." the Demon Lord said.

"I want cute bikini. Please, daddy?"

"Don't ever call me that!"

In parts of the sea open to the public, some nobles already showed off their new swimwear and refined form in the water. Each morning, nobles lined up at Bingo's store to order swimwear with extravagant adornments. Bingo had jumped with joy at first...until the orders didn't stop. Even other small traders that handled fabric, thread, and materials weren't overjoyed for long as every scrap of their inventory melted away. If they tried to fulfill Bingo's every order, they would run out of stock for their long-standing clients, passing the blame to him. The only solution in the end was to increase production from the ground up.

Every Area the Demon Lord carelessly whipped out had a profound impact on the lives of people in this world, even society at large. As they spoke, laborers swarmed Ren with requests to move into the ancient neighborhood that had materialized out of nowhere.

"Perhaps a public beach would do some good in this sweltering country," the Demon Lord mused.

"I swim too! Call furry friends!"

"I'm not calling any furries!" the Demon Lord barked.

While Tron and the Demon Lord wasted time bickering, nobles who had their fill of the beach wasted no time, exploring the Business District where they would indulge in gourmet meals and drain expensive wine. Each night, the inns were packed with nobles who would pay any price to stay longer in Rabbi, putting the construction of more large-scale lodging high on Tahara's priority list.

Staring at the sea, the Demon Lord lit a cigarette with frustration. "No catches yet...?!" He watched rows and rows of boats bob in the waves without any indication that there was a hit. Mostly to eat seafood with his drinks, the Demon Lord had obsessively ordered fishermen to try their luck—all in vain.

"Strange sea," Tron said sleepily. "Fishermen, nobles, Bunnies... No one fish a hit."

"They probably need the Fishing skill. Dammit...! I should have designed it so anyone could fish in it!" the Demon Lord raged.

Back in the game, Fishing was a legitimate skill that required SP to obtain. Players without it never so much as saw a prompt to fish in their UI. Even the fishermen of the Island Legion were powerless against this particular sea. His designs had saved the Demon Lord's hide time and time again, but this one had come back to bite him.

"Buy fish from other countries," Tron suggested.

"No good. All they've got are blocks of salt and vinegar," the Demon Lord said. On this continent, most fish were pickled or cured with salt. Without modern technology to preserve them, by the time they reached Holylight those fish tasted like little more than straight vinegar or salt. For someone like the Demon Lord, who was accustomed to the fresh, flavorful food of the modern day, it was torture. "My dream of a perfect nightcap... It's falling apart... Salted sea urchin, soy-sauce-soaked roe, octopus dipped in wasabi..." the Demon Lord sighed.

"Light bulb. Become Zero. Fish," Tron said.

"You think that meathead has the Fishing skill?!" the Demon Lord snarled.

However, Zero did have the Sewing skill—an homage to the main

character of a certain *bosozoku* comic book leading the sewing club. The skill was a powerful one that recovered the durability of all armor to its maximum. If Zero were to ever open a tailoring shop, there would be lines out the door.

A Communication from Tahara pinged in the Demon Lord's sulking head. The advisor had avoided the Demon Lord over the past few days, sensing the irritable mood his boss was in. Now, he spoke so cheerfully that it was uncanny. *"Sorry to interrupt, Chief. Things are gearing up, all thanks to you. Why don't we do the grand reveal for the Grand Angel?"*

Is he joking... Or is he serious? the Demon Lord wondered.

Ironically, Tahara was merely executing the plan he thought his boss had orchestrated. Now was the perfect time—the Demon Lord had drawn all eyes in Holylight to Rabbi through a series of miraculous public displays. With the addition of foreign dignitaries, like the minister of Eurithеis and the Paladin, the stage was perfectly set. So many world-shaking events had coincided at this moment: the civil war and regime change of Holylight, the resurrection of the Fallen Angel, the blessing upon the Madam, the arrival of the dignitaries, the refugees' arrival from the slums, the emergence of the ancient town, the opening of Rabbi to the sea through the disappearance of a mountain range, the appearance of the mines...

To Tahara, it felt as satisfying as watching a series of perfectly placed land mines going off all at once. Even he could hardly believe that the Demon Lord had pulled this off. Of course, he made sure to chat in a way that unintentionally chased him further into a corner. *"How you brought every piece to the perfect board state... I knew you were a master gamemaker, but I didn't think I'd see another perfect play so soon."*

Perfect game?! I need to invoke the mercy rule! At this point, the Demon Lord was so clueless as to the progress of these events that he could only pray for some kind of downfall to flip the board and reset the score. He decided to throw out the word "angel" to gauge Tahara's reaction. *"Summoning an angel can be quite impactful..."*

Tahara guffawed. *"Perfect closer, don't you think?!"*

The Demon Lord silently groaned. He had told Tahara that he'd

summon his sister, but hadn't mentioned anything about an angel. *"But an angel would be—"*

*"*Grand *Angel, Chief. That's twice now."*

Grand Angel, my ass! You're bordering on incest! the Demon Lord wanted to shout, realizing that the line between genius and folly was a thin one. Manami was no angel—just an ordinary civilian without any powers. He had no one else to blame, though, as he was the one who'd designed Tahara this way.

Tahara continued, oblivious to the Demon Lord's headache, overly excited by the prospect of seeing his little sister again. *"If you ask me, Chief, a Grand Angel's something like White who's got a halo on her head, but my Manami's..."*

One word echoed in the Demon Lord's head like a thunderclap—at last, he'd found an opening to get him through this mess. *"You're right. Let's set the stage for Manami's arrival,"* the Demon Lord said with conviction.

"A-All right...?" Tahara replied with a moment of hesitation, but his excitement quickly won out as he moved on to discuss the date and procedure.

After the Communication ended, the Demon Lord returned inside with a confident smirk on his face.

"What, Demon Lord?" Tron asked.

He laughed maniacally. "If there is no angel, I can just build one! **Create Item: Angel Wings**."

From the void, a set of typical costume angel wings came out—an accessory that contrasted Fallen Angel Wings back in the game, with a garbage Defense value of 2. Just like the Angel's Ring he had given White, it was merely meant to be worn for fashion, which was a common thing for items in the game. By design, it emitted a pointless pulse of holy energy and even claimed that it allowed the user to *fly*...merely because Akira Ono had been listening to a musical that claimed everyone deserved a chance to fly.

"Demon Lord... Your soul is muddy," Tron said.

"And why shouldn't it be?! I'm the Fallen Angel, aren't I?!"

"Clearer now... You're owning it. Somehow, it's impressive."

The Demon Lord cackled again. "All right, let's have that squirrel

earn its keep!” The Demon Lord strode away with long steps, heading for the stage that was about to con the entire world.

Go Fish

"Another day without a catch..."

"How long is it going to take...?"

Complaining voices came from the Island Legion boats on the sea. These were veteran fishermen who could sense changes in the tide through their rods, but even they hadn't caught a single fish. There *were* fish in the water, but they disappeared like puffs of smoke every time they tried to scoop or spear one. They had tried everything. Boats floated carrying volunteer laborers, nobles, and even Bunnie children, but none had celebrated a catch yet.

One of those boats carried Sam, the father of the sisters rescued from the Colosseum in Euritheis. He, too, was a seasoned fisherman who sat with a stern expression.

At the stern of the boat sat Hummer, who looked to be shrinking into his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Sam... I'm taking up a seat on your boat and I can't even help."

"Everyone needs some fresh, salty air once in a while!" Sam laughed heartily. He wore tight, purple swim shorts—the same color as his hair—that showed off his hard muscles. He looked ready to switch from rod fishing to diving.

In contrast, Hummer was the typical portly middle-aged man with a gut. "Sam, do you want to go out a little farther? At least let me help row."

"No, we've been hitting different spots all day. Get some rest while you can," Sam said.

"Well, I feel like I'm better off on the water... I'm always holding back everyone on land..." Hummer had tried his best to change himself and leave his miserable past behind him, but he just seemed to be clumsy by nature, which had led to him being scolded and shunned from every job he'd taken on in the village so far. When he'd haul cargo, he'd trip. When he'd cook, he'd drop the pot. Even when he had a wheelbarrow, he couldn't maintain his balance, spilling precious cement more than a handful of times. He'd been

passed around from job to job, no one bothering to give him a real task. To make matters worse, Cake and the bitchlet would give him their attention, so the other workers would torment him for it. Those who worked with them were understandably frustrated that Hummer was being paid the same day rate as them, despite not being capable of completing the necessary tasks.

Sam had seen Hummer being shunned like this and invited him to join him on the boat. "Keep your chin up, Hummer. Life is like the sea—it changes with every breeze. I was thrown into the Colosseum to settle my debts," Sam explained.

"The C-Colosseum?!"

"Yes. But now, I'm back on the open sea where I belong." Sam smiled, with a twinge of bitterness across his face. He'd been itching to repay King—the Demon Lord—for saving his family, but so far his boats had always come back without a catch. "The Grand Foreman had bragged that everything could be caught no matter the season. When I dove under the surface, there were abalone that are caught in summer, but also turban shells and sea cucumbers that are caught in winter. I've never even heard of a body of water like this."

Hearing that, Hummer took out a book from his pocket, which contained all of Marlon's knowledge and experience, and flipped through its pages. Hummer had made a religious habit of reading through the book. "No mention of a sea like that in this book either..."

"It was created by the Fallen Angel after all," Sam said. "Perhaps we should be looking into sacred texts and myths."

Unfortunately, these two were taking the topic all too seriously—as a product of the game, this particular sea operated outside of nature's laws. In reality, the number of plankton in the sea fluctuated throughout the year, leading to a cycle of various seafood coming in and out of season...but that wasn't written into the sea's design. The only factor that affected the yield of seafood was whether or not the fisher held the Fishing skill.

Hummer grabbed the oars and started rowing with powerful tugs. "Sam, why don't we try fishing near the white tower? Maybe it affects the current or the mood of the fish..."

Sam laughed at that. “The mood of the fish... Yes. Let’s give it a try!” His own mood improved as Hummer rowed toward the Lighthouse.

“Yessir!” Hummer pulled faster and faster until the boat might have seemed like it was gliding on water.

Sam had enough experience on the sea to understand Hummer should not have been able to row that fast. “Do you have much experience rowing boats?”

“No. I worked as a deckhand only once, and I could barely keep up with the chores they assigned me.” Hummer chuckled, still as he sliced through the water at breakneck speed until they arrived at the Lighthouse.

“Hummer, you’re...”

“Now, Sam. Focus on catching. I’ll prepare the bait,” Hummer said, rummaging around the boat for their tackle box. Then, he felt on his shoulder—Sam was holding out the fishing rod to him, smile on his face. “Huh? I-I’ve never fished before...”

“No problem. Everyone starts somewhere,” Sam insisted.

“I’m too slow to catch those darting fish—”

“Just give it a try. My pops used to tell me this bedtime story about the land and sea of trials that lay far north of this continent,” Sam said.

“Trials...?” Hummer repeated.

“No one survives there without some special power. Parents would threaten misbehaving kids with it—that they’d leave them for dead in the land of trials,” Sam said nostalgically as he pushed a piece of molded fish meat onto the hook. Then he put his hands around Hummer’s—which timidly held the fishing rod—and cast the hook into the distance.

“Huh? Wh-What am I supposed to do...?!” Hummer stammered.

Sam laughed again. “Let’s sit back and wait. Some people say the true battle of fishing is against your own patience.”

“S-Sam! Something’s pulling...!”

“Huh?” Sam shot his gaze to the water, where the wooden lure bobbed aggressively. Bracing the panicking Hummer, Sam yanked the rod, revealing a small fish on the hook. Sam swiftly tugged the

line in and inspected the catch. “Y-You caught something...!”

“I-It’s pretty small... Y-You think it’s edible?” Hummer asked, too preoccupied with the thought of eating the fish to recognize the significance of catching it. It didn’t take long for him to flip through Marlon’s book and find the answer. “Look, Sam! That’s a surfperch. It says it’s edible.” Hummer beamed.

Sam trembled, correctly recognizing Hummer’s impossible feat for what it was. “Y-You did it, Hummer! You beat the sea of trials!”

“What? No, that was just beginner’s luck or something...”

“Whatever you call it, come on! Let’s fish!”

“My luck had to have run out with that— Sam?!”

Sam thrust the rod into Hummer’s hands again, guiding Hummer through a cast that sent the lure and bait arcing through the sky. Just as soon as the lure hit the water, something bit. “D-Do you feel?! Pull, Hummer! Pull!”

“Y-Yessir!”

From that point on, the fish might as well have been jumping into their boat. Hummer reeled in catch after catch of whiting, goby, flounder, bass...until the smell of fish surrounded the boat.

Tossing the latest catch into a barrel of water, Sam laughed with enough force and mirth to blow the clouds away. “I can’t believe you, Hummer!”

“Well, I’m not sure what’s even going on...” Hummer said, his eyes shifting like he’d committed a crime. Despite Sam’s elation, Hummer hadn’t quite grasped his reality. Since he’d been busy working on the village’s construction projects, he hadn’t heard about the fishermen’s dry spell more than in passing.

Sam, on the other hand, was officially on cloud nine. “You were born to sail the seas, not live on land! Now, let’s dive in! You can do it!”

“Dive?! I-I don’t even know how to swim! Mercy!” Hummer cried.

“I will teach you, man to man! Now get those clothes off! Seamen don’t need any clothes! We are seamen!”

Hummer shrieked in protest as Sam took out a spare pair of swim bottoms and forced Hummer into them. The end result—a portly, middle-aged guy in a Speedo—could have blinded the uninitiated.

“Wh-What are you going to do to me...?” Hummer asked, covering himself like a virgin on her wedding night...except that he looked absolutely revolting.

Sam ignored Hummer’s question and hoisted him up before diving into the sea. “The sea is calling our name! And we’re freeeee! Freeee diving!”

“Nooooo!”

Sam’s grueling swimming lessons had begun, efficiently instructing Hummer how to move in water and catch his breath, even basic forms of swimming and treading water. Just like he’d taught his two daughters how to swim, Sam praised Hummer’s every move with exaggerated emotions. Some credit was due to Hummer, too, who soaked up every instruction like a sponge, showing no sign of his usual clumsiness. An hour into their lesson, and Hummer had mastered most forms of swimming.

“You have talent, Hummer! Let’s try diving down!” Sam announced.

“O-Okay!” Hummer copied Sam’s flawless dive form and swam down.

Swimming in the clear, blue water, Hummer watched all sorts of fish—even schools of them—swim by, along with crabs, shrimp, and octopuses that hid behind the rocks at the bottom. Everywhere he looked, he saw a treasure trove of ocean bounty.

After a long dive, the pair climbed back onto the boat. While Sam took in deep breaths to refill his lungs, Hummer looked completely unaffected.

“Sam?! Are you all right?!” Hummer asked.

Panting, Sam replied, “Sorry about that... I’m supposed to be teaching you...”

There was a physical limit to how long a human could hold their breath underwater. Even the *amanchu*, who trained all their lives to dive for pearls without any equipment, could only hold their breath for up to five minutes. Sam had just as much training in diving, but that didn’t stop him from being out of breath whenever he emerged. Hummer was the one who defied nature.

Once his breathing was under control, Sam shouldered a large

canvas bag and poised to dive again. “Now we know where our catches are. Hummer, we’re going deeper next time!”

“G-Got it!”

They splashed into the water, swimming deeper and deeper. Every time Sam pointed at a rock or crevice, there was a sea creature hiding, which Hummer snatched without fail and shoved into the bag. By the time they swam up to the surface, the huge sack was nearly full.

Sam blew out a breath as they broke the surface. “Incredible! Apparently, you can catch them with your hands too!”

“Wh-Why can’t anyone else? I have no idea why—”

“If this is the sea of trials, you were deemed worthy.”

“Worthy...?” Hummer repeated in disbelief. “I’m worthy...?”

Sam couldn’t care less why or how Hummer found success at sea—only that he had. At the end of the day, fishermen only cared about one thing: whether or not they brought home enough to feed their families. Having gone this long without a catch had been a true torment.

“Thanks to you, I can finally start paying him back!” Sam said. “Please, come over for dinner and celebrate with my wife and daughters!”

“Y-You’ve been so kind to an oaf like me...” Hummer said, teary-eyed.

Sam patted his prodigy on the shoulder before setting out on dive after dive. By the time the sun set, the bag was filled to the brim with the rewarding weight of scallops, clams, abalone, oysters, turban shells, and blood clams.

“Let’s go back to shore! This is your victory lap, Hummer!” Sam cheerfully declared, waving a red flag—the sign of a full boat.

“D-Don’t you think you’re making a big deal out of nothing...?” Hummer asked sheepishly. Without living through the dread of dry days as the fishermen had, he still didn’t grasp how big of a deal his talent was.

As they neared the shore, voices called from other boats that belonged to fishermen of the Island Legion.

“What’s with the flag?! You got something?!”

“I don’t know how they do things in Euri, but you’d better not be waving that flag as a joke!”

Some of the voices were flared with jealousy and frustration—they hadn’t expected a fisherman outside of the Legion to score the first catch of the sea. Sam seemed to understand their sentiment, because he only answered their questions with a thumbs-up and didn’t boast about their catch any more than that.

Soon, other boats crowded in on Sam and Hummer’s. Hummer shrank into his seat as he rowed. Anytime a crowd gathered around him, it was only to mock and deride him for a mistake he’d made.

“Look up, Hummer. The Grand Foreman is personally welcoming us,” Sam said.

“The Grand Foreman?! D-Did we do something wrong...?”

Sam steered the boat directly to where Tahara stood on the shore, but the Grand Foreman couldn’t wait for the boat to dock—he sprinted into the sea, splashing up sprays. “Yo, yo, yo! We finally got something! Finally!”

“All thanks to Hummer right here!” Sam said, clapping Hummer on his back and pushing him forward to face Tahara.

Swallowing a yelp of pain, Hummer squeezed out, “I-I didn’t know what I was doing, I just...”

Tahara leaped onto the boat and began closely inspecting each catch in the mountain of seafood, verifying that the bounty of this sea was the same as it had been in the Empire. Neither he nor the Demon Lord were anxiously awaiting ordinary seafood. As the Grand Foreman continued, Hummer had slowly sagged until he looked like a prisoner expecting a death sentence.

Finally, Tahara lifted his gaze to Hummer. “You did this...?”

Hummy’s heart hammered so fast and heavy that he thought it was going to burst.

“Way to step up to the plate. You made the Secretary proud.” Tahara grinned.

“I...” Hummer stammered, and his vision blurred.

While the man of the hour sobbed and trembled, Tahara laughed heartily and pulled in Hummer by the shoulder. “Why are you crying, dude? Thanks to you, Manami won’t be disappointed!”

“Uh... Well...” Hummer couldn’t remember the last time he’d been commended like this, and felt gratitude fill his chest.

Tahara’s eyes started to silver too. “I kept worrying about Manami’s nutritional balance these past few nights... I could barely sleep. What kind of big brother would I be if I couldn’t serve her a decent piece of seafood?” Gazing up at the twilit sky, Tahara wiped his tears with his sleeve. This sharp turn in his emotional state was caused by his design to be unhinged about anything concerning his sister. It must have been a jarring contrast to those who only knew him for his aloof leadership.

Seeing Tahara’s change, the fishermen exchanged whispers.

“I’ve never seen the Grand Foreman so shaken.”

“The Grand Angel they are about to summon must be of extreme importance.”

Tahara grinned brightly now, his eyes set on the penthouse balcony on the top floor of the glittering Casino. “There’s the Secretary watching us now. Thanks for saving my ass,” he said to Hummer.

“The F-Fallen Angel?!”

Fishermen scrambled off of their boats and lined up on the shore, bodies tense with anticipation. Then, a flutter of dark feathers preceded the Demon Lord’s arrival, as he’d undoubtedly heard the commotion as Sam and Hummer docked their boat. It was even possible that he’d been watching, mouth watering, since Sam flew the red flag. Perfectly masking his eagerness, the Demon Lord turned to Tahara for an explanation.

“There’s no doubt about it, Chief... These are from the Arena. Hummy right here came in clutch!” Tahara laughed and shoved Hummer forward, earning a nod of respect from the Demon Lord.

As the dark being approached, Hummer’s nerves screamed in protest, his neck shrinking to the point of pain. Suddenly, the Demon Lord grabbed him by the chin and tilted his head up. The Fallen Angel was nose-to-nose with him, like the protagonist of a romantasy novel...with a portly and sweaty dude.

After seemingly inspecting every pore on Hummer’s face, the Demon Lord said something only he understood. “Who knew you

would be the final piece? No wonder Akane found you... You're a treasure."

"Treasure...?!" Hummer repeated. "No, this was all because of Sam. I haven't done anything special..."

The Demon Lord turned his gaze to Sam kneeling beside Hummer, recalling the day he first met him in the Colosseum and the fisherman's energetic daughters. "I haven't seen you since that day in the Colosseum. How are your daughters?"

"Very well, thank you. Practically all they talk about is you, King—I mean, Lord Lucifer."

At this point, the Demon Lord thought, being called King was preferable. "I see. Continue to assist this man," he said in regard to Hummer.

"Of course, Lord Lucifer!" Sam said.

"Let's have a pre-party, Chief! A little barbecue on the beach?" Tahara proposed, eyeing the treasure of the sea he'd waited so long for.

"Mm," the Demon Lord agreed. "Invite the hero too. Drag him out of that hovel once and for all!"

Tahara laughed. "Even he won't stay a stick in the mud after getting a taste of this!"

The Demon Lord pushed a gold medallion into Sam's and Hummer's hands—enough money to live off of for at least a year. Their faces twisted as they realized the value of the coins the Demon Lord had given them, but it was all board game money to the Fallen Angel. He grabbed Hummer by the shoulder and wore a gentle smile—a natural one that came from his prayers for delicious seafood. "I have high hopes for your work...and the pay to match it."

"Y-Yessir! From this day on, I'll do nothing but go out to sea and fish until I become...a master baiter!"

The Demon Lord bit down his laugh with all his might as Hummer wept and the entire crowd was nearly brought to tears. Even Tahara was nodding along, thinking of his sister, and Sam was finally bawling. "Then, Tahara... I'll leave the preparations to you."

"Aye, aye! I can't remember the last time I had good fish! This is gonna be rad!"

With a smile, the Demon Lord vanished with Quick Travel to escape the sappiness. Tahara Quick Traveled as well in order to begin his preparations.

The only sound left on the beach was the quiet lapping of waves...until Cake, who must have been waiting for the opportunity to strike like an asp in a bush, spoke up. “You’re amazing, Hummer! The Demon Lord thanked you personally!” Cake said with a calculated purr to her voice, clasping Hummer’s hands in her own.

Hummer, who had no experience with women, panicked and sank to both knees. “P-Princess... I don’t deserve his praise or yours...”

“Even when we first met in Hellion Territory, I knew you had some special power. I have a real eye for people, you know?” Cake blatantly lied. At the Slave Market, she had only ever looked at Hummer with the calculator-perspective that his stomach fat would keep him from starving longer than the others, like a meat packer selecting the fattest pig on the market. Her outward smile was one of pure admiration, which ruined Hummer in an instant. For someone like Hummer who had rarely received a compliment in his entire life, Cake’s praises were sweeter than his wildest dreams.

Meanwhile, a figure watched that saccharine interaction with hatred in her eyes—the bitchlet, who spent her days following and insulting Hummer. “He’s supposed to be a small fry... *My* small fry... This can’t be happening!” the bitchlet shrieked through the handkerchief between her teeth.

A drunkard called to her—despite the bitchlet’s bitchy personality, she had the appearance of a pretty girl in pigtails. “Hey, babe. Let me buy you a drink... You’re dressed like you’re looking for some attention.”

“Don’t talk to me, you gorgonzola-smelling penniless oil drum. Not if you want to keep your kneecaps,” the bitchlet spat.

“G-Gorgonzola...?”

“I’m not interested in old guys who aren’t pathetic. Get lost.”

“Y-You’re crazy, lady...” the drunkard said and quickly left.

Throughout the interaction, the bitchlet’s eyes—now scorching with obsession—never left Hummer. “I won’t stand for this... I’m going to turn him back into a small fry and gobble him up...!”

Unbeknownst to Hummer, a completely meaningless battle was brewing over him.



That night, guests gathered at the impromptu beach barbecue. Naturally, the Demon Lord had sent the Nine children as messengers so the Paladin would feel too guilty to refuse. The Demon Lord's brain seemed hardwired to produce no thoughts other than petty trickery that helped him get his way. Currently, Weeb was flanked by Ren on one side and Kondo—grinning like a fool—on the other.

"It's done. Here you go." Ren put a freshly grilled scallop on the paladin's plate.

"Thank you..." Weeb said, eyes flaring at the flavor bursting in his mouth, as more abalone and raw blood clams lined his plate. Each and every item on his plate were delectable to the point Weeb was starting to feel dizzy. Unlike a certain someone who had created an entire sea to fulfill his own selfish desires, Weeb always ate what the commoners ate, so it was only natural for his palate to be shocked by these otherworldly delicacies.

Gazing out at the sea of trials—as it was starting to be known—Weeb muttered, "These were all caught by Daruma—I mean, Hummer...?" He thought of Hummer, who'd always been kicked around and put down everywhere he went. To think that he was now the talk of the village was a testament to life's miracles. "Where is Hummer? Isn't he the man of the hour?"

"Master extended an invite, but Hummer thinks the recognition is undeserved. I believe he is attending a small celebration with his friend's family in the Longhouses," Ren explained.

"Yes, that sounds like him..." Weeb curled his lips, thinking of Hummer's face that so often shifted with genuine expressions.

Seeing this, Ren piled sea bass fillets—some grilled with yuzu pepper and others fried—onto Weeb's plate. While the Casino hadn't come with any food, it had come stocked with plenty of seasonings and alcohol for Ren to cook with. As a holder of the Cooking skill, she was capable of expertly cooking any food in the Arena.

The Demon Lord had no doubt appointed Ren as Weeb's attendant for the night to see if she could find the way to the paladin's heart through his stomach. It helped that Ren agreed with him that Weeb should be recruited. In fact, Ren felt that the paladin was much more stable and reliable than many of her fellow advisors.

Kondo had been talking nonstop to Weeb exclusively about games and anime, which was entirely unproductive. “They don’t understand that these are the best foods ever.” He gestured to the canned oden, curry udon, and ramen.

Even Weeb in his infinite grace struggled to deal with Kondo, who treated the paladin as an otaku like himself. “These are...” Weeb hesitated. Kondo’s cans of food, which Weeb had been intentionally keeping out of his eyesight, each depicted an anime girl, thoroughly confusing Weeb, who couldn’t comprehend the purpose of roasting those portraits on a grill.

Ren cast an icy look at Kondo’s unauthorized addition to the barbecue. “Kondo, those are not necessary to tonight’s celebrations. Remove them.”

“You don’t get it, Ren... Weeb would like these more,” Kondo grumbled.

“Keep your ridiculous daydreams to your room,” Ren commanded.

“I’m dead serious here!” Kondo countered.

Seeing the excitement over at the hero’s seat, the Demon Lord smugly knocked back his beer. Azur had been appointed his server for the night, executing the event with elegant precision.

“Azur. How is the hero taking this event?” the Demon Lord asked.

“If I may, judging by his reaction, he seems satisfied with what he was served tonight,” Azur answered.

“But you think we’re missing something,” the Demon Lord assessed. “What is it?”

“If I may, a proper feast with an important guest of honor should also include a meat entrée.”

The Demon Lord grunted. He knew that it was unorthodox to have a seafood-only party. Alas, he had no way of obtaining any meat. Back in the game, the Pantry Area contained any ingredient imaginable from around the globe—there were no other Areas that suggested a source of meat, like Farm or Cattle Ranch. Conditions required to set up a Pantry Area were currently unknown, leaving the Demon Lord without any means of obtaining proper beef, pork, poultry, or even game meat.

“Meat... Any ideas on how to get some, Azur?” the Demon Lord

asked again.

"If I may, I have heard of a farm in central Holylight owned by a master rancher who is...set in his ways."

"Did Dona have meat delivered from him?"

"If I may," Azur said again. "Dona once demanded that the rancher deliver regular supplies of meat to the manor, but the farmer categorically refused."

"Interesting. He certainly has a backbone..." The Demon Lord grinned.

Azur merely inclined his head, imagining what tactics the Demon Lord would employ to finesse an agreement from the rancher.

While the barbecue continued on the beach, Hummer was enjoying a modest celebration at Sam's house. Sam and his family had originally been offered a room in the Casino, but they had all been struck with fear when they first saw the glittering golden temple and asked to be housed in the Longhouses. Compared to the slums of Euritheis, even this meager house was like paradise.

"Drink up, Hummer! Tonight is the night to party it up!" Sam cheered.

"O-Okay... But we're going back to sea tomorrow, aren't we?" Hummer asked.

"We worry about tomorrow, tomorrow! Girls, look at these gold medallions!" Sam gestured to the pair of gold medallions on the table, earning an excited cheer from his daughters who hadn't forgotten how the Demon Lord had tossed golden coins around like he was scattering rice at a wedding.

"Lord King gave them to you?! I can't believe it...!"

"Daddy, they're so shiny!"

Warin and Urin stared at the shiny pair of gold medallions. Even under the weak fluorescent light, they seemed to brighten the whole room with a stable future for the whole family.

Sam put his hands together and prayed to the medallions before turning to Hummer. "The Great Light—no, the Great Hummer... Please bring us more bounties of the sea tomorrow!"

"S-Stop that! You can't *pray* to someone like me!" Hummer said.

Sam wasn't kidding, though. He needed Hummer in order to

conquer that sea. Sam's daughters followed their father's lead, praying back and forth between the medallions and Hummer.

"Please help daddy, Mister Hummer! I want some new clothes! And shoes!"

"Mishter Hummer, I want to eat sweet things..."

The girls' selfish requests didn't quite reach Hummer, who felt pressure mounting on his shoulders—there was no guarantee that he could produce results again tomorrow. If today was a fluke and he couldn't fish up a thing tomorrow, Hummer feared he might be crucified for giving the Demon Lord false hope. Then, a loud clap cleared his mind. Hummer looked up to find Marin, Sam's wife, coming out of the kitchen.

"Girls, don't be rude. Stop that nonsense and come help me with these dishes," Marin said.

"Yes, mommy," the girls answered.

While their little celebration went on, there were some in the village who weren't celebrating at all: the one hundred fishermen from the Island Legion who hadn't met the expectations they placed on themselves.

The mood in their quarters, also located in the Longhouses, was as somber as a funeral.

"Why can't *we* catch anything...?"

"None of our tried and tested techniques work here..."

Their experience in Rabbi had been trial and error without success. Their failure was made even more humiliating by a land-dweller showing up out of nowhere and coming back with a boatful of bounty. In other words, their prides had been wounded severely.

That night, however, a messiah swooped into their dreary apartment complex carrying dozens of fish strung up on a rope and a cage full of shrimp on her waist.

The fishermen stared blankly at their messiah before erupting into shouts.

"Eagle... Did you really?!"

"Fish! She has fish! You got mullet, bass, and even carp!"

"You have shrimps in that cage?! How did you do it, Eagle?!"

Eagle's face strained at the intensity of the fishermen. There

wasn’t much for her to explain. Birds of prey naturally hunted fish, as well as crustaceans, reptiles, and even small mammals. Soaring high above the rest of the world, hawks were at the top of the food chain—the kings and queens of the sky. “I didn’t fish for them, I just did what I normally do...” Eagle said. She had hunted, rather than fished for them. If she had tried to catch these fish with a rod, she would have come up as empty-handed as they had.

“So Eagle can fish!”

“You’re telling me there’s a chance!”

Eagle’s expression remained troubled—she saw the limit of her own strength. “He and I could work from sun up to sun down, but we would never get enough fish to feed everyone.”

This silenced the fishermen. There was no way that Hummer and Eagle could single-handedly feed the rapidly growing population of the village, let alone fulfill orders that were sure to come in from all around Holylight and the rest of the continent once word got out about the exceptional seafood, designed to taste like the best seafood on Earth. Inevitably, seafood in this world would be categorized into two: Rabbi seafood and everything else. And one of those categories benefited the village and nowhere else. The problem remained that Eagle and Hummer were the only sources of the lucrative delicacy.

The fishermen all grumbled, now completely dispirited. “But there’s nothing we can do...”

Eagle pointed to the corner of the room, at an octopus pot—a familiar tool to the fishermen.

“Um, Eagle? What about the octopus pot?” one of the Fishermen asked.

“For example... We can all set up those octopus pots and have him collect them.”

“So we put them out and he brings them in...?”

It was a simple idea to entrust Hummer with the last step. Eagle pointed to a net. “I don’t think he knows how to use a net, but if we all cast it together and pull it in with him, it may yield some fish.”

“All right... So we set up the nets too.”

There were plenty of different ways to fish using nets, but none

of them were a one-man job, not to mention that they all required specialized knowledge and experience to pull off properly.

"It's worth a shot..." one of the Fishermen said.

"O-Okay! Let's go set up those pots!"

A few hasty fisherman each grabbed a pot and ran off, while some of the others eyed the pile of nets. The type of net determined which fish it could catch, as well as the required time and man power to set it up.

"Let's try gillnetting first..." one of the fishermen suggested.

A gillnet was an old and simple tool of fishing, a net that vertically hung by attaching floaters to one end—the perfect method for testing their theory.

"Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

The fishermen, light rekindled in their eyes, ran off like a pack of wolves. Once again, there was quite the hullabaloo happening outside of Hummer's knowledge.

Now alone at the door to the apartment complex, Eagle gazed up at the starry sky. "Hummer, was it...? I'm sorry to have roped you into this."

Perhaps Hummer had been born under some kind of star that ensured his life was one tumultuous event after another. In any case, his trials at sea were only just beginning... Go fish, Hummer. Go fish.

Eagle
Race: Hawk-Hybrid — Age: 16 — Sex: Female

Skills:

Hawk's Curse

An ancient curse cast by devils and Anima that drew war and bloodshed wherever she went. The Demon Lord has removed this curse.

Swooping Talons

A powerful kick inspired by a hawk on the hunt. There are many other versions of this skill.

Feather Storm

A powerful Storm move that annihilates enemies in a wide area.

Apex Predator

She is the ruler of the skies—the top of the food chain.
All creatures, including humans, are her prey.
There is no escape from Eagle's talons.

The last surviving hawk-hybrid who survived tragedy after tragedy.

The winged hawk-hybrid is nearly invincible, soaring through the sky where no one can catch her.

Although she still calls herself the Holy Maiden's servant, she has earned her spot as Luna's partner.

Eagle only has one wish—to annihilate every single Salamander Knight from this world.

Hummer
Race: Human — Age: 48 — Sex: Male

Skills:

God's Gift—Blessing of the Water Elemental

Although he no longer remembers it, Hummer once repaired a decrepit altar that worshipped the water elemental. Out of his kindness, he regularly cleaned the altar and offered wildflowers to it.

Perhaps the water elemental grew fond of his simple and good

nature. It gave him a boon which eventually elevated to a blessing—a form of extreme preference.

Blessed by the cleanly water elemental, Hummer's abilities are boosted dozens of times over in any body of water.

This blessing guarantees that Hummer will find success in anything related to water.

Prank of the Earth Elemental

A prank the earth elemental cast on Hummer out of jealousy for the water elemental's blessing.

On dry land, Hummer's abilities are weakened so badly that he becomes utterly useless.

Elementals are fickle beings that can be cruel at times.

Unlike a curse, a prank can't be broken—unless the elemental who cast it on him has a change of heart.

Hummer is a middle-aged man who lived a life of failure.

Finally, his life came to a turning point. From this moment on, it was all up to his own gumption to make the most of it.

Hummer lived his life in fear of his own shortcomings—now is the time for him to stand up and turn things around.

Sam
Race: Human — Age: 40 — Sex: Male

Skills:

Sonar

Detects marine life.

Current Conductor

Directs schools of fish to move in any direction.

A father of two girls who was sent into the Colosseum because of predatory debt from the Jack of All Trades. He was rescued from certain death by the Demon Lord.

He is an optimistic fisherman and the breadwinner of his household. If he teams up with Hummer and the fishermen of the Island Legion, he can become a force to be reckoned with.

His wife and daughters hold the same set of skills as he does.

Descension Day

Strange movements disrupted the quiet of the sea that night. Boats scattered across the water moved with the grace of a coordinated dance. Some vessels were casting a wide net while some were in pairs, drawing a circle on the surface—experimenting with methods known as drift netting and purse seine fishing. Sam dove in and out of the sea, weaving through schools of fish to mark their locations. At the right time, the nets had to be pulled in...but no fisherman could do that task alone. Dozens of them heaved to rhythmic calls, their faces beet red, working together.

Hummer watched the entire dance intently. At Eagle's suggestion, the Legion fishermen had invited him. Hummer struggled at first to learn the cooperative choreography, but he had no problem jumping in once he knew the movements. On water, his body moved with grace and strength he never thought he had in himself. Even on a rocking boat, Hummer stood as firm as an oak—earning surprised looks of recognition from the Legion men. Every movement Hummer made was that of a man born and raised on the sea.

"I didn't know you were one of us," a fisherman said.

"O-One of you? N-No, I've barely ever gone swimming..." Hummer said.

These men, who made a living on the unforgiving sea, took immense pride in their work—that was true for fishermen of any region, Sam included.

"You're wasting your talents on land. You belong on water," the fisherman added.

"I-I'll...try my best!" Hummer stammered.

"That's the spirit!" The fisherman laughed. "We came up empty again... Try joining them for the next round."

"Y-Yessir!" Hummer switched over to one of the drift netting boats and stared into the sea. Even his eyesight seemed enhanced, because he could clearly see Sam swimming through the water, somehow luring schools of fish to follow him. "W-Wow! How is he

doing that?!”

“Doing what?”

“Sam’s luring the schools of fish into the nets!” Hummer exclaimed.

The fisherman laughed. “What? Don’t tell me that jacked-up guy is some kind of little mermaid.” The quip earned loud laughter from the rest of the crew, which promptly halted as Sam poked his head out of the water and gave a thumbs-up.

Hummer raised his voice for once, calling out, “Let’s pull! There’s an insane number of fish caught in the net!”

At that, the fishermen looked at one another until they reached a consensus. Sam and Hummer had pulled in that great haul yesterday—it was worth a shot.

“All hands on deck! We’re gonna pull it in!”

Roaring with effort, the fishermen tugged the net—now heavy with real weight that promised a bountiful haul.

“Whoa... Hey, do you feel that?!”

“That’s heavy! We got fish, heave!”

Hummer, too, clutched a corner of the net, pulling with all of his might to the rhythm of the leader’s call. Hauling such great weight on the rocking boat was no easy feat, but Hummer moved with the strength and smoothness of a seaman with decades of experience.

Soon, the net full of the sea’s bounty thudded onto the boat, and the fishermen exploded into celebration.

“We did it...! We finally did it! It worked!”

“Yeah... After all this time!”

Tangled salmon and sea bass filled the net—over a hundred of them from this one pull.

Amid the clamor of cheers and embraces, Sam was the first to regain his senses. “Let’s clean them quickly.”

“Right! Almost forgot!”

“The job ain’t done yet! Wave over the other guys!”

While the sea boiled over with warlike frenzy, the village of Rabbi was also heating up on dry land.

Crowds had gathered from all over the country, filling every nook and cranny of the small village—even its roofs and treetops—like a

swarm of ants, their attention wholly on the glimmering golden Casino. As it was, the Casino constantly emitted beams of light that split the sky, demanding the attention of anyone within visible distance. Now it was said that the Grand Angel would descend upon the rooftop of said Casino—a once-in-a-lifetime event. Nobles and commoners alike sped to Rabbi to catch a glimpse of it—a scene all but guaranteed to be immortalized in songs and myths.

Ignoring the boundaries of Rabbi's regulated districts, food stalls and vendors filled every block to accommodate the crowds, selling food and drink as well as clothing items, trinkets, and anything else imaginable on the cheap. Red lanterns were hung across storefronts and houses to add to the festivities. These lanterns—normally seen during festivals in Japan—had come preloaded into the Hot Springs Resort's storage. Some nobles seemed inspired by the lines of glowing red, feverishly writing descriptions or sketching them onto paper, while musicians and street performers showed off their crafts to the crowds around them.

All of this, of course, had been orchestrated by Tahara, zealous from the prospect of finally seeing his sister again. His demeanor showed it too, as he conducted all affairs of the festival: placing the vendors, organizing the crowds, sourcing supplies, clearing the roads, inviting key personnel from around the country, maintaining the village's security... With Ren's help, everything went smoothly.

Patrolling through each area, Tahara shot the Demon Lord a Communication. *"Chief, I just wanna double-check... Are you sure you wanna set that price for all the stalls? They may as well be giving them away."*

"My decision is final. It's a celebration. Don't you think Manami would prefer that happy faces fill the streets when she arrives?" the Demon Lord replied.

"Yeah, you're right... Then I'm gonna make it rain!"

For one day only, every product at every stall in the village would be sold for a single bronze coin. Naturally, that would have tanked these businesses...if the Demon Lord hadn't offered to cover any lost profits. Now every shopkeeper was calling to passersby until their voices were hoarse, selling and selling and selling. Since anything

imaginable could be found for a single bronze coin, shoppers were buying with all their might...but not dropping. High-end items like silk clothing and shoes flew off the stalls, some families shopping for several hats and bags that would last them for years to come. It didn't take long for the streets to fill with people and goods, even the children among them showing off their brand new toys that they could have never afforded were it not for Descension Day.

Whether he saw those vignettes on the streets or not, the Demon Lord casually said, *"More money than we can spend will flow into our coffers, anyway. Give away the booze we bought out from neighboring villages to those in the Longhouses. And distribute the food we collected any way you see fit."*

"You never hesitate to blow money, do you? How much did you move under the table when you were in the Empire?" Tahara asked.

"One thing has never changed. I only play with house money."

Tahara burst out laughing. *"True that, Chief!"*

When the Demon Lord had been entangled in the power struggle of the Empire, he had funded his schemes and campaigns with both legally and illegally procured funds...according to a short story in *The Infinity Game*.

"All right, boys!" Tahara called to his laborers. "Whip out the wagons and go buy out every bottle of booze around—for triple their prices! Tell the bar and liquor shop owners to pay the makers extra too. At this rate, our booze'll run dry in no time."

He could take all the alcohol he needed out of the Casino's cellar without paying, but that didn't contribute to the nation's economy. By procuring drinks from local bars, shops, and distilleries, Tahara aimed to inject even more money into the market. Liquor sellers in the area would find themselves with an influx of cash, which would trickle down to the distillers and farmers who provide the ingredients. They would spend that money on something, somewhere, lining the pockets of someone else... As simple as it was, this was the basic law of circulating the economy. If someone along the line decided to hoard that money for themself and stop that circulation, the economy would rot until it crashed. Misers had been a main cause of Holylight's stagnant financial state.

On the other hand, now that the Demon Lord had the entirety of Holylight under his thumb, his position enabled him to spend money without a thought for the consequences—his interests firmly lay in other matters. Especially when it was money he had snatched up from the pompous central nobles.

On the Demon Lord's command, Tahara moved forward with planning out how to haul the booze into the Longhouses. He was overseeing the workers stocking the wagons with food when Ren and several members of her committee passed by.

"Hey, Ren! Everything good?"

"Why wouldn't it be? There is nothing but admiration for Master among the crowd," Ren said.

"When you throw a party this big... If you don't mind, can you take these over to the Longhouses?" Tahara gestured to the veritable mountain of food and drinks, all part of the hoard they'd confiscated from the central nobles—house money, to borrow the Demon Lord's words.

"That is quite a lot," Ren said. "Have you spoken to—"

"Don't sweat it," Tahara cut her off. "Chief told me to dole these out to the folks in the Longhouses."

"I see. Master always has his attention on the impoverished," Ren said.

"That's...one way to put it," Tahara said. "Just make sure the choir boy knows it's a generous gift from the Secretary."

"Yes. I will enlighten the populace with how deep Master's mercy and compassion runs."

"'Kay... Thanks," Tahara said, not entirely convinced they were on the same page.

Ren seemed unbothered as she immediately led the wagons to the Longhouses...where she would undoubtedly exaggerate the mercy and compassion of her Master, and the residents might just believe her.

After all, the Longhouses were nearly filled up; two thousand refugees from the slums of Euritheis, four hundred freed slaves from Hellion Territory, and one hundred fishermen from the Island Legion already accounted for half of them. On top of that, laborers who'd

heard the rumors of the Longhouses flocked to them, keeping Ren busy allocating the remaining vacancies. Before long, the Longhouses would be at capacity—housing five thousand residents...and enough food and drink to keep five thousand people fed and merry.

The amount of food and drink needed to accomplish that was not insignificant. To fund the entire celebration in the Longhouses without batting an eye would come across as proof of his compassion, whether he intended it to or not.

Meanwhile, the supposed paragon of compassion had been pounding down drinks all morning, having rigged up all sorts of effects on the Casino roof. Aku and Tron watched the Demon Lord drink like he was trying to drown himself.

"M-Master Demon Lord! Don't you think you've had enough...?" Aku asked with concern.

"It's fine. How am I supposed to get through this ridiculous charade without a drink or two?" the Demon Lord claimed.

"Demon Lord. Useless drunk," Tron said, squinting in disgust.

"Look down there," the Demon Lord gestured beyond the balcony. "They've been partying it up all morning. If everybody's drunk, nobody's drunk."

"Demon Lord talking nonsense again," Tron said.

The Demon Lord had cast aside all pretenses of composure. He wasn't getting through this ridiculous ritual without some liquid courage. In fact, he'd only handed out free and one-bronze-coin booze because he wanted the crowd to be as inebriated as he was.

Tron seemed to have forsaken hope for the Demon Lord as she held Mimi to her chest and fell back onto the couch.

Meanwhile, Aku happily watched the village below from the balcony, binoculars in one hand. "Mistress Ren is taking food to the ancient town!" she announced.

"Mm. She can hand out as much of that as she wants," the Demon Lord said.

"They'll be so happy. You are very kind, Master Demon Lord!" Aku said.

"Nonsense. Now that we can secure fresh seafood anytime we

want, all that food the central nobles hoarded is little better than trash—I have no use for it," the Demon Lord said, truth underscoring the casual, drunken replies.

He was obsessed with his own world and the features that came with it, but he had very little interest in anything else. That wasn't a compliment to his character either—he was practically advertising that he thought the cash and goods of this world were worthless. To say the least, that was extremely self-centered and shortsighted. "I'm getting hot from all the booze... Come here, white squirrel."

"Mimi is resting on my chest," Tron answered.

"Come here and you'll get a carrot. Come here, boy!" The Demon Lord wiggled a carrot.

"Demon Lord sucks..." Tron said, watching Mimi climb up onto his shoulder.

Not just the snow fennec, but every animal in this world loved carrots, including humans, who tended to crave carrots in their cooking or as a food of recovery. Demand for carrots had skyrocketed, but since only the Bunnies could grow them, they were perpetually understocked on the market.

"Mimi! Don't be bought out by food!" Aku scolded, earning a sulking squeal from the divine beast as it climbed down the Demon Lord's arm. Somehow, Aku had established herself as the fennec's superior.

"Don't you dare betray me!" the Demon Lord shouted after the fox. "I'm gonna change your name from Icy Hot to Bedwarmer!"

Mimi squeaked again, casting a disgusted look at the Fallen Angel.

"Apparently, you don't know who controls the carrot supply in this village..." the Demon Lord snarled.

"Demon Lord's soul...tainted sludge," Tron remarked.

While they carried on in the penthouse without a hint of gravity, some tension was brewing at the entrance of the Longhouses, where Kaiya stood in Ren's way. "Let us not mince words. What are the Fallen Angel's intentions?" he demanded. For obvious reasons, the Trinary did not take kindly to women. The only thing stopping them from showing open hostility toward Ren was the similarities between

her and Weeb, whom they idolized.

"Master has a vision too far and wide for me to understand its full extent," Ren said.

"Then I'll be clearer. This is just creepy!" Kaiya said.

"Creepy...?"

"What is the meaning of those piles of food and drink behind you?" Kaiya demanded.

"A token of Master's compassion. His orders are to distribute them for free to the residents of the Longhouses," Ren said.

Kaiya might have been surprised by the shocking offer, but after spending days in this ancient town, lifting infinite water from the well, starting fires with the flick of a dial in the strange kitchen, and living among other magical items—like the one that generated powerful winds—he had run out of shock. Combine that with the utopian public bath, complete with a stunning landscape of a white-capped mountain, Kaiya couldn't help but think that this village was made to enthrall those who lived in it. "Why do you welcome the poor with such generosity? It can't be only to secure the labor necessary to dig up the blackstones."

"What are you insinuating?" Ren asked.

"The Fallen Angel intends to take in the poor and conquer the continent! He means to blot out every ray of light and cover the continent in darkness!"

"You are mistaken. Master is the light that shines upon all worlds. There is no other light," Ren said matter-of-factly.

"Blasphemy...!" Kaiya bit out. Born and raised in the Tzardom, the Trinary and Weeb all worshipped the Great Light. Kaiya wasn't going to let this slide.

However, Ren wasn't going to back down either. "To quote Master... Where is your Light and why is it not helping?"

"That's..." Kaiya failed to answer.

"If you say your Light continues to ignore the poverty and war that goes on under its nose, I say that being is terribly powerless," Ren said.

Kaiya gritted his teeth, unable to refute.

"If I may suggest some lateral thinking..." Ren continued.

"What?"

"Someone with the power and willingness to achieve all the ideals you place your faith in... Would that person not be the true Light?"

"W-Wait a minute...!" Kaiya stammered.

"I will not. The very man you admire travels the continent, helping the hungry and downtrodden. If that is not Light, what is?" Ren challenged.

Kaiya grunted through his teeth. Reject her logic, and he'd be rejecting his dear leader Weeb. After moments of fierce contemplation, Kaiya reluctantly made way for Ren and the wagons to pass.

Under Ren's command, the wagons poured into the Longhouses. As the food and drinks were unloaded throughout the area, cheers erupted.

With mixed emotions, Kaiya lowered his head. Ultima and Mushroom clapped him on the shoulder.

"You lost, Kaiya."

"Spectacularly."

The tone of their voices was cut-and-dried, as they were hardened warriors. There was no room for sentimentality, no matter how small the battle.

"Hmph. It is only one battle—far from deciding the war," Kaiya said.

"A loss is a loss, you defanged pup."

"Indeed. A coward like you has no right to serve Sir Weeb. Begone!"

As skilled generals, the Trinary placed a lot of weight on the result of each battle as well. It was unacceptable to the other two that Kaiya had backed down after Ren had simply mentioned Weeb.

Kaiya was the first to draw his sword, prompting the other two to draw in kind. Their battle continued until Weeb caught wind and rushed over to stop them.

By that night, the crowd had become absolutely electric—thanks in no small part to bottomless drinks being handed out for free. Before the descension ceremony had even begun, everyone could

feel that the night was going to be legendary. Thanks to the food stalls selling all of their dishes for a bronze coin each, even the poorest children in the neighboring villages ate their fill.

The box seat erected before the Casino was filled with an impressive lineup: Luna, the lady of the village; her servant Eagle; the leader of the Holy Maidens, White; Harts and Sambo from the North, along with other militant nobles who were still skeptical about the Fallen Angel; Kid himself, representing his trading company; ministers from both Suneo and Euritheis... The last three congregating in one place would have shocked the entirety of the Northern Nations.

Others from the village were invited to the box seat too: the Nine children and Azur, Cake and Leon, and Kyon and Momo—as representatives of the Bunnies. The Madam and her entourage watched from a balcony of the Hot Springs Resort, eagerly anticipating a spectacular climax to Descension Day.

Sam's family stood among the crowd with Hummer, and so did Warlkin—who used to oppose them as a Satanist—shrouded in a thick robe.

"I never expected to bear witness to an archangel..." Warlkin ran his pen along a paper, sketching the golden temple as part of a dutiful report of the summoning for Fuji.

The only invitees who weren't in attendance were Queen and Yu. The former had volunteered to remain in the Holy Castle, and the latter prioritized gathering more Holy Coins.

Harts gazed up at the towering golden temple, in disbelief that such extravagant architecture and culture had thrived in ancient times. "So this is the temple everyone spoke of...?" he asked.

"This wasn't here when I last came to this village," Sambo said. The other militant nobles—who had never so much as set foot in Rabbi before—were blown away by the series of bizarre and mystical facilities. If Descension Day were a sort of magic show, the audience was already hooked, mind and body.

Soon, the golden temple shone brighter than ever, its beam of light blinking with a rhythm in a light show against the night sky. Projections were cast on the wall of the Casino to add more dancing

lights. A majestic hymn blasted from the loudspeakers placed around the village. The crowd seemed stunned at first, until they erupted in cheers as the light show climaxed...and the Fallen Angel alighted on the Casino's rooftop.

"Lord Lucifer... You're incredible," White breathed. She was gazing up at the roof with her fingers twined as if in prayer, watching a scene unfold that was truly a myth come to life.

Luna huffed beside her sister. "H-Hmph! Okay, that was...kind of cool."

Eagle sat entranced by the images being projected on the Casino walls. In all her wandering throughout the continent, she'd never seen anything like this. "Maybe this is why they called him the Ruler of Night..." Eagle sighed. She was way off the mark, but many in the crowd would have agreed with her. Who among them didn't make a connection between the spectacle of light and sound and the Fallen Angel's moniker?

Weeb and the Trinary were no exception—they watched the magical display, completely speechless, wondering who else but the Ruler of Night could pull off such a spectacle.

Basking in beams of light of all colors, the Demon Lord greeted his adoring crowd like a masterful actor onstage—let the farce of a lifetime begin. "Ladies and gentlemen... You are the chosen. Welcome...to my world!"

That was the opening line that played every time an arena opened in the game. To the Demon Lord, it had only ever been a simple announcement, but uttered in this context, plenty of inferences were whispered and exchanged.

True enough, the Nine children were ecstatic to hear the line.

"Azur, what does he mean 'the Chosen'?" one of the children asked.

"It suggests some special qualification and privilege," Azur explained.

"So...*we're* 'the Chosen'?" the girl asked.

Azur remained calm, wanting to convey how close proximity to power also meant close proximity to danger and ruin. "...That is true. But do not forget that we can lose that status for any reason.

Those with power are always fickle and heartless."

"No! I never want to be apart from Lord Lucifer!"

"I'm the one who'll serve by his side! Not you!"

While the children bickered, the Fallen Angel posed on the rooftop with cheeks rosy from alcohol. A stupid idiot got stupid drunk and decided to say something stupid with a stupid light show. In reality, this was a farce on the grandest scale. Fortunately for the Demon Lord, no one there knew his true colors. The divine beast rode on his shoulder, creating a veil of white mist around the rooftop, concealing exactly how drunk he was.

Let's get this started...! the Demon Lord told himself. *If I'm going to feel stupid anyway, I may as well have fun with it!* He downed the bottle of fire spirit and smashed it. A flickering glance at the ring on his finger showed that it was brimming with power—more than enough to pull off this miracle.

A vignette from a short story he'd written long ago flashed in the Demon Lord's mind—Tahara and his sister wandering the streets, having left their parents. They were penniless and starving, but those were also the happiest days of their lives.

With their smiles on his mind, the Demon Lord spoke these fateful words: "Now... I summon Manami Tahara—the Grand Angel!"

Miracle of the Still Angel—Blessing of Chaos!

As soon as his hand sliced through the air, a blast of light came from his ring, lighting up the entirety of the village in divine light. Everyone there seemed convinced that they were witnessing a true miracle...because they were. The Demon Lord's ring was left behind by the Still Angel after using the last of its strength—a bona fide miracle.

Now, Bedwarmer! Cover the entire rooftop with cold fog! the Demon Lord silently commanded. Thanks only to a bellyful of carrots and a whispered request from Aku before the show, Mimi did as he was told. The Demon Lord immediately ducked into the fog and took out a pair of angel wings, ready to slap them on Manami to make her into a fake angel. Someone needed to put the fear of god in this man.

However, when the young girl summoned by the Still Angel's

miracle emerged, a halo glowed above her head, angelic wings fluttered behind her back, and she even carried a golden trumpet on her belt. She was nothing short of the Grand Angel.



The Grand Angel's eyes, radiating with a divine glow, flickered through the crowd...until they landed on someone she would have found no matter how large the crowd was—her brother.

"Isami...?" Manami muttered. She couldn't tell how many thousands—tens of thousands—crowded wherever she was. She'd found him; the person she'd stared at countless times through broadcasts—an infamous advisor to the ruler of the Sleepless Castle, the symbol of the Empire's dominion, and her one and only brother: Isami Tahara.

Before another thought could form in her mind, she was moving. Her brain knew how high above the ground she was, but somehow she knew—she could fly.

"Isami!" she cried out, wondering when she'd last called his name. Ignoring a voice that shouted behind her, Manami ran. Her body obeyed, lifting her into the air. She was in a dream, she convinced herself—that was the only explanation for her *flying* toward her brother.

"Manami!" her brother cried out, frantically running to meet her—and caught her in his arms, holding her tight.

The Still Angel who had granted the miracle of the Grand Angel's summoning was set in its own ways. After all, it had continued to indulge the avarice of humanity even as it consumed itself in darkness. Naturally, the miracle it left behind reacted to the Demon Lord's exact words, summoning Manami...wielding the powers of a Grand Angel.

Now, divine light beamed from Manami, pouring an overwhelming concentration of Holy element with every breath. Before the Grand Angel that glowed with indescribable divinity, Harts and Sambo practically threw themselves out of their chairs and genuflected. No one dared to stay in their seat in the face of this miracle. The two Holy Maidens and Eagle, wide-eyed, stepped out of their chairs and bowed. Kid's characteristic disarming grin tightened as he, too, knelt before the Grand Angel. Even the ministers of Suneo and Euritheis, whose positions forbade them from kneeling without very good reason, leaned back and back as if they were burned by the bright light, until they had no choice but to bow on their knees.

A wave rippled through the sea of people who bore witness to the miracle as they knelt, row after row, all of them bowing their heads. From the silence that followed, sobs turned into outcries of emotion that shook Holylight from its foundation.

Meanwhile, there was one man who was quaking in his boots—the con man who'd accidentally summoned a real Grand Angel. *No freakin' way! She's really an angel...and a kid! Yeah, I was the one remembering that vignette when they were kids, but...* The Demon Lord had only said he'd summon a Grand Angel for the theatrics. Alas, Manami had been summoned as she was: with an undeniably divine glow and wings that allowed her to fly as effortlessly as she walked. *What do I do...?! What now?!* There was no one around to help either—just the divine beast on his shoulder. The white of the beast blended with the white fog and brilliant light,

Beneath the smoke and mirrors, the Demon Lord was sweating bullets as he normally did. *What am I supposed to do with these wings?! And the trick I set up...* Below him was a tidal wave of love and emotion. It wasn't an option for him to say something like "Kids are angels, aren't they?" and get away with it. When the Demon Lord started getting desperate, he spotted White's Angel Ring. As soon as he did, the Demon Lord's expression hardened and he leaped off of the rooftop, holding the Angel Wings he had nowhere else to put.

"Fallen Angel..."

"There's Lord Lucifer!"

"The Fallen Angel is descending upon us!"

The Demon Lord landed and began walking solemnly as the crowd parted for him, his fierce eyes firmly on Luna.

"D-Demon Lord? Wh-Wh-Wh-What do you think you're doing?!" Luna stammered.

"You've done a wonderful job for me. I want to give you this."

"No...! Those are a-a-a-angel wings!"

"Mm. I prepared them for you," the Demon Lord lied as effortlessly as one breathed. If the old adage were true, his pants would be nothing but cinders.

"For...me?" Luna breathed.

“That’s not all. There’s one more thing to light up this night,” the Demon Lord said, then began counting down. “Five...four...three...” When he reached zero, the fireworks began. Flying up from the roof of the Casino, a whopping eight hundred dazzling Fireworks lit up the sky—a classic misdirection well worth the 500 SP it cost.

Once the fireworks began in an explosive barrage, they captured the crowd’s attention without giving them a moment to think. All eyes were on the sky. At first, those who’d never seen fireworks before were speechless at the marvelous display of magic...until they became riled by the booming explosives, until they were throwing their fists in the air and cheering as loudly as they could.

The Butterfly sisters gazed up from the Hot Springs Resort balcony, clearly entranced by the otherworldly beauty. The Fallen Angel had made flowers of light bloom in the night sky. This insane power—and showmanship—was the perfect conclusion to Descension Day.

“A fitting power for the Ruler of Night...” the Madam remarked.

“I couldn’t agree more,” her sister said.

These two were religiously attending the planetarium in the resort. In more ways than one, this was the nail in the coffin.

“Dear sister. Give me a head start, won’t you? Just one step,” the Madam said.

“No need to ask for it. That’s your right as the one who opened this door for us,” her sister answered, catching her meaning.

Weeb and the Trinary watched flowers bloom across the sky silently. While the Trinary quivered with every boom, Weeb looked to be in disbelief. “There is something I’d believed since I was a child,” Weeb said to no one in particular. Perhaps he was speaking to something that slumbered deep within himself. “With a moniker as infamous as ‘the mythical rebel,’ the Fallen Angel must be captivating enough to allure the populace and manipulate it.”

No matter how thoughtless, brainless, and reckless the Demon Lord was on the inside, his outward appearance and actions had been too flashy and too powerful. It was no wonder that people went wild for him, welcoming the Fallen Angel despite the damning legends. Tonight, Weeb finally realized that there was nothing on

this continent that even came close to how powerful the Fallen Angel was. The Demon Lord still hid untold powers and could be forceful and gruff at times, but those were characteristics almost required of a ruler destined to reign over billions. The Trinary remained silent, perhaps refusing to accept the inevitable conclusion they were all reaching.

"Summoning the Grand Angel... Angel's Ring... Angel's Wings... The ancient town... An active coal mine..." Weeb muttered along, unable to control his train of thought. The Demon Lord almost seemed like the Great Light itself—no one of the darkness could have pulled off those miracles.

"B-But, Sir Weeb! He hasn't finalized what he means to do with the refugees."

"Indeed! It is too early to jump to conclusions."

"We must remain here and keep vigilant watch! While soaking in the public baths, preferably!"

Weeb pushed up on the bridge of his glasses. Currently, only some of the refugees had been hired to work in the mines, while the others had been simply given orders to acclimate themselves to the village. Their wage, days off, and job descriptions were expected to be finalized in their contracts in the days to come.

The Demon Lord was looking smug, having pulled off this stunt without facing the consequences of his actions, when his expression suddenly hardened. In one fluid motion, he tugged Ren—who had quietly watched the event unfold all evening—over to his side.

"Master?! Is something wrong?" Ren asked.

"Tahara, I leave you in charge," the Demon Lord announced before vanishing.

"Huh...? All right...?"

The crowd took the disappearing act as another act in the show and answered with uproarious cheers.

Out of all places, the Demon Lord had Quick Traveled to the forest where he had met Aku—where he first awakened in this world.

"There's...another one!"

"Master?!"

The Demon Lord clutched the ring, his face more pained than he had ever shown another soul. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't stop the power from pouring out of the ring. Unable to grasp the full picture, all Ren could do was stand on guard.

A sinister voice echoed in the forest, almost mocking the Demon Lord. "Observation was never your strong suit, Creator. Did you not realize that ring held two distinct powers within it?"

Ren scanned the woods around them, but failed to find the source of those words. The Demon Lord—Akira Ono—however, could have recognized that hellish voice anywhere.

"Chaos and destruction. You must have thought yourself clever, tapping into its power... Too bad you only used Chaos. The other is left untouched," the voice went on.

Unable to speak, the Demon Lord drew Sodom's Fire and thrust the blade into the ring with all of his might—ready to destroy his finger with it. It didn't leave a scratch.

Miracle of the Still Angel—Blessing of Destruction!

Purple haze leaked from it, slowly taking shape. In contrast to the summoning of Manami, this ritual reeked of pure evil. "I always felt that this vessel was but a speck—a stain marked upon a completed being. Each time, I was overcome with powerlessness." The haze took a humanoid form—one of a character Akira Ono knew all too well.

It was the relic of a game he'd cast away—the *other* final boss of 1999. Clad in a robe of black and purple as solemn as a death knell, the figure stood with their hair nearly touching the ground, a menacing staff clutched in their hand. Just a glance of them felt like a thousand cuts to the soul.

"Bloody Mary..." the Demon Lord breathed.

"Oh, you remember? Then again, there is no forgetting me, is there? Long ago, you lost something dear to you when you forsook this husk of the past. There's been a thorn in your heart ever since... Ironic, isn't it?"

"Why...you?" the Demon Lord grunted.

Without a word, Ren thrust her spear faster than the eye could follow—but Bloody Mary leaped back, easily dodging the attack.

“Every enemy of Master’s will be eliminated.”

“You were always such a loyal dog,” Bloody Mary said to Ren. “How does it feel to reunite with your true master? Tell me. How does your creator taste?”

Before Bloody Mary had even finished the question, Ren had swiped her lance sideways, aiming to sever the threat in half. This time, several abominations emerged from the purple robe and stopped the blade before it reached Bloody Mary. Among them was a mechanical bat wing, a shield with pulsing veins on its surface, and something that resembled the face of a crying baby—an array of horrors that would have churned anyone’s stomach to behold them. Ren’s eyes narrowed—there shouldn’t have been any item in existence that could have stopped her attack.

Bloody Mary hadn’t even budged. “This is called parasitic armor. It didn’t exist in the old arena. Chaotic stuff, born from the mixture of magic and cybernetics in a postnuclear cyberpunk world. To celebrate my reunion with the Creator, let me show you another trick.” Bloody Mary concentrated magic in their staff until the ground shook beneath them, as six purple magic circles appeared around the staff. “**Dark Illusion**!”

A devastating beam shot out of the staff, erasing the forest in a straight line. Ren dove onto the Demon Lord and pushed him to the ground. If it weren’t for her, the spell would have dealt catastrophic damage to him.

When the dust settled, Bloody Mary was cackling. “Lucky you brought your dog with you, Creator! No matter. Now, my dream will come true... Don’t be so arrogant to believe all of your creations adore you.” With that, Bloody Mary began to dissolve into thin air.

The Demon Lord desperately outstretched his hand—which took all of his strength. “Maria, wait...! Where are you going?!”

“This body prefers the dark. See you at the bottom of Tartarus...”

“Tartarus?”

“You’ve forgotten too much, Creator... No, those fools have taken your memory and—” Bloody Mary laughed dryly. “That doesn’t matter to me now.” With that, Maria disappeared entirely, leaving a plume of crimson feathers behind.

With this, Akira Ono recognized the move for what it was: Red Phoenix, a precursor to Quick Travel.

"Master... Who was that?" Ren asked.

After a long moment of silence, the Demon Lord managed to answer like he was squeezing out an iron ball from his mouth. "Hellnard Maria, the Bloody Mary... The final boss to a world I left behind."

"A world...?"

The Demon Lord sprawled on the ground. Right now, he didn't have the energy to spew cryptic lines.

"Worry not, Master. If that is your enemy, I will erase it," Ren said.

"No shot. I'm not gonna let you anywhere near something that dangerous," the Demon Lord said without his usual pompous characterizations. No matter how much resistance Ren boasted against magic, he knew better than anyone that a *final boss* was on another level altogether.

"Administrator." The Demon Lord commanded the admin screen to open, projecting a sentence he hadn't read before, spelling an end to an era.

Hakuto Kunai eliminated.

The Laws of the Empire unlocked (x1).

A weak laughter escaped the Demon Lord's lips. Defeating Hakuto Kunai, the final boss, had always been one of the ways to unlock the Laws of the Empire. Players could also earn difficult trophies set up around the game for a chance to use this book, which had the power to drastically change the arena.

In short, the Laws of the Empire was a book that provided a direct line to Akira Ono where players could send in requests. This unique feature led to new skills, abilities, items, and even Areas being implemented into the game.

“Law of the Empire... I didn’t expect things to turn out like this,” said the Demon Lord. As that path had opened up to him, he watched the ring on his finger turn to dust, just as the Still Angel had at its final moment. Crushing hopelessness and emptiness threatened to cave in his chest. “Ren. You better go back to the village without me and—”

Ren had straddled the Demon Lord and sealed his lips with her own. The dark Fallen Angel and the girl in a schoolgirl’s uniform intertwined—a union so shocking to behold that it would have been burned into the soul of anyone who witnessed it.

“H-Hey, what do you think you’re—”

Ren silenced her Master with her lips again. Then, she spoke. “Do not concern yourself with that wretch.” She held his face in her hands and met his eyes with her own icy gaze, one that reminded the Demon Lord of cherry blossoms on the wind.

He was starting to feel dizzy. “O-Okay. Just get off—”

“No.”

While the village of Rabbi went mad over the miraculous summoning of the Grand Angel, what transpired in these woods was just as momentous. Another final boss had descended upon the continent, but no one knew yet how they would impact this strange world.

Hellnard Maria
Race: Demon Lord — Age: Unknown — Sex: Unknown

Weapon: **Queen of the Dead**

A horrible staff as tall as themself. Maria killed the queen with it to take control of Europe City.

Armor: **Pavane for a Dead Princess**

A majestic robe of black and purple. By massacring the last of the noble bloodlines, Maria took control of Far East City.

Parasitic Armor:

Cannibal Bat

A mechanical bat wing.

Hill of Lament

The face of a crying baby.

Silent Raven

A shield with pulsing veins.

Level — 666
HP — 66,666/66,666
Stamina — 600/600
Stats — ?

Unique Skills: **Black Tortoise** / **White Tiger** / **Red Phoenix** / **Blue Dragon**
Magic: Knows all skills of the Dark and Black elements from class-1 to class-10.
Duel Skills: **Cunning Fox** / **Wondering Silver Wolf** / **Phantom Heartbeat** / **Blasphemous Wings**
Special Ability: **Summon Advisor** / **Construct Europe City** / **Construct Far East City**

The other final boss known as Bloody Mary—the one who ruled over Far East City of Chaos, a title Akira Ono created in his youth. Bloody Mary's sex and age were unknown. Currently, the Bloody Mary is a hybrid abomination of Hakuto Kunai and Hellnard Maria. They were powerful enough to rule the world on their own, but their astronomical level became a handicap against the Demon Lord and his army. Victory was still far out of their clutches.

Two’s Company

That night, bonfires roared throughout the village of Rabbi as the revelry raged on without any sign of stopping. After all, an Angel—the likes of which the continent hadn’t seen in centuries—had descended upon them. To those who lived in Holylight, nothing was more worthy of celebration than that. Merchandise and food were practically being given away at every stall, and booze actually was being given away—all fuel to the fire.

Meanwhile, Manami—despite being the object of this historic festival—remained clueless. “Um... This isn’t a dream?” she asked, her gaze wandering to and fro. Until now, she had been convinced that she was asleep. What’s more, her senses had been heightened and she had reversed in age, right down to her childhood.

Tahara turned to White, giving up on explaining anything to his sister in the middle of the raucous revelry. “Can you take over here, White? If you don’t mind.”

“Oh, uh— Yes!” White mastered her elated expression and began controlling the crowd.

Beside her, Luna was twirling round and round. “Finally, I have wings! Angel wings! From this day on, I’ll be the Golden Holy Maiden Angel!”

“Holy Maiden Angel...” Eagle said, staring at her friend with mixed emotions. “Luna, shouldn’t you think this through before accepting such a thing?”

“What’s to think about?! From this day on, you may call me Her Royal Holy Golden Angelic Highness!”

“That’s too long, Luna... People are going to think you’re an idiot.”

“Who are you calling an idiot?!” Luna shrieked, although excitement was still written all over her face.

Harts and Sambo, as if snapping out of a daydream, quickly stood from their box seats.

“Sambo, bring in the soldiers we stationed outside the city. Put them on crowd control!” Harts commanded.

"Yes, sir!"

All Militants moved out to increase security in the heart of the festival, lest some harm come to the Grand Angel in the heated chaos.

Hands shoved into his pocket, Tahara began walking. "Let's talk in my room, Manami. It's noisy out here."

"Your room...? Where are we? I thought I was dreaming!" Manami said.

"Dreaming, huh? To me, living in that other world was one long nightmare. C'mon."

"Isami, wait up!"

The siblings entered the Casino, the heavy doors to the lobby thudding shut behind them.

Manami took in the space bursting with golden light. "S-See, this has to be a dream. I'm a kid again, and I'm wearing this weird dress, and I even have wings..."

"It's not weird. You look good."

"Even in my dream, you're talking nonsense..." Manami couldn't see her brother's face as Tahara walked before her.

Despite his unrelenting adoration for his little sister, Tahara never showed a hint of it to Manami, putting on a mask of aloofness, as if he were looking after her out of obligation. He was kind of tsundere, to the benefit of absolutely no one. A grown man in his thirties acting this way was more disturbing than charming. "Well, it's a luxury hotel upstairs. It'll have everything you need."

"W-Wait a minute...! There's a halo above my head!" Manami said.

"Yep. Suits you perfectly."

"You're making fun of me, aren't you? Isami!"

Tahara had been dead serious, of course. Manami was a literal angel to him. He could have wept on his knees thanking the Secretary for summoning her in this form.

"All right, this is my room. Let's take a breather and talk inside, shall we?" Tahara said, opening the door to his room in the Casino. He often found sleep elsewhere while he executed his countless duties around the village, but considering how the schemes he'd

plotted in this very room were reshaping the entire continent, it could be described as ground zero of the Demon Lord's world shaping.

Once the door fully opened, Manami was greeted by a massive mound of garbage. Pens and papers and instant ramen cups carpeted the floor, like some fugitive of the law had been holing up in it for months.

"Wh-What is this...?" Manami asked.

"My room. I told you."

"Your bed isn't made, your clothes are all over the place..."

"Huh? You just gotta move them aside." Tahara began shoving clothes away to carve a path through the room, and one of the articles of clothing knocked over a half-eaten ramen cup, sending it splashing onto the floor.

"Wait! You just spilled ramen broth on the floor!" Manami shouted.

"Calm down... It'll dry up."

"Your brain is dried up!"

"M-Manami! What are you—"

"Stay out in the hall! I'm going to clean this mess!" Manami shoved Tahara out onto the hall and began cleaning the room with an efficiency befitting a master of all housework.

"Hey, Manami... You don't have to worry about cleaning now, do ya? Besides, guys can't relax unless there's a little mess here and there."

"A little...? I can't see the floor!" Manami began throwing everything she could get her hands on into a trash bag. As she felt more passionately about cleaning the room, her body began to glow. "Why am I cleaning in my dream...? Wait, my body's glowing..."

"Manami... You're lighting up! Like a jackpot on a slot machine!" Tahara said.

"Oh, I feel like I can make this place sparkle... **Cleansing Light**." Bright light burst from Manami, erasing all the trash in its path. In the blink of an eye, Tahara's trash heap had been cleansed. "Hooray! All the garbage and stains are gone! Victory!" Manami said, holding up her fingers in a proud V.

“Victory?! You obliterated my smokes!” Tahara protested, pointing to the spotless ashtray that had been piled high with cigarette butts.

Even the strewn clothes looked freshly laundered—an indication of how powerful Manami’s casual burst of light had been. Having not only cleaned but also cleansed her brother’s room, Manami stared down Tahara. He’d always been a slob, even when they lived together as children, but having to clean up his mess in what she thought was a dream had crossed the line. “Isami, sit.”

“Huh?”

“Even for a dream, this is ridiculous. How many times have I told you to keep your room tidy?” Manami asked.

“C’mon! How long ago was that? We’re not kids anymore—”

“*Sit.*”

“Yes’m.”

Then Tahara’s little sister went on to lecture him about his questionable lifestyle choices. Genius though he might have been, Tahara was utterly disinterested in housework. “All right, all right. I get it! Let me tell you about—”

“No. You definitely don’t get it.’”

In truth, Tahara could have wept with joy that his sister was here, nagging him for minutes on end. As a result, his lips had curled into what looked like an arrogant smirk.

“You’re not even listening, are you? With a stupid smirk on your face...” Manami pointed.

“I’m listening, I promise. Every single word...” Tahara finally laced his hands behind his head and lay down, closing his eyes—he couldn’t hold back the tears anymore.

Manami gave him a sour glare, which was a crucial part of the tableau that had taken these two far too long to recreate.

Meanwhile, in the forest where it all began, the Demon Lord was standing beside a pond, having somehow unsaddled Ren from himself. A good portion of the woods had been wrecked by Maria’s spell, but the pond had remained unscathed.

“It feels like ages ago,” the Demon Lord said.

“This is the place you’ve mentioned before,” Ren said.

"I-Indeed..." The Demon Lord's left hand and Ren's right hand were bound by a scarf—a precaution to prevent the Demon Lord from escaping via Quick Travel. "Ren, I'll need to move quickly if something were to happen. Did you have to tie it so—"

"That person vanished, changing into a being on another level," Ren cut in.

"Mm-hmm..."

"I request a detailed explanation, Master."

Staring at the crystal clear pond, the Demon Lord scratched his head—he wasn't sure how to explain. In short, Maria was the final boss of an MMO he'd once created...but he was struggling to phrase that in a way that would convey that information to Ren.

On the other hand, Ren finally saw the dark cloud lift from Akira Ono, making him shine almost unbearably bright. Just standing close to him made her heart slam against her chest.

"They held the same position as Kunai in another world," the Demon Lord finally said.

"I see..."

Kunai and Maria were very similar characters in many ways. They were both cruel and unbelievably powerful; they were each masters of a castle fortress staffed with trusty advisors. Maria was truly Kunai's predecessor—his prototype. When it came to the City of Chaos title, Akira Ono's youth and recklessness had created a world of absolute mayhem.

"Well, I'll settle the score with Maria," the Demon Lord said.

"It will be too dangerous on your own."

"It's fine. In a way, it's my punishment." The Demon Lord felt a faint prick in his heart.

What sort of twisted tale of comeuppance was this, that the world he had long discarded—against the pleas of countless users—now posed a threat to him?

"You're not thinking about the ones you're cutting out." Those words the Demon Lord once read flashed back in his mind.

"That's a little dramatic, isn't it?" he'd replied with a chuckle. Ironically, the Demon Lord was in quite the dramatic incident. "If I made a better world..." the Demon Lord said to himself, helpless to

do anything else. “I thought everyone would be all smiles... That even the ones who’d been sad or mad about it would come crawling back. I thought it was that simple.”

Ren couldn’t comprehend his monologue—their concepts of reality were incongruent, and the Demon Lord certainly had no intention of explaining that these worlds were online video games on modern-day Earth. Even if he did, it would only make this more confusing.

This isn’t the Matrix, the Demon Lord thought. *Who’s going to accept that the world of the Empire was all virtual—a game made up of 1s and 0s?* To prove that, he’d have to return to modern-day Japan somehow and show them by playing the game. The Demon Lord had no clue how to return to Japan, and even if he could, the game was gone.

“And they...didn’t?” Ren asked.

The Demon Lord’s mind was brought back. Returning to Japan? The whole idea seemed like an outrageous fantasy. “Things did turn out like I’d planned. The population—no, the number of players—exploded. Eventually, that circle grew and enraptured the entire world.”

With the knowledge and experience he’d gained from the prototype, Akira Ono had created the world of the Empire. Naturally, it had become a more fun and advanced experience.

“But there was one...who never came back.” The Demon Lord’s face twisted in pain. That person had been terribly polite, eloquent, and knowledgeable. They had come to Akira’s aid countless times. Perhaps Akira Ono had even held strong fondness for that person. “I thought my new world would knock their socks off... I was going to tell them...”

“Tell them what, Master?”

“‘I told you so.’ I never got the chance, though.” The Demon Lord pulled out a cigarette and lit it. He blew out a puff of smoke, his usual profile looking forlorn, somehow.

“You have me, Master.”

“Mm...”

“Forever.”

"Forever. By your side. Always." Aku had once told him something like that. In this world, where he never knew what tomorrow would bring, he'd never given a real answer. He smiled softly, realizing that he'd been with his advisors for fifteen years—a time long enough for him to call them his family.

"You've always—"

"Master?"

A bizarre, distorted message had played in the Demon Lord's head: *"Message for the Administrator."* He quickly brought up the admin screen and found a familiar string of words.

Let's play, Demon Lord.

Do you remember square one?

Turning off the admin screen, the Demon Lord untied the scarf around their wrists and held Ren close, readying to Quick Travel. "Apparently, our enemy is growing bored..."

"Y-Yes, Master..." Ren's cheeks blushed at her master's embrace, more powerful than ever before. The Demon Lord, too, felt elated to sense his enemy within striking range. "I don't sense him in you anymore, Master," Ren said.

"Hmm...? I guess you wouldn't."

"I finally see you again, truly... My Akira."

"Wh-Why..." the Demon Lord nearly tumbled as she used his real name out of the blue, but managed to put some force behind his voice. "We're returning to the village, Ren. We're going to run those facilities full steam."

"Understood. From this day on, this place is mine," Ren said.

Whoa, whoa, whoa... Why did that sound so ominous?! the Demon Lord thought.

After all that, the unbalanced power structure of Holylight had finally settled. Now that he had made a spectacle out of the Grand Angel's summoning, no one in the country would dare defy the Demon Lord. And that was to say nothing of his remaining SP and the incoming hoard of Holy Coins—it wouldn't be long until he'd have his entire roster of Advisors with him.

Once the dust settles, I'll have to look into Tartarus, or whatever it's called...

With so many factions and players making their moves, the continent was plunging into an era of great change, finally about to settle ancient scores.



Conne/ction

——The City of Rookie, Northern Nations.

A strange pair walked through the streets of Rookie—a city taken in by the Demon Lord's army through a series of scheming and plotting: Tahara, the mastermind behind the acquisition, and Hummer. The former had come to pick up a few things and check on the city, and the latter had asked to tag along.

"This place is bumpin'. Economic growth is a helluva drug, ain't it?" Tahara joked.

"I— I heard they discovered a new level of the dungeon..." Hummer said timidly.

"Bingo! Just as soon as the Secretary got his hands on it. Ever wonder how far ahead he sees? My head would explode if I had to think through everything he sees." Tahara frowned as if simply imagining that had brought on a headache. Alas, the Demon Lord had as much foresight as a blind rat.

Regardless of the Demon Lord's intentions—or lack thereof—Rookie was teeming with adventurers who traveled from all corners of the continent while voices of street vendors rose like a continuous, burbling stream. More and more vendors were selling weapons, armor, and items useful for dungeon crawling. Even the inns and restaurants were booming from open to close thanks to the influx of customers and cash flow, all stemming from the discovery of the new dungeon level.

"And the ones who found it were working on the Secretary's orders," Tahara pointed out.

"Y-Yessir. Adventurers Yukikaze and Mikan."

"Huh. Are they famous or something?"

"As famous as famous can be. They are celebrities among the adventurer community—shining stars, unlike myself... I never caught a break adventuring," Hummer said.

"Another seed planted by the Secretary blooms... It never stops, does it?"

Tahara's generous misunderstanding was warranted. Since the Invasion, the city of Rookie had practically been a disaster zone. Now, shortly after the acquisition, its economy was booming. Tahara was shaking his head at what he imagined to be the depth of the Demon Lord's scheming...when he suddenly beamed. "Get this, Hummy! You know those fish you caught yesterday? Manami chowed those down! She said she's never had fish that good! You should have seen that glorious, Grand Angel smile! Something like that could bring back the dead!"

"I-I'm g-greatly...honored?"

"You put a smile on the face of the Secretary *and* my Grand Angel! You and I are BFFs now! Keep up the good work, Hummy!" Tahara said, repeatedly clapping Hummer on the back and finally putting him in a headlock.

"Ow, ow, ow..." Hummer felt nothing but pain from Tahara's friendly gesture. "D-Does the Grand Angel enjoy seafood...?"

Tahara's eyes became fixed on the distance, lost in a reverie of their days on the streets. "We skipped out on our shit parents when we were kids. For a while, we lived in a damp corner of the docks, living off of the fish I'd nick off of boats. I'll never forget how that fish tasted."

Hummer could only say, "Th-That must have been...difficult," despite the countless questions bubbling in his head: How could an angel skip out on her parents? Then, he recalled how the Fallen Angel had been exiled from Heaven in the myths, and somehow made it make sense.

"Those fishermen had tempers, so you really didn't wanna get caught... After that, we ended up in a Shinto shrine run by this old fart. It feels like I'm always thinking back on those days."

"Shinto... Old fart?" Hummer asked.

"His name's Sougen Okuda—the most powerful guy in the world, but only for three minutes. What a joke, right? Even the Secretary and the other higher-ups of the Empire made sure to stay on his good side," Tahara said.

Hummer felt like his head was about to implode from all of the incomprehensible statements. His only option for maintaining his

sanity was explaining them away as tales of a distant world above the clouds.

Then, a trio of thugs walked over—ones Hummer knew well.

"Well, well, well... If it isn't useless Hummer."

"You thought you were good enough to take a swing at the new level?"

"Nah, he wants to pay us to tutor him again, right?"

Hummer quivered at their voices, frozen by the trauma of these thugs always strong-arming him for every coin he had.

Tahara gave them a glance and said, "How'd these cartoonish trash heaps roll in? I gotta have a word with the security team."

"Huh?! Who are you supposed to be, bozo?!"

"What are you, the pig wrangler? You're about to owe us big time for a special lesson."

"Take it easy... Hey, Hummer! Go get us some booze, like old times!"

Tahara silently lit a cigarette as he stepped forward.

One of the thugs stepped up, swaggering. He bumped into Tahara and tumbled to the ground with all the acting skills of a lousy soccer player. "That hurts... You broke my arm!"

"Hey, dirtbag! You better pay us medical expenses. Let's start with—" The thug cried out in agony as Tahara—hands still in his pockets—landed a roundhouse kick straight from a kickboxing textbook. The sound of his arm shattering echoed in the streets.

Next, Tahara stomped on his right leg, smashing the bone and drawing out an agonized shriek from thug number two. "Sure is broken," Tahara said.

Hummer was frozen in place, unable to react to the split-second retaliation. The final thug—the only one still uninjured—crumpled to the ground in the face of Tahara's brutality.

Blowing out smoke, Tahara looked down at him like he was trash. "No one's gonna make my BFF their bitch... Get up and go get us our booze!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Thug number three rushed to his feet and ran off like the wind.

Tahara sat on a nearby crate like nothing had happened and took

a drag.

Finally, a city guard and his captain arrived. “G-Grand Foreman! I am terribly sorry for this! Thugs like them are flooding the place these days...”

“I don’t pay you to patrol the city just to hear your excuses,” Tahara said.

“Forgive me... With adventurers coming in from all over, we have not had enough eyes on the streets,” the captain said.

“Well... Part of that is on me—I should have wised up to the Secretary’s plans.” Tahara said as he stood from his crate and casually handed five gold coins to the captain. This was his way of maintaining the popularity of the Demon Lord’s regime. “My bad. I’ll make sure you get more men soon. Take the squad out for some drinks tonight.”

“Th-Thank you, Grand Foreman!” The captain thoroughly expressed his gratitude before hauling the thugs away. With five gold coins, he could treat his entire team to as much fine wining and dining as he wanted. It was plenty of money to boost his squad’s morale.

As soon as the captain left, thug number three returned with a bottle of wine in each hand—which Tahara rejected with a chuckle. “Go take it to your buds in lieu of a fruit basket. By the way...I don’t give third chances.”

“Y-Yes, sir! I’m sorry!” The thug couldn’t flee the scene—and Tahara’s predatory gaze—fast enough. All the while, Hummer had been as still as a statue.

“Wakey, wakey, Hummy!”

“Huh?!”

“I’d better send for those new guards quick. Let’s hit the road,” Tahara said.

“Y-Yessir!”

The pair continued down the crowded street, the contrast between Tahara’s slender yet muscular stature and Hummer’s portliness almost comical.

As they walked, those who recognized Tahara made way, pulling aside those who didn’t.

"What'd you do that for?!" one of them asked his companion, who'd pulled him to the side of the road.

"Dumbass! That's the Grand Foreman who took over the city!"

"N-No way... He's that young...?"

While whispers passed along the parted crowd, Hummer stopped and said apologetically, "Sorry, sir. I'd like to make a little detour..."

"Oh? No worries, Hummy. I'll go with you"

"I-I wouldn't dare take your time, given how busy you are as Grand Foreman!"

"We don't get out of the village enough. Let's do something non-work-related, huh?" Tahara said, pushing the reluctant Hummer along.

Hummer stopped to purchase a pail before leading him to a run-down fishing port with several fisherman's huts that indicated how the port had once thrived—now, they had all been eroded by ocean spray.

"This place is pretty run-down... They don't fish around these parts anymore?" Tahara asked.

"Fishing was a huge industry when I was a kid, but Euritheis fishermen started scaring off the locals with battleships."

"And the port was abandoned."

Hummer crouched down by a large rock and began cleaning an altar so dilapidated that it was impossible to tell what deity it might have worshipped.

Tahara watched curiously before asking, "What's that? Some kind of altar for a god of this world?" He chuckled, seeing how diligently Hummer cleaned the altar.

Hummer chuckled too. "I actually have no idea. Coming here...calmed me down, somehow. Whoever this altar was built for, they and I have something in common—everyone seemed to forget about us." Tahara couldn't see Hummer's face, but he noticed how his back hunched with loneliness. Still, Hummer dipped his rag into the pail over and over, scrubbing the forgotten altar. "Unlike everyone else, no one's ever needed me. By doing this, I felt like I was commiserating with someone. Whoever this altar was made for, they'd probably take offense to that..."

Tahara listened to Hummer's monologue seriously. In a way, he had lived a lonely life for so long, apart from his beloved sister. That's why he suddenly suggested, "Then bring it back to the village."

"Okay, I'll bring it— Whaaaat?!"

"Why keep it in this shabby place? There's a lot more life in our village," Tahara suggested.

"But...we can't just move the altar without permission— Oh?"

"What's up?"

"I-I just heard a woman's voice in my head... She said, 'Permission granted.'"

Tahara let out a hearty laugh. "Hummy! It's too early to be sloshed!"

"I-I'm not drunk!"

Tahara laughed again as he shoved the altar into his Backup Backpack and helped Hummer up by the hand. "We may as well take care of my errand now. Tag along with me, will ya?"

"Y-Yessir! I'll go anywhere with you, if you'll have me!"

Tahara took them to the headquarters of the Adventurer's Guild— an organization that monopolized all loot from the dungeon. It had strong ties to other guilds around the continent, leaving no room whatsoever for new business on the market. In short, they were a financial cartel. At this point, Tahara had no intention of interfering with the established system surrounding the dungeon. He was only seeking to buy some of the loot from the guild at a fair price. For once, Tahara was too busy to dip his hands into the adventurer-monster-dungeon cookie jar.

"You said you used to dungeon crawl before you joined us," Tahara said.

"Yessir..." Hummer didn't have many good memories from Rookie. He'd suffered a serious injury soon after becoming an adventurer, so he'd been forced to work as a porter thereafter...but he made it very far. Now, he only remembered how he'd been bossed around by young adventurers for a pittance.

"Oh? That meat skewer looks good. Wait for me inside, will ya?" Tahara said.

"Y-Yessir!"

As Hummer entered the guild, the three receptionists rose with perfect posture to greet him...and clicked their tongues obnoxiously. Tahara had brought them to a counter reserved for big shot merchants—off-limits to adventurers and small fry.

"You're at the wrong window, *dude*."

"You're that useless porter."

"You're looking for the window by the dungeon. How stupid are you?"

The receptionists sat back down as if Hummer had caused them a great inconvenience by prompting them to rise and greet him. That was when Tahara came in.

The receptionists shot up to their feet. "Welcome, Grand Foreman!" they said as if the picture of hospitality.

Tahara didn't so much as glance their way as he handed Hummer a skewer. "Here. Hang back for a minute and eat this."

"Y-You didn't have to buy one for me...!"

"Once we get back to the village, let's do a barbecue on the beach. I'll bring Manami. She loves those fish... Maybe she's thinking about our time hiding out at the docks too."

"I-I could never intrude on your family time..." Hummer stammered.

Seeing them act buddy-buddy, the receptionists seemed to realize their mistake, because their attitude toward Hummer did a 180—no, a 540. They scurried around the counter and cozied up to him.

"Mister Hummer! This way, please!"

"Huh?" Hummer blurted.

"Mister Hummer, here's a cigar from Euritheis."

"What?! I-I've never had a cigar..."

"This is a cup of fine tea from Suneo. Please let us know what we can do to make you comfortable."

"Y-You shouldn't waste something that expensive on me...!" Hummer said, swarmed by the three receptionists and their insistent hospitality.

Meanwhile, Tahara was looking through his order form. The Grand Foreman was in search of sand snail shells. When finely

crushed and mixed with clay, water, sand, and gravel, the mixture became similar to concrete—material that he couldn't get enough of to support the unending construction in Rabbi. There were countless materials Tahara needed more of: copper and iron that could be harvested from monsters called Tin Men; the meat of Raging Chicken—a popular dish among laborers because it was cheap and nutritious, despite its toughness; the feathers of Great Ravens, which appeared in the lower levels of the dungeon—these were mainly used to make arrows, but also as accessories. With how quickly the village of Rabbi was growing economically, there were never enough goods to go around. The villagers were always starving for more. Tahara also needed to source vast quantities of leather and dairy products, but those would have to come from Mylk, the dairyland of the Northern Nations. Unfortunately, Holylight and Mylk were separated by a great distance and had no preestablished trade.

"Sweetheart," Tahara called to one of the receptionists. "I need more leather, but we're too far from Mylk. The Tungya tribe or whatever got massacred for disappointing the Secretary... How am I supposed to import anything?! Why does my boss have to be like this?!"

"I-I see...?" the receptionist said uncertainly.

"So. Can you scrounge up as much leather and dairy as you can?" Tahara requested.

"U-Understood! A-And, for your usual...?"

"Huh? All of it, sweetheart. All of it. Carry 'em all out for me," he instructed.

"Y-Yes, sir!" The receptionist snapped to attention, pumping her fist a little in celebration. Whenever the Grand Foreman came knocking, they always cleared out their stock...which led to a fat bonus for the employees of the guild.

Hearing the news of Tahara's arrival, the Guildmaster darted out of his office, rushing past the other employees who stood ramrod straight as to not insult their most valuable client.

"Ah, Mister Tahara! Thank you for coming!" the Guildmaster said as he shot a glance at Hummer, sitting nervously by Tahara. The

Guildmaster searched his memories until he recognized Hummer as the porter who'd always been mocked for being useless. But this man was shrewd enough to approach Hummer with the same attitude he carried when speaking to Tahara. "And Mister Hummer! Thank you for making the time!"

"N-No, I...just happened to tag along..." Hummer said.

"Nonsense! Our doors are always open to you, sir."

While Hummer sat anxiously, Tahara processed more purchases, igniting a sort of frenzy within the guild. The items he ordered would be hauled to the village of Rabbi at once, where individual vendors could purchase them directly. These hauls of merchandise never lasted long in Rabbi and were quickly bought out. Even after suffering catastrophic damage from the Invasion, the city of Rookie was enjoying the economic benefits that came with rising demand for dungeon loot—just another ripple effect of the Demon Lord putting his industry into full gear.

"Well, take care like usual, will ya?" Tahara concluded.

"Thank you! Please come again!" the receptionists said as Tahara flung open the door and left, Hummer sheepishly following behind him.

After leaving the guild, Tahara and Hummer headed to the slums.

"There's someone there who looked after you?" Tahara asked.

"Yessir. She often brought me leftovers when I was hungry..."

"So now you're paying her back?"

"I'm trying to repay even a fraction of the kindness I received..."

"Now that's a wholesome story."

Despite the sun shining high in the sky, the slums seemed dingy and dark. Every city had an underbelly, but Rookie's was particularly seedy. Adventurers either found glamorous success or miserable failure in this city—there was no in-between. A stench hung heavy in the air of the slums, and its residents wore stained, worn-out clothes. This wasn't unusual for this continent, though. The villagers of Rabbi were the outliers for bathing and washing their clothes pretty much daily.

Noticing those details, the pair walked deeper into the slums. Eventually, they came up to a woman in her forties pulling a stall.

"You're...Hummer!" she said. "I thought you'd dropped dead..."

"It's...very nice to see you again, Michi."

"And who's this?" Michi asked, gesturing to Tahara.

"Don't mind me. Feel free to stroll down memory lane." Tahara sat on a crate again, looking relaxed as ever as he lit a cigarette. He had nothing against neighborhoods like this—he had been raised in one, after all.

"Where do you live now, Hummer?" Michi asked.

"R-Right now I'm in Holylight..."

"Where it's full of stuffy nobles? You better not be starving."

"I-I'm not... And, um, I wanted to thank you for helping me out," Hummer said.

"Ha!" Michi scoffed. "*You*, thank *me*? Very funny." She started preparing her dishes to sell. Genuinely, she hadn't expected any thanks. She'd only occasionally given him leftovers out of pity and anger at how pathetic Hummer had looked back then.

"B-But Michi, I..."

"Stop mumbling! If you want to thank me, order something!" Michi said.

"O-Okay! Then, I'll take the usual..." Hummer said.

Tahara couldn't help but laugh at how quick and snappy Michi was. To someone like her, Hummer must have seemed like an oaf.

"I'll take one too. Whatever he's having," Tahara said.

"You'd better have the coin to pay for it," Michi said.

Tahara barked a laugh. Since coming to this world, he'd never been eyed like that—like she suspected him of being destitute. Now that the Demon Lord's legion had cleared out the Central coffers, Tahara—who managed all aspects of their operation—was as rich as an oil tycoon. How could he have not laughed when he was treated as a penniless street urchin?

"No sweat. Hummy's got fat pockets nowadays." Tahara turned to Hummer. "Mind picking up my tab?"

"N-No, of course not!" Hummer took out a leather pouch and tugged it open to reveal it full of silver coins.

Michi's expression shifted...to anger. "How the hell do you have that much money?! Don't tell me you and this shady guy stole it

somehow!”

“N-No! I’m sort of a fisherman now...” Hummer quickly said.

“Have you completely lost your mind? There’s no fish in Holylight.”

“There’s plenty of fish,” Tahara cut in, not wanting Michi to call the guards and have Hummer thrown into the slammer.

Through his fishing, Hummer was earning an exorbitant pay every day—certainly enough to draw suspicions in this town where he was known as a useless porter.

Michi seemed to be over the conversation as she began cooking. She drizzled oil onto a pan and tossed in a handful of sliced garlic.

Instantly, its aroma tickled Tahara’s nose. “That ain’t fair. It’s just about lunchtime too.”

Ignoring his comment, Michi poured cooked rice into the pan, scooping in ladles full of soup—a mixture of chicken broth and aromatics. Stirring the contents of the pan with expertise, Michi narrowed her eyes at Tahara. “So, where are these fish in mountain-locked Holylight?”

“Holylight has an opening to the sea now. Hummy’s our rising star, bringing in catch after catch,” Tahara said.

“Rising star my behind... You’d better not be on some street drug.” Michi poured in a small cup of milk and cheese, then poured the dish into wooden bowls. “There. Six bronze coins per bowl. Pay up.”

“Y-Yes, Ma’am! Thank you!” Hummer said.

Tahara took his bowl and inspected it closely, making note of each ingredient used. “Is this a risotto?”

“What’s a risotto?” Michi asked.

“It’s not a dish local to this country, is it?” asked Tahara.

“It’s something I came up with. No one hardly ever buys it. Apparently it’s too expensive for a street seller like me.”

Tahara waggled his nose and made sure the only scent was the appetizing blend of garlic, broth, and cheese—no poison. He practically inhaled it, relishing the perfect balance of melting cheese on piping hot rice. “This is too good!”

“Y-Yessir! I always loved this dish...” Hummer said with a wide

grin on his face. This bowl of street food in the dingy alley was true soul food for him.

"Michi, right?" Tahara asked, still shoveling the risotto into his mouth. "For someone selling in the slums, the quality of your ingredients is insane. You don't get milk and cheese this good unless you trade with Mylk."

"Same story as this oaf here," Michi said. "Once upon a time, I decided I'd feed a dumbass starving on the street. Somehow, that dumbass went and made a successful business in his home country."

A nostalgic look crossed Hummer's face—this was a mutual acquaintance. "Marlo has really gone far... But he's never forgotten Michi's kindness, so he still sends her all sorts of goods."

"Yeah? Interesting stuff," Tahara said, his eyes glimmering for a moment. The timing couldn't have been better, just as he was desperate for Mylk dairy. "You got a way to contact this Marlo?"

"Ha! Even that dumbass is a customer of mine. I'm not gonna introduce him to a shady guy like you," Michi said.

Tahara laughed. "Shady guy, huh? I can't argue with that. I got a suggestion for you, though. Wanna come to Holylight?"

"Forget about it... Who'd choose to live in that country run by good-for-nothing nobles?"

"That's the thing. We slaughtered most of those nobles," Tahara said.

Michi might have taken that as a joke...if she hadn't seen enough people in these alleys to know that Tahara was a true killer. Here and there, his look or movement reminded her of a professional assassin's.

"Be careful who you hang with, Hummer. This guy's bad news!"

"W-W-Wait! Michi, he's—"

"You're absolutely right," Tahara said cockily. "Think about that move to Holylight." With that Tahara turned to leave, knowing full well that harping on his offer would only make Michi want to reject it more.

Apologetically, Hummer slid a heap of silver coins onto Michi's stall and jogged to catch up with Tahara. "I-I'm sorry about that... Michi's always been...stubborn, you could say."

"Don't worry about it. After we eat a few meals there, she'll come around," Tahara said. Street vendor or no, Michi had put her heart into her cooking, and she couldn't have been getting that many customers in these alleys. What chef didn't want more people to eat and enjoy their food? If Michi were to open a food stand in Rabbi, Tahara knew she'd be swamped with diners from dusk till dawn.

Marlo, huh...? I gotta get in touch with him, somehow, Tahara thought as he grabbed Hummer and vanished by Quick Travel.

In the blink of an eye, they were back at the village of Rabbi, where plenty of tasks awaited them.

Meanwhile, crowds flocked to the entrance of the Bastille Dungeon in the city of Rookie. The plaza before the dungeon was overflowing with people, including porters negotiating rates and adventurers coming together to form temporary parties. The item vendors in the plaza were certainly happy, as everything from waterskins, tents, oil, rope, small knives, and sand dials all flew off their shelves as soon as they put them out. There were plenty of other characters, like adventurers who hung on every word of a fortune teller, or a barber humming and trimming along.

The Bastille Dungeon had once been a destination for rookies—adventurers just starting out. Now that the new level had been discovered, adventurers of all skill levels found themselves in Rookie. Even some notable adventuring parties had gathered at the dungeon, which was previously unheard of in the city of Rookie. The reason for such a large crowd was the sighting of Noble Badgers on the new level. They resembled white badgers, and a steak of their meat tasted truly divine. What's more, the sightings were frequent and numerous, despite Noble Badgers being so rare, even in dungeons suited for three-stars and four-stars. Cuts of meat from a single Badger easily fetched five gold coins, and their hide was often put to auction among collectors. It was also popular to use their hide in crafting luxurious scarves. Another monster found on the new level was Foggy Crystal, which dropped an extremely valuable item called a Crystal Rose. People were in a positive frenzy at the prospect of getting their hands on these, especially since the monsters were weak enough for any adventurer to defeat.

“Who thought Noble Badgers would show up in a dungeon like this?”

“A ton of them too.”

“No one had made it to that level before. They went unhunted and multiplied.”

The porters stashed their food into their backpacks as they chatted. They were all packing plenty of rations, from vegetables, jerky, dried fruit, salted nuts, to even waterskins full of wine. Every party was packing for a long crawl, determined not to return until they’d scored as many of their desired items as they wanted. No matter how rare the meat or leather or crystal was, its value was sure to plummet once the market was flooded. Every party was anxious to gather as much as they could and sell it off before that happened.

In the middle of the frenzied adventurers stood Yukikaze and Mikan. They had already made a name for themselves, but now there were even rumors that they would be brought up to A-rank for their contribution. This tag team could be spotted anywhere, with Yukikaze’s white, fairylike skin, and Mikan’s even tan.

It seemed that the other adventurers couldn’t help gossiping about them.

“They’re such a good team... You think Mikan would let me buy her a drink?”

“I shall defend Yukikaze’s back door with my life.”

“Dream on. They’re never gonna know either of you exist.”

Unbothered by the stares and whispers, Mikan took in the rebuilt city of Rookie, its devastation still fresh in her memory. “Look at this place, Yukikaze. I feel like this place was a wasteland not too long ago.”

“...Zap that thirst.”

“What?!”

All systems were operating as expected with these two, including Yukikaze’s unhinged comments. Except, perhaps, that Mikan looked a little awkward that their discovery had led to such a kerfuffle. Actually, she had great grievances regarding their discovery.

“Why’d you have to name the level something that makes no

sense?!" she demanded. On this continent, the finders of new discoveries were given the right to name them. This applied to minerals, plants, monsters, and even new levels of a dungeon. Mikan and Yukikaze had fought over the naming right, but Yukikaze had ultimately won the right over a deadly battle of rock-paper-scissors.

"...It's a beautiful name. Mister Fox inspired me," Yukikaze said. Of all the names she could have chosen, she had named the level *F Boy? More like F Daddy*.

Mikan's wrath was entirely justified. "'F Boy? More like F Daddy'?! In what world did you think that was an appropriate name?!"

"...Mister Fox is an F God."

"Shut up!"

Speak of Mister Fox and he shall appear. The Demon Lord Quick Traveled to Rookie, now in his original form, but his towering stature and pitch-black trench coat drew enough attention as it was. He'd clearly come to Rookie because of the message he'd received in his admin screen.

Yukikaze sprinted to the Demon Lord and fully embraced him, stunning him. "H-Hey!"

"...Taking in nutrients only you can provide, Mister Fox."

"There is no such thing!" the Demon Lord protested, even as he noticed his surroundings with amazement. Restoration efforts had still been well underway when he had last come to Rookie, but now the city looked as good as new. What's more, it was teeming with almost as many people as the village of Rabbi. "This place is lively today. Is there some sort of event?"

Mikan puffed her chest as if she had been waiting for him to ask. "Good question. While you were wandering around who-knows-where, we made a critical discovery."

"Oh? What is it?" the Demon Lord prompted.

"...A clit-ical discovery. Mikan is down horrendous."

"Stay out of this!" Mikan shrieked. She reached for her waterskin and took a swig. Since the Demon Lord had paid them a gold medallion to research the dungeon, she was treating this as she would a debrief of an official quest. "Listen. We found a new level of

the dungeon. A path to the 21st level."

"I remember that 20 was the lowest. You're telling me there's another...?" The Demon Lord's suspicions were confirmed—the message he'd received on his admin screen was the same one he'd read at the bottom of Bastille Dungeon.

While the Demon Lord plunged deep into thought, Mikan continued, sounding wary. "Apparently the level's full of Noble Badgers and Foggy Crystals. Rumor spread, and now we have adventurers coming in from all over the continent. We're in takeover mode."

The Demon Lord raised a brow. "Takeover mode?"

In its normal state, adventurers crawled the dungeon in search of loot, like an infiltration. At times, dungeons turned the tables by sending monsters from its maw—an Invasion. "Takeover mode" was when adventurers camped out at every level of the dungeon with plenty of food and drink. Everything from weapons and armor to merchants and blacksmiths were sent inside. If there was demand for it, people even set up taverns in the depths. Unlike any dungeon, the only thing that was truly bottomless was human avarice. Takeovers happened organically when new dungeons or levels were discovered. As Mikan explained this, the Demon Lord could recall plenty of examples from Earth. People were always drawn to any hint of profit and usually ended up using similar strategies as each other to obtain that wealth. One time, a story broke in Japan about someone who stumbled across a small fortune in a bamboo shrub. Immediately, people began scouring any and all clusters of bamboo. When there was high demand for a certain product, scalpers rushed to buy them out. Even in different worlds, human behavior remained largely the same.

"Takeover. It's well put," the Demon Lord said.

"...You can take over my body any time, Mister Fox."

"That's not what I—" The Demon Lord's objections were cut short as he saw what Mikan had handed him—a strange paper. "What is this?"

"Dunno. Whatever writing was on it, it disappeared as soon as we tried to read it," Mikan said.

The Demon Lord read the bizarre text. In the next breath, he was tugging Mikan by her waist and Quick Traveling to level 20.

When they appeared without a sound, whispers broke out among nearby adventurers.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What was that?! How did we get into the dungeon?! What did you...?!" Mikan shrieked.

"Which way to go down, Mikan?" the Demon Lord demanded.

"Th-That way... H-Hey! At least explain what you did!"

Ignoring Mikan's panic, the Demon Lord strode in the direction she'd indicated, the strange paper balled up in his white-knuckled fist.

"...My first teleportation with Mister Fox. So spicy," Yukikaze breathed.

"Spicy? You mean scary!" Mikan countered.

"...It's peak romantasy."

"Can you shut up forever?!"

The Demon Lord took in the 20th level of the dungeon, which he could barely recognize. Countless illuminations—powered by Light Spell Stones—had been installed everywhere, lighting up the dungeon like it had a high-noon sun. Vendors filled every cell on the floor, converting them into taverns, gambling rooms, and even brothels. The entire level seemed to serve as a rest and refueling stop for adventurers about to plunge into the unknown.

The Demon Lord strode past the whispering adventurers and stood at the top of the staircase going down. As soon as he read the paper, it was like a fog had lifted from his mind to reveal a person—someone he'd spent so much time with in Japan, but couldn't even remember their name, age, or gender.

"XX... No, Rising Star." That had been their username. The realization struck the Demon Lord like a dagger thrust into his chest. *How could I have forgotten...? Something's not right.* Rising Star and Akira Ono had been best friends, always effortlessly spending time together. Back in those days, Akira might have thought nothing more of the username than, perhaps, that it was a little cringey. But now, the title "Rising Star" carried a whole new meaning. *When I looked into texts about the Fallen Angel in the Holy City's library...* the

Demon Lord recalled. There were many myths and accounts about Lucifer the Fallen Angel. Some called him Satan, and others claimed that he was the ruler of all angels. It seemed like every text he opened had another moniker for Lucifer: Child of Dawn, Mythical Rebel, Lightbringer, Dawn Star, Ruler of Night, Child of Twilight...and Rising Star.

The Demon Lord's mind—Akira's mind—spun round and round as memories came rushing back. He uncrumpled the paper in his hand and read it again.

Dear Akira, what did you leave behind?

If "leave behind" meant forgot, Akira had too many responses. One question after another popped up in his head, leading to more and more questions without answers. Why had he been summoned to this world as the Demon Lord? Whose voice had spoken to him before he was summoned? What was the meaning of those memories of an apocalypse on Earth that he saw in flashbacks? What was the Great Light? Who was Lucifer who fought against it? What was Tartarus? Why had Maria appeared like a sudden nightmare? How could he use the powers from the game in this world?

Akira's mind raced to find the root of these questions and realized that his memories before the summoning didn't make sense. The Infinity Game *was a worldwide MMO... But when I shut down the server, I was alone at home, not in an office. That doesn't make sense. How accurate are those memories? Did I really shut down the servers so peacefully?*

The Demon Lord glared at the stairs that plunged into darkness and snarled, "Are you there? This will be the last time you mess with my life, you piece of shit...!"

Who—what—awaited him down those steps? In the back of his mind, the Demon Lord knew. Yet, he hadn't acknowledged it fully—he was avoiding it, subconsciously.

Just when the Demon Lord was about to take another step, darkness fell. Somehow, all of the Light Spell Stones went out at once. The sudden blackout plunged the adventurers into chaos as they shouted, scrambled for their weapons, and tried to get into

formation.

Then, countless glass screens appeared in the air as if to surround the entire level of the dungeon, all littered with mocking emoticons. While the adventurers looked on in horror, this was just a reprisal for the Demon Lord.

He lit the cigarette in his mouth and smirked. "Crass and uninspired, as always."

As if in answer, a sentence appeared on the screens: *No peeking.*

Revulsion coursed through the Demon Lord's veins. It seemed like a warning—*Don't go digging in your memories*—and a cruel mockery all at once. Forcing his hands to stop shaking, the Demon Lord took a slow drag. "Enough of your cheap theatrics. Show me your face!" As soon as the Demon Lord tried to descend the stairs, he was violently bounced back.

A barrier buzzed in his path, with illuminated lines of text: WARNING—KEEP OUT.

"Dammit! What the hell is this?!" The Demon Lord slugged the barrier at full force, but it didn't budge.

In fact, letters in deep-red font, as if written by fresh blood, flew onto the screen.

Devour all, like the planet stained in red.

Rule over all, like the planet teeming with blue.

The Demon Lord felt his gut free—these messages were telling him to take control of all there was. He attempted another tackle at the barrier to no avail.

As if in derision—like a spider's web wrapping around its prey—another message appeared on the screens.

My other half...it is not yet time for us to become one.

"I'm not your other half, you bastard!" The Demon Lord threw Sodom's Fire before he could think about it, shattering the screen before him into a thousand pieces. In a chain reaction, the other screens began shattering after flashing a string of letters in a number of scripts—English, Arabic, Mandarin, Hangul... None of them were intelligible, so the purpose of these must have been only to mock the Demon Lord.

While the adventurers screamed and ran from the downpour of

glass, the Demon Lord took his bravado and went full tilt. “Not yet time, huh? Fine. I’ll go take care of everything!” With a flourish of his coat, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled.

As soon as he disappeared, the Light Spell Stones came back on, illuminating the whole level again. Relieved, the adventurers loudly called to each other and began cleaning up the mess that was left behind.



In the shadows of a peaceful humdrum, the stage was steadily being set, with many stars and starlets waiting in its wings. The prelude to a world war that would shake up the entire continent was quietly well underway.

Postscript

Thank you so much for picking up this milestone volume! Lots of fun occasions this time around, like the novel and comic book coming out at the same time, and the anime coming just around the corner after this book hits the shelves.

There are plenty of hardships I could reminisce about: from the planning of this story to the unfolding of it, from winning the award to signing these book deals... Is my life flashing before my eyes?

Jokes aside, let's do a quick recap of volume 10. So far, I've written a lot about what each faction did and how they changed through the civil war. In this volume, Hummer—the shining hope for all middle-age men—finally unlocks his full potential. He was one of the precious few normies in this story full of whacky characters, but I wanted to write people who excel in all sorts of fields beyond combat.

Back when I was an honest working joe, I was told over and over again that there were winners and losers in life, and I think that sentiment has only gotten more intense with time. Now people are talking about the parent lotto, the teacher lotto, the boss lotto... It's a "lotto" nonsense if you ask me!

At my age, I can't help but feel that life isn't that simple. You can't just say the richer you are the better person you are. My point is that the true winners are the ones who don't give a crap what the world thinks of them and do what they want.

No one's controlling me, for example. And I only hope that you, dear reader, also live the way you want to live.

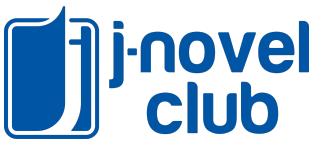
I want to write a little about the anime, but I'm sure a lot more details than I can share now will have come out by the time this book hits the shelf. Last time, I mostly gave some edits to each week's script, but I've been involved in the read throughs and the recordings through online calls. I can't thank the production team

and voice cast enough, who all tackled my story with their whole hearts week after week. I created that part of the story years ago, but those characters are hard to forget. I'm hoping we can all enjoy the anime together.

See you in volume 11!

8/28/2024 Kurone Kanzaki





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by Kurone Kanzaki

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