Moon Blossom

The Ruthless Reincarnated Mercenary Forms the Ultimate Army

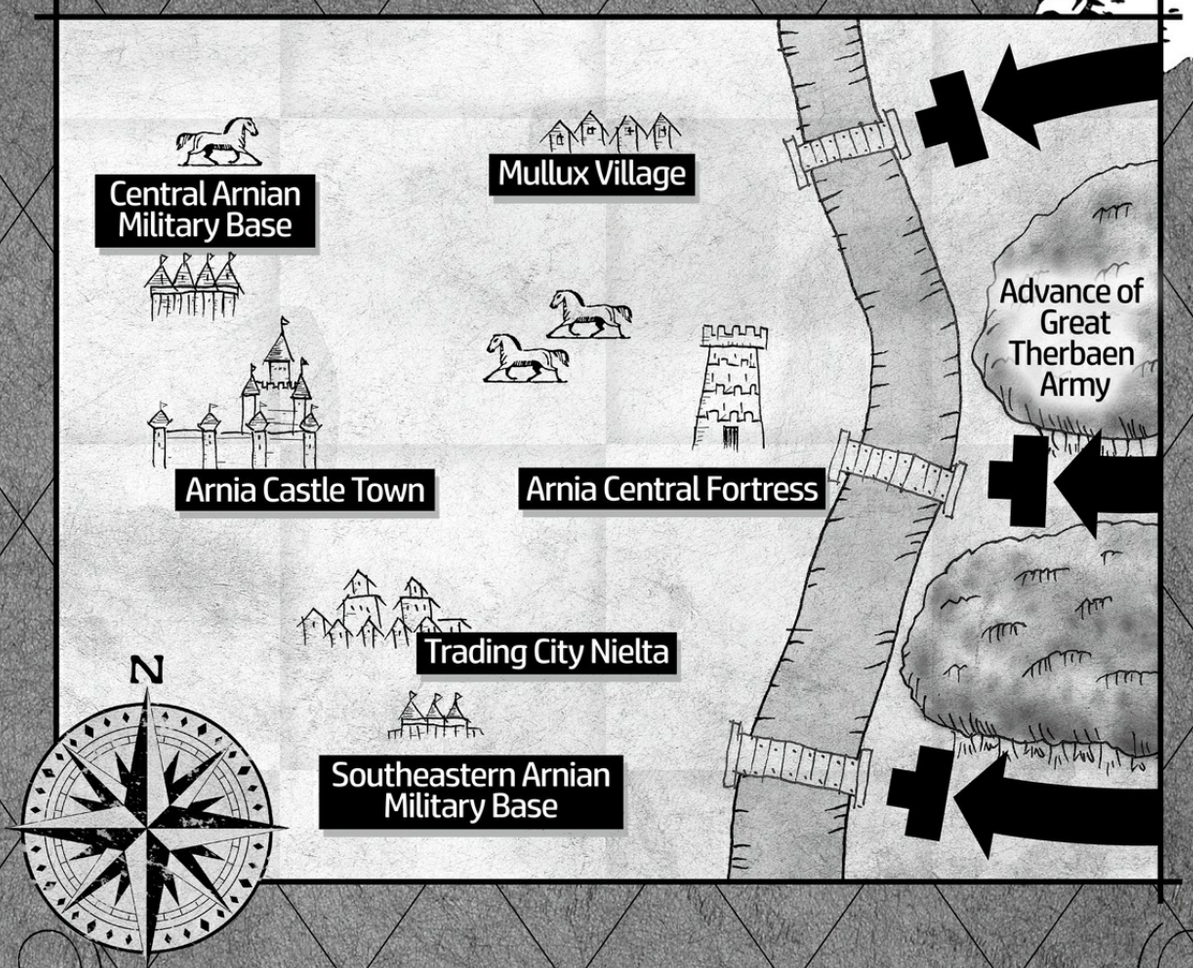
Asura

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Map of Eastern Arnian Kingdom



Map design: Kimura Design Lab

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Part One, Chapter One: First kill at age thirteen? No. It was much earlier.

A large group of infantrymen proceeded down a straight forest path. They were the target for this mission. They carried their spears in their right hands and their shields in their left... Swords hung from their waists, and leather armor protected their bodies. It was the standard equipment for foot soldiers.

While still hidden away behind a tree, Asura counted how many people were in the infantry platoon. There were three squads, about thirty people in total. This was the first job that Asura's mercenary group had taken on, so they wanted to make their debut with a splash.

The thought of the coming battle filled Asura with excitement. She took a quiet but deep breath and with a small smile, signaled the countdown with her fingers.

Three—*Listen up, you guys. You have to stick to the plan, all right?*

Two—*We're a platoon going up against a battalion, but there's no need to fear.*

One—*We are strong.*

When Asura put down her last finger, her deputy, Lumia, shot a bolt of light magic towards the battalion. In this world, offensive magic lacked firepower. One could use it in a street brawl, but common sense dictated it too useless for actual warfare. That was why being a healer was the only way for mages to move up in the world. No one was counting on Lumia's magic to do any real damage.

Ah, but I'm a romantic when it comes to magic. And besides, it all comes down to how you use it. That was Asura's take on the matter.

The enemy army froze, standing on guard at the ball of light that had suddenly appeared before them. And then, the ball of light exploded with a dazzling flash.

“Go! Go! Go!” Asura yelled. At her call, her companions leaped out from the forest and swarmed the path. The front line of the enemy army had dropped their spears, moaning in pain as they clutched at their eyes.

“Ha ha! Never heard of ‘Flashbang’?!” Asura leaped into the air, her long silver hair flowing behind her. One of her comrades supported her with wind magic.

Someone at the army’s rear guard, whose eyes had escaped the brunt of the Flashbang, yelled out, “It’s the enemy! Engage! It’s the enemy!”

Too slow, Asura thought gleefully. While still midair, she scattered seven pink petals before landing on the other side of the road. Thanks to her comrade’s support spell, her jumping ability had been greatly increased. Even then, this support magic was limited to a single target, so it was said that having several well-trained, physically strong foot soldiers was far more effective.

As soon as Asura’s flower petals landed on the enemy soldiers, the delicate blossoms exploded. They were only strong enough to blow someone’s head off, but they were sufficient. Not like humans could live without a head anyway.

Asura’s magic was “Fixed Element: Flower.” It was a Fixed Element found only in first-rate mages, but even so, its firepower was middling at best. Despite how long it took to learn magic, many of its uses were seen more as conveniences than anything else. That was why warriors were regarded more highly than mages.

While Asura leaped to the other side of the road, a foot soldier writhed in pain as embers swept up his body. It was the fire magic cast by a blond boy named Jyrki, a member of Asura’s mercenary group. Fire magic at its strongest could only burn a single person to death. The commonly accepted view was that killing someone with a sword was faster. But for the purpose of sowing panic and chaos among the enemy’s ranks, there was nothing more efficient than fire magic. One couldn’t fault the panicking soldiers—they were watching one of their own be turned into a funeral pyre.

After using his attack spell, Jyrki quickly fled into the woods. Iina, the one who had cast the support spell on Asura, was already there.

Good. That’s exactly what you need to do. “Fire and maneuver.” Get out of the

way as soon as you take your shot.

Lumia brandished her twin daggers and made her way to Asura's side, slashing the throats of three enemies as she went. As usual, her attacks were smooth and precise like a dancer's movements. Asura's team mainly used daggers as their weapons. Depending on the situation, they would wield other arms, but for this fight, they'd only brought knives.

Next, the battalion commander, the only person in the army on a horse, suffocated. One of Asura's companions—a large man named Marx—had created a water bubble right on the enemy's face, making it impossible to breathe. Water magic was usually used to treat wounds and cure poisoning, as well as to create drinking water. It was practically useless as an attack spell. Throwing water on an enemy wouldn't stop them. But drowning them certainly would.

"Ha ha! Your commander has just died! Well? You still wanna go?!" Asura yelled excitedly.

If she had her way, she wanted the infantrymen to come at her. She wanted to annihilate them all. But in both this world and her previous one, the enemy usually surrendered or retreated if their commander was killed. But just as that thought entered her head, one of the soldiers charged her. He must have dropped his spear, because he charged at her with his sword drawn.

"A suicide attack done willingly with no reinforcements? You're an idiot, but hey, this kind of chaos is part of what makes war fun." Asura readied her dagger with her right hand and gestured at Lumia to enter the woods with her left.

Lumia obeyed instantly. At the same time that Asura dodged the soldier's slash with the most minimal of movements, she slipped behind him and kicked the back of his knee with her boot with maximum force. He fell to the ground, then she wrapped her arms around him from behind.

"Oh my. A neck placed right in front of me?" She slid her dagger across his throat. "Did you think we were just a bunch of normal mages? Too bad. We're soldier-mages. We can fight in close quarters too."

Asura's expression softened and her lips pulled in a smile. *Finally, a real war.* Her heart couldn't stop racing and she couldn't stop smiling. Just from this first

attack, thirteen enemies were dead. What an auspicious start.

Now then, I guess I should scatter some petals. Asura's magic could be used as land mines as well.

"Retreat! Retreat!" someone shouted, likely the enemy's vice captain. "Don't go into the forest! Take up a defensive formation!"

It was a wise decision, in Asura's opinion. The surviving foot soldiers adjusted their positions at once. Now Asura and the others were at a disadvantage. Even if they shot magic at the soldiers from the shadows of the trees, the enemy could easily deflect with their shields. And besides, the true essence of a soldier-mage's strategy was a rapid-fire assault. After that, the enemy would bring the battle to a location with plenty of obstructions to hide behind. But Asura's group had taken that likely scenario into account and planned accordingly. And that wasn't all.

"We're moving on to plan B! Wait for my signal!" Asura yelled as loudly as she could to ensure her allies on the other side of the road heard her. Things were finally starting to get fun, so she'd play until the end.

Her deputy Lumia approached her. "Asura," she said in a dissatisfied tone. Her voice was as husky and sexy as usual.

"What? Is there a problem?"

"We've already completed our mission. I don't believe it's necessary to massacre them all."

At twenty-eight, Lumia was the oldest of the mercenary group Moon Blossom, Asura's platoon, and an experienced combat veteran. The waves of her shoulder-length brown hair were obviously natural rather than the result of a perm. Lumia was on the whole, to put it mildly, extremely sexy. She had a very beautiful face with a captivating and mature allure.

Her breasts were on the larger side too, though not to the point that they were enormous. It felt great to bury your face into Lumia's chest. One of the things that made Asura grateful for being reincarnated as a girl was that even if she touched other women, it wasn't regarded as sexual harassment.

Granted, she only ever did that to Lumia.

“Our mission was to stop the enemy battalion and, if possible, deplete their forces,” said Lumia. “Or that was what I thought it was, anyways.”

Asura gave a slight shrug. It had been thirteen years since Asura was reincarnated in this world, so in other words, she was still only thirteen years old. She had trained her body, but it still felt weak and scrawny compared to her previous life as a man. In truth, Asura looked slim and her chest was small. She was so flat that the mounds of her breasts looked more like a trick of the mind.

Asura was very taken with her own face, however. It gave off a slightly frigid impression, but if you asked her, she’d say she was a young girl of unparalleled beauty. She knew she wasn’t wrong, as she’d been told as such to her face several times. *Oh wait, that’s only after they also say, “If you keep your mouth shut,” isn’t it?*

“I believe we’ve more than accomplished our mission,” Lumia said calmly.

“We did. So? Are you telling me that we should just pack it up? This is my first job, Lumia. The first job since we gathered our companions a year ago. I’ve been training my whole life to lead a mercenary group for exactly this purpose, ever since I awoke to my memories at the age of three. Besides, it’s not as if killing more people would get us in trouble for providing too many freebies. And also, if I don’t have to mince words, I just like war.”

In her past life, Asura had been the leader of a mercenary group and fought in many countries. She could never forget how much fun that life was, and why she’d chosen the path of a fighter in this one as well.

“If you insist on killing everyone, then I will judge that you’ve crossed the line,” Lumia said.

“Ah, I see. Well, well, aren’t you kind to the enemy?” Asura chuckled. “But hey, Lumia, they’re invaders. They’ve come to kill the people of the Arnia Kingdom. You know, our employer? They’re soldiers, here to rejoice in slaughter. On the flip side, that means they should be prepared to be slaughtered themselves, no? Even *if* that means being killed by a contemptible band of mercenaries like us.”

Lumia fell silent, but looked as if she was still deep in thought.

Ah, if I don't offer some sort of compromise, then we'll have to kill each other, Asura figured.

A battle to the death between Asura and Lumia—if Asura ever were to descend into nothing more than an atrocious murderer, then Lumia would stop her, even if it meant killing her. That was Lumia's resolve. But in the mercenary business, knowing where to draw that line was vague and difficult.

"What's wrong, you cowardly mages?!" the enemy vice captain bellowed. "Is that all you've got?! You cravens! Why don't you come out and fight us face-to-face?! Or is ambushing us and then scurrying away the only strategy that you have?!"

"There, Lumia, can't you hear that? They *want* to die. They're calling me—calling *us*. But..." Asura paused. "Lumia, I don't want to fight you. I don't want to kill you, nor do I want you to kill me. You're the only family I have, in the truest sense of the word. And so, how about I offer them an opportunity?"

"An opportunity?"

"Yes, Lumia, an opportunity for them to live as afforded by war. To put it in simpler terms, I'm going to give them the opportunity to give up."

"Are you saying that you'll call for their surrender?" Lumia asked.

"Yes, that's right." Asura replied. "I want to respect your opinion, so I don't mind kindly explaining to them the difference in our strengths. If you wish, then I'll even throw in a smile. But hey, listen, if they still don't back off after that, then I'm going to do it. I'll do it. *We'll* do it. Of course, that includes you, since you're my subordinate. We'll thoroughly and wholeheartedly show them the meanings of the words 'hell' and 'despair.'"

Asura stared straight into Lumia's brown eyes. Lumia eventually let out a sigh.

"I understand. If you're going to offer the enemy the right to choose, then it wouldn't count as crossing the line." With that, Lumia was convinced.

"Then, wait for my signal," Asura ordered. It was sure to be a wonderful signal—the beautiful and heart-pounding call to resume their battle.

Asura walked out of the forest alone. The soldiers had just started to relax

their defensive formation. Quite a bit of time had passed, so they must have figured that Asura and the others had already fled.

“Defensive positions!” the enemy vice captain barked as soon as he saw Asura. The soldiers immediately raised their shields back up.

“My oh my. Don’t you think that’s a bit too cowardly considering your opponent is a cute little girl?” As promised, Asura had a bright and cheery smile. All that was left was to convince the enemy that they were outmatched and ask for their surrender. Then she could fulfill her agreement with Lumia.

“I recognize that silver hair and black robe! You’re the one who ordered that ambush earlier, aren’t you?! Just who are you?! You move more like an assassin than a mage. Who’s your employer?!”

“I’m Asura Lyona, leader of the mercenary group Moon Blossom. Take care to remember that. We’re neither mages nor assassins. We’re—”

“Leader? *You?*” the soldiers murmured among themselves after hearing that.

I was in the middle of a sentence, Asura thought to herself. She had planned to say, “We’re soldier-mages!” as loud as she could.

“Shut up and let me finish. Listen, we are incredibly strong. The day you win against Moon Blossom is the day that pigs fly. If we continue to fight, then it’ll become a one-sided massacre. Now, I’m fine with that, but my kindhearted deputy isn’t.” Asura raised her hands and shook her head with theatrical exasperation.

“So I recommend that you weak, pathetic cowards just surrender. Don’t worry. I promise that we won’t kill you. We’ll hand you over to the Arnia army and that’ll be the end of it.”

Even if that was the result, it was more than enough of a freebie for the Arnia army. But the enemy soldiers started yelling.

“Q-Quit screwing with us, you brat!”

“The Great Therbae Kingdom would never surrender to a little kid!”

“Mages or assassins or whoever you are! Don’t think a single successful ambush makes you victors!”

Asura couldn’t help but giggle at their delightful protests. The enemy soldiers froze at the sight of her smile. She wasn’t aware of it herself, but Asura’s smile was terrifying to behold.

“Then let us continue this reverie of a battle. A fight centered around magic, it’s the stuff of dreams!”

Asura raised her right hand and snapped her fingers. In an instant, Iina literally flew out from the forest under the power of “Aircraft,” a wind-element support spell. As she soared above the enemy soldiers’ heads, she dropped several bottles right on top of them. After she landed on the opposite side of the forest, the soldiers burst into flames, all thanks to Jyrki’s fire elemental spell, “Fireball.”

“Oh, I guess this is more of a nightmare for you all, huh?” Asura corrected herself.

The bottles Iina had dropped were filled with oil. If magic wasn’t powerful on its own, all you needed to do was amplify it.



The sound of the enemy soldiers' death throes rose above the roaring of the fire as they thrashed in pain. Eventually, they fell to the ground one by one, never to move again.

"Sticking together in a defensive formation sure back*fired* on you guys," Asura quipped.

"Shut up, you shitstain!!!" A lucky soldier who had managed to escape most of the oil rushed towards Asura.

"Hey, watch out. My—" But at the same moment Asura opened her mouth, the ground beneath the enemy soldier exploded.

"GAAAAAHHHH!!!!!!" He fell to the ground, his right leg blown to smithereens.

"Didn't you hear me?" Before Asura could finish, the soldier rolling on the ground exploded yet again and his blood splattered onto her cheek. "I scattered my mines over there, so you'll be blown into pieces if you're not careful."

When Asura had snapped her fingers earlier, she'd activated her flower magic, "Mines," and set them in front of her. Her Mines took the form of seven petals, imperceptible unless one was looking for them.

"Lumia! Marx! It's time for cleanup! Keep one of them alive! You two can choose the lucky survivor!"

At Asura's command, Lumia and Marx emerged from the forest and slashed the throats of the remaining soldiers with their daggers. They were the most proficient at hand-to-hand combat within Moon Blossom. But they shared the same flaw of kindness.

Lumia killed with an elegant touch while Marx favored a more forceful approach. Both carved a path through the enemies, snuffing out their lives before Asura's eyes. It wasn't long before they'd virtually exterminated them, but one was still alive, so it wasn't a total massacre. In any case, the battle was over. In Asura's opinion, it was a terribly lonely revelation.

"All right then." Asura walked up to the final soldier and smiled at him. It was a normal smile that befitted her physical age, but the soldier remained rooted

to the ground, a terrified look on his face as he stared up at her, unable to even get up to his feet. “There’s a reason we kept you alive, you know. Now, let’s have a little chat. Listen closely.”

Asura crouched before him. On closer inspection, he was quite young, likely around seventeen years old. In many of this world’s countries, he’d be considered a legal adult, albeit a very young one.

I see, those two let the youngest guy live.

“We’re Moon Blossom. You got that? The ones that destroyed your battalion were the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. I recommend that you hire us the next time your country goes to war. Like they say, today’s enemies can be tomorrow’s employer.”

Part One, Chapter Two: The quality a leader needs? Probably a mindset that enjoys everything and a broken way of thinking.

In the audience chamber of Arnia Castle, King Arnia sat on his throne and looked down at the members of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. It consisted of three women and two men, all of whom were dressed in black robes. According to his general's report, they'd accomplished some truly amazing military feats, to the point that it was impossible to believe they were a band of mages. Thus, he'd immediately summoned them before him.

"My oh my, if it isn't the young king himself. Whatever could you want from us?" The one who spoke was a young silver-haired girl with a faint smile. She was slender and appeared to be the youngest of the lot, but her face was unsettlingly pretty. In a decade's time, she'd be considered a woman of unparalleled beauty, and could likely even become a noble's bride. However, in King Arnia's opinion, she had a serious problem.

"How dare you?! You're standing before His Majesty the King!" the captain of King Arnia's private guard, clad in pure-white armor, exclaimed. "You must kneel first, and remain silent until he grants you the permission to speak!"

The girl's problem was her lack of manners in the face of nobility. She wasn't the only one. Every member of Moon Blossom stayed standing, not even lowering their faces.

"Why should I do that?" the silver-haired girl asked with extreme disgust. "He isn't *our* king. Besides, I hate kneeling and I hate taking orders. I have no interest in any rules aside from the ones in my group."

"Why, you little—! What kind of talk is that?! I'll strike you down where you stand!" The captain unsheathed his sword.

The girl's face suddenly grew blank and she stared at the captain with a terribly dark look. "You're sure about that?"

“Urk...” Intimidated, the captain stopped moving.

“Stoppin’ was the smart choice there, pops,” a blond boy said. “The boss ain’t the sorta girl who shows mercy when trouble comes ’er way. That goes for Iina and me too.”

The blond boy and the black-haired girl named Iina both held daggers in their right hands. It was clear that they had been preparing for a fight.

“Plus...Jyr...and I both...hate kneeling too,” Iina piped up.

What an astoundingly audacious group! And what dark eyes all of its members possessed! At the very least, these three—the silver-haired girl they called their boss, Jyrki, and Iina—were all absolutely broken people.

“They do not need to kneel. I shall allow it. You, put your sword away.” They were a dangerous lot, in King Arnia’s opinion. He even felt that they’d seriously start a war against an entire country if the alternative was bending a knee. The captain sheathed his sword at the same time Jyrki and Ina put away their daggers.

“Lumia, Marx, if you two wanna kneel, you can go ahead,” the silver-haired girl said. If the king remembered the reports correctly, she was Asura Lyona, the leader of Moon Blossom.

“Don’t mind if I do then.” With that, the captivatingly beautiful woman, Lumia, knelt before the king.

“You have my thanks, Boss. As a former knight, it feels awful *not* to kneel.” The large red-haired man, Marx, also knelt with a quiet motion. His toned muscles were obvious even through the robes, and he was surely a warrior of terrifying skill. Right then, a realization hit King Arnia.

“Wait. You... Your name is Marx? Are you perhaps Marx Redford from the Knights of the Azure Skies?”

“There was a time in my life when that was my title, King Arnia. But now, I am simply Marx, a soldier-mage from the Moon Blossom mercenary group.”

King Arnia ruminated over that answer for a while. Then he said, “Hmm, I see. That reminds me, what is a soldier-mage? A warrior who can also use magic?”

That was the main reason King Arnia had called upon them. He'd wanted to know more about Moon Blossom, and how this small group of only five had managed to destroy a battalion of about thirty men.

"Young king, I can answer that question," Asura said. "I was the one who invented the soldier-mage army branch."

"Army branch?"

"That's right. We're ultimately based on soldiers, not on warriors. It's true that all of us can use magic. However, magic is but one of our weapons, much like an AK-47 or an RPG."

"A-AK...?"

"Oh, sorry. Forget about that. I meant like a sword or a bow." Asura shrugged nonchalantly. "Let me continue. We can use magic at the same time as close-quarters combat, so of course, we also undergo physical training. A soldier-mage is one who can utilize magic effectively, can understand the 'fire and maneuver' strategy, and can fight without relying solely on their spells."

"'Fire and maneuver'?" King Arnia echoed, scrunching up his face in confusion.

"It's a way to move on the battlefield. You shoot and then you run. Or I guess, you cast a spell and then you run. Our specialty is guerrilla warfare in forest and urban environments. We don't face off against our enemies in an open field like most armies do."

King Arnia let out a breath, truly impressed. Not at the philosophy of the soldier-mages, but rather at how articulate Asura's explanation was. She was a very bright girl, and it was clear why she was able to lead the group as their boss.

"Your Majesty, allow me to add onto that," Lumia said. "We are a group that conceals ourselves, ambushes our targets, and then kills them using magic and physical weapons."

"Hmm, I see. So you're mages who operate like assassins, then?"

"In my past life, finding the enemy first to launch a preemptive strike was

considered the normal strategy, so it doesn't really feel right to get called an 'assassin' for that," Asura murmured, tilting her head to the side. "But stealth kills *are* part of our repertoire, so I guess it's not a *total* misunderstanding..."

"Your past life?" King Arnia queried.

"Ah. You probably won't believe me anyway, but I was a mercenary in my past life as well. Ha ha, when I was forty, I ate a missile to the face from an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer and got sent off to the afterlife. Man, that sure was a fierce and fun battle." She spoke with such a happy expression on her face, but King Arnia couldn't understand even half of what she said.

"Asura, he thinks you're insane," Lumia sighed.

"Humph. I don't care," Asura snorted. "No one believes in my sanity anyway."

It was true that Asura's attitude and statements were not those of a stable person. But her bizarre way of thinking was the key to Arnia's victory. That was the premonition the king had, anyway.

"I would like to use your group at key strategic points going forward. How long will you be staying in our country?"

"Ha ha! What a foolish question. Young king, we're mercenaries, remember? Think of us as wandering ghosts in search of our next battleground. We'll be here until the war ends, so use us whenever you like. So long as you give us the proper pay, we'll do whatever you want."

Asura was grinning, but without any hint of adorable precociousness. Frankly, the king found her completely mental. If the Arnia Kingdom could properly utilize the Moon Blossom mercenary group and Asura Lyona, then they might be able to win against the Great Therbae Kingdom. However, should he mishandle the reins, those fangs might turn to bite their keeper...

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"So," Lumia said wearily, "the first thing we do is go hog wild in a bar?"

"Oh, lighten up. We won, didn't we? We destroyed an entire battalion. I'd say that gives us the right to indulge in the alcoholic ambrosia of victory."

It was the night of their first job, which had ended with their first victory.

Asura had booked an entire bar located in the slums of Arnia castle town, and they were going all out with their celebration. The tables were laden from end to end with extravagant platters of food, and each member of Moon Blossom had a courtesan attending them.

“Boss, you say ‘alcoholic,’ but that’s tea you’re drinking, isn’t it?” Jyrki asked in a cheery tone as he stuffed bills down a courtesan’s cleavage. His face was bright red thanks to the three beers he’d tossed back. With Asura (the boss) and Lumia (the vice captain), he spoke in a more proper manner than usual. He wasn’t very good at it though.

“This body still can’t handle any alcohol,” Asura lamented. “If I drink, I’ll throw up for sure.”

“Is that...your weakness, Boss?” Iina was a little unsteady on her feet, so her courtesan was supporting her weight. Iina was a fifteen-year-old girl with short black hair. She had a nasty look in her eye, and one only needed to glance at her to know she was a bad person.

“The alcohol is forgivable, but calling for courtesans? Really?” Lumia said.

“It’s better to have pretty ladies around to pour your liquor, right? Or should I have hired male prostitutes for you and Ina?”

“Stop that. I’ve sworn a vow of celibacy, and plan to uphold it until the day I get married.”

“Oh, absolutely. I’ve also taken the same vow, so I’m fine with just the alcohol.” Marx looked shy around the courtesans and he couldn’t stop giving them small, grateful nods. He looked slightly drunk.

Lumia was twenty-eight and Marx was twenty-five, but both were completely serious about their vows of celibacy, so Asura wouldn’t mock them for it.

“Well, I di’n’t make that vow, so can I go get a room, Boss?” Jyrki was eighteen years old and the sometime leader of a bandit group. He had blond hair and a friendly air about him. Apparently, he was a somewhat good-looking fellow, but Asura wouldn’t know, considering she had no interest in men’s appearances.

“I won’t tell you how to use your own money, Jyrki. Do whatever you want

with it. I, too, have hired my fair share of courtesans back in my past life."

Asura had already evenly split the contingency fee with everyone. For this outing, they'd used the group's shared money, which was what they'd received up front. It was supposed to fund their supplies and weapons, but everyone had used their own for the job, so the cash became a bonus. The group had solely hired the courtesans to pour drinks, so if Jyrki wanted to sleep with one of them, he'd have to pay out of his own pocket.

"'Kay, I'll see y'all tomorrow." Jyrki wrapped his arm around the courtesan's waist, an unprecedentedly wide smile on his face, and left the table with her.

"Jyr's such a perv...a degenerate...an idiot... Go die," Iina murmured under her breath as she stared at Jyrki's retreating backside. Iina and Jyrki weren't siblings by blood, but she worshiped him like an older brother.

Asura grabbed a skewer of meat, but upon seeing a young courtesan staring at it with open desire, asked, "Do you want to eat this?"

"May I? May I really?" the girl replied, her eyes sparkling with delight.

"Of course. You girls can indulge yourselves as well," Asura said, smiling at the other courtesans.

"How kind of you," Lumia said, her expression softening.

"Nah. We ordered so much that there'd be leftovers anyway." Asura wasn't kidding. The amount of food before them was staggering.

"Oh, right. Asura, I want to have a serious talk with you. Watch out around the royal family."

"You mean because of lèse-majesté or whatever it's called?"

"That's right. King Arnia is a patient and forgiving king, but there are also many who lack those virtues."

"I hate buttering people up as much as I hate kneeling. If you pick a fight with me, I'll buy it. If you declare war on me, we'll fight to the death. That's all there is to it."

"I...just don't want you to end up like me."

“Yeah, I bet. I guess you’ll just have to pray that all the monarchs in this world are tolerant people.”

Lumia heaved a sigh but she didn’t say another word, drowning them with a sip of wine.

“U-Um...” the young courtesan said.

“That reminds me, I don’t believe we ever got your name.” Asura gave her a smile. “My name is Asura Lyona. I’m the leader of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom.”

“Oh, er, I’m Salume. Um...th-thank you so much for the food.”

“It’s fine. Eat as much as you like.”

“M-Miss Asura, you look like you’re younger than me. Yet you’re a mercenary?”

“That’s what I said. How old are you, Salume?”

“I’m fourteen.”

Salume had shoulder-length brown hair and her body was still immature. It was hard to find anything to compliment about her face, but she wasn’t particularly hideous either. In Asura’s opinion, she was the type of girl who would be a better girlfriend than the typical bombshell babe. But Asura’s lover was, first and foremost, the battleground.

“Wow, you’re so young,” Asura said. “You’re still a year older than me though.”

She felt bad for Salume, but only a little. The girl might have been sold as collateral for a family member’s debt, or perhaps she’d had no choice but to become a courtesan in order to survive on the streets. In Asura’s past life, it would be a crime for Salume to work in this establishment, but her story was a pretty common one in this world.

“Is being a mercenary...something that I could do too?” Salume asked.

“Oh?” Asura huffed a small laugh. “If you want to be one, then I can let you into my group.”

“Really?!” There was a mix of excitement and anxiety in Salume’s voice.

“Yes, of course! If you enjoy dying while being shot at by arrows, penetrated by spears, slashed by swords, and trampled under enemy feet, all as you writhe about in your own blood, then you’re more than welcome. Getting raped multiple times before you die is certainly in the cards for you if you’re unlucky. It’s a dream job if you’re into the idea of going to hell while thinking about how blissful your life was *before* you became a mercenary.”

Salume fell silent at Asura’s words. It might have been a bit too exciting for her.

“Before that happens...there’s training...so tough that your body stops working...” Ina said irritably. “You never told me...that you would do such terrible things to me...”

“You mean the torture training, don’t you?” Marx’s face grew pale at the memories. “I seriously considered returning to the knights while going through that.”

“But you all persevered,” Asura said bracingly. “All of you had different reasons for becoming a mercenary, but with your strong conviction, you got through my basic training regime. Now all that’s left is to take on contracts whenever you please, get practical experience, and die as you live on the battlefield. What an amazing life! Besides, aren’t defeat, capture, and torture all part of what makes war fun?”

Asura was the only person who looked like she was enjoying herself.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding,” Lumia sighed, placing her face in her palm. “We don’t need that sort of amusement. I never want to experience torture, *or* your torture training ever again, Asura.”

“Really? I quite enjoy getting messed up like that. Every time I think back to what I did to you all during torture training, shivers run down my spine. I wonder if there’s someone out there strong enough to turn me into pulp?” Asura punctuated her last words with a laugh and the air in the bar froze.

“Y-You’ve...truly lost it, Boss.” Marx’s expression was pinched.

“Boss...you’re too scary...” Iina dropped her fork.

“Oh, Lord... I pray that Asura will regain even a single drop of her sanity...” Lumia clasped her hands before her and started to offer a fervent prayer.

“Before I forget, Salume, do you want to join?” Asura asked with the smile of a normal girl. In reply, Salume’s mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. “Well, we’ll be staying in Arnia for a while, so take your time and ponder on it. After our next victory, we’ll hire you again. Ah, by the way, how much do I need to pay if I want to buy Salume from this place?”

That question was directed at the courtesan attending to Lumia. She looked to be the leader of the group. “Salume costs seventy thousand dora,” she said. “She’s got quite the debt.”

Dora was the universal coinage of this world and was similar to American dollars in terms of value. The contingency fee from this job was a hundred thousand dora, so split into five shares, each person got twenty thousand.

“It seems I don’t have enough,” Asura sighed. “Wait a little longer. After I finish a few more jobs, I’ll be able to pay a meager price like seventy thousand dora.”

That was when three soldiers suddenly burst into the bar. “Is Asura Lyona here?!”

Asura raised her hand. “I’m right here.”

“I have a commission for you from His Majesty King Arnia! The enemy has taken control of an intermediate-tier monster and is pushing back our lines. Is your group capable of exterminating monsters?!”

“Monsters? It would be my first time hunting as part of Moon Blossom, but I see no issue. It’s still a battle in the end. We accept the job.”

“You have my thanks! Please head to Mullux Village first thing in the morning! You’ll receive more details on the situation later!” Without any further words, the soldiers raced out of the bar.

“And look at that, money just came flying into my pocket. I’m blessed, aren’t I?” Asura said with a cheery smile. Marx was deep in thought with a serious expression on his face and Iina looked a little nervous. “‘Blessed? How so?’ Ha ha, I wonder that myself,” Asura continued, finishing the conversation on her

own since no one else was considerate enough to oblige. “Maybe my blessings come from the goddess of war herself.”

Part One, Chapter Three: Die vibrantly on the battlefield. It's far better than dying while grasping at straws.

"Oof, this is terrible," Jyrki murmured from the rooftop of a house.

"Hmm. It looks like the monster-tamer platoon's basic strategy is getting the monsters to do the fighting, boxing the stragglers in, and then finishing them off. Yeah, it's a pretty terrible tactic, but not so bad from an energy-conservation standpoint."

Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom were dressed in their usual black robes, but now also equipped with bows and quivers of arrows.

"Er, that's *not* what I meant," Jyrki sighed.

"I believe he was referring to the massacre the monsters perpetrated, Boss," Marx said.

"Can...we win this?"

Mullux Village was already in a terrible state of affairs. "Pillaged" was an apt descriptor for it.

"Prob'ly not, yeah? Intermediate-tier monsters are waaaaay too strong."

Every single corpse on the ground had been torn apart by a monster's claws or fangs. Intermediate-tier monsters were far faster and stronger than humans. *But that's all they have going for them*, Asura thought.

"We just need to stick to the plan," she said. "I'll take responsibility if we can't defeat them, and if we survive, then you can punish me as you see fit, heh heh. More importantly, the problem here lies primarily with the Arnian army."

Judging by their messy leadership and coordination, the Arnian soldiers were out of their depth when it came to urban warfare. They were hardly putting up a fight as the enemy slaughtered them.

“Right. Didn’t anybody order the villagers to evacuate?” Lumia asked. “So many of them are inadvertently getting caught in the cross fire.”

“Inadvertently? Nah, Vice Cap’n, don’t those Therbae bastards look like they’re goin’ out of their way to kill the villagers? Those sickos are havin’ fun.”

“I agree. Heartless monsters,” Marx spat.

“Well, that isn’t our problem,” Asura said. “Now then, it’s about time to get started. We’re in a pretty nice position here.”

A monster-tamer platoon happened to pass below Asura’s group. They didn’t notice her group because they weren’t looking up, a fault they shared with the Arnian army. Whether it was their inexperience with urban warfare or just general idiocy, the platoon couldn’t even fathom the idea of being attacked from above. Their shortsightedness was understandable to Asura though, as the armies of this world usually fought in formations in wide-open spaces.

“Don’t misread the situation here, everyone,” Asura warned. “We are in an advantageous position, so our strategy will be fire and fire.”

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The man was the commander of one of the four monster-tamer platoons of the Great Therbae Kingdom’s army. His Majesty himself had been the one who’d come up with the revolutionary idea of using monsters in warfare. This platoon used an intermediate-tier monster resembling a black wolf, which the soldiers had named “Pilly.”

Pilly’s speed and strength had pushed the Arnian army’s lines all the way back to Mullux Village. This village was located near expansive tea fields, the source of the Arnia Kingdom’s income, and burning them to wreak economic devastation was this platoon’s mission.

The platoon commander enjoyed drinking tea from the Arnia Kingdom, so this was a bit unfortunate. However, sacrifices had to be made during war. He set the tea fields and villagers’ houses ablaze, and mercilessly cut down Arnian soldiers along with any villagers who hadn’t fled in time. Of course, many soldiers also fell to Pilly’s claws.

Mullux was a big village and the platoon had come here to completely

annihilate it. Flames licked at the wood, creating a burnt stench that rose through the air. Even now, the commander walked through the roads, keeping an eye out for Arnian soldiers and villagers. Complete annihilation meant utterly erasing Mullux Village from the map.

"Man, with Pilly around, Arnia's just a bunch of worms. Isn't that right, Captain?" one of his subordinates said with a grin.

In total, the commander had four subordinates and one monster. This was the same structure as the other three monster-tamer units. In this world, a platoon typically consisted of around five people, with four platoons forming a single company to carry out military duties.

Before they entered the village, the grandshield company had also participated in the battle, serving as protection against arrows. However, since they weren't necessary in battles within the village perimeter, they'd returned to base first. The Arnia Kingdom's army was at battalion strength, but the commander estimated that they'd already lost over half of their men. By comparison, the Therbae army had suffered virtually no casualties. The monster-tamer platoon was more than enough to mop them up.

"Arnia was never that strong to begin with, right?" another subordinate crowed. "Add Pilly into the mix and bam, it's massacre time."

We're winning by a wide margin. Our victory is guaranteed. This has already become a search-and-destroy operation. By the time the sun set, Mullux Village would be wiped out. After that, they could return to base and enjoy a brief respite.

"Petals?"

That was when a large number of pink flower petals began drifting down from the sky.

"Did the more impatient guys already start celebrating with some flower confetti?"

"Who knows?"

The commander grabbed one of the petals as it fluttered and held it in his hand. It looked perfectly normal, with nothing out of the ordinary.

“It’s so beautiful...” his subordinate said, looking up at the sky.

Following his line of sight, the commander looked up as well and noticed a silhouette out of the corner of his eye. A group of people were observing them from the rooftops. In the middle of them was a silver-haired girl whose face was stretched in a terribly dark smile. The mere sight of that expression made him feel as if ants were crawling over his skin.

A petal brushed against his subordinate’s cheek. The next moment, his face burst.

No, that wasn’t right. His face exploded? As blood and flesh scattered around them in a rain of gore, panic gripped the platoon. No one had any clue as to what was happening.

Yet another subordinate screamed in pain as his shoulder was blasted away.

“We’re under attack! Don’t let the petals touch you! We need to find some cover!” the commander yelled. Not all of the blossoms were exploding, but it was impossible to tell which ones would. “We need to get to a place where the petals can’t—”

However, an arrow to the throat interrupted the commander before he could finish issuing his order. Immediately after, countless arrows embedded their tips into his body, and the commander’s corpse fell to the ground, his eyes staring aimlessly to the sky.

The soldiers’ panic peaked upon losing their commander. They unsheathed their swords, but none of them had visual confirmation on their enemy. Some of them blindly slashed the air only to have their blades explode, and they yelled as the shrapnel dug into their skin.

Arrows continued to rain down on the troops. Though they bounced harmlessly off Pilly’s armor-like pelt, the humans weren’t so lucky. To accommodate Pilly, all of them were only equipped with light leather armor for quicker movement. One by one, the commander’s subordinates fell and Pilly raised his voice in a howl.

Oh, Pilly. We’ve all perished, but at least you’re still alive to avenge us.

The commander had already died, so he had no idea that after Pilly’s final cry,

the monster immediately suffocated to death.

***

“See? What’d I tell you? Monsters are no biggie,” Asura said, atop the roof of a house.

“Boss, thank you so much for your assistance. I never imagined that my Water Prison could be so useful,” Marx said excitedly.

Water Prison was a spell that Marx could use with his manifestation magic. It could only create water and had no offensive properties, unless one happened to cast in front of a target’s face. Then they’d drown, which was how Marx had killed the black, wolflike monster.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Marx. You hardly need to thank me,” Asura replied. “We’re comrades and like-minded romantics about magic. As long as you know how to use it, magic can be as strong as any weapon.”

Asura had been the one to come up with Water Prison, not Marx. The idea of using manifestation magic as a means of attack was unheard of in this world. At its core, all magic had its own element. There were many different kinds of Fixed Elements, but there were six basic ones: water, fire, wind, earth, light, and darkness. Of these six, darkness was fairly rare.

After that, there were four different categories of magic: attack, support, healing, and manifestation. Marx’s Water Prison was a manifestation spell of the water element. Every mage possessed their own element, which meant that Marx could only use water spells. This would never change, outside obtaining a Fixed Element.

“Boss, I really like your flappy little Wild Dance spell. It’s super pretty.”

“Jyrki, can you not describe it as ‘flappy’?”

“Huh? Why?”

“I just don’t really like that word.” Asura shrugged. “It sounds ridiculous.”

“Good idea on mixing an attack spell with a manifestation one. That was Mines in the Wild Dance, right?” Lumia asked.

That compliment made Asura smile. “Doesn’t it get boring to start each battle

with Flashbang? There's nothing we can do about Water Prison being our finisher though. It's just too convenient."

"I can't help but feel emotional about all this," Marx said. "I never imagined that a water mage like me could defeat enemy commanders or monsters with magic... I'm truly glad that I became a soldier-mage, even if it got me disowned by my family."

Marx descended from a line of warriors, and had spent most of his life dealing with his family's scorn at his magic. So in the past, he'd had to hide and practice his magic in secret.

"Y'know, I'm more shocked that we're actually *winnin'* these battles as if we're normal soldiers," Jyrki said.

"And without breaking a sweat either, since my Water Prison's been our trump card."

"Monsters...die if they can't breathe...too?"

"Was that the first time you all fought a monster?" Asura asked. In the past, she and Lumia had exterminated a monster together. If she recalled correctly, it had also been an intermediate-tier monster.

"No, I fought against them back when I was a knight," Marx answered. "But it didn't go as smoothly as today, since we attacked it head-on."

"Today was our first time. Right, Iina?"

"Yeah."

"I see. Well, I hope you all understand now that they're not too difficult to beat." At Asura's comment, Marx, Jyrki, and Iina all nodded. As for Lumia, it seemed that she had never considered an intermediate-tier monster a threat. "Why don't we split into teams of two and three, and then hunt down the remaining three monsters? This can double as your training."

"'Kaaaay. How should we split up?"

"The Blue Team will be Lumia and myself. The Red Team will be the remaining three."

"Huh?! Hold up now!" Jyrki yelled. "That's unfair! The power balance is *way*

off with you two on one team!”

“We’ll...die...” Iina sighed, slumping her shoulders.

“Er, I believe that it would be fairly difficult to kill a monster without the boss or the vice captain’s help,” Marx argued with a serious look on his face.

“No, the teams are even. The three of you should be able to handle it.” Asura shrugged. “Let’s see... Normally, I’d ask Marx to be the leader, but since this mission is gonna double as a training session, I want Jyrki to take command.”

“Me?!” Jyrki yelped.

“We’re...dead...” Iina whispered in despair.

“Yep.” Marx nodded. “We’re dead.”

“Boss, this ain’t me giving you lip or anythin’ but, uh...could you maybe reconsider?”

“Not gonna happen. Even if you don’t believe in yourself, you gotta do it, Jyrki. If you fail to kill the monster, then die vivaciously. That’s an order.”

Marx had once been a platoon commander during his time with the knights. If this were a more dangerous opponent, then Asura would have let him handle it, but considering what they were dealing with on this mission, it was the perfect time to let Jyrki rack up some experience.

“A-All right...”

“Does anyone else have something they’d like to say?” Asura asked. After no response, she nodded. “Good. Then let’s start the mission. Move out!”

***

“We met in a place just like this, didn’t we?” Asura said, jauntily walking through the ruins of Mullux Village as if she were enjoying a picnic. The occasional corpse strewn on the ground brought a smile to her face. *Did you die a vibrant death? Or did you simply just die?*

“I can’t believe it’s already been ten years,” Lumia murmured nostalgically as Asura pondered upon the bodies.

“We’ve sure been through a lot, haven’t we, Teach?”

The flames consumed the houses with a satisfied *crackle*, and the scent of burning wood mixed with the aroma of freshly spilled blood. There weren't quite enough bodies for this to qualify as a hellscape, but it was a view that Asura dearly enjoyed.

"I haven't heard that nickname in so long." Lumia sighed. "By the way, should we really be wandering around like this? I thought scouting ahead and landing a preemptive strike was the soldier-mage's way."

"And I said that this doubled as a training session, didn't I? If the two of us strike first, then we'll win too easily. Besides, there's no guarantee that battles will always start on our terms. So for this one, I'm thinking we should enjoy a preemptive strike launched by the other side."

"You mean we'll purposely let the enemy find and attack us?"

"Exactly. We'll build ourselves back from that, and then it'll be 'fire and maneuver.'"

As soon as Asura finished her sentence, a boy who looked to be around ten years old ran out from behind one of the houses. When he saw Asura and Lumia, he tried to stop himself but, carried by his own momentum, he slipped and fell onto his behind.

"Don't be afraid. We're members of the Arnian army," Lumia said with a gentle smile upon seeing the boy's terrified expression.

"To be more specific, we're mercenaries who've been hired by the Arnian army. We won't hurt the villagers, so—"

"Please help! M-My mom and dad were killed!" the boy interrupted. "A-And if I get caught, I'll get sold off to the West!" He pushed himself to his feet and threw himself against Lumia's body, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"Over there! I found the brat! Oh, and more women too, Captain!"

"That's fantastic news. Perfect for some pocket change."

A monster-tamer platoon accompanied by a bearlike monster emerged from the shadows of the same house that the boy had run out from. In total, there were five men and one monster.

“By ‘pocket change,’ I suppose they mean they’re engaging in some human trafficking,” Asura hummed. “If I recall, West Felsen has slavery, right?”

“That’s right.”

The entire region that Asura and the others lived in was the land of Felsenmark. In terms of size, it was slightly smaller than Europe. If you were to look at a map of Felsenmark, you would see that it was split up into three subregions: West, Central, and East. The Arnia Kingdom, for example, was located in East Felsen.

“Ooh, nice. They’re hot. We should have some fun with them before selling them off,” one of the soldiers said.

“I like the silver-haired one.”

“What in the world are you gonna do with a brat like her? You know, *normal people* like the older lady.”

“You idiot. Girls around the silver-haired cutie’s age are at their prime.”

The soldiers of the monster-tamer platoon conversed with slimy smiles on their faces. *Ahh, it truly feels like a battlefield now*, Asura thought to herself. Every battlefield had units that felt like they were composed solely of thugs.

“Let’s update the parameters of our training mission,” she said. “We’ll exterminate our enemies while protecting this boy.”

“What are you saying?! That’s too dangerous! We should just let him escape!”

“No way. It’s not every day that we have a kid to use for practice. Just relax. No one would blame us if we failed.”

“Y-You...” Lumia gritted her teeth and clenched her fist, but ultimately fell silent.

“Besides, don’t you want to see the men who killed your parents die a pathetic death, boy?” Asura asked with a dark grin.

The boy’s body twitched back in fear, but only for a moment. “I do! If you’re gonna take revenge for my mom and dad, then I wanna watch it!” He released Lumia as he voiced his request.

“And there we have it, Lumia. I won’t have you arguing against my decision. Now then, let’s start from these conditions.” With that, Asura turned to fully face the monster-tamer platoon.

In response, the men smiled confidently. From their perspective, Asura’s team was a woman and two children. No one would expect any of them to put up much of a fight. The soldiers were likely thinking that they could capture them and then have some fun raping them. Then, they probably planned to sell them off and forget about them.

“Ha ha, missy, you’re thinking about fighting?” one of them said. “We’re the strongest monst—” But he couldn’t finish his sentence, as Asura threw a dagger clean through his throat.

“Pretty good, aren’t I?” She laughed mockingly.

“Why, you little—!” the remaining members of the monster-tamer platoon roared with rage.

Part One, Chapter Four: You say you saw a fish swim through darkness? Ah, so you were the one spying on me.

From atop the roof of a house, Jyrki and the others watched as the Arnian soldiers clashed with the Therbaens.

“Arnia...so weak...” Iina muttered.

“More like, aren’t intermediate-tier monsters just super strong?” Jyrki said.

The Arnian platoon was completely helpless in the face of the black, wolflike monster the Therbaen soldiers had brought. Jyrki and the others had been observing the battle since it started, and the monster had already ripped two Arnian soldiers into ribbons.

“So when should we join the fray?” Marx asked Jyrki, his arms crossed.

“Great job, Loura!” one of the Therbaen soldiers yelled excitedly. “Shred the remaining three into pieces!”

They were all so distracted with bullying the Arnian soldiers that none of them noticed Jyrki’s team watching them. According to Asura, they almost never looked above their heads. So long as they remembered to conceal their presence, it would be difficult for the soldiers to discover Jyrki and the others.

“You hear that? That black monster’s little Loury.”

“All right. So? When are we going to jump in? What should we start with?”

“Marx...you’re so...serious,” Iina said with a theatrical shake of her head.

The Arnian soldiers tried to attack with their swords, but the monster named Loura easily avoided them. There was a very clear difference between their physical capabilities. Then, Loura ripped off an Arnian soldier’s head, swallowed the meat, and licked the blood off its maw.

“Isn’t it, like, super aggressive on top of being super strong?”

“I wonder if...it thinks humans are snacks...? In my next life...I wanna be a monster too...”

In contrast to Jyrki’s grimace, Iina looked genuinely delighted. Watching a person die sparked something like joy within her due to her strong misanthropy. Jyrki was more than familiar with this part of her. After all, it had taken her a long time to open up her heart and trust their old bandit friends, as well as their new comrades in Moon Blossom. If you asked Jyrki though, this behavior was fairly typical for street children.

“If you’re gonna eat someone, then eat me first. I’m delish...probably.”

“I won’t...eat you, Jyr...” When he first met Iina, she had been a terribly twisted child. He had watched her licking an adult’s shoes with a bright smile on her face, just for a share of bread. She had been smiling while cursing the world. “I won’t...eat my savior...but I might eat you...Marx.”

“Why would you eat me?” Marx asked. He tilted his head, though his expression remained impassive. “I consider myself to be your teammate, more or less.”

“It was...a joke. I won’t eat...people in Moon Blossom.”

“Hmm. Why did you call him your ‘savior’?”

“You know, people who poke their noses into others’ pasts aren’t very well-liked.” By the time Jyrki finished saying that, only one soldier of the Arnian platoon remained. He seemed to be a fairly strong fighter and, despite his wounds, he didn’t even attempt to escape.

“Is it so wrong to want to learn more about someone in the same unit as myself?”

“Well, no, it ain’t a big deal, I guess. All I did was invite Iina to join my bandit group.”

He’d found her, a ten-year-old girl, trying to sell her own body, and thought to rescue her from her hellish fate. He’d wanted to tell her that she didn’t need to smile or curry favors to live anymore.

“‘Let’s steal everything from the shitstains in this world’... You were so cool...”

Jyrki had said that while immolating the overweight lump who'd tried to purchase a skeletal Iina.

"You two lived a life I can hardly even imagine," Marx said.

"It ain't that big a deal. At the end of the day, we were just orphans who got bullied a lot, so we teamed up and fought back. This kinda boring story exists in thousands of places around the world."

Jyrki had already been a bandit when he met Iina. He'd seen her when he visited her city to scout it out and though he'd felt sorry for her at the time, he didn't approach her. But she stayed stuck in his mind, even after sunset, so he'd returned to the city to look for her. That had been when the fatty bought her. He'd been in the middle of stripping Iina out of her clothes in the middle of an alleyway when Jyrki came across them. *Ahh*, he'd thought, *this world is an unfair pile of shit.*

"I used to hunt down people like you."

"I bet, considering you used to be a knight." At the request of the local militia, the knights occasionally lent their strength in protecting the peace.

"But now we're brothers-in-arms, fighting side by side. Fate works in strange ways."

"Yeah. Our boss is a crazy little girl, Iina and I were bandits, and you used to be a knight. I don't know what the vice cap'n used to do, but she probably has a few skeletons in her closet, yeah? What a pleasant little mercenary group we make... Ah, jeez, the last guy just croaked. Marx, can you hit little Loury with your Water Prison?"

"If I do it now, yes." Loura was busy devouring the Arnian soldier she'd killed.

"All right. Iina, shoot the enemy commander," Jyrki ordered, holding up three fingers.

Iina slid an arrow out of her quiver and nocked it into her bow. Jyrki lowered one finger and Iina cast Accelerate, a manifestation spell, upon the arrow. It created wind in order to increase the target's speed. Jyrki was down to a single finger, and then he pointed it at a downward angle.

At his command, Marx cast Water Prison at the same time Iina released the arrow. A ball of water enveloped Loura's face and it struggled, panicked and confused. Iina's arrow pierced straight through the enemy commander's head, burying into the dirt next to him.

"It's the enemy!!! Look up!!! They're on the rooftop!!!" one of the enemy soldiers yelled as he unsheathed his sword.

"Now then, I wonder how they're gonna make their way up here," Jyrki murmured to himself as he nocked his own arrow into his bow. He immediately shot it into the soldier's chest, sending him to the ground as the second casualty.

Iina once again released an Accelerated arrow, only to have a soldier deflect it with his sword.

Jyrki, who had been in the middle of pulling out his second arrow, froze. "You gotta be kidding me..."

Iina's arrows, when enhanced by Accelerate, traveled at a speed that was extremely difficult to parry. At the very least, Jyrki found the task impossible. Then, the same enemy soldier leaped into the air. He didn't activate any magic, but in a single bound, he landed on the roof of the house.

From his physical appearance, he looked to be around eighteen years old, which was the same age range as Jyrki. He had shoulder-length silver hair and a fairly attractive face. Heightwise, he was slightly shorter than Jyrki.

Jyrki immediately shouldered his bow and took out his twin daggers. He glanced in Loura's direction to check on her status—still not dead. In that case, the top priority was making sure Marx remained safe. Even if the rest of the monster-hunter platoon escaped, they *had* to kill the monster. Otherwise, Asura wouldn't let him hear the end of it.

"You're an interesting lot," the silver-haired soldier said. The pattern so far was that people with silver hair all had messed-up personalities. Granted, Jyrki had only met one other person, Asura, with silver hair.

"You're pretty good," he said. If the soldier was willing to talk, then they could buy Marx some time. Their only goal was exterminating the monster, so if

worse came to worst, they didn't have to bother with the other soldiers.

"You guys can go back now," the silver-haired soldier said with a cheery smile. "Loura's not gonna make it anyway."

His words had been directed at the remaining two members of the monster-tamer platoon. Unsure of what to do, they had remained rooted to the ground, staring up at them. But upon hearing what the silver-haired soldier said, they ran away without any hesitation. It seemed that they were confident that their silver-haired comrade could handle things.

"Hey, tell me your name," Jyrki said.

"Huh? Me?"

"I'm talkin' to you, aren't I?"

"Why don't you tell me your name first?" The silver-haired soldier laughed, sounding as though he was having the time of his life.

"I'm Jyrki Kuusela of the mercenary group Moon Blossom. That is my surrogate little sister, Iina Kuusela. That big guy using magic there is—"

"Marx Redford from the Knights of the Azure Skies," the silver-haired soldier interrupted. "You participated in the Hero Selection Exam twice, didn't you?"

"At present, I'm a member of Moon Blossom," Marx said, holding up his own dagger.

That meant that Loura was dead. Now then, what should they do? Jyrki and the others had a numerical advantage, but their opponent was clearly skilled.

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Using nothing more than eye contact, Lumia informed Asura about her plan to use Flashbang. Asura shook her head in response. Using it would make this too boring and, more importantly, she had to let the boy watch the destruction of the Therbaen monster-tamer platoon.

"Don't you dare interfere!" a particularly large man from the monster-tamer platoon yelled at his comrades before he rushed at Asura. He didn't even unsheathe his sword.

“Hmm. There’s a monster right there and yet you’re not going to use it?”

“Shut up, you brat! How *dare* you kill my friend?!” He raised his fist high in the air and yelled, “I’m gonna beat you half to death, rape you *to* death, and then sell you to the pits of Hell!”

The fist he raised was his right. Asura twisted her body to the right and with the back of her own right hand, she redirected his punch. At the same time, she employed a knee-drop technique, utilizing her forward momentum to slip behind the man’s back. Then she kicked him right in the balls with the tips of her boots. He screamed bloody murder as he rolled on the ground, clutching at his crotch.

“Ah ha, looks like I crushed them with that one.” Asura had been a man in her past life, so she knew from personal experience how vital that spot was. “It wouldn’t have been so bad if you’d thought to wear a full suit of armor, but you’re barely got anything on, heh heh. I guess you can’t indulge in your favorite hobby of raping women on the battlefield anymore. Are you sad about that? So sad that you could just die?”

“I’m...*sniff*...gonna kill you!” The soldier looked like he was halfway to breaking down in tears as he glared up at Asura, but he still couldn’t get up on his feet.

“Ha ha, you only have yourself to blame. You shouldn’t have underestimated me, you know? Stop acting coy and use the monster.”

“Geete! Kill that brat!” the commander of the monster-tamer platoon ordered.

I see. So that monster’s called Geete? Asura thought. *Well, whatever. I don’t plan on remembering its name.*

Geete howled, then got up on two legs and charged at Asura.

“Oh, it’s faster than I expected...” Geete raised its right fist into the air and punched down on Asura. Though she guarded herself from the attack with her left arm, the impact still tossed her into the air and sent her crashing on the ground. The attack was powerful enough to have killed a normal person, but Asura sat up immediately. “I thought I’d die, ha ha.”

A faint golden glow emanated from Asura's body. It was the effect of Lumia's support spell, Cloak. It created an armor of light that dramatically increased one's defensive power, but its drawback was that it didn't last very long. Even if Lumia put all of her strength behind it, it only remained effective for about two minutes.

"That really hurt." Asura chuckled. Her left arm hung loosely by her side. "Look at that. It's broken. Ahh, it hurts! It's so painful that I'm getting all excited. This is so fun, don't you think? There's nothing better in this world than a fight to the death." The smile on Asura's face was wide with bliss and upon seeing her expression, Geete took a step back. "Are you scared of me, Geete? You must be kidding. You're an intermediate-tier monster, stronger and faster than any human. And yet, you're frightened of me? Why in the world would you be, when I haven't even done anything to you yet?"

All Asura had done was get pummeled into the ground. That was the only thing that had happened during their fight. But when she glanced at the monster-tamer platoon, their expressions were frozen, as if they had encountered a natural disaster on the level of a Demon Lord.

"Oh, come on now," Asura said. "I only managed to survive thanks to Lumia's magic. It's not like I'm immortal, you know? I'm nothing more than an ordinary little girl. You could kill me if you stabbed me with a sword or shot me with an arrow. In fact, you could even punch me to death. There's no reason to be afraid. Now, shall we continue?"

However, Geete still refused to budge.

"It has nothing to do with magic," Lumia said. "Asura, I'm also a little afraid of you sometimes."

Asura wasn't sure what to say to that. "But I haven't done anything yet." She sighed as if to say that the situation was beyond her comprehension. "I don't really feel like fighting anymore."

The excitement of earlier had completely disappeared, but it was fine. Ultimately, this was nothing more than an advanced training session. If this had been a real battlefield, she would've used Flashbang at the very beginning. After she compromised her enemies' sight, she would've quickly slashed their

throats. If the blade couldn't cut through Geete's hide, then she would have placed all seven petals of her Mines onto him and blasted him. That would have finished the job.

"Lumia, let's switch positions. I'll defend the kid, so you attack them. Make sure you kill them all, got it? This is a commission, after all."

They'd already received their advance payment of ten thousand dora. Their success fee was fifty thousand per monster, which meant that if they killed all four, they'd earn a total of two hundred ten thousand dora.

Lumia was quiet for a moment before finally saying, "I can't kill that monster with my current equipment."

"Stop joking around, Lumia. Just use an attack spell. You know, the ultimate attack spell you loathe so much."

Attack spells normally weren't particularly powerful no matter what element was used. However, Lumia's element was an exception. She simply camouflaged her spells to look like they were of the light element, but in reality, she was using her Fixed Element. It was one atypically geared for offense: to be more accurate, it could only be used for battle. She had everything that she needed for combat: the support spell Cloak, the manifestation spell Flashbang, and healing magic.

"A-Attack, Geete! Kill them! That brat isn't glowing anymore!" the enemy commander yelled. In truth, Cloak's effect had already worn off.

"Lumia, if you can't obey my orders, then please leave my group. Didn't you promise that you'd listen to my commands during missions? And that in return, you'd have my permission to kill me if I ever crossed the vague lines you set? I'd fight back, of course."

Geete still looked a little unsure, but at the commander's order of "Do it, Geete!" the monster howled in preparation to strike.

"Now then, Lumia, the enemy's about to come at us. They're about to attack, even though they're scared out of their wits. What're you going to do?"

Geete once again charged towards Asura. A pained expression appeared on Lumia's face but she unleashed her magic.

“Divine Retribution.”

In an instant, Geete crumbled to the ground, slashed apart into eight pieces of flesh. The one who butchered the monster and turned the battlefield into a sea of blood was a beautiful, broadsword-wielding angel. Her wings were pure white and her skin smooth as silk. Sitting upon her pale-blonde hair was a halo of light.

“I figured you’d use it, Lumia. I knew it. You really are one of us. Your little holier-than-thou attitude is just an act. How can you deny it? Now that you’ve shown off that spell, the only thing left for you to do is to massacre everyone. After all, it’s not as if you can reveal your beautiful yet disgusting true self.”

Lumia had been trapped inside darkness. By the time Asura met her, she had already fallen to its corrupting power.

“It looks like you have some strong guilt, but why don’t you just forget about the past and enjoy the present with me?” Asura continued. “Let’s play the war game, just like you did before.”

Asura had never seen that era of Lumia’s with her own eyes, only heard about it. But a long time ago, when she watched Lumia fight, she’d understood that the two of them were exactly the same.

“That spell...” the enemy commander said. “That’s Divine Retribution...the Angel of Death...? Oh no...don’t tell me...you’re the mass murde—”

In the next instant, the angel tore through the commander and sliced up the remaining three soldiers. With a gentle expression on her face, the angel disappeared into the air.

“I will never be like that ever again,” Lumia said calmly. “And Asura, neither will—”

“Try saying that without the casual murder next time.” Asura snorted. “Send the signal.”

At Asura’s order, Lumia nocked an arrow and shot it into the air. A loud noise sounded out from the arrow as it flew. This type of arrow was called a messenger arrow and for this mission, they used it to signal the defeat of a monster.

“I just hope that one day, you’ll be able to go back to being who you really are,” Asura said softly so that Lumia couldn’t hear her.



Part One, Chapter Five: Will fighting fair and square earn me any brownie points?

“And just who in the world do you think you are, huh?” Jyrki asked the silver-haired boy.

“I’m Punti. It’s not set in stone yet, but I plan on participating in the next Hero Selection Exam. Well, if I *do* take it, I know that I won’t fail it like Marx Redford over there.” Punti chuckled merrily.

“Wow, Marx. Even someone like you can fail a test? Actually, this is the first time I even knew that you were a hero candidate.”

“Do you seriously think it’s that easy to obtain a hero title?”

“I guess not.”

Though heroes had special privileges, they also had unique responsibilities. The only people who could earn that title were those who possessed overwhelming combat prowess.

“Anyway, if I can’t win against Marx Redford and his funny little friends, then there’s no hope for me in the exam. I’m going to have you all serve as my training dummies.” With that, Punti slowly raised his sword.

Jyrki clicked his tongue irritably. “Why in the world is someone like you in the monster-tamer platoon?” None of them had foreseen this turn of events.

“Isn’t it obvious if you think about it a little?” Punti replied, cocking his head to the side. “Or are you too stupid?”

“Don’t make fun of him,” Iina said angrily. “Though I admit...Jyr is a little stupid...”

“You’re really not helping. Ah, wait, Iina, you seriously think that about me?”

“I suppose you’re to serve as insurance on the off chance that the soldiers can’t control their monsters,” Marx guessed. Even in the face of this

unexpected situation, he remained as calm as ever.

“Ahh, right, yeah! That was totally what I was gonna say, you know?”

If that was true though, then it meant that Punti was strong enough to defeat an intermediate-tier monster all by himself. Jyrki wanted to call for a retreat but Punti didn’t seem the type who would let them escape.

Then, a messenger arrow flew up into the air a short distance away from them. Punti turned his attention to the arrow, distracted by the sound.

This is the only chance we’ll get. Jyrki signaled with his hand.

“Oops.” Punti took a step to the side, and where his face was a mere second before, Water Prison manifested in the air. Iina released an arrow enchanted with Accelerate, aimed at where Punti had moved to, but he deflected it with his sword.

Seeing his opening, Jyrki closed the gap between them and slashed out with the dagger in his right hand, but Punti dodged it. At the same time, the effect of Accelerate enveloped Jyrki’s left arm. He reversed the dagger in his left hand and brought it down on Punti’s neck like a punch. This was Jyrki’s true aim. All of the other attacks had been nothing more than feints.

But Punti still evaded it. “That’s some nice teamwork. Did you guys spend a lot of time practicing?” It wasn’t a clean dodge though, and blood dripped down his neck. Clearly, it wasn’t a fatal wound. Jyrki had only sliced through skin.

“Move!” Jyrki yelled as he jumped backwards. He landed on the other side of the street Punti and the other members of the monster-tamer platoon had been on. He saw Iina and Marx leap in opposite directions to each other as well.

They split up, each running in a different direction—east, west, and south. Punti wasn’t on Jyrki’s tail, and judging by his fixation, he was likely going after Marx.

“Damn, that guy was super strong... Looked like he was better than Marx.” But Jyrki wasn’t too worried. “We’re just a funny little mercenary group who don’t mind playing dirty.”

Normally, it was better to avoid fighting enemies who were stronger than

you. However, retreat was sometimes impossible. On top of that, if the enemy was acting alone, then...

“Iina, Marx, I’m counting on you two.”

...Iina would be the one to defeat him.

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Punti chased after Marx without hesitation. He leaped at him, slashing out with his sword as soon as his feet touched the ground. Marx skillfully deflected the attack with his dagger.

“Nice! I expected nothing less from the man said to be the next commander of the Knights of the Azure Skies!” He continued to strike at him with his sword but, even though he only wielded a dagger, Marx deftly defended himself from the blows.

If I could ask but for one thing, Punti thought, *it’d be to fight against Marx armed with a sword.*

“You still haven’t seen enough of the world,” Marx said.

“Huh? Are you calling me inexperienced?” Punti didn’t give Marx any time to breathe, continuing his relentless assault. Marx was still blocking every hit but he was slowly backing up, bit by bit.

I can win this. I can win against Marx Redford! Unlike Marx, Punti wasn’t famous, so this was the perfect opportunity. He would be able to enter the Hero Selection Exam as the man who defeated Marx Redford.

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then *what* were you trying to say?!”

As soon as Punti yelled the words, Marx jumped to the right. An arrow flew at him from Marx’s previous direction, completely within Punti’s blind spot. Their teamwork was nothing to scoff at, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Marx had eyes on the back of his head.

The arrow that flew at him was much faster than an ordinary one. It was probably the work of that flat-chested, black-haired girl with the nasty look in her eyes. He vaguely remembered hearing her name but had already forgotten

it.

Punti twisted his body and managed to dodge the arrow. But he was unable to avoid it completely and it scratched his left arm. The pain was brief and inconsequential. Punti was knocked off-balance, and that was when Marx pounced. Punti evaded Marx's dagger and simultaneously leaped backwards to give himself some distance.

"You move fast," Marx said. "I won't be able to catch you by myself."

True to his word, Marx didn't try to chase after Punti. Wary of incoming arrows, Punti adjusted his grip on his sword.

"Ha ha, when you talked about seeing the world, did you mean your teamwork?" Punti asked. "Too bad though, because it won't work on me."

"No," Marx said, shaking his head. "I'm not that strong. So defeating me won't give you much bragging rights."

"Ha! Marx Redford from the Knights of the Azure Skies, 'not that strong'?! Why don't you save your lies for someone else?!"

"I'm Marx from the mercenary group Moon Blossom. They're not here right now, but my boss and vice captain are so strong that I'm practically a child compared to them."

"Hmm. If that's the truth, then I'd love to meet them."

He'd meet them, fight them, and then win. He'd never heard of Moon Blossom before. If it was a mercenary group created by a hero-class person, then he would have heard rumors at least. That meant neither the leader nor the vice captain were heroes. And yet, they were stronger than Marx. In that case, Punti thought, they would be the best candidates for his training partners.

"Meeting the vice captain wouldn't be so bad, but you'd regret meeting the boss. I suggest you avoid her at all costs."

"Well, now you're only making me want to meet her more."

"Let's say that in the future, you have the chance to meet her," Marx said with a serious expression. "If she invites you to join Moon Blossom, turn down her offer. All right? Never, under any circumstances, accept her invitation.

Consider yourself warned."

"I wouldn't join anyway. I don't wanna be a mercenary. I just want to meet and defeat her."

"No, that would never happen. The boss is the last person in the world who would fight fair and square. Someone as straightforward as you would never win." Marx huffed out a small laugh. "But you're lucky. At the very least, you might die before you meet our boss. That's completely dependent on her commander, of course."

"What? What are you...saying...?" *Huh? My body...feels numb...* Using his sword as a makeshift cane, Punti barely managed to avoid collapsing onto the ground. "That arrow earlier...was poisoned, huh...? You cheater..." So that entire conversation just now was to buy time for the poison to spread.

"All of Iina's arrows are tipped with poison. You lost the moment it scratched you. I forgot to mention this, but if our boss uses disgraceful tactics, then it stands to reason that her underlings would too. Now then, what should we do, commander?"

"Hmm? What *should* we do? There's nothing innit for us if we call him. It'd be pretty interesting to bring him home with us and have him meet with the boss. Iina, whaddaya think?"

Jyrki popped his head out of the window from one of the houses.

Ahh, I see, Punti realized. In their original plan, Jyrki would have launched some sort of attack from that window. However, Marx started buying time for the poison, so Jyrki remained hidden and watched over the proceedings. They were a truly despicable trio.

"Boom."

At the same time that Punti heard the black-haired, flat-chested girl behind him, a sharp and terrible pain erupted from his crotch. He wanted to scream, but only a pathetic squeak sounding like a crushed frog escaped from his throat. Unable to support his own weight, he fell to the ground.

"I'd rather...bully him to death..."

“That ain’t really my style. If we’re gonna kill him, let’s do it in one go, yeah?”

He could hear the flat-chested girl’s elated voice, along with Jyrki’s pitying one. *If, and this is a big if, they decide that they won’t kill me...if I survive this ordeal thanks to their fickleness, then I swear that I’ll kill that flat-chested girl. I don’t care what happens to the others. I just need to see* her *dead.*

After he made that oath, Punti fell unconscious.

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“What a beautiful sight,” Asura sighed as she gazed upon the corpses left behind in Divine Retribution’s wake. The spell had completely torn them apart, turning the battlefield into a sea of blood littered with the body parts of the angel’s victims. “Little boy, do you have anywhere to go?”

The boy didn’t reply to Asura’s question. He was staring out into space, as if caught in a dream. Asura figured he was reveling in the aftermath of the slaughter.

“It was a wonderfully one-sided massacre, wasn’t it?” Asura called out to him. “I love battles like that. How about you?” With her right hand, she patted the boy on his head. Her left hand remained motionless by her side.

“Oh, um... Th-Thank you for helping me get revenge...”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Killing them so happened to be one of our mission objectives anyway. And how about an answer to my question? Do you have anywhere you can stay?”

“My uncle works as a livestock farmer in Tellace Village so I...can probably go there.”

“Ha! Livestock, you say?! So you’re going to spend the rest of your life raising animals with your uncle?! It’s a fine life and you’ll never want for employment, but it’s not the path that suits you.”

“But I don’t have anywhere else to go...”

“How about becoming a mercenary?”

The boy’s eyes widened at Asura’s suggestion. “Huh?”

Lumia's expression mirrored his shock, but Asura didn't pay her any heed as she continued, "You have talent. You showed it by escaping from the monster-tamer platoon all by yourself. Most people would've just frozen and waited for death. But you chose to run. Not only do you have brains, but you've got luck on your side as well. More importantly, you watched without averting your gaze as that angel butchered up those soldiers. It felt good, didn't it?"

Asura smiled at him, and the boy returned it with one of his own as he nodded.

"Heh. The trauma of seeing your family killed before your eyes broke you. You'll never fit in with society again. Raising livestock with your uncle will never lift the darkness from your heart."

The boy nodded, listening intently to Asura's words.

"Like I said earlier, being a farmer is a fine job, but it's no longer something for you. You'll just get frustrated, which will turn into aggression towards your surroundings. You might even end up killing someone... Actually, in your case, you *definitely* will. If the alternative is becoming a murderer, why don't you join my mercenary group? There, killing your enemies will get you praise *and* money."

The boy pondered Asura's suggestion.

"Asura, how can you be so sure that he'll end up a murderer?" Lumia asked.

"Oh, come on. He was laughing as he watched you do this, you know?" Asura gestured around them. At the blood and flesh, at the death and despair. The stench of the burning village mingled with the scent of the battlefield. "That's not a normal response. He's the same kind of person we are."

"This isn't a sight I particularly enjoy gazing upon," Lumia retorted.

"But it's not as if you hate it either. You're completely neutral about it, aren't you?"

"I do have my opinions on it, even if it's nothing more than regret that I've done it again."

"And I suppose your excuse is that it only happened because I ordered it?"

“It’s not an excuse if it’s true.”

“All right, if that helps you sleep at night,” Asura sighed. “Oh, that reminds me. I won’t command you to use Divine Retribution in front of the others, so don’t fret over that.”

Divine Retribution would reveal Lumia’s true identity, but in Asura’s opinion, Moon Blossom would still accept her. Lumia simply needed to work up the courage to expose herself, and then her conundrum would be solved. If she could only face her true self, she would enjoy life so much more.

The sound of a messenger arrow whizzed through the air and the three of them looked up.

“It looks like the other team’s done with their mission, so there’s only one monster left,” Asura said.

“Right. What’s our next move?”

“Nothing. We’ll leave it to Jyrki.” With that, Asura turned back to the boy. “Have you made up your mind?”

“Miss, I’ve decided. I’ll become a mercenary.”

So the boy ended up choosing the path of violence and battle over a peaceful farmer’s life.

“In that case, you’ll have to refer to me as ‘Boss’ from here on out,” Asura said. “What’s your name and age?”

“I’m Reko, and I’m eleven years old,” the boy replied.

“All right. Welcome to Moon Blossom. I’ll raise you into a nice and strong soldier-mage.” Asura laughed, pleased with herself. “Oh, I can’t wait to go back and buy Salume. We’ll have to raise her alongside Reko here. Lumia, I’m sure you know this already, but I just love teaching new recruits.”

“If *that’s* what you call teaching, then I don’t doubt it,” Lumia sighed while shaking her head. “Oh, you poor kids...”

“Heh heh heh, what should we do first?” Asura muttered to herself, her expression soft with glee. “I guess it would be a bit too early to start them off with my basic training regime... Should I work on their bodies first? Their magic?

Or maybe I should start by beating them into utter submission and compliance? Ahh, what to do, what to do...”

“So you’ll be the first person to receive Asura’s elite education, huh?” Lumia bundled Reko up into a gentle embrace. When Marx, Iina, and Jyrki joined, they’d already been more than competent in battle and only required Asura’s basic training. However, Reko truly needed to start from scratch.

“O Lord, please grant Reko a strong will...”

Part One, Chapter Six: Do you like despair and regret? No? Well, you should, because they're coming for you.

Moon Blossom ended up reuniting without ever actually eliminating the fourth monster-tamer platoon. Neither the Blue Team nor the Red Team sought it out.

"And here I thought that you guys would go and defeat the last platoon too." Asura shrugged dramatically.

"Hey, there wasn't anythin' I could do about that. Sorry, but Iina and Marx were runnin' on empty."

"You...blamed it on me...?"

"On me too. I hate commanders who do that."

Both Ina and Marx grimaced at Jyrki's excuse. Neither of them had even fully depleted their magical energy.

"I'm not angry or anything," Asura said.

"Th-Then we'll go look for 'em..." Jyrki's face tightened, but Asura held up her hand to interrupt him.

"I'm sure they've already retreated. Can't you tell by the state of the battlefield that they're not around anymore? I can think of a few reasons as to why they'd pull back, but it doesn't matter."

It was more than likely because they'd noticed their allies dropping like flies.

"I...really misjudged the situation. We shoulda continued to fight even if it ended with Iina and Marx passin' out."

"I already told you that I'm not mad," Asura insisted. "This was just a commissioned job, remember? We weren't required to rout the enemy forces."

"Oh, yeah!" Jyrki's expression brightened with relief. "Yeah, you're right!"

“By the way, who’s that silver-haired fellow there? At the very least, explain why you’ve dragged him here with you.”

Marx looked down at his right hand, currently tightly wrapped around the left ankle of a silver-haired boy. “Apparently, he’s a hero candidate named Punti.”

“He said he wanted to meet you, Boss, so we brought him here,” Jyrki added.

“But he’s...an enemy soldier. So if you’re okay with it...I’ll bully him to death.”

“Don’t do that,” Lumia said, smiling at Iina. “The battle’s over. If you kill him now, it’ll be nothing more than murder.”

“I should’ve...killed him earlier...” Iina whispered sullenly and Lumia looked away, pretending that she didn’t hear a word.

“Why did he want to meet me? If he wants to join Moon Blossom, then he’s more than welcome.” Asura’s face lit up, practically sparkling with joy. “My dream is to create a big mercenary group that’ll make its mark on the history books, so the more the merrier.”

“Ah, no, he specifically said he had no interest in joining,” Marx corrected. “I don’t think he’ll ever become a mercenary.”

“It kinda felt like he wanted to fight you, Boss.”

“Then toss him out.” Asura pouted, puffing out her cheeks. “I have no use for him. There’s no need for us to kill him, nor are we obligated to hand him over to the Arnian army. Our service period has ended. Just leave him there.”

“Understood.” With that, Marx released Punti’s ankle.

“That reminds me, who’s that brat there?” Jyrki asked.

“Is he someone I can bully?”

“He’s probably a villager who couldn’t escape in time, so the vice captain took him under her wing,” Marx hypothesized.

Asura chuckled and puffed out her chest proudly. “His name is Reko. He’s our new teammate.”

She placed her right hand on Reko’s head while her left hung loosely at her side. Once they returned to the castle town, she planned on having Lumia treat

it with her healing magic, which could take care of any injury or disease. However, extremely serious injuries took a long time to treat, and there was a chance that the patient would die before it took effect.

“Pleased to meet you,” Reko said calmly. He had brown hair and a youthful face. Though he wasn’t particularly ugly, it didn’t seem he had the potential to mature into a handsome man either.

“Yeah, nice to meetcha,” Jyrki replied with a light wave. “Our new teammate, huh? A teammate... Wait, *teammate*?! That brat there is gonna join us?!”

“I can’t kill a teammate...” Iina lamented. “How boring...”

“Boss, I can’t approve of you lying to such a young child,” Marx said with a shake of his head. “Have you explained what kind of group Moon Blossom is? More importantly, have you explained what kind of person *you* are?”

“Marx, there’s no need to explain anything because Reko’s already seen Lumia and me fight. That should be enough, no?”

“If he’s made his decision after seeing that, then I have nothing more to say.” Marx shrugged, backing down immediately.

“Well, it’s not as if I plan on throwing him into the fray right away. To start him on the basic training regime, we’re going to have to focus on teaching him how to actually fight first. You guys will help me out with that.”

As soon as the words ‘basic training regime’ left Asura’s mouth, Jyrki, Iina, and Marx all pulled a face.

“H-Hey, Reko, right? I’m Jyrki, the hottest guy in Moon Blossom. Nice to meet you and welcome to hell.”

“How unfortunate for you that you survived... I’m Iina, Moon Blossom’s mascot... Welcome to hell.”

“It’s too late to turn back, so don’t regret your choice. My name is Marx, and I’m a man who finds romance in magic. By the way, Moon Blossom doesn’t have a mascot. Welcome to hell.”

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Asura and the others booked the same bar from the night before and dined

there. Though they didn't spend as much as they had yesterday, they made sure to only order extravagant dishes.

"You can keep eating. Just listen," Asura said. "Our payment for this mission is a hundred and fifty thousand dora, though I haven't gone to get the money yet."

Her left arm had been set and hung in a sling. She'd asked only for the most basic of first aid from the Arnian paramedics and the limb still throbbed with pain. The sooner she could get it fixed up with Lumia's healing magic, the better.

"Sooooo, how much do we each get?"

Iina held up her hands to count before she realized something. "Um... I don't...have enough fingers..." Unfortunately, humans weren't born with fifteen fingers.

Asura sighed at their sorry display. "I'm going to have to work with you two on your fundamentals one day. I was so focused on your combat training that I completely forgot to work on your brains."

"If you split up that money between five people, then you each get thirty thousand dora. Why can't you figure that out? Are you stupid?" Reko asked, tilting his head to the side quizzically.

"Huh?! What'd you say, you snotty-nosed brat?! I'll kill you!"

"If you keep this up...I'll put sand in your boots..."

"Huh. Lately, I've been discovering a lot of sand in *my* boots, but I guess that was your doing, Iina? May I punch you later?"

"Hey, this conversation is going nowhere, so can you all shut up?" Asura threatened. "If you can't keep your mouths shut, I'll shove a stick up your assholes and poke around."

At Asura's threat, the three mercenaries immediately fell silent. All of them had been poked in the ass more than enough times during Asura's torture resistance training. "Now then, let's get to business. I was wondering if it would be all right to ask you three and Lumia to split eighty thousand of the payment

among yourselves?”

“Boss, are you trying to say that you plan on using seventy thousand dora to purchase Salume?” Marx asked. As expected, Marx could do math in his head and could read between the lines. It was a given though, considering his past position. An idiot couldn’t become a knight, after all.

“Yeah, that’s exactly it, Marx. Of course, it all depends on if you guys are okay with it.”

“I’m fine with it,” Jyrki said. “I’m interested in your dream of, uh, addin’ people to Moon Blossom and makin’ a big mercenary group that’ll make its mark in the history books. I mean, that sounds pretty sweet.”

“Doesn’t it?” Asura smiled. “War is my goal in and of itself, but I figured it would be nice for us to have something to work towards as a group. It’s not anything concrete right now, but we can hash out the details in the future.”

“Hmm... Boss, you really...like war, huh? As for Salume...I don’t care...”

“War’s fun, that’s why. Whether something is fun or not is all that motivates me.”

“I’m against it,” Marx piped up. “Ah, let me rephrase that. I’m for making Moon Blossom bigger, but not if it means recruiting a girl who seems so put-together.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Asura replied with a light shrug. “If Salume doesn’t want to join, then she won’t have to.”

Marx nodded. “If the decision ultimately falls on her shoulders, then I have nothing more to say.”

“Fantastic. Lumia, how about you?”

“I’m in,” Lumia said. “I think it’d be nice for Reko to have a training partner at his level. It’s difficult to get through the basic training regime alone, but having someone to lean on will make it more bearable.”

At Lumia’s explanation, Jyrki, Iina, and Marx all nodded deeply. When Asura created Moon Blossom and gathered her team, she’d made the four of them go through the basic training regime together.

“All right. In that case, I’ll go buy Salume after I get the money tomorrow. You can all have that day off. Go have fun shopping or something. Oh, but, Reko, you’ll be coming with me.”

“Yes, Boss.” Reko nodded his head obediently.

“Now then, it seems like all of you stopped eating during our talk. Let’s finish up here and return to our inn—”

But before Asura could finish talking, the door to the bar slammed open with a violent *bang*.

“Excuse me!”

A horde of men entered the establishment. At the very front of the crowd was a fat, grinning man who looked to be in his forties. His clothes were all of the highest quality, and he was decorated from head to toe with colorful jewelry. Three members of the Arnian military police trailed after him, and even farther behind them were three men who looked like your typical hooligans. One of them, who sported a mohawk, held a chain in his hand that was tied to a familiar girl.

“Salume...” Asura whispered.

Salume stood naked next to the hooligan with a mohawk. The only thing on her body was a collar, from which the chain extended. As if that wasn’t unsettling enough, Salume’s body was covered in bruises.

“I have a business proposition for the fine ladies and gentlemen of Moon Blossom,” the fat man said, the wide smile never leaving his face. “My name is Uno Hassinen and I’m a merchant. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“My name is Asura Lyona, the leader of Moon Blossom. What kind of business do you wish to discuss?”

Well, I can already figure it out, more or less, Asura thought to herself.

Uno snapped the fingers of his right hand. The hooligan with a mohawk roughly yanked Salume forward until she was standing at the fat man’s side. “I heard that the leader was a little lady, but I never thought the rumors were true,” he said.

“Enough. Just tell me what you want.”

Uno chuckled low in his throat. “It’s about this girl here, see. I purchased her for seventy thousand dora and was letting my men have some fun with her today. But a little birdie told me that the folks at Moon Blossom wanted to buy her for a hundred and fifty thousand dora.”

“Jyrki, sit down. That’s an order. Iina, don’t touch your dagger. Marx, calm down. It looks like the military police with Uno are the real deal.”

Asura could tell that the members of Moon Blossom had grown angry as soon as they saw the shape Salume was in. And thanks to Uno mentioning that his men had had “some fun with her,” that anger had morphed into a murderous rage. Even Lumia’s eyes glittered with the promise of death. If Asura lost control here, then the bar would turn into a bloodbath.

Not that Asura particularly minded that scenario, of course.

“What sharp eyes you have, Little Miss Leader. Ha ha, you’re absolutely correct. These gentlemen are indeed real members of the military police.” A wide smile remained plastered to Uno’s chubby face. “If any of you lay a finger on me, then you won’t be able to freely walk through the streets of Arnia tomorrow. You’d be criminals, after all.”

“I’m surprised you knew that our payment would be a hundred and fifty thousand dora, as well as the fact that we planned on purchasing Salume. Where did you get this information?”

Asura hardly needed to ask this either. She’d only just mentioned the hundred and fifty thousand. Considering when Uno and his goons arrived on the scene, it was likely either the bar owner or the young waiter. She could even figure out that Uno’s men had likely been on standby near the back door of the bar. As soon as they’d heard the intel they needed, they’d all swarmed in from the front door.

“Humph, you’re more a scalper than a merchant,” Asura scoffed under her breath. “And the worst kind of scalper too.”

“Oh, and by the waaaay, would you like to hear what’ll happen to this girl if Moon Blossom chooses not to buy her?”

“There’s no need for that. A hundred and fifty thousand dora, was it?”

“Yes. I must inform you that I do not partake in haggling of any kind. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Hmm. Let me tell you a bit about myself,” Asura said calmly. “I was the leader of a mercenary group in my past life as well. There was a time when we were hired by a rebel army in a region known as the Middle East.”

Uno looked completely lost at Asura’s sudden change of topic. But she continued without a care. “They were so appreciative of the work we did that they led us to a certain building. The region they ruled over was on the peaceful side, even if it was an artificial peace. So I was pretty surprised when I entered the building to see it full of young girls that they’d captured and turned into sex slaves.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Shut up and listen. It’s about to get interesting.” Asura laughed softly. “I don’t know who started it, but it went from being an orgy into a bloodbath. Ha ha, they must’ve been pretty pissed off at the sight of those girls. We ended up killing everyone in the rebel army. Isn’t that a hoot? Our professional reputation took a hit and it took us forever to build up client trust again, but it felt amazing.”

In truth, Asura knew who’d fired the first shot, but the end result was so funny that she’d never bothered to scold them.

“You know, we’re the type of people who’ll jump in and go with the flow if someone else starts something. That’s just the way we are. Do you understand what I’m trying to say? Hm? Do you get the point of my story, fatso?”

Uno knew exactly what Asura was insinuating: that she had no plans of stopping the members of her group if they lost control.

“If you lay a finger on me, then—”

“Then we’ll be criminals, right? Oh yes, I’m more than aware of that. On my end, I’d prefer to work in Arnia for a while longer, so this isn’t an ideal situation for me. So then, seeing how nice I am, I’ll offer you idiots with no idea who you’ve been threatening a wonderful chance to escape from this mess.”

“I have real members of the military police, plus my bodyguards, on my side, you know?” Uno spluttered. “I don’t care if you’re a mercenary group. If you think you can act all tough around me, then I’m going to have to teach you a—”

“Shaddup, you pig,” Jyrki snorted. “Our leader hasn’t finished talking yet. I’ll kill you.”

“Kill them all... Kill them all... Kill them all...” Iina chanted in a soft voice.

The members of Moon Blossom were brimming with motivation. If they were dealing with scumbags, then Lumia wouldn’t bother to stop them.

“None of you know how to have a civil conversation,” Uno snarled, his expression darkening with fury.

“There, there, just calm down. You should at least let me tell you what kind of chance I’m giving you.”

Asura slipped her right hand into the pocket of her pants underneath her robes. Then, she took out a single-dora coin and flicked it into the air with her thumb. It flew in an arch, spinning around and around, until it landed in front of Uno.

“I’ll buy Salume with that. Now, pick it up. Once you do, leave Salume here and get out of my sight. Luck has truly smiled upon you all tonight, since you managed to buy your lives with a single dora. Rather than counting sheep in bed tonight, count your blessings. It’s not every day that I decide to be so nice.”

Part One, Chapter Seven: What'll I do if I pick up a coin of freedom? I'll toss it once more as I dance through hell.

"It seems you underestimate me," Uno said with a theatrical shake of his head. He looked like such a clown that Asura started laughing out loud with the rest of Moon Blossom following suit. "Wh-What's so funny?! I'll kill you!"

At Uno's yell, the three hooligans all unsheathed their swords. Following their lead, the three members of the military police also raised their weapons.

"My oh my, this is truly a riot," Asura said, her voice still tinged with mirth. "It's quite the opposite. *You* are the ones underestimating *us*. Underestimating Moon Blossom, of all groups. Let me give it to you straight: if you don't pick up the coin, we're going to kill every single one of you. So pick it up."

"Oh, cut the crap! As soon as you attack, a whole army of military police will swarm in and... Huh?"

The three members of the military police fell to the ground without a sound, each sporting a dagger embedded in their forehead.

"What was that you said about the military police?" Asura giggled.

Jyrki, Iina, and Marx had all thrown their daggers to take out the military police first, to prevent them from blowing their whistles and calling for reinforcements. All three of them had known exactly what they needed to do, even without Asura's orders.

"Amazing..." Reko whispered.

"Moon Blossom doesn't need any fools who'd miss a target at this distance," Asura said. "You'll be able to do this in the future. Well, I'll make you practice until you can, anyway."

"They...they were real military police. You do realize that?" Uno said, his eyes and mouth twitching.

“That might’ve worked on your previous victims, but such a threat is useless against us. We solve all of our problems with force. If the military police try to arrest us, then we’ll destroy them. If the royal army decides to target us, then we’ll exterminate them. If the king orders us dead, then we’ll cut off his head. Unlike hooligans like you, we’re a true military group capable of such rampant violence.”

The scene fell quiet at Asura’s words.

“I-I’m outta here!” one of the hooligans exclaimed. He dropped his weapon and ran towards the entrance of the bar. Then a dagger sank into his leg and he fell to the ground with a strangled scream.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Lumia asked. “Didn’t you hear what our leader said? She’ll kill every single one of you if you don’t pick up that dora.” She remained seated, with no intention of standing up. The men before her were so weak that she could beat them all without even getting up on her feet.

“Pick it up, Mister Uno,” Lumia said with a smile. “You don’t want to die, do you? Your wanton cruelty angers me, but it would be best for all parties if I didn’t have to kill you.”

“Th-The one who’s wantonly cruel here is—!”

“Is who?” Lumia interrupted, tilting her head slightly to the side. The bright smile on her face sent Uno scrambling towards the coin.

“I-I’ll pick it up! I’ll pick it up!”

But before Uno’s fingers could touch the dora, Salume reached down and grabbed it. Unable to comprehend why she would do such a thing, he stood there, rooted to the spot.

“I won’t let you pick it up,” she said with a look of cold determination in her eyes. “Die.”

No matter what she had to do, she’d make sure he perished here in this bar. That was the only way he could ever make up for the abuse she’d received at his hands.

“Good going, Salume!” Asura cheered. “Oh, how wonderful! The moment you

return that dora to me will be the moment you become a free woman!”

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing, you idiot?! Give that thing to me!”

Uno ran forward, reaching out for the coin. But Salume dodged his hand and ran to Asura’s side.

“Now then, everyone, it’s about time to close the curtains on this party. The heroine of the show is ours now. So I’m going to have to ask the villains to exit stage left.”

At Asura’s dramatics, Lumia commented, “I never knew that you were a fan of the theater.”

“They’re villains, but...we’re even more villainous...”

“Duh. The dude probably thought of himself as a monstrous villain around town, then ended up pickin’ a fight with a group of *real* monsters. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.”

“I suppose...that everyone here except for the vice captain and myself do count as monsters.”

“All right, enough. Hurry up and finish the job.”

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In the end, it was one kill per person. Lumia, Iina, and Jyrki each killed one of the three hooligans with a dagger throw. As for Uno, he was sent to his death by Marx’s Water Prison, as a show of consideration for Salume to watch her tormentor drown slowly and painfully.

“Now then, Salume, if you return that dora to me, you’ll be free,” Asura said. She held out her right hand in a wordless invitation for Salume to place the coin upon her palm.

It took a moment for Salume to answer, and when she finally did, it was in a reedy voice. “No.”

“What was that?” Asura asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Please let me work as a mercenary!” Salume exclaimed, leaning forward in a low bow.

“Oh, come on,” Asura said with a wry smile. “That’s what I planned to do, but you’ve gained your freedom. And yet you’d discard it of your own will? Unlike Reko, you’re not broken. You can still return to society and live as a normal person.”

Salume raised her head with a clear expression on her face. It was then that Asura realized that she had not made this decision lightly.

“I want to become stronger,” she said. “So that I will never... So that no one will ever again be able to...” Her words trailed off and her breathing hitched.

“Enough. You don’t have to say any more. I know what you went through, so I know what you want to say.” Asura sighed and continued, “But—and this is a big ‘but’—we are a group of murderers. We’re incapable of making anybody happy. The only endings awaiting us are being sliced to death or dying as we roll in pain. The best alternative would be a vivacious death. Either way, only dead ends lie in the road ahead of us. Do you understand that?”

“Even so!” Salume yelled, her voice shrill as a scream. “Even so, I wish to become stronger!”

“Very well. Then I shall raise you into the strongest soldier-mage in my group. From today, you are no longer Salume, a slave. You are Salume, a mercenary of Moon Blossom. Welcome to hell.”

“C’mere, wear this.” Jyrki shrugged off his robes and draped them over Salume’s naked body.

“Th-Thank you so much...”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re teammates now.” Jyrki smiled back. Then he walked towards the kitchen. “So, which one of you squealed to the pig? Was it you, pops? Or you, Mister Waiter?”

Both the bar owner and the waiter shook their heads frantically before pointing an accusing finger at the other.

At that, Jyrki heaved a sigh and then looked back at Asura. “Boss, what should we do? Back in my bandit days, we woulda killed both of them. But since this is a mercenary group, I’d like some orders, pleeeease.”

“Before I give them, I must say that I’m impressed, Jyrki. I didn’t expect you to figure out that they were the ones who leaked our location.” Asura covered her mouth with her right hand in mock surprise. It was clear from both her tone and her action that she was mocking him.

“Uh, ain’t it obvious?! Just how stupid do you think I am?!”

“I knew it too...” Iina said. “Are you proud of me?”

“Not really. Considering the timing of their entry, those two are the only suspects,” Marx said. “They must’ve stationed either the hooligans or the military police at the back entrance.”

“Most likely,” Lumia said with a small shrug.

All of them, barring Reko, had come to the same conclusion Asura had. It made Asura a little happy to see that, since it would save her the time and effort of having to explain how the information had escaped from the group.

“If you’re honest, then I promise that I’ll spare your life,” she said, looking in the direction of the kitchen.

“R-Really?” the waiter replied. He was the only one between the two who gave a reaction.

“I see. So it was you.” Asura grinned.

Too late the waiter realized his mistake. His face was slack with shock for a second before he fell to his knees, rubbing his forehead desperately upon the ground as he begged, “Please! Just don’t kill me!”

“All right. But you have to promise to keep quiet about what happened today.”

At Asura’s words, the waiter raised his head. “Of course.”

Asura glanced in the owner’s direction, and he nodded his assent as well. “Jyrki, clean up the corpses. Have the waiter and the owner help you. Just in case, we’ll make them our accomplices in disposing of the bodies.”

“’Kay. By the way, Boss, this fat merchant’s got a whole lot of jewels, so would it be chill if I took some?”

“Knock yourself out,” Asura replied with a nonchalant wave. Jyrki raised his arms above his head in celebration.

“I want...jewels too...”

“Hey, Reko, help me out here. I’ll let you keep the pocket change you earn.”

At Jyrki’s orders, Reko looked in Asura’s direction. She silently waved her right hand once more, signaling that he could do what he wanted. Reko correctly interpreted the gesture and, along with Ina, walked towards Jyrki.

“Now then, let’s make our way back to the inn. Lumia, once we arrive, I want you to use your healing magic on Salume.”

“Oh? You don’t want me to use it on that left arm of yours?”

“I can hold out till tomorrow.”

Since Lumia’s healing magic took time to work, she couldn’t use it to heal two people in a single night.

“You really are a softie underneath it all.” Lumia laughed with a joyful tone.

“Shut up. Salume, Marx, let’s go.” Asura stood up from the chair and started to walk towards the entrance.

“I’ll participate in the cleanup,” Marx said. “I’m not entirely comfortable leaving it all up to Jyrki and the others.”

“Hmm.” Asura pondered on that for a bit and then nodded. “You have a point. Make sure you erase all evidence of our presence. I’m counting on you.”

“Understood.”

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Warm. That was Salume’s opinion of Lumia’s healing magic as it soaked through her body. *It’s warm and it feels so good.*

They were sitting in the room that Asura booked for herself in the inn. When Moon Blossom checked in, they had each gotten their own room, so it stood to reason that Salume didn’t have one. For today, she would sleep in Asura’s room with her.

“Now then,” Asura said as she stripped off her robes. “Do you mind if we chat

a little?”

She neatly folded her robes and placed them on top of a long dresser. Underneath the robes, she wore brown pants and a white blouse embroidered with the Moon Blossom symbol. Her belt looked fairly bizarre. It had several leather sheaths for her daggers, but a few were empty. Asura must have used and discarded a number of them.

“Ah, no,” Salume finally replied. Unlike Asura, she kept Jyrki’s robes on since she was still naked underneath.

“We’re going to teach you and Reko quite a few things,” Asura said as she sat down on a chair.

Salume and Lumia were sitting on Asura’s bed. It wasn’t a very good one, but it was much better than anything that Salume had ever experienced. The room itself wasn’t very fancy either. Its only notable feature was its sheer commonality. But it was still preferable to when she was a courtesan and living in poverty. Back then, she and all of the other courtesans had needed to squish together into a single house that was old and reeked of mold. The idea of never having to return there ever again was enough to put a smile on Salume’s face.

“First, I’ll check how well the two of you can follow orders. After that, we’ll do some physical training to build up your strength. Once we have a solid enough foundation, I’ll start teaching you magic and combat techniques, and for this time around, I’ll add in lessons about common knowledge. Once I believe you’re ready, we’ll move you on to the basic training regime of a soldier-mage. Do you understand what I’m saying so far?” Upon seeing Salume nod, Asura continued, “It takes a while to learn magic, so at the earliest, you’ll see real combat in a year or so. At most, you’ll play a support role.”

“I don’t really know much about magic,” Salume admitted.

“I see. I’ll give you a rundown of the basics, then. Magic uses the magical energy inside your body. I call this energy ‘MP.’”

“Empy?”

“It’s an acronym for ‘magical power.’ To use magic, you must first materialize your MP, change its element, and then alter its properties. Your starting point is

learning how to materialize your MP."

"What that means is recognizing the MP inside your body, and then learning how to take it out at will," Lumia added coolly.

"Once you take out your MP, you have to alter its element. Everyone has their own unique element, and it's impossible to know what yours is until you actually channel your MP."

"Short of attaining a Fixed Element, it's impossible to change the element you're born with," Lumia said. "Once you're able to use a Fixed Element, then you'll be able to call yourself a grand mage."

"No, you won't. We're soldier-mages—warriors that use magic as a weapon. We're not the same as normal mages. Are you following along with what we're saying?"

"Yes."

The words made sense to Salume in a vague sort of way. But she knew that if they ordered her to call out her MP at this very moment and channel her element through it, she wouldn't even know where to start.

"Then the last thing you'll need to do is change its property. There are only four properties that magic can have: attack, healing, support, and manifestation. You choose one of those properties and alter your magic to align with them. Once you're more experienced, you'll be able to assign two properties to a single spell with a technique called dual affix."

"That's an impossible task for a beginner, so pretend Asura didn't say anything," Lumia sighed.

"I suppose it's true that it takes years of practice to reach that skill level," Asura admitted. "You start off learning how to use magic in your first few years. Then it takes another few years to obtain a Fixed Element. Learning how to dual affix would be a few more years after that."

"That's one of the reasons why there aren't a lot of mages," Lumia added. "By the way, there's no particular order to earning a Fixed Element and learning dual affix. It really depends on the one who..." Lumia trailed off in the middle of her sentence and turned her gaze to the door.

Asura slowly got up from her chair and pulled a dagger from her belt. Salume was a little confused as to why they were acting this way. Then, someone knocked on the door.

“Asura Lyona, I wish to speak with you in private.”

Oh, I see. Salume nodded to herself. The two of them had sensed the presence of another human. She was impressed by their perception and wondered whether she’d ever be able to pull off the same thing.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.” Asura chuckled humorlessly as she sheathed her dagger. The door slowly opened, revealing a man who looked to be in his twenties. There was nothing special about the clothes he wore, and yet he naturally exuded a distinguished aura. “Did you come alone?”

“Yes. It’s a highly confidential topic that I wish to discuss, and I didn’t even bring a guard with me. I visit the towns in disguises like this from time to time, so I’m used to it.”

“Ah, I see. Come in, come in, King Arnia. So long as this isn’t an attempt to hook up, you’re welcome here.”

Part Two, Chapter One: We're risking major losses? Really now? At most, we'd lose our lives.

King Arnia sat down in the chair that Asura had been occupying, so Asura dragged out another chair and sat down across from him.

"Asura Lyona, don't you think it's a little cramped?"

"Just call me Asura. And I'm such a pretty girl that it shouldn't be uncomfortable to sit so close to me, right?"

In truth, Asura had just messed up placing the chair. But it was too much work to get up and fix it, so she decided to just roll with the punches.

"H-Hmm..."

"Oh? Your eyes are as beautiful as the sunset."

"I-I see... I never knew that..."

"So? What did you want to talk about?" Asura leaned back in the chair, her tone casual and light.

King Arnia cleared his throat and then said, "For starters, I'd like to hear the honest opinions of Moon Blossom's leader and vice captain in regards to this war."

"I think that we can still have a lot of fun. What about you, my deputy?" She tilted the chair slightly as she leaned back to look at Lumia, who was still seated on the bed.

Lumia sighed quietly. "You wish for my honest opinion, King Arnia?"

"Yes, if you please."

"Arnia has no chance of winning."

"I figured." King Arnia didn't seem disappointed or upset at Lumia's words. He simply nodded impassively. "Vice Captain, can you offer me a concise explanation of your reasoning?"

“Therbae simply has a stronger army. They have more men, and their soldiers are better trained. Not only that, but they’re able to control monsters.” Lumia spoke in a tone as dry and emotionless as the king’s. “On top of that, they burned your tea fields, one of Arnia’s key industries. Am I right in stating that the principal battlefield now is in the southeast fields?”

“Yes.”

“Your lines won’t last for very long. I give it around ten days or so.”

“My generals said the same thing. How did you know?”

“We analyzed the difference in strength, compared the results, and then joined this conflict.”

“My deputy here is drawing up a simulation of the war in her head,” Asura said with a sly grin. “Tell him what’ll await Arnia if we don’t do anything to help.”

Lumia nodded. “You’ll suffer a defeat at the principal battlefield and lose a trading city. With your tea fields razed and the trading city that served as the economic heart of Arnia lost, you’ve essentially died financially. Even if Therbae left you alone after that, Arnia would undergo a slow destruction. Of course, I assume you would surrender before that, but I’m not sure if Therbae would accept it.”

“Miss Vice Captain...do you have much experience with war?” King Arnia asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Yes. But it’s all in the past.”

“I see... And may I ask what’ll happen if Asura and Moon Blossom lend a hand?”

“You’ll be able to win in the southeast,” Asura declared confidently. “However, if the war continues, then you won’t win in the end. At best, you’ll be able to get a tie. That’s because—”

“Hero General, Matias Arlandel,” Lumia cut in, her tone severe.

“Unfortunately for you, the enemy has a military hero on their side,” Asura said. “Arnia, on the other hand, doesn’t even have a hero candidate, let alone a

hero. This is a huge handicap in multiple senses of the word. Even if they weren't military, you could conscript a domestic hero if you absolutely needed to. But you can't even do that."

"I wonder if conscription would even work," Lumia wondered out loud. "There are plenty of heroes out there who simply live in a country without having any investment in it. This is just my impression, but I feel like most heroes do whatever they want outside their duties."

"That's why I said it was unfortunate."

"You're right. I heard that Matias was a patriotic and loyal soldier even before he became a hero." Lumia turned her gaze from Asura to King Arnia. "Your Majesty, I'm sure you know that a hero possesses inhuman powers of combat, yes?"

"Yes. I hear they're capable of amazing feats such as splitting the earth with their sword, splitting boulders with their fists, and running faster than horses. They're even able to fight against supernatural disasters such as Demon Lords."

"Demon Lord?" Asura's lips quirked. "An entity that appears at given intervals to threaten the livelihoods of humanity, was it?"

Demon Lords were gods of destruction that possessed an almost infinite amount of MP. Wherever they went, they wreaked havoc as their instincts dictated. The vast majority of them were completely insane, with nothing but anger and hatred in their hearts.

"Normal people," Lumia said slowly, "would never think of challenging a Demon Lord. You only need to look at it to know that it's not something a human can handle. But heroes will fight, because that is their duty. Every time a unit is formed to subjugate a Demon Lord, only half of their numbers ever return."

"And yet Matias Arlandel survived a Demon Lord mission twice." A shudder of excitement ran through Asura's body. That very same Matias was the supreme commander of the Great Therbae Kingdom's army. "Now then, King Arnia, let's go over our victory conditions once again." Asura was completely motivated for the job. Even though they still hadn't gotten an official request, she knew that they would end the night with one. Otherwise, King Arnia wouldn't have

sneaked out to meet them in the dead of night. “We’ll have to either kill the supreme commander or force him to retreat. Either that, or the gong will sound on the battlefield. One of these three needs to happen.”

“To be more specific, a gong sounding on the battlefield is a metaphor for the generals coming together for a conversation,” Lumia explained. “It signals an armistice.”

“But most of the time, those conversations are for one party to suggest a capitulation to the other, with conditions like, ‘Don’t execute my soldiers or generals.’”

“Hmm. But so long as Matias is around, then I doubt Therbae will sound the gong. If anything, we would be the ones to do so,” King Arnia said.

“Well, let’s continue. To be more specific, the three conditions I mentioned are all the first steps we would take towards victory. The final decision lies with Therbae’s king. Worse comes to worst, he could replace his supreme commander and then attack Arnia again.”

“No matter what, so long as the supreme commander is a hero, we can’t defeat him. The only way Arnia can win is by forcing a retreat.”

“Exactly. Heroes have special privileges and duties. At least that’s what they say about themselves. So it could all be hogwash.”

“Do you have to say it like that?” Lumia sighed, but with a smile on her face. “All heroes consent to performing their duties the moment they earn their title. As for their privileges, they have enough power and command enough respect to force people to honor them.”

“And so they’re troublesome to deal with,” Asura said. “If I recall, there’s a privilege that forbids people from killing heroes, doesn’t it? Breaking that rule will cause all heroes to come for us in revenge. Even I think that would be a pain in the neck to deal with.”

“Those privileges are aimed at other heroes...” Lumia corrected. “They were made to stop heroes from fighting and killing each other. No one made those rules thinking that a civilian would kill a hero, though I’m sure that they’d get punished if they *did* manage it.”

“What about heroes killing civilians?” Asura asked.

“It’s forbidden to kill someone out of a personal vendetta, as well as to kill someone for personal gain. They’re called ‘heroes’ but they’re really just battle junkies. Whether or not they’re actually good of heart depends on the individual. They’re all strong enough that they can break laws with impunity, so the privileges are in place to keep them in check. No one would want to support heroes if they were nothing more than a lawless group of barbarians.”

“I see.” Asura nodded. “The Hero General is a military man, so to him, we’re enemy soldiers. In this situation, even if he went around massacring Arnian soldiers, it wouldn’t count as a personal vendetta or be seen as something done for personal gain. On the other hand, if the Arnian soldiers manage to kill him, then all of the heroes become their enemies. Did I get that right?”

“There’s the possibility that the entire country of Arnia would become a target,” Lumia said. “In saying that though, there’s never been a civilian who managed to kill a hero. I was trying to say that even defeating him is impossible.”

“To begin with, most people wouldn’t even start to think about attempting to kill a hero,” King Arnia said. “They answered the call of the Great Hero and are fighting against peak-tier monsters and Demon Lords to protect humanity’s future. We feel respect for them, not murderous intent.”

The reason people listened to and obeyed the privileges that the heroes set was because they were risking their lives for the sake of the future.

“Are you going to continue that thought with a ‘but’ or a ‘however’?” Asura joked, and King Arnia frowned.

“Does it matter which one? Asura, even with my disadvantages, I still wish to protect Arnia.”

“I know. So? What do you want us to do? C’mon, just say it.”

“Matias...” King Arnia swallowed. “Will you kill...the hero Matias?”

This was a once-in-a-lifetime job request. No one in this world would ever seriously consider the idea of killing a hero. It would bring down the wrath of all the other heroes. Anyone who wanted that was a heretic, and it was no

exaggeration to say that there was something seriously wrong with them.

“Ha ha! Did you hear that, my deputy?!” There was pure joy on Asura’s face, but Lumia’s was tight.

“King Arnia, take that back. We can still pretend that you didn’t say anything.”

“Boy king, you don’t have to take that back. Ahh, things are getting interesting.”

“Hold on, Asura... I mean, Boss. Some jobs are all right to take and some aren’t. This is obviously the latter. Even a million dora wouldn’t be worth the risk. It’s not even possible to fulfill the request! How can anyone kill a hero?!”

“Well, it’s possible, isn’t it?” Asura leaned back so far that her body formed an arch. From Asura’s perspective, Lumia’s slightly angry expression was upside down.

“How?”

“Obviously, if I stand in front of him like, ‘Let’s have a fair duel,’ then I’ll lose. But, my deputy, you’re all worshipping these heroes a little too much. They’re heroes in name, but in reality, they’re just humans who’re really good at fighting, aren’t they? They’d die if you poisoned or strangled them, just like the rest of us.”

“Hypothetically, let’s say we manage to kill Matias,” Lumia said. “What do you plan on doing after that? The other heroes will target us to avenge him, and we’ll have to fend all of them off.”

“Then we’ll wage a war against the heroes...is what I’d like to say. But it’s true that we don’t have the manpower for that...*yet*, anyway. So we’ll just have to kill him without leaving behind any evidence, then play dumb if asked about it.”

“Evidence... You hardly need to worry about that! If Matias were to die right now, it’d be obvious that Arnia did it! Fingers would immediately be pointed at us since we’re their hired mercenaries.”

“Yeah, I bet. But no one’s ever managed to kill a hero before, right? Then, they’d need evidence to prove that we were the ones who pulled off such a miracle. Heroes aren’t a gang of thugs that can go around seeking revenge on

nothing more than hearsay and theory.”

After Asura said that, Lumia placed the palm of her right hand to her forehead and then shook her head. Ignoring her exasperation, Asura turned her attention back to King Arnia.

“Now, then, boy king, let’s talk payment. According to my deputy, a hundred million dora isn’t enough for us to risk it. I also don’t wish to undersell my services.”

“Is it...really possible for you to kill him? Kill...a hero...?” King Arnia’s eyes were as wide as saucers, clearly shocked.

“Oh, come on, *you* were the one who wanted us to do it. It’s because you thought that we’d be able to pull it off, right? Then trust that instinct of yours all the way until the end.”

“R-Right... If I may be honest, I expected you to decline this job... After you refused, I was going to ask you to fight alongside my army in the southeast plains, where combat is the fiercest.”

Ah, I guess that was what the boy king truly wanted to discuss when he came here, Asura mused. “All right, we’ll take that job for you.”

“Huh?” King Arnia said after a pause to register Asura’s words.

“Phew...” Lumia sighed. “I’m glad you’re not *entirely* insane, Boss.”

“Let’s see... How does twenty thousand dora per day sound to you?”

“Of course, that sounds fine, but...what about the hero?”

“Oops, I didn’t explain myself properly. I meant that I would take that job for you to camouflage our true aim.”

“Excuse me?” Lumia glared at her leader. There was a venomous edge to her voice. “And what do you mean by that, Boss?”

“On the surface, we’ll be nothing more than a mercenary group that the king hired for a daily fee of twenty thousand dora. To onlookers, it won’t look as if we’ve taken a job as important as assassinating Matias. Receiving too much money at once would be the same as advertising to everyone that we were the killers.”

“Then how will we get our proper payment? Don’t tell me that we’ll be getting on the heroes’ bad side as an act of charity? You’d truly be insane if that’s your plan.”

“Oh, come on, deputy. You don’t have to sound that mad.” Asura chuckled.

Lumia glared at her. “I *am* mad!”

“Don’t worry, I have a plan,” Asura sighed with exasperation. And then, without warning, she reached out to grab King Arnia’s head, pulling his face towards herself.

“B-Boss, what are you doing?!”

“Shh.” Asura stared straight into King Arnia’s eyes, the gap between their faces practically nonexistent. The king didn’t look away, meeting her gaze unflinchingly. “Can you stake your life on this, boy king?”

“If it will bring victory to Arnia, yes.”

“‘Kill a hero for me’... I doubt anyone has ever received a request as crazy as this before. You’re mad. Is that how you became the king at your age? Remind me again, you’re twenty, right? Twenty-one?”

“I’m twenty-two, Asura. And if you ask me, I believe that you’re just as mad if you’re willing to take on said request.”

“Well, that’s why I’m a mercenary.”

“And that’s why I’m the king.”

After a few seconds of silence, Asura opened her mouth. “Boy king, your life is the payment I want for killing Matias.”

“My life? Do you mean to say you want me to take you as my wife?”

“Why in the world would I be proposing to you right now? That’s obviously not it. Boy king, I want you to be my pawn until the day that you die. Grant every request I make, and do everything I order. Work yourself to the bone for me and die for my sake. I want you to stake your life, in all meanings of the word. That’s the weight of the job you want us to do.”

King Arnia swallowed and thought on Asura’s words for a short while. “Very

well," he finally said.

"Just so you know, I am a very demanding person, and I kill anyone who can't cough up my payment. Keep that in mind, boy king."

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The next morning, the members of Moon Blossom gathered in Asura's room. Of course, this included Reko and Salume.

"Sorry for calling a meeting on your day off," Asura said, a bright smile on her face.

"The population density is...insane... The only place to sit is on the ground," Iina said, her face devoid of any emotion.

"I have a new job for us. Happy news, isn't it?" Asura announced from her spot on Lumia's lap. Though Lumia was seated in a chair like a normal person, she also served as a seat for Asura.

"So we don't have today off anymore?" Marx asked from where he was leaning on the wall.

"You still do. We'll make our move tomorrow, after my arm finishes healing," Asura replied, unable to keep the wide grin off her face as she savored the warm softness of Lumia's breasts against her back.

Lumia had already cast some preliminary healing magic on Asura's arm, since she'd had leftover MP after healing Salume. It still hurt and felt strange, but at least she didn't need to have it in a sling anymore.

"'Kay, so what's this new job?" Jyrki asked from his spot in the other chair.

"Change seats with me..." With that, Iina kicked—literally kicked—Jyrki off the chair. As Jyrki tumbled off it, his arms windmilling for balance, Iina took the opportunity to slide into the seat.

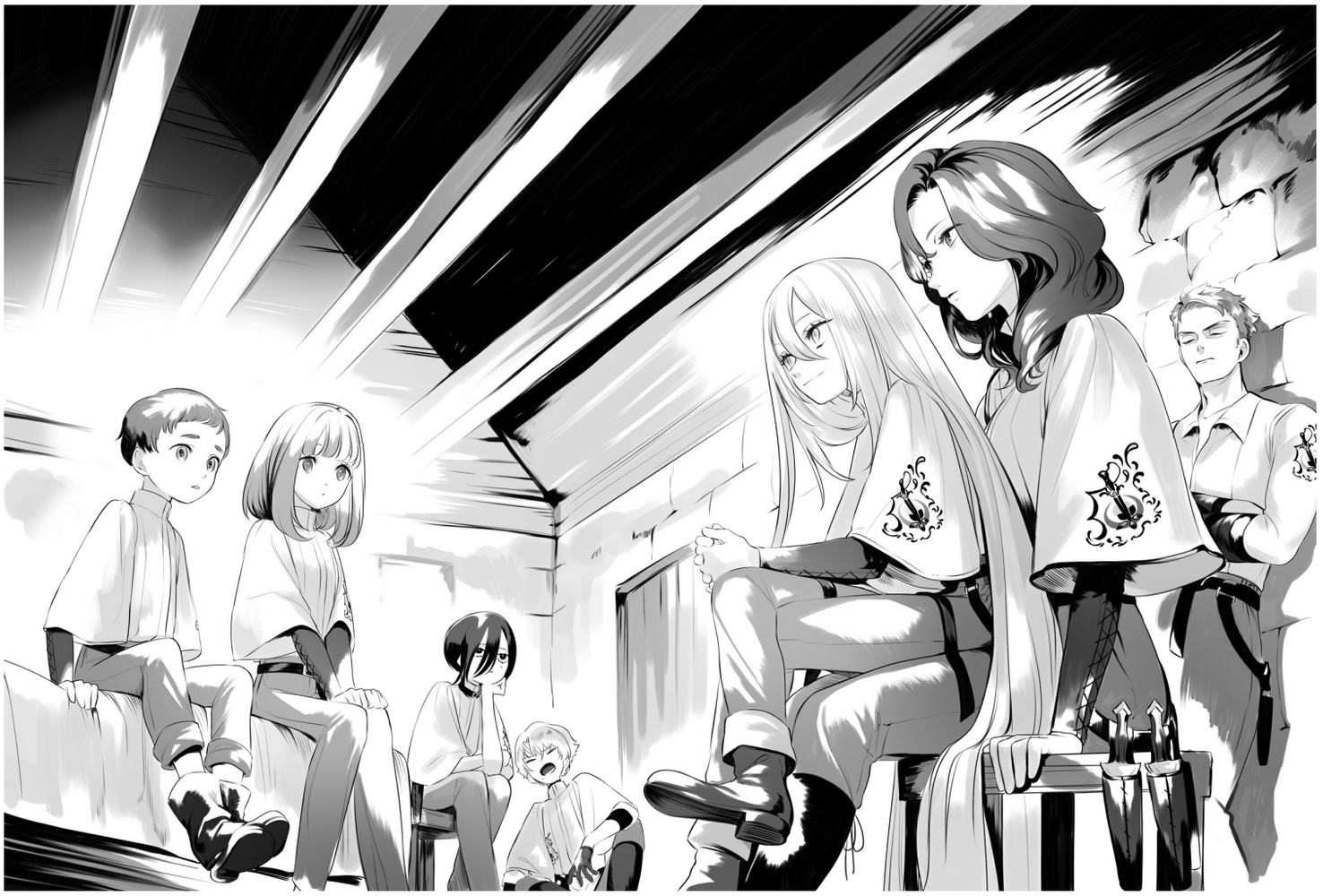
"Why, you little—! I was sitting there first!" he yelled angrily, but Iina simply looked away in disinterest.

"Boss, is this job something that I can help with?" Reko asked. He and Salume both sat atop Asura's bed.

“Of course, Reko,” Asura said. “We’ll be splitting into two teams for this one. You and Salume will mostly be running errands for us, but you’ll still be able to participate.”

“We’ll be splitting up into Red Team and Blue Team again?” Marx asked, calm as ever.

“No. This time, we’ll be splitting into Alpha Team and Beta Team. Both Plan A and Plan B will be put into action at once.”



“Two...plans?” Iina asked, tilting her head quizzically.

“That’s right. Lumia will be in charge of Alpha Team, consisting of Jyrki, Marx, and Salume. Alpha Team’s job will be going to the battlefront in the southeast plains and, along with the Arnian army, defeating the Therbaen troops. Put all you got into this. Fight with the intention of forcing a retreat.”

“D’you mean to fight with the intention of winning the war?” Jyrki asked.

“If you want to think of it in simpler terms, then yes. However, there’s a chance that the war won’t end even if Therbae pulls back its army. So long as the Hero General remains alive, they always have the option to invade again in the future.”

“But there’s nothing we can do about that,” Marx said.

“And that’s where my Beta Team will come into the picture, Marx. Beta Team will be Iina and Reko. We will come up with a plan to assassinate the hero, Matias.”

“Ahh, that makes sense. If we kill the hero, then they probably won’t think to invade again...” Jyrki nodded to himself. But the next second, he sat up straight and yelled, “As if that’s even possible?! Boss, what in the world are you talkin’ about?! Have you completely lost your marbles?! Like, I always knew you were a crazy little shitstain, but this is a li’l beyond that! Won’t we get into tons of trouble for killin’ a hero?!”

“Boss, I share Jyrki’s concerns,” Marx said. “This does not sound like the plan of a sane person. The possibility of it succeeding is too low. Killing a hero sounds implausible, and even if you succeed, will the heroes not wipe us out in retaliation?”

“Killing a hero...sounds like too much...even for us...”

“See? I told you so,” Lumia sighed softly.

“U-Um...may I say something?” Salume asked apologetically as she raised her right hand.

“You have my permission. Go ahead,” Asura ordered.

“Heroes are, um, people who protect the future of humanity, and defend us

against strong monsters and Demon Lords. So that's why people don't normally think to kill them, right?"

Everyone blinked confusedly at Salume's words.

"So what, Salume?" Asura prompted.

"Ah, um, so I was wondering...if everyone here thinks that it's okay to kill a hero?"

"It's cool, ain't it? If it's even possible, anyway," Jyrki scoffed. "*I* certainly don't think so! I mean, it'd be like trying to defeat our vice cap'n. Even if we surrounded her and beat her up, we'd end up losin'."

"If it's an order, then I would have no choice but to do so," Marx said. "Obviously, I agree that killing a hero doesn't sound realistic. As far as I know, no one has ever managed to do it. 'Trying to defeat our vice captain' is a sound comparison. If we can't even defeat Lumia, then there's no hope for us to defeat a hero."

"A hero...is human. We can kill humans... But I don't think we can win either... The vice captain is my enemy... But all I can do is...put sugar into her water..."

"Lately, I've been curious as to why my water tastes so sweet, but I see... So it was your doing, Iina? How naughty of you. I'm going to have to punish you later," Lumia said with a soft smile.

Upon seeing Lumia's expression, Ina jumped to her feet and dashed towards Marx, throwing her arms around him. "It was...Marx's idea..."

"Don't involve me in this," he sighed. "Don't think I forgot the fact that you put sand in my boots. Vice Captain, I can assist in holding Iina down."

At Marx's betrayal, Iina rushed to Jyrki. "Jyr..."

"Shaddup. I haven't forgotten about how you kicked me off my chair. That's karma for ya. Hope some pain'll smarten you up."

"I see..." Salume nodded to herself. "I wondered if our leader was unique in her disposition, but I see that everyone is just as bad. I hope that I can catch up to everyone soon."

"What do you mean?" Reko asked.

“Ah, well, isn’t everyone equally crazy? All they’ve discussed is whether or not it’s possible to kill the hero, and what they would do afterward. No one, including the vice captain, cares about the morals behind murdering one.”

Part Two, Chapter Two: What does a mercenary need? Beyond the ability to joke at any moment?

In the middle of the Great Therbae Kingdom army's temporary headquarters, Hero General Matias Arlandel sat in a chair that he had placed in the middle of his tent.

"Arnian tea truly tastes pleasant. Don't you agree, Teresa? It's perfect for a spot of afternoon tea," he said.

Matias had short silver hair and an equally silver mustache. He was of average build, but his handsome face made him popular with the kingdom's women. His dedication to his wife, who had been his childhood friend before marriage, was also a trait that added to his popularity. On top of everything, Matias also had the title of a hero. He gave off a sense of gravitas befitting one who had become the supreme commander of the Great Therbae Kingdom's army at the age of thirty-seven. Despite all of his impressive titles and achievements, the large cup he was holding in his right hand was cheap and unevenly shaped.

"And yet, a detached force went off and burned all of the fields to the ground on your orders," his deputy, Teresa, said in a calm voice. She was twenty-four years old, with long, eye-catchingly glossy black hair.

"I had no other choice. It's not as if I enjoyed razing the internationally renowned tea fields of Arnia for the sake of our petty king, who went and started such a foolish war to satisfy his childish pride."

"Don't you think you're speaking out of turn?"

"Humph. I'm not scared of him. He's a coward who can't start a war unless I'm around, yet has the pride of someone who thinks he can. Don't you agree that starting a war with Arnia out of jealousy towards its king, who's around the same age as him, is ridiculous?"

"In any case, neither you nor I can refuse his orders so long as we're in his army. There's no need for any more complaining."

“The previous king was a wise man. He was someone who deserved loyalty.” Matias sighed as he thought of the Great Therbae Kingdom’s previous monarch, who had died from a sudden illness. That had been when things started to go wrong. “If the Great Therbae Kingdom doesn’t change its ruler, then it will perish.”

“That’s out of line.”

“Humph.” Matias took a sip of the tea. It was truly delicious. Why must they destroy Arnia when it was capable of creating such delectable leaves? “Drinking the world’s best tea from a cup given to me by my son when he was a lad... There’s no greater joy in this world. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I’ve heard you say that many times now,” Teresa sighed with a small shake of her head. “He made that cup himself, right?”

Before Matias could answer, a messenger ran into the tent. “General, I bear news!”

“Has Arnia surrendered?”

“No. Our spy discovered that the mercenary group, Moon Blossom, will be reinforcing them. Morale is high on the Arnian side.”

“Moon Blossom... The mercenaries I’ve heard so much about, huh?”

They’d completely obliterated the reinforcements that Matias had sent to take down Arnia’s central fortress, and with only a few people at that. They had even gone so far as to keep one of the Therbaen soldiers alive so he could spread their name. Thanks to Moon Blossom, Matias had to give up on conquering the central fortress.

Not only that, but Moon Blossom had destroyed three of the monster-tamer platoons he’d sent to wipe out Mullux Village. Word of this had spread like lightning among both allied and enemy forces. It was understandable, considering they’d killed three intermediate-tier monsters with a group as small as a platoon. There was one more concern Matias had about them.

“Is Punti still missing?”

“Yes! No one’s seen Lord Punti, the monster mediator, yet!”

Even Punti, a hero candidate, had gone missing after his encounter with them.

“Punti is a powerful warrior, but his personality is very...honest. If they cheated in their battle with him, I doubt he would’ve been able to handle them. I should’ve taught him what kind of people mercenaries are...”

As a whole, mercenaries were usually in charge of dirty work. They took on jobs that clients didn’t want to give their actual soldiers, or participated in underhanded operations that would sully a country’s honor. Mercenaries often performed work that no one on the straight and narrow would ever have to do.

“Sir, you underestimate him,” Teresa said. “Punti is stronger than you think he is. The average mercenary wouldn’t be able to defeat him even if they tried to gain the upper hand with trickery.”

“Would you consider Moon Blossom a group of ‘average mercenaries’? You call soldiers for hire who can destroy a battalion with a small fraction of its men and exterminate three monster-tamer platoons ‘average’?”

Their feats were so unbelievable, Matias suspected the involvement of another hero.

“Ah, no... I apologize... I spoke out of turn...”

“It’s fine. I will go see them myself. Tell the troops that tomorrow, Hero General Matias himself shall cut a path through the battlefield!”

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Jyrki and his team were in the middle of traveling to the front on horseback. Since Salume didn’t know how to ride a horse, she sat behind Jyrki on the saddle.

“It’s cool that we’re going to the front and all, but will we even be able to do anythin’?” Jyrki asked Marx, who was riding alongside them on his own horse.

Lumia rode in front of the two. Though there was a small distance between her and the men, she remained close enough to listen in on their conversation.

“I believe...that we’ll have to fight in a different way from the usual strategies we employ as soldier-mages,” Marx replied slowly. “But I’m not sure.”

“If we don’t do anything, then we’ll get in big trouble,” Lumia said, turning her head to look at them.

“So that means the boss is for real about this?”

“Vice Captain, what were you and the boss talking about yesterday?” Marx asked.

Asura had revealed Moon Blossom’s new job to Jyrki and the others yesterday morning. After the meeting ended, Jyrki and the others enjoyed their day off, but Lumia stayed behind to talk with Asura.

“Asura is serious about this. She had me pretend to be the hero in order to confirm some things. I don’t know the details of her plan, but I hypothesize that she’ll be using arrows.”

“Aw, man,” Jyrki sighed with a shake of his head. “It ain’t matter if the other team succeeds or fails. It’ll all be the same thing for us—a pain in the ass!”

“Vice Captain, what is your honest opinion about all this? Do you think that the leader, Iina, and Reko can pull this off? I simply can’t imagine how they’d do it.”

“I can’t envision it either,” Lumia replied. “All I know is that Asura will do it for sure. I guarantee that she’ll go through with her plan, though there’s no telling whether it’ll actually succeed or not.”

“Just what kinda crazy is she?! ‘Play dumb if we kill him, but play dumb even if we don’t.’ What’s that even supposed to *mean*?!”

Asura had looked so happy while talking about killing the hero yesterday morning. No one knew whether she simply enjoyed difficult missions, or whether she felt fired up at the prospect of doing something no one had ever done before.

“More importantly, I have to say that I’m not too pleased about the payment we’ll be getting.”

“Yeah, same here, Marx.”

According to Asura, the payment Moon Blossom would receive for killing the hero would not come in the form of cash or jewels. Instead, it would be their

right to ask something of the king. That was it.

“Arnia isn’t a dictatorship,” Lumia said. “Of course, King Arnia still has plenty of decision-making power, but there are many limitations on what he can do.”

“He’s got, like, a parliament or somethin’, right?” Jyrki asked. He wasn’t very familiar with the rules of government.

“That, and there’s also the chance of getting dethroned by his nobles and citizens if he makes the wrong calls. According to Asura, he’s closer to a...um, what did she say...a p-president? Yes, that’s right. She said that he’s closer to a president.”

“What’s that?”

“A grand leader... Someone who presides over things, mostly used for the heads of countries. Isn’t it an interesting word?”

Though Jyrki couldn’t see Lumia’s face, he knew that she laughed a little bit after she said that. Her voice had been light with amusement.

“Why not just call him a ‘king’? Wait, now that I think about it, ‘president’ sounds pretty sick... Hey, Salume, which word do you prefer?”

“Huh? Why’d you suddenly turn the conversation to me? Anyway, I think ‘president’ is cooler.”

“Right?! Yo, Marx, what about you?”

“I don’t care either way. I only care about our payment.”

“It’s too little for how much we’re expected to do. I agree that it’s unfair,” Lumia said. “So that’s why we have to end the war first, in order to get the cash reward. I’m actually good at warfare, you know.”

“Wow, Marx, didya hear that? The vice cap’n told a joke.”

“I’m not joking, Jyrki. I used to be in the army. Listen, everyone, we have to force the Therbaen army to retreat *before* Asura kills the hero.”

Lumia was completely serious about this. The smile on Jyrki’s face when he heard her order was strained.

“Vice Captain, that’s not exactly an easy task either,” Marx said.

He was absolutely correct. The Arnian army was weak. On top of that, Jyrki and the others were being forced to fight in a way they weren't used to.

"Besides, so long as the Hero General's still kickin', they might regroup and reinvade!"

"Until we force them to retreat, that's nothing more than a hypothetical. There's nothing certain about a 'might' or a 'maybe,' right?"

"Well, yeah..." Jyrki muttered. Both the leader and the vice captain of Moon Blossom talked about difficult missions as if they were a walk in the park.

"Vice Captain, do you have a plan?"

"Of course I do, Marx. For an army of that size to move around, they would need plenty of supplies, especially when it comes to rations. What do you think would happen if we were to burn all of them to a crisp?"

"Wooow." Jyrki's smile tightened. "That's harsh. Vice Cap'n, you've been becoming more and more like the boss lately!"

Even the Arnian army would be more than enough to defeat the Therbaens if the Therbaens were famished.

"Hmm. A tactic befitting a soldier-mage. It's a wonderful plan," Marx said. He nodded his head several times, looking pleased.

"I guess it is, compared to fighting them head-on and on open ground," Jyrki agreed.

"By the way, we'll be using the proper techniques of fire and maneuver." That was the basic strategy Asura had taught her soldier-mages.

"So in this situation, we'll attack their food stores, one after the other?"

"Move as soon as you strike, and strike as soon as you move... That's what you mean, right? I never thought it could be used like this. The boss is so smart."

As they continued to converse, they saw ahead of them the largest trading city in the Arnia Kingdom. They would rest up there for a bit and then continue on to the main battlefront in the southeast. Their estimated time of arrival to the battlefield would be around noon.

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At the same time Lumia's team reached the trading city, Asura was stretching. The breeze that blew across the grass and caressed her cheek felt fantastic. She was standing in some plains located northwest of the castle town.

"Boss...what are we...doing here? Why'd we...even bring our base...?"

Ina had driven a horse-drawn cart, covered by a canopy, all the way out to the fields. Though little, this cart was Moon Blossom's base. Everything that they needed was in it, from weapons to armor. They even had extras of their usual robes, including ones in different colors.

"I hear that the plains in the southeast are really similar to these ones," Asura explained. "So we're going to practice here."

Yesterday, Asura had asked the people in the castle town about this place. All of them had heard about her accomplishments for Arnia and had been more than welcoming.

"Boss, here you go." Reko grabbed a bow and a quiver of arrows from the cart, then handed the bow to Asura. After that, he returned to the cart.

"Isn't that...the small bow we always use...?"

In order to prioritize speed and agility, Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom tended not to use large bows.

"This is called a composite bow," Asura said. "I had it made custom, specifically for a special situation in my plans. It took a lot of time and money before I was satisfied with the final result."

"What's...so different about it?"

"Normal bows are made out of wood, right? But this one uses a number of things mixed together. That's why it's called a composite bow, because it uses a *composition* of materials."

"So...why does that matter?"

"It just makes it a better bow. You can think of it as having longer range and more destructive power." Asura's left arm had fully recovered, and she held up the bow without any problems. After readying it several times, she nodded to

herself and murmured, “Good.”

“Iina, here.” Reko grabbed a training target and handed it to Iina. The target was a square piece of wood. On it, there was a black circle that had a smaller red circle painted inside it.

“I have to...act like the target?”

“No, we’ll hammer a stake into the target and have it stand on its own in the ground,” Asura said. “Iina, I want you to stay next to me. I’ll need your Accelerate.”

“I just had you hold on to it,” Reko explained.

In response, Iina silently smacked Reko with the target.

“Oh, how wonderful! It looks like Reko’s mastered the art of joking at any given moment. This is a must-have quality for a mercenary. However, the next time you do or say something unnecessary, I’ll feed you my shit.”

“If it’s the boss’s shit, I—”

“Shut up. Don’t say another word,” Asura rebuked him.

“I was joking,” Reko replied.

Once again, Iina smacked Reko on the head with the target. This time, she put much more force behind it.

“Idiot Reko...go get a stake...”

“Oww...” Reko rubbed at his head and headed towards the cart.

“Can we kill the hero...with an arrow?” Iina asked, tilting her head to the side. “Even the hero candidate...deflected my arrow at close range... So why bows...? This bow just has better range and power...right?”

“It’d be impossible under normal conditions, yes.” Asura laughed. “I mean, Lumia can catch arrows shot at her with her bare hands. When I saw her do that yesterday, I couldn’t stop laughing.”

“So then...why?”

“Right. That’s a good question, Iina. No matter the distance, arrows are useless against enemies with hero-level skill. Not even a composite bow would

do the trick. But how about shooting them from far away?”

“Wouldn’t they...be able to dodge it...?”

“They might be able to do so if we don’t get enough distance. But what about an arrow that flies at them from outside the range of their perception?”

Iina blinked, a confused look on her face. She couldn’t comprehend what Asura was saying.

“According to Lumia, she can’t sense anything farther than three hundred meters away from her. So we’ll play it safe and try from five hundred meters. It’ll keep us hidden too, which is exactly what we want.”

“You’ll shoot from...that distance? Will you be able to hit him...? Will it even reach him...?”

“With this composite bow, it will reach him even without Accelerate. But of course, we’ll enchant the arrow with it. I doubt the Hero General has ever been sniped from such a long distance before.”

Part Two, Chapter Three: There's nothing better than something shiny. And that's why Flashbang is the best.

Punti was eating dinner in a bar he'd found in Arnia's castle town. On that day—when Iina kicked him in the balls—he vowed that he would kill Iina even if it was the last thing he did. In order to fulfill that promise to himself, he came to Arnia's castle town without returning to the army.

However, much to his misfortune, Moon Blossom was no longer in the castle town, and was rumored to be heading to the southeast battlefront. Punti sat alone at the bar counter. There were only a few customers here and there, and it didn't seem that it was doing very well on the financial side.

"Hello there. May I sit next to you?" a silver-haired girl asked Punti.

"Beautiful miss, why do you want to sit next to me? There are plenty of empty chairs."

Punti's guard went up, but he wasn't armed at the moment. In fact, he wasn't wearing anything at all that could reveal him as someone from the Great Therbae Kingdom. Even his clothes were something he'd torn off a corpse back in Mullux Village.

"I hear that you're searching for Moon Blossom?" Ignoring Punti's question and his obvious caution, she sat down next to him and ordered some milk. She was so beautiful that she could sober up a drunkard with her looks. She was dressed like a normal villager and didn't seem like she was hiding anything under her clothing.

"I'm a fan," Punti said after he recovered. "I was simply going around to try and hear some stories about them."

That was the truth, insofar as that was how Punti carried himself when he talked to the Arnians. Moon Blossom had only made their mark on history a few

days ago, and yet the populace was already treating them like heroes. Of course, only the Arnians viewed them that way.

“I’m Nayori, an information broker,” the girl said. “My job is to sell large amounts of information for little coin. Of course, part of my job includes buying intel as well.” She finished her joke with a smile. Punti wasn’t into girls younger than him, but the smile was so alluring that he felt a little shy.

“I already learned what I wanted to! Sorry, but I don’t wanna buy what you’re selling,” Punti replied with a wave of his hand.

“Oh, really? But I think you should. I’m sure it must be a terrifying experience, being alone in enemy territory as a Therbaen.” The smile on her face morphed into a jagged one that sent shivers down Punti’s spine.

“Why—?!” Punti shot to his feet and lowered himself into a fighting position. He wasn’t armed, but he was a trained fighter.

“I told you that I’m an information broker, didn’t I? I know who you are, but I have no intention of exposing you. Sit down.”

Punti swallowed. “Who are you?”

“An information broker. How many times do I have to remind you of that? Now, sit down, Punti.”

“I see... So you even know my name? Are you a spy? Or are you from another nation, one unaffiliated with either Arnia or Therbae?” Obeying her order, Punti sat down at the bar again. He watched the bartender slide the girl her milk. After he walked away, Punti asked, “Okaaay. So how much is the information you wanna sell me?”

“A hundred dora.”

“That’s cheaper than I expected. What’s the catch?”

“Fine. I’ll make it two hundred dora. There’s no catch.” After she said that, the girl took a swig from the milk. Punti took out a hundred-dora bill from his pocket, placed it on the counter, and then slid it to the girl. “You only paid half of my asking fee, but that’s all right. The mercenary group, Moon Blossom, is at the battlefront in the southeast. However, their leader isn’t with them.”

Punti thought about the information. “So?” he asked. He had no interest in their leader.

“But their vice captain, Lumia Canarre, *is* with them.”

‘Lumia Canarre’... Punti had never heard that name before. She was a complete nobody, yet Marx had said that their vice captain was incredibly strong.

“I suggest you challenge her to a one-on-one fight,” Nayori continued. “It’s not an overstatement to say that she is the only person with some measure of conscience in Moon Blossom. She keeps her promises. If you win, then she’ll fulfill whatever request you make.”

“That’s not a one-on-one fight. That’s a duel.”

“What’s the difference?” the girl asked with a shrug.

“A one-on-one fight can take place on a battlefield for a wide number of reasons. However, in a duel, you and the other party discuss what you want first, and it only happens when both fighters give their consent. After the duel, the winner’s wish gets granted. There’s more, but those are the basic differences!”

“I see. Then, you’d be asking for a duel.” The girl chuckled, looking convinced of the logic.

“In saying that, though... I don’t reeeeally think that a mercenary would agree to a duel. I put my money on her little friends joining in halfway through our fight so that all of them can try to beat me up.”

“Don’t worry. Lumia won’t let that happen. I don’t know about duels, but I *do* know that she enjoys one-on-one fights, thanks to her past profession.”

“Was she a knight or something?”

“Not exactly. She was a soldier.”

“Hmm...” In any case, Punti had never heard of her. Judging by the name, it sounded like she originated from Central Felsen, but he would’ve heard rumors about her if she were famous. “Nayori...was it? Why do you know so much, hmm? You don’t seem like a normal information broker to me. Are you sure

you're not a spy?"

"I'm just an information broker," Nayori said. After she enjoyed some of her milk, she continued. "Moon Blossom's a hot topic right now, so all I did was sniff around."

"So do you know anything about the flat-chested girl they have? With the black hair? Her name is—"

"Iina Kuusela? Is that who you're after?"

Punti placed yet another hundred-dora bill on the counter, and the girl reached her beautiful white hand for it. Why would someone with looks as lovely as hers work as an information broker? No, she was lying about her profession. She was probably a spy, as pretty girls were suited for espionage. She wasn't just pretty either. Her broken and terrifying smile was proof of that.

"Iina Kuusela is a former bandit, and she joined Moon Blossom because the leader liked her. She's around fifteen, if I remember correctly. She specializes in wind magic and archery. Of course, she can use other weapons as well. As for her personality, she's cruel and cold, and gets off on the sight of people screaming and crying."

"So she used to be a bandit, and she's a messed-up pervert..."

"Her rival is Lumia, her vice captain. Apparently, their personalities don't mesh well together."

"So if I challenge Lumia to a duel and win, do you think she'll hand Iina over to me?"

"At the end of the day, it's just a group of mercenaries. They're not bound by any rules or laws. Iina is particularly ill-mannered, so I don't believe that anyone will raise a fuss if you really *do* manage to win against Lumia, the strongest member of Moon Blossom."

"What if I directly challenge Iina to a duel?"

"Do you seriously think she'll accept? Even if she does, that future you feared —the one where everyone surrounds you and beats you up—will come true. Listen, Lumia is the only person who will go for it, as well as the only one who

will play by the rules."

"I see! Okay, I got it. Thanks! I'm going to go back to my inn." After paying his bill, Punti left the bar. Right before he exited, he turned around one last time and saw the girl giving him a small wave.

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"General Matias! We're being attacked again!" As Matias was resting up in his tent, a messenger ran in with the news.

"Damn! Again?! This is the third day in a row! Give me a break, for crying out loud!"

Matias shot to his feet, grabbed his sword, and ran outside. Moon Blossom hadn't appeared on the day he'd heard they would arrive at the battlefield. He'd gone out to the front lines himself to personally destroy the group, and yet they'd never showed.

However, they appeared that very night. They set fire to several tents before disappearing into the night, with one of the tents they'd attacked having contained their food stores. Matias tried to deal with this by increasing the number of guards at night, but many tents were burned down the next evening as well. Tightening security had only cost him more of his soldiers.

"General, they burned down our food stores again! If we don't stop them soon, our men will starve to death!" a commander reported as soon as he saw Matias emerge from the tent.

"How do they know which tents contain our rations?!" Matias exclaimed. "Just where are they coming from?!"

Under normal circumstances, night attacks were not conducted in large-scale wars such as this one. That was because they exhausted soldiers on both sides. As soon as the sun set, the soldiers would lay down their arms and take a rest. That was the unspoken rule of warfare. Moon Blossom was completely ignoring this etiquette. Aside from the food, the soldiers would soon get too fatigued to fight if this went on.

"We must destroy them! We must do everything we can to prevent them from leaving the camp alive! I'll go into battle as well! Where are they?!" Matias

demanded.

“Th-They’re coming this way!”

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“We’ve been succeeding in our raids every day. It’s like, ‘Wow, maybe we’re, like, actually super dope,’” Jyrki commented. From atop his galloping horse, he shot off a flame-tipped arrow. Salume was sitting behind him, holding on to an extra quiver. Her job for this mission was to carry their supplies while observing the mercenaries at work.

“All we’re really doing is following the vice captain’s orders. Her past experience in the army is really useful,” Marx said while atop his own horse. Like Jyrki, he was releasing flaming arrows from his bow. All of the fire they were using had been created with Jyrki’s manifestation magic.

“I’m still shocked that the vice cap’n used to be a military gal. Welp, it’s thanks to that why we know what’s where in the enemies’ camp. Not to mention that night attacks are super effective.”

“Is my past in the military *really* that surprising?” Lumia asked. From her horse, she swung her lance in a wide arc, mercilessly smashing the approaching enemy soldiers into the ground.

“Weeeeell, how should we put it? Judging by the way you talk and walk, you feel more like a noble!”

“There are nobles in the military too, though.”

Both Jyrki and Marx continued to chitchat as they let loose fire arrow after fire arrow. They’d brought quivers stuffed completely to the brim with oil-tipped arrows. The flames from the burning Therbaen tents illuminated the area so brightly, it was practically daytime.

“Whether I used to be a noble or not doesn’t matter,” Lumia said. “I’m not doing anything that special either. It’s just that the Therbaen soldiers expend all their energy fighting during the day, so they’re absolutely exhausted, unlike how we can take our time to rest up.”

There was no chain of command present to order the Therbaen soldiers. They

ran towards Lumia to meet her in battle, but running towards her without a single plan or strategy was literally all they were doing. Lumia's spear was not one that could be dodged by such a mindless approach, and all they succeeded in doing was adding to the mountain of corpses on the ground.

"It seems like they've increased the number of guards, but they're hardly a match for us." Marx was using fire arrows now, but when he killed the team standing vigil earlier, he'd used a sword.

"All right, we're going to thoroughly thrash them today. We're going to force their retreat tomorrow. If we waste too much time, Asura'll do something unnecessary."

"Oh, woooow, didya hear that, Marx? The vice cap'n described the boss's plan as 'something unnecessary.'"

From the trading city, Jyrki and the others had traveled through the forest in the north and then attacked the Therbaen camp from the side. Right now, they were somewhere around the very middle of it. On the first day, they'd gone all the way to the back and struck there. Yesterday, they'd attacked in a way that looked like they were dashing from the south side all the way up to the north.

"It's true that it's unnecessary, isn't it?" Marx replied. "It feels like we've got everything handled here."

Both Marx and Jyrki had started this operation doubting that they'd be able to force the Therbaen army to retreat. Even if it was possible, they had imagined it to be an incredibly arduous task. Yet, now that they were actually in the thick of things, the Therbaen army was dropping like flies, unable to lift a finger against Moon Blossom's night raids.

"U-Um," Salume said, "I...also feel that way."

"Oho? Big talk for someone who was shaking the entire first night."

"I'm used to it now."

After Salume finished her sentence, a spear flew past her face and grazed Jyrki's right arm. It continued to shoot past them, aimed straight towards Lumia. She deflected it out of the air with her lance and pulled on her horse's reins, slowing it down. Upon seeing her do so, Jyrki and Marx followed suit.

“That was a dangerous way to say hi,” Jyrki snorted. “I’m used to that kinda stuff, but that probably spooked you good, eh, Salume? Did you wet yourself?”

“I did *not* wet myself,” Salume answered, sounding miffed.

“Vice Captain, why are we stopping?” Marx asked. “They’ll surround us.”

“Well, we should at least return the greeting,” Lumia replied with a small smile. She turned her horse around and called out, “Good evening, Sir Matias, Hero General.”

A man was standing before her eyes, and several soldiers surrounded him. The man wore armor as red as fire, from which a white cape blew in the wind. He had short silver hair and was of a similar physical build to Jyrki.

“Vice Cap’n, don’t tell me we were ridin’ towards him this whole time? Oh, come on...”

“If you had mentioned this at the beginning, I would have argued against this plan until I ran out of breath.”

“And that’s why I didn’t say anything.” The smile on Lumia’s face never faltered.

“You’re the mercenary group, Moon Blossom?” the man—Hero General Matias—asked.

“Yes, that’s us. My name is Lumia Canarre, the vice captain of Moon Blossom. I wouldn’t say that I’m excited at the prospect of fighting, but...let’s play for a while.”

She kicked her horse’s sides and urged it into a gallop, charging straight towards Matias. In response, he pulled out his sword. In the instant her horse ran past him, she struck out with her lance. Matias parried it, then countered the hit.

Though Lumia dodged the worst of it by tilting herself backwards while still on horseback, the blade still made a small cut down her abdomen. Lumia’s hair and robes billowed around her from the wind pressure caused by the swing of Matias’s sword.

“You gotta be kidding me. That wind reached us all the way here! It didn’t feel

like an attack from a human. If I were the one out there, I'd be dead."

"Heroes really are as monstrous as they say... And before that, he parried the vice captain's lance as if it were nothing, and even countered! *That* is unbelievable to me."

"The vice cap'n dodging the counter was...also pretty monstrous..."

"Oh?" Matias said, sounding impressed. "You're strong. You have what it takes to be a hero."

"And you're as strong as I'd expect from a hero on active duty. I don't think I'd be able to win against you one-on-one."

"If you were a young girl of eighteen, I'd have you quit your mercenary group on the spot and make you into a hero candidate by my side..."

"Don't spout nonsense. If I'd spent the past decade living a normal life, then I already would've become one of the greatest heroes in the world," Lumia replied. "But I don't regret a single day from these past ten years."

Lumia hadn't improved as a fighter in ten years because all of her attention had been focused on raising Asura.

"So no one knows your name because you wasted a decade of your time?" Matias sighed. "And today, you'll be throwing away your entire life."

"That won't happen. We're the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. We're soldier-mages. And more than that, we're your worst nightmare."

"Our worst nightmare? You're not entirely wrong about that. Do you plan on keeping me up all night?"

"Exactly." Lumia sucked in a deep breath and then yelled, "You and your men shall never know peace! We will never let you sleep, nor will we let you rest! We'll continue to attack you, night after night!"

"Until your soft-bellied soldiers all lose their minds and die!" Jyrki added to Lumia's words. He understood what she was trying to do.

"We won't give you even a moment of peace! Quiver in fear whenever the night approaches!" Marx, too, knew what Lumia's plan was.

“Hey, Salume, you say somethin’ too,” Jyrki prompted.

“Huh? Ah, all right.” Salume took a deep breath. “You dummies!!!”

“Wow... So uncool...” Jyrki sighed. It sounded like the kind of insult a kid would sling on the playground.

“Try to stop us if you can! But let me warn you that not even a hero will be capable of doing that! Good evening, everyone! We’ll be seeing you tomorrow night, and the night after that, and the night after *that*, until we destroy you all!” With that, Lumia raised her hand and created a Flashbang.

“Phew, harsh,” Jyrki murmured approvingly.

Lumia’s plan was to destroy the enemies’ morale, as well as implant the fear of never knowing when to expect a raid. Not only that, but with a single attack, Lumia was able to demonstrate to them that she possessed strength rivaling—or perhaps even surpassing—that of a hero candidate. At the same time, though, her brief bout with Matias showed Marx and Jyrki that not even Lumia was capable of defeating a hero.

“If I kill you all here, then this will end!” Matias tightened his grip on his sword.

“So you’re unaware of what this is? I used it back in the forest, you know?” Lumia smiled as the ball of light she’d created with her right hand started floating into the air.

“Close your eyes,” Jyrki whispered to Salume before he squeezed his own shut.

“This is called Flashbang. Remember that, unless you want us to escape from right under your noses tomorrow as well.”

The ball of light burst, and immediately, a blindingly bright flash filled the air. All of the enemy soldiers, including Matias, pressed their hands to their eyes as they yelled and writhed in pain. With this one spell, Lumia proved that not even a hero could stop Moon Blossom. All of this was to crush the enemies’ spirit.

“The vice cap’n really is cruel. I wonder what kinda soldier she used to be.” Having Lumia as an enemy would be the absolute worst-case scenario

imaginable. Even without their leader—a complete ass who was rotten to her core—she was able to do this much damage to the soldiers. “Her hobby is warfare. And I guess that makes her talent ‘breaking enemies’ spirits’?”

Part Two, Chapter Four: What am I most afraid of? The leader of Moon Blossom, obviously.

The blood was roaring in Salume's ears. Though all she was doing was sitting behind Jyrki, it was more than enough for her to understand the atmosphere of the battlefield. The first day had been terrifying, and she'd closed her eyes several times. She'd stopped doing that on the second day, but she was still scared of the carnage around her.

Today, though, Salume felt relaxed as Jyrki carried her through the bloodshed.

"Hey, Salume, the enemy archers are greeting us all in a line. Take a look," Jyrki said.

When Salume looked to the front, she saw the aforementioned enemy archers, standing in two rows. "Um, they're two platoons... No, it's probably a single company."

There were five in the front and five in the back. Next to them stood a woman, likely their commander. Jyrki occasionally talked to Salume like this to teach her about the battlefield. For example, she knew that if the soldiers were able to properly hold a formation against an ambush at night, they probably had a skilled leader. And that wasn't the only thing she'd learned over the past three days, of course.

"You see that chick wearin' the different armor? They're commanders and high up the ladder. So as long as we kill them, we'll end up with the advantage."

The archers in the front released their arrows, but Lumia smacked more than half away with her lance. Any she missed, Marx deflected with his sword. None of the arrows made it to Jyrki or Salume.

"Here ya go!" Jyrki was constantly shooting arrows of fire. He'd already emptied his quiver and exchanged it for the spare one that Salume had been holding.

Salume's job was observing the workplace, as well as holding on to and

handing them their supplies. She saw the archers in the back row fire their arrows as well. They were much closer than before, but Lumia, like before, fended them off.

“Wow...” Salume whispered.

Their combat skills were so impressive, she was emotionally moved. Marx covered for arrows that Lumia couldn’t get to, while Jyrki continued to shoot his fire arrows with calm precision. They all trusted each other, and the foundation of that trust was built on an understanding of their skills and techniques.

I want to catch up with them! Salume fervently wished.

Before the archers in the front line could shoot their arrows again, Lumia set off a Flashbang. The archers covered their eyes, groaning in pain at the spell’s effect. *So this is the real way to use magic.* Lumia had taken a spell that could only create light and elevated it into a weapon.

No one had ever thought of using magic in warfare before, as it was previously only seen as a way of making life more convenient. Spells were all weak in power and took time to learn, so picking up swordplay was far more useful. That had been the general consensus on magic.

But as an example of Moon Blossom’s innovation, Jyrki’s fire magic was adept at creating fire arrows, eliminating the need to carry torches to set arrowheads ablaze. Magic was convenient, and with a little outside-the-box thinking, it could be convenient in war as well.

“I’ll let one of you kill the commander!” Lumia exclaimed. With a sweep of her lance, she threw the archers aside and cleared a path.

Aside from magic, they were proficient in a variety of other weapons as well. Though their expertise was in ambushes, they each had enough skill to face down their enemies in a head-on fight. That was what it was to be a soldier-mage. Salume thought they were the coolest people she’d ever seen.

“Then I shall,” Marx said. In the next instant, his horse galloped forward, and as soon as he passed by the commander’s side, he beheaded her in the blink of an eye.

Amazing... These people are truly amazing! The commander’s head was still

flying through the air when the swell of emotion passed through Salume.

Their eyes met. The commander had been a beautiful woman with long black hair. But now, her life was over. She might have had people important to her, and goals she wanted to accomplish. A mercenary's job was to end people, stealing lives in exchange for money. Salume felt a little guilty, but this, too, would eventually pass. She would get used to the feeling of seeing people die. And once Salume started to kill people herself, she would get used to that as well.

Ahh, I see, Salume thought. *So that's what the boss meant when she said that there were only dead ends for us in this life. Death will become our daily routine until the day it becomes my turn.*

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"Teresa..." Matias stopped chasing after Moon Blossom and got off his horse. "Teresa..." The head of Matias's trusted vice captain had become split from her body. He gently picked it up and embraced it. "I can't believe that we lost someone...as amazing as you...in a war as foolish as this..."

Though she had not been on the level of a hero candidate, she had been a strong, wise, and fair woman. The surviving archers gave their reports with looks of regret.

"They used light to blind us... Vice Captain Teresa never even had the chance to fight them."

"Yes... Yes, I can imagine. That is the only way you would've been killed without at least buying us some time."

Matias was crying. It had been a long time since he'd done so, but he simply couldn't hold back his frustration. He could've forgiven Moon Blossom if they had killed Teresa in a proper fight. However, they'd attacked at night, set fire to the camp, and used light to blind the soldiers. They didn't fight with a warrior's pride. All they did was run around and wreck the Therbaen encampment. The soldiers had been tired from the battles during the day, and Moon Blossom had murdered them, relishing in the violence the entire time.

"I won't ever forgive...those monsters..." Matias growled.

All of Moon Blossom's military accomplishments were lies, built up through their underhanded night attacks. He had to destroy them. They weren't just a weapon that King Arnia chose to wield for his country. They were poison. Matias knew that mercenaries did dirty jobs no one else wanted to do, but would normal mercenaries really go this far? As he looked at the burning remnants of his camp, Matias knew that they could couldn't keep up the fighting for much longer.

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A shiver went down Lumia's spine. She was terrified, and she knew that Jyrki and Marx likely felt the same. Since Salume had joined Moon Blossom only recently, she didn't understand what was so horrifying about the sight that greeted them.

"Why are you here?" Lumia asked.

They had finished their night attack on the Therbaen encampment, but right when they returned to the Arnian one, they saw standing before them a familiar young girl. Lumia and the others were on horseback, so they were looking down at the girl while she stared up at them. Her face was stretched in a smile, and her eyes were sparkling with delight.

She looked every inch like a child who had just received a new toy. Someone who didn't know any better might think she was a sweet and innocent little girl. However, that would be a costly mistake.

"Something very interesting happened. We'll be able to use it as a Plan C. Think of it as your reinforcements. It was such opportune timing that if a god exists in this world, he undoubtedly handed this toy to me with the intention of me using it."

Asura Lyona, the leader of the mercenary group Moon Blossom, had never once been an "innocent little girl." She was the very personification of malice.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Lumia muttered.

As the one who'd raised Asura, Lumia had quite a few regrets. She'd met Asura when Asura was three, and already there were more than a few things wrong with her head. But she wished that at the very least, Asura could've

grown up into a slightly more normal person. The only thing that Lumia could do was keep watch so that she didn't devolve into a senseless mass murderer.

"Are there any days...when we don't have bad feelings?" Iina said from Asura's right-hand side, tilting her head slightly. On Asura's left stood Reko.

"From a triumphant return to a one-way ticket to hell..." Jyrki sighed.

"I feel despair akin to watching a peaceful country destroyed in a single night," Marx said with a shake of his head.

"Why are you all always so pessimistic?" Asura complained, her hands on her hips. "I swear, this is a very interesting development, okay? I guarantee it."

"It appears you delivered a heavy blow to those Therbaens today as well." Teropekka Branner, the general of the Arnian army, approached Lumia and the others to greet them.

"Yes, I suppose. We did quite a bit of damage," Lumia replied. She looked back towards the Therbaen encampment, which was still burning from Jyrki's fire arrows.

But it wasn't enough. They hadn't caused sufficient damage to force a retreat. If Lumia and the others didn't hurry and get them to leave, then Asura would kill the hero, or at least die trying. The outcome didn't matter, since both would be the absolute worst scenario imaginable.

"Don't be so humble, Lumia," Asura said. "Even from here, we can tell that you created a hellscape on their side."

"I'm truly glad we hired you. I even dare to hope that we might win at this rate."

Teropekka was the person who'd first hired Moon Blossom. He was a man of around forty-five years old, and his salt-and-pepper goatee suited him. With his graying hair pushed back and his muscular build, he gave off a dignified impression.

"You hold on to that hope, General." Asura smiled.

"Yes, I think I shall. Now then, I'm going to go get some rest."

"You coulda just forgotten about us and caught some Zs, gramps," Jyrki said.

“Humph. I’m not old enough to be called ‘gramps’ yet,” Teropekka snorted. He then returned to his tent.

“Now then, let’s talk business.” After Asura said that, Lumia got off her horse. Seeing her do so, Jyrki, Salume, and Marx followed suit. “Do you remember Punti?”

“Punti?” Lumia echoed. It was a familiar name, but she couldn’t quite place where she’d heard it.

“Hey, isn’t that the hero candidate who said he wanted to meet the boss?” Jyrki said.

“The one I was dragging?” Marx asked.

“Oh...the one whose balls I kicked in.” Iina nodded.

“Ahh,” said Lumia. “I guess we did meet someone like that.” She hadn’t cared about Punti at all, so she didn’t remember anything beyond what the other members of Moon Blossom detailed.

“I heard that someone’s been looking for us,” Asura explained. “The Arnians told me where he was. And who did I see when I went and checked it out? Our dear friend, Punti.”

“Oh, really? So? What’s up with him?” Lumia asked. She didn’t understand what he had to do with anything.

“I heard that he was a hero candidate, so I thought I’d get rid of him if he was a threat. But since he came all the way to enemy territory, I figured I should check him out just in case.”

“How did you do that?”

“Hmm, good question, Marx. Let me cut straight to the chase: I asked the boy king. As a country with enemies on all sides, Arnia must have sent spies to other nations, right? There should be a lot of agents in Therbae in particular, since they’re at war.”

“I see.” Lumia nodded. “Arnia definitely would have information on key members of an opposing faction. So you had him give you intel on Punti?”

“That’s right.” Asura chuckled. She looked like a child enjoying a game of

Twenty Questions.

“Isn’t stuff like that usually confidential or whatever?”

“Of course, Jyrki, it was obviously confidential intel. But do you really think I’d back down just because someone told me I couldn’t access it? I told the boy king, ‘If my plan succeeds and I kill the hero, I’ll ask you to display your asshole to me. But if you give me what I want, then I’ll reconsider.’ He didn’t look too happy about it, but he gave me the information I wanted.”

“You seriously...blackmailed the king of a country...?” Lumia staggered backwards, looking faint. She surely would’ve fallen over if Marx hadn’t hurriedly held her up from behind.

“Vice Captain, please get a hold of yourself. This isn’t the first time the boss has done this, right?”

“I’d *never* wanna be the vice cap’n...”

“Mama...your job is so difficult...”

“Boss, you sure do what you want.”

“That’s so cool of you.”

“Salume, Reko, no,” Lumia said, recovering. “Do *not* try to imitate her. Our boss is rotten to the core.”

“I’m not going to refute that, but what a thing to say. Anyway, can we get back to the topic at hand?” At Asura’s question, the assembled members of Moon Blossom nodded. “I couldn’t stop laughing after I read what was in Punti’s file. That’s why I got in contact with him under the guise of an information broker. He’s going to come here tomorrow and when he does, I want you to duel him, Lumia.”

“Huh? Why do I have to duel him? No way. Why don’t you do it?”

“This is part of a mission, my deputy. Therefore, this is an order. I want you to duel him tomorrow. Now, repeat that back to me.”

“I’ll...duel with Punti tomorrow.”

The rule between them was that if Asura gave an order, then Lumia had to

follow it, no matter how much she disliked it. Asura normally didn't care how much her mercenaries talked back at her or insulted her. She was very tolerant towards opposing opinions during missions as well. However, the one thing she couldn't stand for was disobedience on the job.

If anyone refused her orders, she'd put them through so much hell that they'd wish they were dead, then hammer obedience and loyalty back inside them. That was the way she did things. Even Lumia, who'd raised her and taught her how to fight, was no exception.

"Good." Asura nodded. "Don't look so unhappy, Lumia. You'll be helping out with Plan A."

"And how will I be doing that?"

"Right. You see, Punti's full name is Punti Arlandel. He's the son of the Hero General, Matias Arlandel."

Part Two, Chapter Five: Let's talk about fear and despair. I was probably too haughty.

Punti borrowed a horse and rode it close to where the southeast battlefront was. It had been a peaceful journey, absent of any unexpected happenings, since most of it had been along the established roadways. Until now.

A woman was standing right in the middle of the road, and upon seeing her, Punti pulled on the reins to slow the horse down. The battlefront was so close that he could practically see it, so it was highly unlikely that the woman before him was a civilian. She had an alluring face, and her wavy brown hair reached just past her shoulders.

"Judging by those black robes of yours, are you by chance a member of Moon Blossom?" Punti called out.

She was wearing black robes, just like the three members of Moon Blossom he'd fought back in Mullux Village.

"My name is Lumia Canarre, and I am the vice captain of Moon Blossom. I've come to get you, Punti. Let's go to the Arnian encampment together, if you dare to accompany me. The general himself will serve as our witness."

"Oh? How considerate of you to come and fetch me! Did the silver-haired information broker squeal on me?" Punti hypothesized that after she sold him information on Moon Blossom, she'd turned around and sold intel about him to the mercenaries. She was certainly a shrewd opportunist.

"That's right. You seek a duel, don't you? I accept. We'll discuss our conditions and requests before the witness." With that, Lumia turned her back to Punti.

"Don't you worry that I might be the kind of villain who'd attack you from behind?" Punti asked. He urged his horse forward and pulled up next to Lumia, walking down the path by her side.

"Someone who wanted a duel wouldn't do something so meaningless, right?"

“Well, yeah.”

Is she really as powerful as they say? She seems a bit too gentle to be a mercenary, but she walks so gracefully, she must be a skilled fighter.

“Should I call you Miss Lumia?”

“Please, call me whatever is comfortable for you.”

“Miss Lumia, how strong are you?”

“You’ll know as soon as the duel starts. Speaking of which, I’m surprised you can do as you please during wartime. Are the rules in the Therbaen army not strictly enforced?”

“I’m just special.”

That was right. Punti Arlandel was a special human, born and raised as the hero’s son. If it was limited to duels, then the only person who could win against Punti was his father, Matias. Aside from fights against heroes and other hero candidates, Punti had lived the life of a winner. He could even single-handedly defeat an intermediate-tier monster.

Lumia shrugged. “If I were the general, I wouldn’t allow any of that.”

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In the Arnian encampment, several soldiers and the members of Moon Blossom formed a circle around Punti and Lumia.

“Punti, I assume you’d want Moon Blossom to hand over Iina upon your victory?” Asura said delightedly.

“Miss Information Broker, whyyy did you immediately go and sell me out?” Punti sighed.

“I saved you some time. I should get some extra compensation for that.”

“I guess you’re right. Thanks to your welcoming committee, I was able to enter the Arnian encampment without any fuss. Actually wait, just who are you really?”

“I’ll tell you that after the duel.” The smile on Asura’s face didn’t budge at all.

“Your prize, Iina Kuusela, is right here,” said Teropekka, general of the Arnian

army.

Iina was standing next to him with her arms tied behind her back. Asura had been the one to tie her up so it would look like Moon Blossom really planned on offering her up. They couldn't afford to have Punti escape here.

"What I want upon my victory is you, Punti. If I win, then I would like you, without putting up any resistance, to turn yourself over to the Arnian army as a hostage."

With Punti alone, they would have enough bargaining power against the Therbaens to request that they return all of the Arnian prisoners of war. That was how high a status he boasted. However, Asura's aim was something else.

"I shall be the witness," Teropekka said. "Are there any objections to that?"

"I apologize for doing this in the middle of wartime, general," Punti said. "Is it all right for you to be doing this instead of commanding your men?"

Since it was still daytime, the Arnians and the Therbaens were still fighting.

"So long as Matias doesn't show up, my forces have it handled. Thanks to Moon Blossom, the Therbaens are exhausted. Besides, your capture would be a greater boon to my army than any scuffle."

"I suppose. So that means you all know who I am, and understand just what value I have. May I borrow a weapon?"

One of the soldiers threw his sword towards Punti, who caught it easily out of the air.

"Would you like me to use a sword as well?" Lumia asked.

"You can use whatever weapon you want!" Punti replied confidently. "You can use magic too. Do whateeeever you want. But the only thing I won't allow is someone trying to intrude on our fun."

"I won't let that happen," Teropekka said. "I swear it, on my honor. This will be an official duel."

"All right, all right, just start already." Asura groaned. "I just wish that I could drink alcohol to fully enjoy the show." It was truly unfortunate that her body physically couldn't handle any liquor yet.

“Very well.” Teropekka nodded. “Now then, both of you, this will be the final confirmation of the rules. Neither of you can kill the other party. Both of you are very important to us.” Upon seeing both Lumia and Punti nod their assent, he gave the order. “Now, begin the duel!”

As soon as he finished speaking, Punti moved.

“Oh? He’s fast,” Asura murmured.

Punti closed the distance between himself and Lumia in a heartbeat and slashed out sideways. Lumia blocked the attack with her sword, held in a single hand, and Punti’s eyes widened in shock.

“Salume, did you prepare my tea?” Lumia asked nonchalantly.

Punti leaped back to put some distance between them again.

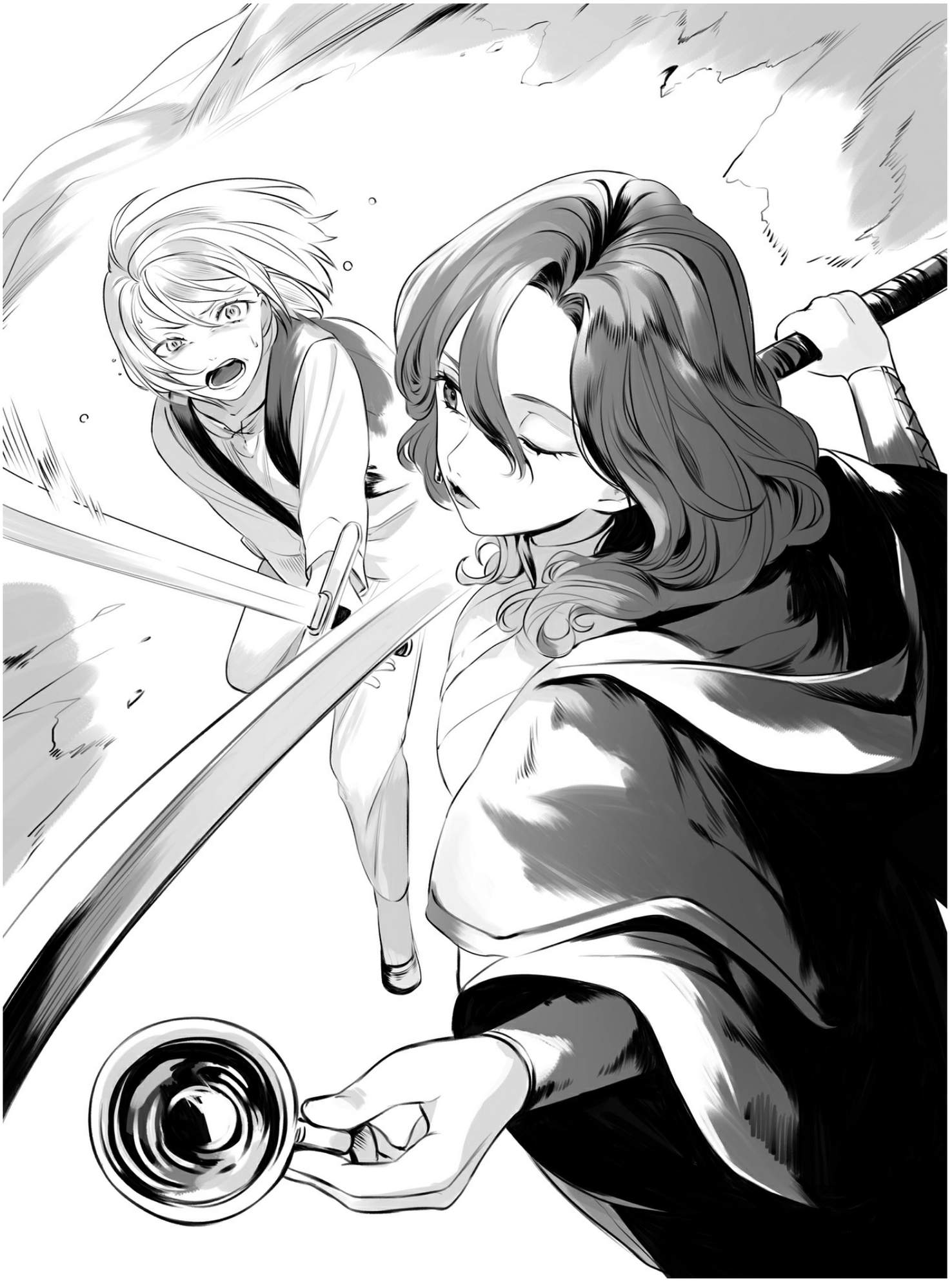
“Here you go, Vice Captain,” Salume said as she handed a teacup to Lumia.

Lumia accepted the drink with her left hand and said, “This isn’t an intrusion. I just wanted to have some tea. Don’t worry about me. Go ahead with your attack if you wish.” With that, she took a sip.

“Don’t underestimate me!” Punti yelled, his face dark with fury as he leaped forward once more.

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Impossible! Punti was panicking. With the sword she held in one hand, Lumia easily parried every single one of his attacks. She was even so relaxed that she occasionally took some sips of her tea.



Even when he changed the angle of his strike or tried to circle her to attack from behind, Lumia blocked every single move.

“What the hell?!” Punti yelled. He was holding his sword with both hands and attacking with all of his strength. And yet, Lumia parried his blows without a single change in her expression.

“I happen to have some experience with a sword,” she explained.

“This is more than just ‘some experience’!” Punti stopped and backed off. If he didn’t catch his breath, he wouldn’t have enough stamina to keep fighting. “How is someone like you still a nobody?!”

Dueling her felt like fighting against a Great Hero. Punti had once fought against the Great Hero, Axel Ehrnrooth, who had the title of Unarmed Great Hero, and was famous for fighting without the use of any weapons. He was undoubtedly the strongest man in Eastern Felsen. Punti felt the same sense of despair he’d felt against Axel. Of course, Axel hadn’t been serious and when Punti talked to him later, he’d said that he had only been using twenty percent of his strength.

“Just who the hell are you?!” Punti demanded.

“I’ve already given you my name.” Lumia finished drinking her tea and placed the empty cup on the ground.

“Impossible... This is impossible! Do you realize how strong you are?! It’s inconceivable that I’ve never even heard rumors about you!”

“I spent the past ten years wandering around while raising a snotty little kid,” Lumia explained. After she said that, she readied her sword. It was the first time she’d done so since the duel started. She held the sword sideways in the air, with the hilt in front of her forehead.

“That stance...is from Central...?”

Lumia’s stance was one from the swordplay schools of Central Felsen. Eastern Felsen styles usually held the sword so that the tip was pointed at the opponent’s face.

“I’m hardly surprised, hero candidate. You’re familiar with Central Felsen’s

swordsmanship styles as well?”

“Just who are you, really? Is ‘Lumia Canarre’ a fake—” Punti was cut off in the middle of his sentence. To be more precise, he wasn’t able to finish it. The blade of Lumia’s sword was already touching his left cheek.

“I’d hoped you could’ve at least reacted to that. The hero candidates lately are all of such poor quality compared to those of the past.”

“I...I surrender...”

Punti fell to his knees. Despair, helplessness, and most importantly, fear... For a brief moment, when Punti suggested that Lumia wasn’t her real name, Lumia gave off a feeling so terrifying that it felt like Punti had been facing down a Demon Lord.

Is she really human? Punti wondered, unable to control his shivering.

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“Honestly, does the boss really need us if she has the vice cap’n?”

“Hmm. Now that I think about the past two missions, as well as this one, I agree that the vice captain could’ve handled everything on her own.”

“She’s so scary...so scary... The vice captain is...terrifying...”

“I can hardly find the words!”

“I knew that this would happen.”

While the Arnian soldiers were tying up a limp and pliant Punti, the members of Moon Blossom offered their opinions on the duel they’d witnessed.

“Jyrki, I invited you all to Moon Blossom *because* I needed you,” Asura said. “It’s because you’re all here that we can split into two teams and accomplish so many things.”

“Well, yeah, but seein’ the vice cap’n fight just makes me sad at the power difference between us.”

“Get used to it.” Asura accentuated her words of encouragement with a slap against Jyrki’s back. “Marx, you’re more than strong enough, so don’t worry too much about it. Besides, you’re good at coordinating your attacks with others,

right? Lumia's not so good at that, so it can be hard to use her at times."

"Are you...saying that I'm easy to use?"

"That's a compliment, Marx. Don't get all upset. It's impossible to try and gauge Lumia's individual strength as a fighter because she exceeds any standards that you can set. Sometimes I doubt she's even human, ha ha. Iina, Lumia's only scary during a duel. In a lawless fight to the death, I'd be the one to win."

"I...agree, but..."

"In any case, just stop putting sugar into her water," Asura concluded cheerily.

In truth, she was in a fabulously good mood. Not only had she seen Lumia's swordsmanship after a long time without witnessing it, but everything had gone according to her plan.

"Okay... Anyway, can you..." Iina turned around and showed her back to everyone. "...untie me?"

"Leave her be," Lumia ordered. "Think of this as revenge for the sugar. I just wish that I had a whip on me..."

"No... Help me, Boss..." Iina looked at Asura, teary-eyed.

"Now, now, Lumia," Asura said. "Can you save that for later? We're going to take our leave now. There's lots of things that we have to handle on our end."

"You're going back already? Why don't you come with us for the night attack? I can already see the path to victory."

Asura shook her head at Lumia's suggestion. "Yes, I imagine that your team will be able to force the Therbaen army to retreat. Just from observing the battles visible from here, I can tell that they don't have much manpower left. You did amazing. If you want, I can give you a pat on the head."

"I don't want one. More importantly, are you really going back?"

"I am. Actually, before that, I should say my farewells to Punti first." With that, Asura approached him. He was staring at the ground, his limbs bound up by rope. "Hey, you went through quite the ordeal, Punti."

“They...called you their boss...” Punti raised his head and stared at Asura with dull, lifeless eyes.

“Ahh, right. I haven’t introduced myself yet.” Asura chuckled. “My name is Asura Lyona. I am the leader of Moon Blossom. With your help, we’ll be able to retrieve all of the Arnian prisoners.”

And once they returned Punti to the Therbaen army, they no longer had anything to fear from him. They’d broken his spirit.

“You...planned this whole thing out...from the very beginning...?”

“Of course.” Because Asura knew who Lumia really was, she also knew that... “A mere hero candidate could never hope to defeat my Lumia. If you want to win against her, then you better bring along a true hero. Now then, I hope you have a good day. The sunny weather makes for a fine day to despair.”

“Yeah... I don’t want to see you or Miss Lumia...ever again...”

“Good. Iina, Reko, let’s go.” Asura walked to where they’d tied up the horses and jumped onto hers. After that, she reached down with her left hand and pulled Reko up. “Don’t touch my boobs.”

“What boobs?”

“I’ll kill you. Hold down here,” Asura said, looking miffed, and Reko hurriedly moved his arms so that they were wrapped around her stomach instead.

“Boss...do you want me to take him?” Iina asked after she’d gotten onto her own horse.

“Nah, it’s fine.” After she said that, Asura started to move her horse forward.

Iina followed behind her. They left the Arnian encampment and, after traveling for a while, Asura suddenly changed directions, moving towards the north. There was a forest there, which was also where Moon Blossom had had their first victory.

“All right, it’s about time to begin.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Boss...you tricked everyone...”

“It’s all part of the plan, Ina, so there’s no problem with that,” Asura replied, an evil grin on her face. “We’ll gift those Therbaen shitheads a deeper despair than what we gave Punti! I wonder what faces they’ll make. I can hardly wait.”

Part Two, Chapter Six: “Heroes are symbols of hope who defend humanity.” Sure they are. Die!

The Arnian soldiers rang the gong and called for a ceasefire. Even in war, there were rules. While Asura and Moon Blossom ignored most of them, it wasn’t as if war was a lawless affair. The ringing of the gong signaled that the general wanted to speak to the opposing side. Most of the time, they rang the gong to surrender, so fighting usually stopped unless it was particularly heated.

The Therbaen and Arnian soldiers all lined up in a row and faced each other at a distance of about twenty meters. From the Therbaen side, Matias and several other commanders walked forward. From the Arnian side, so did Teropekka and Moon Blossom. They dragged Punti along with them as their hostage.

“Punti?!” Matias exclaimed upon seeing him.

“Sir Matias, we would like to exchange prisoners,” Teropekka said.

“I was wondering where you’d gone...but you got yourself captured by Moon Blossom?” Matias glared at Lumia, who simply shrugged without confirming or denying the accusation.

“We would like to exchange Punti, your son and a hero candidate, for all of the Arnian soldiers you have captured,” Teropekka continued.

“All...of them...?”

“I believe that he is worth all the effort of ringing the gong, stopping the fighting, and offering a trade. Because of that belief, I have neither tortured nor interrogated him. However, if you refuse, I’ll have no choice but to extract as much information as I can before executing him.”

“You bastard... I bet that you only managed to capture Punti because Moon Blossom used some underhanded tricks!” Matias yelled, his face red with fury. He looked like he was seconds away from drawing his sword on them.

However, everyone knew that he wouldn’t. Heroes had privileges, but were

bound to their duties as well. They were forbidden from killing people out of a personal grudge or for personal gain. If Matias killed someone while the gong was ringing over the battlefield for a ceasefire, it would be a murder committed for his own selfish reasons. He would immediately get his hero status taken away from him.

“Punti,” Lumia ordered with a smile. “Why don’t you explain to your father just how you were captured?”

“Dad... I lost a duel...”

“Impossible! Someone of your caliber losing a duel?! I don’t believe it! Whom did you lose to?! Was it to Teropekka?!”

“It was to me,” Lumia said. “I apologize, but I know a thing or two about fighting. But I’m sure you know that.”

“Lumia Canarre...the vice captain of Moon Blossom... Yes, if you were Punti’s opponent, then you’d be evenly matched...” Matias growled, clenching his fist.

“‘Evenly matched’?” Lumia scoffed. “That’s not a very funny joke. But we can discuss that later. So, what is your decision? Will you trade prisoners with us?”

For a few moments, no one spoke until slowly, Matias said, “We will. Hey, some of you go grab the Arnian prisoners!”

After Matias’s order, silence filled the air again. It was thick and heavy, but Lumia didn’t seem bothered. When she glanced at Jyrki, he mouthed “I’m gonna piss myself” at her. It was hard to blame him, considering a hero who saw them as his enemies was facing them down. When she looked at Marx, he was staring at Matias without saying a word. Since it didn’t look like there’d be a problem there, Lumia turned her attention to Salume.

Salume still didn’t fully comprehend how strong or scary a hero was, so she had a fairly calm look on her face. But she was half hiding behind Jyrki. It looked like she was doing her best to disguise her fear.

“It’s a little boring waiting here like this,” Lumia said. “Why don’t we have a little chat?”

“There’s nothing I want to discuss with you pieces of human filth,” snapped

Matias. “As soon as we finish exchanging the prisoners and the battle restarts, I will personally strangle you to death with my bare hands. Look forward to it.”

“Oh my,” Lumia held her hands to her face in mock surprise. “Is that a personal grudge?”

“It would be nothing more than killing an enemy soldier on the battlefield.”

“Ahh. How scary.” Lumia smiled.

“I’ve got them here!” a Therbaen soldier exclaimed, Arnian hostages in tow. In total, there were twelve people behind him.

“Looks like they caught quite a few,” Jyrki whispered.

“So it seems,” Marx agreed.

With all parties present, the hostage exchange went smoothly.

“Punti, do you know how worried I was?” Matias said. He grabbed Punti, who was still tied up, in a tight embrace.

Right now, Matias’s attention was fully focused on Punti. *If I take him by surprise, I might be able to defeat him*, Lumia thought. Of course, she would never do that. But the fact that the thought entered her mind was proof that Asura’s soldier-mage training had seeped right into her bones. Asura wouldn’t care about a touching reunion between father and son, nor would she care about the rules of etiquette on the battlefield. If she were here, then she’d at least try to capture him, even if it meant beating Matias half to death.

“I’m sorry, dad...” Punti whispered.

“It’s fine, son. As long as you’re safe and... Guh?!”

Suddenly, Matias curled in on himself, clutching at the arrow that had been shot into his shoulder. In the next second, another arrow went clean through his head. Without another word, he fell to the ground.

“Huh?” Lumia gasped. She had no idea what had just happened.

She wasn’t the only one either. It was as if time itself froze as everyone’s brains worked to process the scene before them.

“Hey! You gotta be kidding!” Jyrki yelled. “A hero dropping dead while

negotiating with us?! Huh?! No freakin' way!"

Dead? The hero? Matias is dead? The Hero General Matias, who was said to have returned from two Demon Lord Expeditions, is dead? From just two arrows?

"What happened?!"

"Where did those arrows come from?!"

"Who did it?! Who shot them?!"

The soldiers around Matias's corpse started yelling. Punti whispered "Father?" in a quivering voice. Lumia looked around in search of the assailant, but she couldn't see anything. There was no one around them.

Who shot the arrow? Ahh, there's no need to even ponder that question. It's the handiwork of that goddamned bitch! Lumia gritted her teeth. *You'd kill him at this very moment? Right after the negotiations went smoothly and everyone let down their guard?*

Matias in particular had been relaxed, since he had just gotten his son back. And that was when Lumia finally realized that Asura had duped her. Asura had said that this would help with Plan A. But that had been a lie. From the very beginning, Asura had lied to them!

When Asura captured Punti, her plan had extended all the way to this very moment, when Matias would lower his guard. It was all so that she could take advantage of this crack in his armor and shoot him. Everything she'd done had been to raise the success rate of Plan B, even by a little.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Teropekka demanded.

"I'm the one who'd like to know!" Lumia shouted back. "In any case, we have nothing to do with it!"

Play dumb if we succeed. Play dumb even if we don't succeed.

"Vice Captain, the panic is spreading. We should retreat," Marx said. He was still calm, comparatively.

"Huh? What? Eh?" Salume was looking around, clutching at Jyrki's robes with her right hand. It seemed that she still hadn't fully grasped the situation.

“We’ve finished exchanging the prisoners! We’ll return to the camp!” Lumia ordered.

“We’ll return as well! We can’t have them pinning the hero’s murder on us! Go back! Don’t go to battle! Return to our camp as fast as we can!” Teropekka ordered.

If Arnia attacked now, then they would win against Therbae. However, that was the last thing they should do. Victory after what had just happened would be like advertising that killing Matias had been part of Arnia’s strategy. Of course, even without doing so, someone from Arnia would be the most likely suspect for the crime.

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Several minutes earlier, Asura and her team had been sitting in the branches of a tree. It was on the border between the forest and the plains, and offered a clear view of the main battlefront. “Clear view” was a bit of an overstatement, of course. They were still six hundred meters away, and so they couldn’t actually see much of anything with the naked eye.

“I was wondering what these colorful clothes were for,” Reko said. “But I get it now. They let us stay camouflaged in the forest.”

“That’s right. I doubt they’d be able to see us from that far away, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.” Asura and the others weren’t dressed in their usual black robes, but instead in green-and-brown camo ones. They’d brought them and other tools they’d needed the previous night. “Now then, it’s about time for them to start exchanging their prisoners.”

The gong had already rung over the battlefield, so the fighting itself had paused. Asura thought this was a wonderful rule of etiquette. In this world, battle only ended when the sun went down and when the gong sounded. *And, of course, when everyone’s dead.*

“Iina, you’ll be our designated sniper in the future, so listen close. Reko, you really only need to listen. Just keep this information in the back of your brain.”

“Me...?” Iina asked from where she was standing on a branch higher than Asura’s.

“Yes. You’re the best archer among us. It won’t take you long to pick up sniping.” Asura peered into the scope fixed onto the composite bow. It didn’t have a reticle, but there wasn’t much she could do about that. “Sniping while lying prone is ideal. However, it’s impossible to shoot from that position with a bow, so kneel on one knee and hold your posture.”

“I’ve seen you...practice that a lot...” Ina commented.

“Yeah. But I don’t believe I’ve ever explained the reasoning,” Asura replied. “Man, am I glad that magnifying technology exists in this world, even if it’s not very accurate.”

It felt like the order of technological advancements in this world was all wrong compared to Asura’s previous one. Like it had A, but it didn’t have B. It had this, yet it didn’t have that. The saddest part about this world was that it didn’t have guns. But the happiest part for Asura was that it had magic.

“You’re the first person I’ve seen...put a magnifying glass on a bow...”

“I bet. The idea of long-distance sniping doesn’t exist in this world. Humph, I’m not surprised though. It’s a world that worships warriors, after all.” It was a world where duels and one-on-one battles were the norm, and fighting fair and square was the priority. “Oh! They’ve started the exchange,” Asura grinned as she peered into the scope. “Wind and distance are the two most important aspects to keep in mind as a sniper. Of course, you also have to pay attention to gravity’s pull on the bullet...I mean, the arrow.”

“I understand...sorta.”

“Hold the target in the sight of your scope, which is this magnifying glass, by the way. Then, decide on what you want to aim for. You’ll have to consider the wind, distance, and gravity. After that, it’s all down to feeling.”

“Boss...you practiced thousands of times...for that...um, ‘feeling’?”

“Yeah. I thought my arms would fall off.”

Asura could hit a target two thousand meters away with a sniper rifle. But it had only been after coming to this world that she started practicing with a bow and arrow. She could use one, but was far from being an expert.

“The wind is blowing in our direction, but it’s a slight breeze. The distance is about six hundred, though that could be inaccurate since I’m measuring with my eyes.” Asura nocked the arrow and adjusted the angle slightly, checking with her scope the entire while. “When sniping with a bow, you have to aim at a point above your target. At this distance, it’d be around fifty degrees, I believe? I’m guessing the travel time of the arrow would be around ten seconds. All of this is just intuition, though.”

“Will I...be able to learn that intuition too? I’m...not confident...”

“Practice until you do. Also, we’ll be using Accelerate this time, so in this case, it’s fine to aim straight at the target. The arrow’s travel time will be much shorter too.” Truthfully, without Iina’s Accelerate, Asura would never think to shoot someone from this far. Though she *did* have the composite bow made for sniping purposes, she’d been imagining a much shorter distance. “Now, this is the important part. If your target is a hero, then two arrows is your limit.”

“Why...?”

“The first arrow will be from beyond the range of their perception, so they won’t be able to respond. In the best-case scenario, you’d kill them with this first arrow. They’ll still be confused by the time you shoot your second arrow. So eight times out of ten, it’ll hit them. However, they’ll react to the third one.”

“Will they...? I’d take five arrows...before I could respond...”

“It’d be impossible for *you*, Iina. I’m talking about heroes right now.”

Even for Asura, it was a fifty-fifty chance whether she’d be able to react to the third arrow. However, Lumia would definitely be able to catch or deflect it. In that case, Matias, who was said to be a candidate for a Great Hero, would likely respond as well.

“Just in case, I’ve prepared three arrows,” Asura continued. “Even if I miss all of them, we’ll call it a day and withdraw. Shooting a fourth arrow runs the risk of him discovering our position.” Even if Matias figured out where they were, they had enough distance to escape. Even so, Asura didn’t want the slightest chance of being seen. She would cover all her bases, completely and thoroughly. That was what it took to assassinate a hero. “Now then, when you pull the trigger...I mean, when you shoot the arrow, you must hold your breath

to make sure that there's as little room for error as possible..."

After she said that, Asura held her breath and Iina enchanted the arrow with Accelerate. Through the scope, she could see Matias embracing Punti. Everything was going to plan. They were beyond the outer edges of Matias's perception.



At this moment, the only thing in Matias's consciousness was Punti. Asura released her arrow and immediately nocked a second one. She held her breath as Iina quickly cast Accelerate. After making some minor adjustments to her angle, Asura released her arrow again. The first arrow hit Matias in either the shoulder or the arm.

Asura clicked her tongue irritably and reached for the third arrow. However, the second arrow cleanly struck through Matias's head. "Yes!"

It went exactly as planned. This was precisely why she'd needed Punti. Even if she missed with the first arrow, so long as Matias's attention remained fixed on Punti, then there was about a ninety percent chance he'd be unable to react to the second. She'd captured Punti to maximize the success rate of this mission.

"Boss...that was amazing... I don't think I'd be able to do it..."

"Humph, then practice. Don't fret. I'll even be kind enough to show you the ropes," Asura said as she leaped out of the tree.

"Kind...?" Iina repeated as she followed suit.

Reko also descended from the tree, though he had to lower himself to another branch before his feet hit the ground.

"I've always been kind to you, haven't I?"

"If that's what you call kind...then what would you call...strict?"

"If you want me to be a strict teacher, then I'll be happy to do so. But before that, we have to retreat." Asura turned and ran deeper into the woods, with Ina and Reko following close behind her. Excitement buzzed through her body with each step she took. She'd killed a hero, viewed by everyone as some divine figure from the heavens. She'd killed a hero, a task everyone claimed was impossible. Laughter bubbled out of her from the ecstasy. "Ahh, it's truly a shame that we can't advertise this."

All that was left for them to do was perfectly play the part of the innocent accused.

Part Two, Chapter Seven: You want to see my petals? They're a beautiful pink. But watch out for the explosions.

Four days after Asura killed the Hero General Matias, Moon Blossom was summoned to the audience chamber in Arnia Castle.

"Thanks to your efforts, the Therbaen army has retreated," King Arnia said. "Moreover, a Therbaen messenger arrived yesterday and we were able to sign a two-year armistice."

"That's fantastic news. I suppose that concludes our business here," Asura replied with a casual shrug.

As per usual, she refused to kneel. If Asura didn't kneel, then neither did Jyrki and Iina. Reko and Salume were standing straight as well. Only Lumia and Marx were on one knee, their eyes lowered to the ground in respect.

"The death of the hero was truly shocking..." King Arnia sighed. "As a result of that, my general, my soldiers, my parliament, and I had to deal with the heroes' interrogation. It was hardly an issue, of course, since none of us were involved in the incident." His face looked slightly weary after he said that.

"It looks like they didn't show much mercy. Well, just thank the stars they didn't torture you. All of the evidence was circumstantial and nothing was conclusive, so that's hardly a surprise. Unlike us, the heroes can't just enact violence whenever they wish," Asura chuckled.

"That's not entirely true, little missy," a man said as he emerged from the shadow of a pillar. He had a physique best described as "ripped," and had even bigger muscles than Marx.

"My apologies, Asura," King Arnia said with genuine regret in his voice. "He insisted on interrogating you and the rest of Moon Blossom."

"Right here?" asked Asura.

“Yeah, right here, little missy. I want eeeeveryone here to hear you bastards’ confession, you see.” The man looked to be around sixty years old. His white hair was cut short and neat, and he exuded an incredibly aggressive fighting spirit. Both Lumia and Marx immediately raised their heads. Salume’s body twitched backwards.

“‘Confession’? What would you want us to confess, Mister Hero?” Asura asked, smiling at him. Fighting spirit, no matter how aggressive, was hardly something to fear.

“Right. I ain’t a hero,” the man said, stalking up to stand in front of Asura. “I’m the Great Hero, Axel Ehrnrooth, little missy.”

“I apologize for my lack of manners. I never thought that a group of ruffians such as ourselves would ever get the chance to be interrogated personally by a Great Hero.”

Each region—East Felsen, Central Felsen, and West Felsen—only had two Great Heroes. In other words, Axel was the sixth-strongest person, at the very least, in all of the countries on the map (disregarding uncharted territory) and out of all of the people in the world.

“A Great Hero... Is it really true?” Lumia gasped, a terribly surprised look on her face as she stood up.

“I dunno how much truer it can get, ma’am,” Axel laughed. “Now then, little missy.” At this, Axel turned his attention down to Asura. “I hear you’re the leader?”

“That’s right. I am Asura Lyona, the leader of Moon Blossom. There’s no need for you to remember my name. We’re nothing more than insignificant little insects for people like you, aren’t we?”

“Yeah. But it’s a whole other story if said ‘insignificant little insects’ killed a hero. I’m going to cut right to the chase: did you kill Matias?”

“We did not.”

As soon as the words left Asura’s mouth, Axel punched her in the face. She’d been completely taken off guard. The impact tossed her back several meters, and she rolled along the ground before slamming into a pillar.

“Sir Axel! What are you doing?!” King Arnia demanded as he stood up from his throne.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it, boy king,” Asura coughed. Using the pillar as a support, she slowly stumbled to her feet and waved her hand at him. The members of Moon Blossom watched on silently.

“Listen here, little missy,” Axel said as he slowly approached Asura. “Considering the situation, it’s painfully obvious that Arnia killed Matias, ain’t it?”

“How naive.” Asura tried to laugh, but before she could do so, Axel’s fist drove into her stomach. “Gah!” The pain was so immense that she fell to the ground, curling up into a ball and pressing her hands to her torso.

“But you know what, little missy? No matter who I talked to, nobody knew anything. ‘We didn’t do it,’ was all they said. But it’s a given. We’re not idiots. We know that no one on Arnia’s side could’ve killed Matias.” He kicked Asura’s prone body and sent it flying into the air. “And you know what?” As she started falling to the ground, he reached out and grabbed a fistful of her hair. “Everyone kept saying the same thing: ‘If there’s anyone who could do it, it’d be that group of mercenaries, Moon Blossom.’”

“What? Are you accusing us of being the culprits based solely on rumors?”

“Yeah. And guess what? I asked Punti about it too, and he told me that there was a high chance you were behind it. Said your group specialized in underhanded tactics. I heard that when Matias died, you and a black-haired girl weren’t with the rest of your mercenaries.”

“And that’s just circumstantial evidence, isn’t it? I didn’t do it.”

Asura had barely finished talking before Axel punched her five times. With her hair still in his grip, there was no means for her to escape. All she could do was moan in pain at each strike. However, she remained conscious. Axel was making sure that he held back with his hits.

“No, you *did* do it. Or perhaps you acted on your own? I’ve no idea. But if you take the situation and the testimonies into account, then Moon Blossom are the only ones who could’ve killed him. I’m willing to bet someone from Arnia hired

you, didn't they? I'm not that far off from the truth, am I? So spill. Who's your client, and how did you go about killing him?"

"Like I said...how naive."

Axel slammed Asura down onto the ground so hard that she bounced off the floor.

"That's enough, Sir Axel! Asura already said she isn't responsible! You're going to kill her!"

"Shut up, Your Majesty. We're seriously pissed off. Can you blame us though? A *hero* was killed. That's never happened before. They weren't even killed by another hero. He was killed by some nobody whose name we don't even know!"

"Ha ha... I hear that Matias died from an arrow?" Asura asked as she slowly pushed herself to her feet.

"Huh?"

"Where did...the arrow come from? Who...shot it? Were there...any witnesses?" Asura continued.

"It's 'cause we don't know that I'm here to make you talk!" Axel yelled. He slammed his fist into Asura's stomach and, no longer able to hold it back, she threw up onto the ground.

"Ha... Is your hobby...making pretty girls like me puke?"

"You brat. Do you think I enjoy beating up a little kid like you?! Huh?! I'm obviously only doing this because you're the culprit!"

"But you're not killing me... That's because you don't have solid proof... So it would go against a hero's duty to never kill someone out of a personal grudge...right? In particular, you're a Great Hero... You have to act as an example for all the others..." With that, Asura stood up. She was used to being tortured and had trained for it. This body could withstand the pain.

"That's not it! Didn't I say that this has never happened before?! I still can't accept that Matias was killed! Unless you reveal how you did it, then the other heroes won't accept it either!" Axel's fist smashed into Asura's cheek. Though

she stumbled, she didn't fall down this time. "Do you get it?! Do you get what you did?! None of us expect to be killed by a group of random thugs! You've completely flipped what was normal to us on its head, so now we have to find a way to deal with it!"

"That's not my problem."

"You little—! Why should we...why should heroes like us have to be wary of possible assassinations?! We're humanity's measures against the Demon Lord! We fight *for* humanity! So why should we have to be killed by the very people we're sworn to protect?!"

"But you all have your own lives, on top of your own work, don't you?"

"Huh? What does that have to do with anything? What are you trying to say?"

"You're human before you're a hero, so it stands to reason that people would bear a grudge or two against you. All of you are famous, and yet none of you thought to have measures in place in case someone tried to kill you? *That* was the foolish part. Are you sure you haven't become too arrogant in your own strength?"

"Why, you—!" Axel snarled. He punched Asura again, but this time, she sidestepped the fist. Axel was furious, but he wasn't putting his entire strength behind each hit. He was holding himself back so that he didn't accidentally kill her. "Stop dodging!"

"Er...I'm about to die, you know? I dodged that for your sake."

Axel's punches were powerful enough to destroy boulders. Even if he was going easy on her, the damage was nothing to laugh at. If Asura ate two or three more hits, then she would no longer be able to get up. So this was the limit. She would no longer allow him to freely whale on her anymore past this point.

"You... You killed a hero! Do you know what that means?! You betrayed humankind! All of you are humanity's enemies! If you got that through your thick skulls, then tell me what you did! I'll give you a normal execution if you do. No torture! I'll simply kill you! That's not so bad, is it?!"

"Of course it's bad, dummy," Asura said.

“You’re the dummy here! Who do you ruffians think you have to thank for being able to enjoy your little war games?! Huh?! It’s us heroes! It’s ’cause we’re risking our lives to eliminate threats against humankind!”

“Humph. It’s astounding how mistaken you can be.”

“What?!” Axel pulled his fist back to deal yet another blow to Asura’s face, but he froze when he felt a killing intent.

“That’s truly enough, Sir Axel,” Lumia said in a frigid voice. “If you insist on continuing to punch my Asura...no, our leader, then I will kill you.” She was already holding her daggers in her hands.

“Huh?! Didn’t I already tell you idiots who I am?!”

“What does that matter, gramps?” Jyrki snorted, wielding his own daggers at the ready. “You goin’ senile already? You seriously think we’ll let you go home alive after you punched the livin’ lights outta our leader?”

“Kill the Great Hero...” Iina said calmly as she readied her bow. “I’ll return Boss’s pain to you...by a hundred times...and then kill you...”

“Our leader already said we didn’t do it. It’s true that we have nothing to do with Matias’s assassination, yet you went and practically killed her. If you thought you could get away with that, then you’re severely underestimating us.” Even Marx held up his dagger, ready to fight whenever he was given the ready.

“Boss didn’t do it...” Salume said. “You punched her so many times and she kept saying she didn’t do it. So I think she’s innocent.”

“Even if Boss *did* do it, she’s saying she didn’t, so she’s obviously innocent,” Reko said. “Why don’t you go back to your casket, your deranged old fool?”

“Are you all for real?” Axel growled. “You’re all serious about fighting me?”

“That’s right,” Asura sighed. “You should’ve gone home before happy hour ended.”

“Huh? ‘Happy hour’?”

“I’ve been letting you get the better of me this whole time, haven’t I? But that’s over now. You’ve reached the limits of our patience. So don’t move, Axel.

If you do, I'll kill you."

***

These guys are serious—totally, completely, deadly serious—about duking it out here. That was the impression Axel got from the killing intent emanating from Moon Blossom. That was why he chose to remain still. He wouldn't lose in a battle against them. Not only that, but he'd be able to kill them as well. He'd be able to claim self-defense, after all.

However, Axel himself wouldn't emerge completely unscathed. He'd heard rumors about Moon Blossom. They were each powerful fighters in their own right, and were able to coordinate attack patterns together. On top of that, he had very little experience in antimagic combat. In other words, it would be difficult to defeat Moon Blossom without killing them. If he killed them, then the truth of what happened would never come to light.

"Salume, come here a second," Asura said. Salume jogged over to Asura, who continued, "I'm a little tired, so act as my chair."

"Huh? Your...chair? You want me to be your chair?"

"That's what I said. Get on all fours over there."

"Ah, all right." Salume obediently followed Asura's orders and lowered herself to the ground like a dog. Asura put her whole weight on Salume's back and crossed her legs. "U-Um...how does it feel?" she asked timidly.

"Hmm." Asura slapped Salume's butt a few times. "It's not bad."

"Why didn't you pick me?" Reko complained. "I'd love to be your chair, Boss."

"Do you want me to...make you my chair?"

"I don't want *you*, Iina. I want Boss."

"You piss me off... I'll shoot you...before I shoot the Great Hero..."

Despite radiating enough killing intent to plunge the entire room into silence, Moon Blossom continued casually chattering among themselves.

"Won't your death threats to me count as evidence that you killed Matias?" Axel asked.

“No, they won’t,” Asura replied. “We didn’t kill Matias and we’ll prove it to you. Let’s see...” She looked around the room until her eyes landed on a member of King Arnia’s personal guard. “Reko, go borrow that man’s spear. I’ll kill him if he doesn’t hand it over to you, so don’t worry about him being a selfish boy.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Reko ran over to the personal guard, took the spear, and then ran back to Asura.

“Hold the spear so that the point is in the air, Reko.”

“Yes, Boss.” With that, Reko obediently did what Asura asked.

“Take a close look, Axel,” Asura said as she pointed to the tip of the weapon. “After we kill you, we’ll stick your head on the spear and parade through the city while advertising ourselves as the mercenary group with enough skills to murder a Great Hero.” After she said that much, Asura paused and hummed as if she’d just noticed something. “Ha ha, I guess you’d be dead, so we wouldn’t be able to prove anything to you. But, news of it would spread to the other heroes, wouldn’t it? If we were the ones who killed Matias, then we would’ve already been bragging about it.”

The grin on Asura’s face was an ugly and broken one, and seeing it made a chill run down Axel’s spine. She was serious. This crazy little girl meant every word that came out of her mouth.

For the first time in his life, the Great Hero Axel was afraid of another human. He boasted himself to be the strongest man in East Felsen, and yet he feared a little thirteen-year-old girl. It reminded him of when he first stood up against the supernatural disaster Demon Lord, back when he was still a fresh-faced novice. In a fight between Axel and Asura, Axel would win. Or he should be able to, since he was much more powerful than she was. If that was the case though, why couldn’t he stop imagining his bloody head upon that spear?

“Are you human?” he asked.

Even that was doubtful. He went so far as to wonder whether she was a peak-tier monster in disguise. Creatures capable of such things were rare, but it

wasn't as if they didn't exist.

"Do I look like I'm not? Of course I'm a human. For some reason, lots of people fear me when they see me, but I'm nothing more than your run-of-the-mill human. Well, I do admit that I'm not right in the head. Everyone says that about me, so I suppose it's true," Asura chuckled.

Ahh, Axel realized. *It's because of this laugh. I recognize what this is.*

"In any case," Asura continued, "I can understand why you suspect us. Circumstantial evidence aside, we honestly don't give a damn about killing a hero. So of course, we wouldn't feel the need to hide our accomplishment. Listen, none of us fear whatever payback you heroes can dish out. In fact, I look forward to waging war against all of you."

The Demon Lord—the enemy of humankind that takes pleasure in death and destruction—laughed in the exact same way that she does.

"Do you understand? Are you comprehending the words that are coming out of my mouth? If we'd killed Matias, then we would have dragged him through the streets as our trophy."

That maliciously delighted smile that sends shivers down my spine...

"Axel, I commend your judgment to stay still. You cannot win against us, and the reason is simple: it's because we're soldier-mages. I'm sure you've never had experience fighting against one. Of course, in a one-on-one fight, none of us would be a match for you. Not even Lumia, the strongest member of my group, would be sure to defeat you. But, here, let's take this flower petal for example. Why don't you pick it up and give it a closer look?"

When Asura raised her right pointer finger, a single petal started to drift down from the sky.

"What's this gotta do with anything, huh?" Axel snarled as he snatched it out of the air. In the next instant, his left hand exploded, splattering gore around the room. "GAAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!" He fell to the ground, writhing and screaming.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Are you an idiot? Are you an utter *fool*? I'm so, *so* sorry! It must have just looked like a flower petal, didn't it? So I'm not surprised you

touched it! This is what a soldier-mage does, Axel!!! It’s because musclebrained idiots like you keep falling for these traps that I’m having the time of my life right now!!!”

Axel thrashed on the ground and the members of Moon Blossom surrounded him. Their daggers were unsheathed, ready to kill Axel at any moment.

Part Two, Chapter Eight: I enjoy presenting options because I know what my opponent will choose.

“Now then, Axel, it looks like the tables have completely and utterly turned on you. You were enjoying hurting an adorable little girl such as myself, and now I’m the one who’ll be having fun at your expense. Don’t worry. I’m sure that you’ll start liking it once we get started,” Asura sneered.

“I really like it when you smile, Boss,” Reko said.

“You have such shit taste, Reko,” complained Jyrki, but with a smirk. “That ain’t a ‘smile.’ That’s a ‘spine-chilling sadistic grin.’ I don’t care who you crush on, but seriously, don’t fall for the boss.”

“He’s right, Reko. Do *not* fall for her,” Lumia said. “Besides, *I* was technically the one who saved you and took revenge for your parents, you know? Why was Asura the one you warmed up to?”

Moon Blossom was enjoying an ordinary conversation while still maintaining their usual murderous intent. In Asura’s opinion, they were just as crazy as she was. Axel held his left arm close to his body to try and stem the bleeding as much as possible, but he wouldn’t last much longer.

“Let’s talk business.” As soon as Asura said that, the members of Moon Blossom fell silent. “It’s simple, Axel. There exists a line, vague as it is, that I won’t cross. Though I wouldn’t mind killing you right here, that line is quite important to me. So I’m going to give you a choice.”

What was important to Asura wasn’t crossing the line, but having to bid farewell to Lumia if she did. This time, at least, the first person who suggested killing Axel was Lumia herself. Asura glanced in her direction and Lumia scrunched up her face apologetically. *So that’s how much she loves me?* Asura thought. *Even if it means killing a Great Hero, she wanted to protect me.*

“First,” Asura continued, “we can continue to converse like this and have you die from blood loss. It would be sort of a foolish end for a Great Hero such as

yourself, but I wouldn't mind that."

"That's not...gonna happen..." Axel hissed.

"Hmm, I figured. Second, you can die as the result of battle. This is what you want, isn't it? We would never underestimate the power of a Great Hero. Even in your current state and in this current situation, you would be able to kill one of us if you focused on them. Actually, you might be able to down two of us. Whatever. In any case, I suppose you'd aim for me first. However, I recommend that you pick the third option."

"Out with it..." Axel was crouching, his right hand steadying himself on the ground.

"Apologize. Once you do that, I'll let you leave here alive. Heck, I'll even throw in a bonus. I'll have Marx stop your bleeding with his magic. Unfortunately, his healing magic won't be enough to return your hand to normal, since he specializes in antidotes. But he can sanitize, clean, and close up the wound, and increase your natural healing speed a little bit."

"I...still believe that you lot are the culprits. None of you have any sense of morals. It's more than clear to me now that not only are you all capable of killing a hero, but you'd do it gleefully too."

"I guess you proved that yourself."

"However, at the same time, I also don't believe it was you..."

"Ha ha! Have you lost so much blood that you can't even think straight anymore?! It's us, yet it's not us?! Axel, make up your mind!"

"Shut up... I'm also confused... If you guys killed Matias, then you would've broadcast it for sure... But the fact that you didn't..."

"Means we didn't kill him. I have no interest in taking credit for someone else's good work."

"Good work...you say? Killing a hero...killing a Great Hero candidate like Matias was...good work?" Axel's right fist clenched tightly.

"Of course. I'd love to invite the true culprit to Moon Blossom if I ever find them. So then, what do you plan on doing, Axel? If you kiss my boots, then I'll

even donate money for your artificial arm.”

“Even if Moon Blossom didn’t do it...your existence is too dangerous... None of us expected people like you...”

“So now you’re going to rewrite the rules, aren’t you? Do whatever you want. We have no interest in rules beyond breaking them. What I want to know is which option you’re going to choose. At the rate it’s going, your death from blood loss seems to be the way it’ll play out, though.”

“Speaking of...even if this all ends with my apology...do you think the other heroes will...stay quiet at the fact you did this to me? To a Great Hero?”

“Then you make them stay quiet. It’s not like we killed you or anything, so there shouldn’t be an issue. None of you made it illegal to blow off a hero’s hand, right? If you really want to, just add ‘Dear citizens, we heroes are very fragile so pwease don’t hurt us’ to your new rules,” Asura giggled.

“What’d you say, you little...?”

“I’m saying this for your own good,” Asura sighed with a light shrug. “In any case, if our conflict doesn’t end here, then war will be what’s next. I don’t care either way. The choice lies in your hands.”

Axel grimaced bitterly, clicked his tongue, and then said, “I got it. At the end of the day, my injury was due to my own carelessness... I’ll tell the other heroes to not make a fuss and embarrass me...”

“That would be ideal.”

“But the existence of Moon Blossom...has the danger of overwriting many things in this world... So I’m going to keep an eye on you...and what you do...”

“Do whatever you want. So long as they don’t interfere with our work, we won’t attack your little spies.”

After Asura said that, Axel took a deep breath and then slowly let it out. “Sorry about that, little missy. You guys are the culprits, yet at the same time not. I’m sorry. Next time, I’ll find some more conclusive evidence and then come back with the other heroes for your head.”

“Good. I forgive you. Your blown-up left hand makes us even. Marx, stop his

bleeding.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Marx immediately used the water healing spell, Bandage. A somewhat viscous mass of water enveloped the stump of Axel’s missing left hand. Incidentally, Asura was the one who’d come up with the spell’s name, since the water reminded her of a bandage.

“Make sure you get some proper treatment,” Marx said. “With your hero’s privileges, you can receive the best medical attention from any institution for free, right? The water will disappear in thirty minutes, so get to a doctor before then.”

As soon as Marx finished talking, the Moon Blossom members surrounding Axel backed up three steps and gave him some space.

“Truthfully,” Axel said as he stood up, “I don’t want to see any of you ever again.”

“We hear that a lot. Enjoy the rest of your day, and make sure you buy a good artificial limb,” Asura said, waving her hand.

Axel walked out of the audience chamber and closed the door behind him. As soon as he did so, almost everyone in the room collapsed weakly to the ground. King Arnia was practically slipping off his throne as he gasped for breath.

“All of you are pathetic,” Asura said upon seeing them. “Isn’t that right, you guys?”

“I was scared stiff too!” Jyrki exclaimed as he crouched down, knees shaking.

“I’m...also exhausted...” Iina sighed as she fell face down onto the floor.

“I admit, I didn’t expect a Great Hero to come all this way. It was a shock,” Marx sighed heavily as he slowly sat down.

“Humph. My people are just as useless. Salume and Reko have way more backbone. Isn’t that right, Lumia?”

“I...almost killed a Great Hero... I threatened him too...” Lumia placed her hands on Jyrki’s shoulders, using him to support herself even though he was sitting down on the ground.

“Salume, if you’re tired, I can take your place as the boss’s chair.”

“I’m fine, Reko.”

“Hmm? I said I can take your place.”

“And I said I’m fine. Please don’t worry about me. I’m still not much use in combat, so at the very least, let me be a chair.”

“There’s no need for that,” Asura said as she stood up. “Let’s go home. We’ll have a nice long break today, and from tomorrow, we’ll focus on training for a bit. After that, we’ll go to our next battlefield.”

“Didn’t we train yesterday and the day before? You told me to hurry up and evolve my magic to a Fixed Element and had me cast spells until I emptied my...uh, MP!” Jyrki complained.

MP recovered while resting, and every time it recuperated, the maximum amount of MP one could store increased. That was how one improved their MP.

“I practiced shooting an arrow...until it felt like my arms would fall off...”

“All I did was coach Reko and Salume on their strength training, so I’m not particularly tired.”

“Coaching wasn’t all you did. We spent some time training together, remember? To be honest, my muscles started getting fatigued the day *after* a workout...”

“To tell the truth, my entire body hurts,” Reko said.

“Mine too,” Salume agreed.

“Didn’t I say that practical training would continue until you die?” Asura said in response to Moon Blossom’s complaints. After that, she approached King Arnia.

“Ohh, Asura. Are you all right? My apologies, I never expected the Great Hero to do that.”

“It’s fine, boy king. My entire body is wracked by pain and I’d love to rest as soon as possible, but this was all within the realm of expectations. Sit up.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m telling you to sit up straight. How much longer do you plan on exposing this pathetic display?” Upon hearing that, King Arnia quickly sat up properly in his throne and Asura settled herself in his lap. Then, she grabbed his face with both hands and tugged it towards herself. “One day, I’m going to return here with plenty of requests for you,” she whispered into his ear. “One day, I’m going to add more members to my group and create something like a mercenary nation. When that time comes, I want to borrow your strength. So keep your crown. Promise me that you won’t fall to disease or injury or rebellion. Got it?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“G-Get away from the king!” the captain of the guard commanded in a high-pitched voice. It was impressive of him to say that to Asura after seeing what she’d done to Axel.

“Stop trembling. Continue to protect your monarch.” With that, Asura got down from King Arnia’s lap and returned to Moon Blossom.

“Didya give ’im a kiss goodbye?” Jyrki asked sincerely.

“Poor King Arnia... To think that he’d catch the boss’s eye...” Marx shook his head.

“Asura, no. I won’t allow you to date anyone unless I acknowledge them,” Lumia said.

“What kind of impression do you have of me? I have no interest in men. All I did was talk to him.” Asura gestured with her right hand and ordered her mercenaries to stand. “Now, let’s go back.”

***

Asura and the others left Arnia Castle, and were on their way back to their lodgings when Salume opened her mouth apologetically. “Um...”

“What is it? I apologize if you’ve become addicted to being my chair. But I won’t judge you for your interests. Everyone in this group has their own brand of insanity, so don’t worry about it,” Asura said from Marx’s back.

Asura hadn’t asked Salume to be her chair because she wanted to bully the girl. She really had been seriously injured from Axel’s punches. Even so, she’d

walked around on her own two legs until Moon Blossom exited the audience chamber.

“Er, no, it’s not about the chair...”

“I was just joking, Salume. Now I feel sad because you didn’t play along. Being able to joke around is a necessary trait in a mercenary, you know?”

“So what, we’re a comedic mercenary troupe?” Jyrki sighed, spreading his arms out in exasperation.

“Er...um... Boss, you didn’t *really* kill the hero, did you?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Huh?”

“Like I said, I did. It was like...” While still on Marx’s back, Asura mimed aiming with a bow. “It was like, *zoom*.”

“Y-You killed him...?”

“Is that so strange? If I recall, I said I would.” Asura couldn’t understand why Salume was raising a fuss about it after the fact.

“I was completely under the impression that you were being wrongfully accused... No one said anything at all...”

“They’re amazing actors, aren’t they?”

“Huh? Actors?”

“No, perhaps ‘swindlers’ is more apt? They’re disgusting little liars, don’t you agree? But in any case, this conversation is over, Salume. Never bring it up again. No one’s monitoring our movements yet, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“Ah, right.” Salume still looked a little uncomfortable.

“I’m happy that you’ve now figured out the boss’s true nature,” Lumia said. “We were all forced into a position where we had no choice but to lie. The only swindler here is her.”

“She was so cool,” Reko sighed.

The group of them continued walking for about twenty seconds. Then, several

members of the military police swarmed before them and blocked their path.

“What do you want?” Lumia asked the police after everyone stopped.

There were seventeen military police officers in front of them. Even with all of Moon Blossom present, that was still a large number. One of them stepped forward and asked, “Are you the mercenary group, Moon Blossom?”

She was a woman around thirty years old with dark blue hair reminiscent of the ocean. The color of her uniform differed from that of the other military police. All of the others wore blue while she alone wore white. It was doubtful that hers was different just to avoid clashing with her hair color. What really made her stand out, however, was a certain accessory on her face.

“You’re wearing glasses, aren’t you? Fairly expensive ones at that,” Asura observed.

Magnifying technology existed in this world, as did corrective lenses. However, they were still considered luxuries.

“Yes, I am. I get paid very well, Miss Asura Lyona.”

“Hey now, if you know who I am, why did you ask if we’re Moon Blossom?”

“It was just to stand on ceremony,” the woman replied with a light shrug. “More importantly, could I request that you come with me?”

“So you completely ignored the fact that I asked what you wanted?” Lumia sighed, looking a little put out.

“I apologize, Miss Lumia Canarre. You’re the vice captain of Moon Blossom, aren’t you? Obviously, I know who all of you are. It was because of your accomplishments that we Arnians were able to push back the Therbaens. I thank you for that.”

“Ahh, I see,” Asura laughed. “‘But’? ‘However’? ‘Except’? I assume you’re going to use one of those words to continue that thought, right?”

“That’s exactly correct, Miss Asura Lyona. But... However, what we are here for has nothing to do with that victory. The military police do not have much to do with war.”

“I’m hardly surprised. You’re an investigative organization, if I recall. Your job

mainly focuses on arresting criminals. If you're here about the hero, we didn't kill him. We were on our way back from proving it."

"Then how about the murder of Uno Hassinen? May I request that you accompany us in regards to that?"

Salume twitched backwards at Uno's name. With that reaction, she basically admitted that she knew who he was. Asura had no intention of blaming her for that, though. As she was right now, Salume was hardly any different from a random girl off the street.

"You're Miss Salume Tikka, aren't you? You were sold as a courtesan when you were thirteen. But according to our records, Uno bought you very recently. So why is it that you're with Moon Blossom right now?" the lady of the military police asked with a bright smile.

"What should we do, Boss?" Jyrki hissed. "Should we attack? I've never liked the military police, y'know."

"Me too... I hate military police... Kill them all?"

Both Jyrki and Iina looked ready to pounce, but neither of them had drawn their weapons yet.

"No, don't. I don't want to burn any bridges on our way out of Arnia. I shall accompany you, but only on the condition that you heal me."

"I understand. If that would make all of you come peacefully, then I have every reason to accept that condition." The lady of the military police gave them yet another big smile.

This is just a guess, Asura thought, *but someone like her is probably what they mean by "a truly good person."*

Part Three, Chapter One: There's something you want to ask me? Then say the magic word.

After she received treatment, Asura headed to the commandant's office. It was a fairly large room, and far more comfortable than she'd expected. On her left, several trophies and medals decorated the shelves, and on her right, portraits of all the previous commandants hung from the walls.

"Miss Asura Lyona, please take a seat," Circie Hermisallo, the provost marshal general of the military police, said with a smile while sitting behind her desk. She had hair as blue as the ocean, and wore a white uniform and glasses.

They'd already finished their introductions to each other. As for the other members of Moon Blossom, they were waiting in another room. Asura lowered herself into the chair opposite of Circie, with the desk between them.

"Just call me Asura. Circie, how old are you?"

"I'll be thirty-one this year... But I'm still thirty right now! If I recall, you're thirteen, yes?"

"That's right. My fourteenth birthday is still some time away. Now, when did you become the provost marshal general?"

"I earned this position two years ago. Excuse me, but am I being interrogated here?"

"No, we're just having a chat. It's the same as saying, 'What nice weather we're having today.' Would you prefer to talk about that?"

"I see." Circie sighed. "May we discuss the matter at hand?"

"Before we do, why did you remove my equipment?" Though Asura was still wearing her usual robes, all of the daggers underneath had been taken away by the military police. She was completely disarmed at the moment.

"It's a precaution. We'll return it to you later, so please do not worry about that. Now, may we discuss the matter at hand?"

At Circie's firm attitude, Asura exhaled softly. "As you wish. We killed Uno Hassinen."

She gave a straightforward and honest answer because there was no need to hide it at this point in time. The reason was twofold. First, the military police already had proof, which was why they had arrested Moon Blossom at all. Secondly, Uno wasn't a hero or anyone of note. Though Asura had gotten her mercenaries to dispose of the body just in case, it wouldn't be an issue at all if someone discovered it. Right now, they could do anything they wanted to. After all, they had a boy king who would listen to their every command.

"I see..." Circie said, blinking rapidly. "Ah, well, we knew that, of course. We...discovered where you'd buried the body...and we have witness accounts..."

Asura immediately understood that meant the owner and waiter of the bar had spilled the beans. Since she didn't plan on any further involvement with them, she wouldn't seek revenge. Both the owner and waiter were civilians, even if one or both leaked info to Uno. If Asura killed them, then Lumia would get angry with her. Lumia could become ruthless in dealing with human scum, but even then, she preferred limiting her killings as much as possible.

"So?" Asura asked. "Are you going to arrest us?"

"Yes, that's right. That's more or less what we plan to do..."

"'But'? 'However'? 'On the condition that'?"

"Miss Asura...why are you taking the words out of my mouth?"

"I figured that you had something you wanted to ask of me. No, I suppose I should say that's what I hoped for? After all, if that wasn't the case, then I'd have no choice but to defeat all of you."

Asura finished her sentence with a low chuckle and Circie twitched backwards. In this case, 'defeat' didn't mean that she planned on killing them. She'd simply ask King Arnia to pardon them and get out of jail that way. Her words were more like a threat made to speed along a business transaction.

Circie swallowed. She steadied her breathing, calmed herself down, and said, "I was investigating the organization backing Uno Hassinen."

“Hmm. I didn’t know he had any sponsors. I thought he was nothing more than your average piece of shit.”

“We’d been conducting an undercover operation looking into his backer, but you and Moon Blossom killed our agent.” Circie’s voice was tinged with rage. The anger was not only at her investigation having been disrupted, but also at the loss of her compatriot.

“We killed three members of the military police, but one of them was yours? Sorry about that. I didn’t know that he was in the middle of an undercover operation. You have my sympathies.”

“I don’t need your empty words!” Circie’s expression twisted with frustration.

“Yes, of course they’re empty. Enemies are enemies, no matter whether they’re part of the military police or not. Will you lose yourself to your anger and become my enemy as well? I wouldn’t consider that a smart decision. Now, say the conditions of your deal. We’ll accept it depending on what they are.”

“The people of Arnia...love you...and Uno was an infamous scoundrel... Though you and your group are criminals, there’s the risk that we would be vilified for bringing you to justice...”

“Are you afraid of public opinion?”

“Yes. Investigative organizations such as ours tend to be the target of the civilians’ outrage.”

Oh, that reminds me. A memory prickled at Asura’s consciousness. *Everyone hated the police in my previous life as well.* Of course, Asura had been one of those haters. It created an interesting paradox in which the people hated the very law enforcement that they needed. Not that Asura had ever relied on them.

“So?” Asura prompted. “What do you want me to do?”

“I’d like you to pin down the Arnian branch of the criminal organization that was backing Uno, as well as someone by the name of Little God.”

“What kind of organization is it?”

“It mostly deals with drugs. But it does pretty much everything, from

extortion to assault to theft to murder. It's a cross-border organization, with branches in every corner of Felsenmark. The members refer to their leader as 'God.'"

"A drug cartel... No, I suppose it'd be closer to a mafia? Like the Felsenmark Mafia? So you're saying that an office or something of theirs is in Arnia?" Asura asked while reminiscing on a certain mafia movie she'd watched in the past.

"What's a 'mafia'?"

"It's...an informal term used for a criminal organization."

"I see. This is my first time hearing that word, but I like the sound of the 'Felsenmark Mafia.' I'll use it. Should we call it 'Felmafia' for short?"

"I'm glad you like it." Asura shrugged lightly.

"Now, these people are extremely dangerous. Unlike soldiers, they have no qualms against using underhanded tricks. However, so long as you find their hideout and Little God—the branch leader—we'll pardon all the crimes you've committed within Arnia."

"No."

"I see. For starters... Wait, what?" Circie's eyes widened.

"First off, why are you relying on us?" Asura asked. "Secondly, if we want a pardon, we'll have the king give it to us. Though he'd need the majority vote of his parliament, he should be able to clear away our wrongdoings, right?"

"Um...I...thought to ask for your help because I was impressed by Moon Blossom's competence... And I wanted your aid on this investigation in return for an official pardon because you were the ones to ruin our operation in the first place. Is it really so strange?"

"It's not strange at all. But the truth is that quite a few of your men have been killed, yes? Or you've received some sort of warning?" Upon hearing Asura's words, Circie bit her lip. "I see. So that's how it is. Looks like those Felmafia guys have really been taking you for a spin, huh? You can't think of anything to do, so you came to us as your last resort, hoping that we'd be the salvation you need? Am I wrong?"

Asura was smiling as though she was having the time of her life. Felmafia was too much for the military police to handle, so they'd decided to rely on mercenaries. Though she'd taken a shot in the dark, it didn't look like she was too far off the mark.

"That undercover operation...was our last hope...but because of you..."

"Ohh, I'm so sorry. Terribly sorry. Ha ha! Just be honest and stop acting all hoity-toity with your little pardons. Go on, say 'Please help us.' You can even beg if you want. I'd be willing to consider it then."

If Asura thought of it as a way to train her mercenaries in intelligence gathering and combat, it wouldn't be a bad job to take on. However, she didn't like Circie's attitude.

"We can always arrest you..." Circie started before Asura coldly cut her off.

"Try it. Just so you know, if you become our enemy, we'll kill so many of your men that the Felmafia will look like a joke. Who'll protect the safety of this country then? Hmm? I want to leave Arnia without burning any bridges, so make your request like a normal person and then show me the cash."

Silence fell over the room. Asura waited for Circie's response.

"A pardon and ten thousand dora," Circie finally said. "We'll also remove Jyrki Kuusela and Iina Kuusela from the wanted list, though my authority is limited to Arnia."

"Oh? The two of them are wanted?"

"Didn't you know?" Circie's expression tightened. "Jyrki is one of the ten most wanted criminals in Arnia. I didn't know his name, but...wait a second." Circie pulled open one of her drawers and started leafing through the huge pile of wanted posters. "Here. This is Jyrki Kuusela, isn't it?"

She held a wanted poster in her left hand and showed it to Asura. With her right hand, she pointed at the portrait drawn on it.

"Oh, wow, it looks just like him. Yeah, that's Jyrki all right."

Underneath his portrait, it read, "Fourth Leader of Bandit Group Banknotes of Freedom. Real Name Unknown."

“Y-You didn’t know about this despite traveling with him?” Circie asked, sounding a little exasperated. She folded up the wanted poster and then placed it back down on the desk.

“I knew that he was a bandit. But I barely considered it an issue.”

“We’re talking about the Banknotes of Freedom here! It’s a super famous group of bandits! Granted, it suddenly dissolved about a year ago. But it’s not as if law enforcement called off the search!”

“It didn’t dissolve. It was destroyed.”

“Huh...?”

“Lumia and I destroyed them while we were having a picnic. That was when we recruited Jyrki and Iina. They were both good fighters on top of being able to use magic, so I thought they’d make fine underlings.” Asura laughed. Circie looked like words were failing her. “Well, whatever. So? You just want us to find Felmafia’s hideout and Little God, right? What should we do after that?”

“Ahh, right. After that, we’ll ask for reinforcements from the Knights of the Azure Skies, then raid them.”

“Ha! The Knights of the Azure Skies, you say?! Ha ha! What respectful ideals they have! They don’t belong to any nation, and would rush to the aid of anyone who requested it. It’s something like that, isn’t it?!”

“Is there a problem with them? Does this have anything to do with Marx Redford?”

“No, there’s no problem. The Knights of the Azure Skies is an organization. They have plenty of sponsors, but even with their backing, they don’t have enough money to maintain a group of knights. That’s why their aid is a paid service, isn’t it? How much do they cost?”

“Thirty thousand dora for a platoon. So?”

“Then give that money to us. We’ll destroy the Felmafia for you! That’d make our fee a pardon, thirty thousand dora, and the erasure of Jyrki and Ina’s names from Arnia’s wanted list. But honestly, I don’t think they give a damn about that!” Asura didn’t care about it either. But if Arnia was willing to clear their

ledgers, then there was no reason to turn down the offer. “Of course we’ll find Felmafia’s Arnian branch and destroy it for you! It’s a better deal than splitting up your payment and hiring both us and those Knights, isn’t it?”

As a point of compromise, it was more than enough. The members of Moon Blossom wouldn’t complain about the job either if this was the payment. The only thing left that Asura needed was...

“‘Destroy’? This is completely different from fighting on the battlefield! Your opponents are hardcore criminals and—”

“We’re more or less the same thing. Don’t worry about it. We’ll make sure to slaughter them all, until no one would dare to set up another criminal organization within Arnia’s borders. That’s what you want to hear, right?”

“If...you can do that, then yes! Please!”

“Yes, that’s it. ‘Please.’ That’s all I wanted to hear. We’ll accept the job.”

The last thing Asura needed was Circie’s ‘please.’ The contract was made.

“Provost Marshal General Circie, pardon my intrusion!” a member of the military police exclaimed as he entered the room. Asura turned around in her chair to check the newcomer’s face.

“What’s the matter? I’m in the middle of something,” Circie said as she adjusted her glasses with her right hand.

From Asura’s observation, there was something off about this officer’s expression.

“This won’t take long. I have a message from Little God: ‘Give up. How many times do we have to warn you?’”

The officer threw a knife and Circie froze, unable to respond.

“Tsk.” Asura didn’t have any weapons on her, so she reached out towards the flying knife with her left hand.

It sank into her palm, and as soon as the metal tore through her flesh, she felt the poison that had been smeared upon the blade. *If this had been Lumia, would she have skillfully grabbed it out of the air by the handle?* But it was more than enough that she’d been able to react while seated and save Circie. It

would've been ridiculous if her client died as soon as they'd finished negotiations.

"Who are you?!" Circie demanded. She stood up and drew her sword.

The military police—no, the assassin disguised as a member of the military police threw a second dagger. Asura snapped the fingers on her right hand. When she did so, the assassin's head and shoulders burst in an explosion of blood, scattering gore around the room. She'd used her flower magic, Mines. Circie deflected the knife out of the air with her sword and then turned her attention to Asura.

"Miss Asura, thank you so much! Are you all right?!"

Of course I'm not all right. This isn't good. Getting poisoned is the absolute last thing I needed. It was apparently the type to take immediate effect because she could feel herself getting dizzy. However, she still couldn't lose consciousness. Not yet. She stood up and took a deep breath.

"MAAAAARX!!!!!!!!!!" She screamed for him using all of the air in her body. Circie looked terribly shocked at the volume and Asura turned to look at her. "When Marx arrives, tell him I've been poisoned. Then, tell Lumia about your request. Tell her to do her best to finish it. Now, I'm going to sleep for a while."

With those final words, Asura's consciousness faded into darkness.

Part Three, Chapter Two: I’m proud of you all. Not because I think you’re trash. In the true meaning of the word.

The members of Moon Blossom, excluding Asura, had all been taken to what looked like a waiting room inside the military police’s headquarters. Lumia was relaxing on the sofa. Reko sat down next to her and then lay down, placing his head on her lap. Lumia began combing her fingers through his hair like she was petting a cat. Marx leaned against a wall with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. Iina was wandering around the room, investigating to see what she could find. Jyrki sat down on the sofa across from Lumia and stretched. Salume watched them all, a confused look on her face.

“U-Um, everyone... I-It looks like we’ve been locked in from the outside...”

The military police had confiscated all of their weapons before taking them into the room. On top of that, they’d locked the door. It made Salume nervous that the police were fully intent on arresting them all.

“I can open a lock like that in three seconds,” Jyrki said with a light shrug.

“I can open it...in four...” Iina added while peering inside an open drawer.

“It would take me about ten seconds.” Lumia smiled wryly. “I’m not very good at lock picking.”

“Neither am I. It would take me about eight,” Marx said without opening his eyes.

“Huh? You all know how to pick locks?” Salume exclaimed, looking incredibly surprised.

“Iina and I used to be bandits, so we were always able to do it.”

“Marx and I learned from Asura,” Lumia explained. “You’ll be forced to practice it in time, Salume. Asura requires you to be able to pick one within ten seconds at the maximum. I worked really hard to accomplish that.”

“You really have to do everything...” Salume whispered. Moon Blossom was like a treasure trove of skills and talents.

“However,” Marx said, opening his eyes to look at Salume, “it would be faster to kick down that door.”

“I...I see...” Salume looked at the door. *I can’t do either of those things.*

“Siddown, Salume. Stop standin’ around,” Jyrki called, hitting his palm against the cushion next to him. “Let’s chill.”

Salume followed his instructions and sat down next to him. “Um... They took Boss to another room, but I wonder if she’s all right?”

They’d all watched as Asura received medical attention from the military police, but as soon as they’d finished, she’d been the only one taken away to a different room.

“Don’t worry, Salume. Boss ain’t the type to rampage indiscriminately. She’s always calm, like to the point it pisses me off,” Jyrki snorted.

“That’s right... I’ve never seen her...panicked...” Iina agreed.

“Besides, she’d wanted to leave Arnia on good terms. She won’t raise a fuss. You don’t have anything to fear,” Marx added.

“Right. She’ll likely remain nice and calm unless something terrible happens. So you can sit back and relax, Salume,” Lumia concluded.

“Um...that’s not what I meant... I was wondering whether Boss is okay... I wasn’t worried about her rampaging. I was worried about her getting interrogated...” Salume’s worries had been directed at Asura herself, not her possible actions.

“You saw what went down between Asura and Sir Axel, didn’t you?” Lumia said. “Neither interrogation nor torture works on her.”

“It don’t work on us either, by the way,” Jyrki couldn’t help but butt in.

Salume had heard that part of Moon Blossom’s training was withstanding torture. Since she didn’t enjoy physical pain, she was incredibly nervous about receiving that lesson.

“Just once...I’d like to make Boss cry...” Ina muttered. “She doesn’t cry no matter what I do... In fact...she says I’m not trying hard enough...”

Aside from learning how to handle torture, all members of Moon Blossom received training in inflicting it as well. All of them had put Asura through the wringer, but she’d looked like she was having so much fun that the *torturer* ended up feeling uncomfortable. That was what they told Salume anyway, but she could believe it. Asura had looked like she’d enjoyed her conversation with Axel. Normal people would’ve cried and confessed if they’d been punched as much as Asura had by a Great Hero. That was what Salume would’ve done.

“I’ve never seen the boss cry before. Have you, Vice Captain?”

“Hmm, no, I haven’t. I met her when she was three years old, but she was like that even back then,” Lumia sighed at Marx’s question.

“What a scary brat,” Jyrki commented.

“Yes. When she saw me, she said, ‘If you’re not my enemy, then raise me. As you can see, all the adults here have died. Due to my youth, there are plenty of inconveniences that I can’t handle alone. So you have to raise me.’ It’s been ten years since then so I paraphrased a little, but that was the gist of it.”

“What kinda...three-year-old...” Iina grimaced and then she sat down next to Marx against the wall.

“Well, in any case, I’m glad that I met her,” Lumia said with a gentle smile.

“Me too.” Marx nodded. “Life as a soldier-mage is like a dream for me. The two people I idolize the most are Jeanne Autun Lala and Asura Lyona.”

“Woooow. You really just compared our leader to the world’s greatest warrior mage,” Jyrki laughed.

“The only hero in history...who had her title stripped from her...” Iina whispered.

Everyone knew who Jeanne Autun Lala was.

“What’s she up to now? She ran away before she could be executed, right?” Reko asked. “She’s basically a myth to me.”

Jeanne had become a hero at fifteen and experienced a Demon Lord

Expedition at sixteen. When she was seventeen, she'd fought for and won independence for her home country, and at eighteen, she'd gotten her hero title taken away. Then, she'd been sentenced to death. She was the strongest hero in history, one whose destiny had taken her down a uniquely difficult path. If she were still alive, and she'd continued her training, then she would've likely become a peerless fighter.

"Who knows? She completely hid herself away after the Great Massacre," Lumia said. "It's nothing more than rumors, but I heard that she created a criminal organization and has been hiding herself in the shadows ever since."

"It's said that Jeanne killed everyone at the site of her public execution and pillaged the nearby villages as she made her escape," Marx said. "People eventually referred to that incident as 'the Great Massacre.'"

"Miss Vice Captain, you come from Central Felsenmark, and at your age you must have been around when all that went down, right? Have you ever seen Jeanne?"

Jeanne had been feared as much as she'd been admired. She'd reached the heights of glory with her achievements, as well as experienced the depths of despair due to the machinations of those around her. Central Felsenmark was the birthplace of such a dramatic figure.

"In a way," Lumia said. "We're of the same generation."

"Vice Cap'n, when you said you were in the army, did you mean you were in Jeanne's?!" Jyrki exclaimed.

"That would explain...why she's so strong..." Iina nodded.

During Jeanne's time, her army, the Oathkeeper Brigade, had been the symbol of victory. Her own charisma and divinity had been so prominent, no one managed to escape her shadow and achieve fame on their own. Even so, it was rumored that all of them had been exceptionally skilled fighters.

"I don't want to talk about my time in Central Felsen yet. Maybe in time, though," Lumia said.

"That's unfortunate," Marx replied. "I'm a huge fan of Jeanne's, so I'm looking forward to the day you feel comfortable enough to share your stories about

her.”

Everyone here has their demons, Salume realized. Jyrki and Ina had been bandits, and Marx had been a knight. There was the chance that Lumia was a former member of the Oathkeeper Brigade. How could Salume compare to people like that? She’d been raised by her physically abusive, alcoholic excuse for a father. Despite how pathetic she’d felt, she’d tried to protect him, only for him to sell her to a brothel as collateral for his debt. *I’m nothing at all. I’m no one of any importance.*

Jyrki gently placed his hand on Salume’s head and suddenly started petting her hair, uncaring of how he messed up the strands.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Salume asked.

“Nah, you just started lookin’ super down. We’re a cheery mercenary group, remember? Just have fun with life.”

“What’s the matter?” Lumia tilted her head. “Are you one of those affected by the Great Massacre?”

“No, that’s not it. I was born and raised in Arnia. I just kind of started thinking about how I’m not much of anything compared to everyone else...”

“It’s not as if we’re anythin’ either,” Jyrki snorted.

“That goes for me as well,” Marx nodded. “The only thing I have is my pride as a soldier-mage of Moon Blossom.”

“Salume...you need to grow more of a backbone...” Iina shook her head. “Take a leaf out of Reko’s book... He’s just a villager, but acts like he owns the place...”

“Yeah, that reminds me. Hey, you butt,” Jyrki snapped. “How’re you so casual about lyin’ down on the vice cap’n’s lap? Switch with me before I kick you off.”

“I would like to lie down there as well,” Marx said, raising his hand.

“Do you want...to lie down on me?” Iina asked a little excitedly. It looked to Salume like Iina *wanted* to try letting someone sleep on her lap.

“Nah, I don’t want one from you, Iina.”

“I also don’t really care about Iina’s lap.”

“I’m so pissed off... Just wait and see what I have in store for you two...”

“Ah ha ha, I might be interested in sleeping on your lap, Miss Iina,” Salume said to mediate the situation.

“Fine... Just this once, got it?”

With that, Ina shoved Jyrki aside and sat down on the couch. Then, she patted her knees, so Salume timidly rested her head on them. Right as she did so, an incredibly loud scream echoed through the room.

“MAAAAARX!!!!!!!!!!”

Everyone knew that something serious had happened. By the time Salume raised her head, Marx had already kicked down the door, and within seconds, all members of Moon Blossom rushed out of the room. Salume and Reko were the only ones left. They looked at each other and then ran after the others.

***

When Asura woke up, she found herself in a clean and spacious room. A warm light entered from the window by her bed. She slowly pushed herself up and noticed for the first time that she was completely naked. Next to her bed, there was a bucket of water and a towel, which someone had likely used to wipe down her body.

“Boss, you’re awake?” Marx had been doing push-ups next to the bed and he stood up after he noticed Asura. Reko, and Salume were doing push-ups by his side, but they didn’t stop.

“Oh? Who are you? And who am I?” Asura asked as she stared down at her left hand. The wound had already closed and it seemed the venom was completely gone from her veins. Marx had likely neutralized the toxin followed by Lumia healing the injury.

“That’s not a very funny joke.”

“Really? I thought it was a classic,” Asura shrugged.

“Boss!!!” Reko tackled Asura and threw his arms around her.

“Hey, I only just recovered enough to wake up. Don’t rush at me with your full strength.”

Reko pressed his nose against her and breathed in deep. “Mm, your sweat smells *so* good, Boss.”

“Marx, do something about this perverted brat.”

After Asura said that, Marx grabbed Reko by the scruff of his neck and then tossed him away. Reko adjusted his position in the air and landed on his feet. The sight of his agility made Asura think that he was about ready to start learning close-quarters combat. She was already making him practice his magic little by little every day. Since it took a while to master it, she had him learning it slow and steady.

“Boss, you had such a high fever! You were so hot to the touch a-and...so...” Salume stammered nervously.

“Calm down, Salume. I’m fine. Marx, explain the situation to me.”

“All right. To start with, we’re in an inn in Nielta, one of the trading cities.”

“Why are we in a trading city?”

“It appears that one of the hideouts of that criminal organization—the Felmafia, was it?—is here. The military police had managed to figure out that much and so we came here while taking care of you.” Marx looked away from Asura for a moment. “Salume and Reko, continue with your training. If you insist on slacking off, you’ll have my fist to deal with.”

Salume and Reko hurriedly returned to their push-ups.

“Where are the others?” Asura asked.

“They’re collecting intel. Just so you know, you slept for two entire days.”

“No wonder I feel so well rested. Do we know anything about the assassin?”

“According to Jyrki, he’s part of the Assassination Alliance and likely isn’t directly affiliated with Felmafia.”

“He was just a hired killer?”

“Yes. Not only that, but apparently, murder wasn’t his only goal. Doling out

warnings also falls in the Assassination Alliance's wheelhouse. The poison on the knife wasn't lethal. Though it would cause a high fever, the afflicted would survive if they got some proper treatment."

"How's Circie?"

"The vice captain told her to stay indoors as much as possible and to have around-the-clock security. It wouldn't do for our client to die. We wouldn't get any money, after all."

"That's amazing, Marx." Asura clapped. "Excellent. I'm so proud of you all."

"As I recall, you ordered us to do our best."

"Yeah, that's right. In any case, you did good. Everything up to this point has been perfect."

"I agree. So then, how should we proceed from here?"

Marx turned to face the door. Salume and Reko stopped their push-ups and climbed onto Asura's bed. Then they huddled down behind her as if trying to hide.

"Don't do anything. I'm sure he'll come in on his own. Tsk, he gives off fighting spirit like it's the only thing he knows how to do. Didn't he ever learn how to enter a room like a normal person?" Asura complained.

The fighting spirit was so powerful that even Salume and Reko could sense it. To fully utilize one's strength, one needed to spread fighting spirit through their body. People who became heroes had to first learn how to control their fighting spirit. It wasn't a secret technique or anything, so those with talent could do it without any prior training.

The fighting spirit was emanating from a place just outside the room. The door slowly pushed open and the Great Hero, Axel Ehrnrooth, entered.

"Sorry for the disturbance, little missy."

"Control your fighting spirit, Axel. It's too aggressive. I know how it works so it doesn't scare me, but my little ones are freaked out."

"Sorry 'bout that. Can't seem to control it around you." Axel raised his left arm. Everything past his wrist was gone, and it was still wrapped up in

bandages.

“I see. Whatever. Just put your fighting spirit away.”

“Humph. I’m looking forward to the day I get to punch you with a fistful of it.” Even as he said that, Axel relaxed and the air around him settled.

“I hope that my young body will be able to handle your full strength,” Asura said, holding her arms in the air. When Axel punched Asura back in the audience chamber, he hadn’t been using his fighting spirit. He’d only used it in the beginning as an intimidation tactic. “That reminds me. Hurry up and get yourself a prosthetic. I’m sure there’s a cool one out there.”

“Yeah, I’ve already commissioned one. More importantly, there’s something I wanna talk to you about.” Axel looked around the room. “Well, let’s wait till everyone else arrives.” After he said that, he sat down on the ground with a grunt. “Hey, little missy, you sleep in the nude? Same here.”

“Thanks for that unnecessary bit of trivia,” Asura said. “I’m only naked because I was running a fever. I normally sleep in a shirt and underwear.”

Part Three, Chapter Three: The past is the past. It's behind me, but I still despair upon remembering it.

"How am I supposed to react when I return to my lovely home, only to be greeted by a bear sitting on my couch?"

"Jyr...we can just kill a bear...so I'd prefer that scenario..."

"Why are you hanging around like you're a friend of ours? Can you explain to me why you're all just having a lovely spot of tea?"

As soon as they returned to the inn, Jyrki, Iina, and Lumia let their thoughts on the intruder be known.

"Oh, c'mon, don't be so mean to me," Axel laughed. "That little lady there was the one to pour the tea."

"Oh! Um... He's a Great Hero, after all... I thought I'd offer something to drink...um, so as not to be rude..." Salume explained, trembling the whole time.

"Humph. I was the one who told her to serve some tea. You don't have to be so on edge, Salume," Asura sighed, spreading her arms to the side. She had already put on her clothes and was sitting upright on the bed. Reko was next to her, and Marx was standing with his back against the wall.

"Now then, Sir Axel, what are you doing here?" Lumia asked as she sat down in a chair. Iina and Jyrki remained on their feet.

"Right. I heard that you guys are gonna take down a criminal organization, see. Well, before you do that, I want you to capture the brass, get some intel from them, and then tell me about it. Whaddaya say?"

"And why, pray tell, is a Great Hero interested in a criminal organization?"

"You're sounding pretty prickly over there, lady."

"Hmm, I wonder why? Perhaps it's because you beat Asura half to death, Sir Axel."

“I apologized and we’re even, thanks to what you did to my left hand, aren’t we?”

“That’s right,” Asura butted in. “Let it go, Lumia. So, why *are* you interested? I’m surprised you already know about this.”

“I’ll always, forever and ever, be keeping an eye on your actions. But that doesn’t matter right now,” Axel said. “Opinions on whether that group is a threat to humankind are split within the hero community.”

“I see.” Lumia nodded. “I’m guessing a youth said something about how a giant criminal organization causes nothing but harm to humankind?”

“How’d you know that it was a youth who said it, lady?”

“Talk like that is reserved for the young, isn’t it? I’m guessing they’re a new hero, with a strong sense of justice, whose path never veered from the straight and narrow?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Axel sighed. “And since we’re dealing with humans, some heroes don’t agree with that statement. But...have you heard the rumors?”

“Rumors? What kind?” asked Asura.

“So the guy heading the organization is called God, yeah? And some people are saying that it’s a pseudonym for Jeanne Autun Lala. We decided that we would do something *only* if those rumors are true.”

“Oh? Jeanne Autun Lala, you say?” Asura smirked. “That’s amazing. If I recall, she’s the youngest person to become a hero, as well as the strongest hero to lose her title. Am I correct?”

“Someone broke Jeanne’s record for the youngest hero a while back.”

“Is that so? That’s just how records are, I suppose. Does this mean that you heroes are still searching for Jeanne even a decade later?”

“Well, of course. These days, she’s a blemish on our history. That’s how most people view her, right?”

“And are you saying that you’re different, Axel?”

“Humph, on the inside anyway.” Axel shrugged. “It ain’t just the heroes, by the way. Military police in countries all around the world are looking for her. She’s at the top of almost every wanted list. It’s about time for us to clean the slate, yeah?”

“‘Clean the slate,’ huh? Well, do whatever you want. We don’t have much to do with that. Our only job is to destroy the Felmafia’s base in Arnia. So we’ll give you any information we can get.”

“Thanks a bunch.” Axel grinned and spread his right arm out to the side.

“Great Hero Axel,” Marx said excitedly, “have you ever seen Jeanne? What did she look like?”

“Of course I’ve seen her. I was part of the same Demon Lord Expedition as her. She was pretty, with bright and shining eyes.” He turned his gaze to Lumia. “Let’s see... She probably would’ve looked a lot like that lady there if she’d been a bit older.”

“What an honor,” said Lumia.

“Well, one thing’s for sure, you ain’t Jeanne. You resemble her, but you lack Jeanne’s divinity—traits that made her seem like a god. Besides, she wouldn’t live a life as carefree as a mercenary’s after committing the Great Massacre. It’s way more believable for her to be heading a criminal organization.”

“Of course,” Lumia said and upon hearing that, Axel sighed.

“Listen to my stories for a little, Lumia Autun.”

Lumia’s expression twisted a little. Only Asura was able to recognize the confusion on her face. The other members of Moon Blossom widened their eyes, but only Marx remained unmoved. It was highly possible that he had already suspected her identity.

“I still don’t believe that Jeanne killed the king and second prince of her own country,” Axel said. It was for that crime that Jeanne had received a death sentence, and what’s more lost her title as a hero. “This is just my guess, but Jeanne probably got wrapped up in the royal family’s power struggle. And more than that, I suspect that the heroes had something to do with it too.”

“That’s an interesting hypothesis.” Asura laughed. “Not the part about the power struggle. The part about the heroes.”

“I even wrote a petition, you know? I asked them to reconsider Jeanne’s death penalty. I may be a Great Hero, but I’m just one of six. Central Felsenmark’s Great Hero was the one who approved Jeanne’s sentence, so I couldn’t save her.”

“Sir Axel, you submitted a written petition?” Lumia asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. Part of Jeanne’s punishment was public torture, remember? I didn’t see it for myself, but just hearing about it disgusted me. She was just eighteen years old. But they stripped her and dragged her around the town for the people to throw rocks at. Then they whipped her until she lost consciousness. The people from Central Felsen were always a nasty bunch, but what they did made me sick.”

“We have something in common. I also hate the people in Central.”

“But even after all she went through, Jeanne never raised her voice. I heard that she never even once looked down and away from the crowd. If that’s true, then just how strong was she?”

“Who knows? Perhaps she simply stopped caring.” There was a slightly sad look on Lumia’s face when she said that.

“Maybe. But even so, would someone like Jeanne suddenly use Divine Retribution when the time for her execution came? I wasn’t there for it, but when I went by later, the place was a field of corpses. It’s impossible to kill that many people at once without the use of Divine Retribution.”

“Divine Retribution is the ultimate attack spell, though it’s distinct from other forms of magic,” Marx said. “It’s the reason why Jeanne was the strongest, wasn’t it?”

“What kind of spell was it?” Reko asked.

“It manifested an angel of death, which has the same combat strength as a hero. Jeanne was able to create three angels at once,” explained Marx, the resident Jeanne fan. “That means that, albeit temporarily, she could fight with the power of four heroes despite being a single person.”

Reko hummed. It was hilarious to Asura to see his reaction, since he'd already seen Divine Retribution with his own two eyes. Reko realized this too. He stared at Lumia, who placed her index finger to her smiling lips. "It's a secret," she mouthed. Jyrki noticed their silent interaction, but didn't seem to understand.

"I heard about this later, but they'd captured Jeanne's little sister too," Axel continued. "They suspected her of being in on it. This is just a guess, but maybe Jeanne was trying to protect her. And then during the execution..."

"She either learned that the person she wanted to protect was already dead, or was led to believe that. Does that sound about right?" Asura asked, moving her arms minutely.

"Something like that, yeah." Axel huffed. "Jeanne overshadowed her, but I heard that the little sister was a warrior mage just like she was. I don't know much about magic, but I heard that the sister used the light element and still didn't have a Fixed Element."

"Jeanne's little sister, Lumia Autun," Marx said as if he were lecturing a class. "Lala was the title given to the head of the house, so the younger sister couldn't call herself that. Well, the moment that Jeanne received a guilty verdict, she'd lost her Lala title. But even now, people refer to her as Jeanne Autun Lala."

"I guess I just wanna say sorry. Sorry I couldn't save your big sis Jeanne," Axel said, staring at Lumia. Everyone else looked at her as well.

"I'm not Lumia Autun," she said with a sad smile. "Even if I am, there's no need for you to apologize, is there?"

"I see." Axel stood up. "Name, appearance, strength... Everything about you matches what I know about her. But if you say you aren't Jeanne's sister, then I guess I was wrong." He shoved his hand into his pocket and then threw a wad of cash at Asura.

"What's this?" she asked.

"I'm hiring you for a job. I'll have one of our young'uns monitor you. He's a Great Hero candidate who can match me blow for blow in a match. But he's much too happy-go-lucky, so train him up for me, will ya?"

"Happy-go-lucky?"

“Yeah. He believes in the inherent goodness of humanity and doesn’t have any real combat experience. Doesn’t think that an opponent will attack him until someone gives the signal to start...”

“Isn’t that true for all heroes?” Asura pointed out. “Not about their belief in goodness or their combat experience, but in the fact that they never think they’d get attacked.”

“I...guess. They don’t believe that they’d be killed by humans, yeah. I was the same until I met all of you.”

“I can tell. Have you all come up with a countermeasure against assassinations? I do think that, hero or not, unless you squirrel yourself away in an underground bunker, the threat of death is always hiding around the corner though.”

“Huh? What the hell’s a buhn-ker?”

“I meant to say...unless you squirrel yourself away in a sturdy underground room. If you don’t want to be killed, then you have no other choice but to live your life without interacting with anyone or involving yourself in anything.”

“As if that’s possible. Even heroes have their own routines, or lives, I should say.” Axel twisted his face. “It’s too late to add a rule to stop heroes from joining organizations of their choice. We can’t ban them from starting a family or force them to abandon their country.”

“Then the possibility of being killed still remains.”

“And things worked out perfectly fine until now, dammit!”

“So *all* of you were just a naive and idealistic bunch. Don’t worry, though. I’ll teach that future Great Hero candidate of yours just how cruel reality can be.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Knowing that shitstains like you and your group exist in this world is already a valuable lesson. By the way, this candidate is the one who broke Jeanne’s record for being the youngest hero.”

After waving at them with his right hand, Axel left the room.

“Training a hero sounds like an interesting job. And wow, he gave us fifty thousand dora. Let’s party after we take care of our business.” Asura grinned as

she shook the wad of cash at the group.

“Niiice. But a hero’s already strong, yeah? What’s to train? You mean making them mentally stronger?”

“That’s probably it,” Lumia said, answering Jyrki’s question. “More often than not, heroes already have some real combat experience and have killed people by the time they earn their title. They’re aware of the realities of the world. But it sounds like this one is missing that.”

“U-Um...before we move on, may I ask a question?”

“No, Salume.” Lumia shook her head. “I said that I don’t want to talk about it yet.”

“Y-You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Everyone was curious about Lumia. In Asura’s opinion, the time was more than ripe for Lumia to reveal her secrets. Axel had already touched on a large portion of them.

“Now then,” she said, “let’s return to the main topic. What information do you have for me?”

“Right,” Jyrki nodded. “We pretended that we wanted drugs, caught the seller, and made him croak a buncha stuff.”

“There’s a local criminal group...aside from the Felmafia...in this country...” Iina said.

“They’ve already finished fighting over turf though. The lines have been clearly drawn and since neither side wants a war, it seems like they’re all peacefully doing their business in their respective territories,” Lumia explained.

“So, we went to the Felmafia’s turf, grabbed *their* seller, and made *him* croak a buncha stuff.”

“He didn’t know Little God...or their hideout...”

“It seems like the underlings don’t know anything about all of that. But the seller’s boss is the manager of an underground casino and he told us where it is.”

“Good,” Asura said with a clap of her hands. “What did you do with the sellers?”

“We killed ’em and then hid their bodies.”

“We thought...it would be best if we remained...a secret...”

“Excellent work,” Asura nodded. “There’s no time like the present. Let’s pay that casino a visit. Grab your equipment and then assemble in front of the inn in ten minutes. Salume and Reko, you two still do not have permission to wield any weapons. Now, move out.”

***

“Now!”

At Iina’s signal, Marx kicked down the door and stormed into the casino. Jyrki and Lumia followed him, with Iina bringing up the rear. Asura strolled in casually, hiding Salume and Reko behind her back. All of the men in the passage had already been killed. Since they were all likely members of the Felmafia, Asura didn’t care.

“Jyr! I said...no magic!”

“Huh? Didn’t you say ‘use magic’?”

“No! Marx...hurry! Extinguish the fire!”

Jyrki had roasted someone to a crisp with Fireball. Smoke filled the air along with a terrible stench. Marx used a water attack spell to put out the flames before they started burning down the building.

“Vice Captain! Kill them...properly!” Iina dealt the last blow to an enemy that Lumia had left incapacitated but alive.

“Asura didn’t order us to kill everyone, did she?”

“Do it...even if it wasn’t the order! Everyone here...except their boss...can die!”

“Then say that from the beginning, won’t you?” Lumia sighed with a dramatic shrug.

“It’s kind of...a mess,” Salume murmured. “But no one on our side is hurt.”

“Iina sucks at being the leader,” Reko said. “Even so, this operation is going smoothly.”

“It’s because our enemies are weak. Iina doesn’t have any experience as a commander, so I’m having her practice on these losers,” Asura chuckled.

“By the way, how will we figure out which one of these people is the boss?” Salume asked.

“The last one standing would be their leader. They’re the manager, after all,” Asura explained. “Usually, the underlings are the ones who come at us first. Those in power would be behind them.”

“Like you right now, Boss?” Reko asked.

“I’ve always been the aggressive type, so I sometimes lead the charge. But if they’re the manager of an underground casino, they wouldn’t be at the front of the assault. It’s likely that they earned their position thanks to their smarts rather than their combat prowess.”

***

Marx cast Water Prison over the underground casino manager’s face and after watching him struggle for a few moments, he released the spell. The manager started to cough violently as soon as the water fell away.

“Good. Looks like you’ve cooled off,” Asura said with a cruel grin on her face. In her hands, she was holding a thick whip made specifically for torture. “Tell me Little God’s real name and the location of your hideout. If you do so, we’ll grant you an easy death.”

Asura was sitting in a chair, looking down at the manager. He was on the ground with his hands tied behind his back. They were conducting the interrogation in the casino’s staff room. She’d already sent all the other Felmafia members in the building to the afterlife. Granted, since she’d been supervising Ina’s leadership skills on this mission, Asura hadn’t raised a single finger.

“Do any of you...understand...what you’re doing?” the manager hissed. He was a man in his late thirties and it looked as though he’d received some physical training. Emphasis on “some.”

“Based on my past experience, torture isn’t really that effective,” Asura said, ignoring the manager’s words. “It doesn’t work at all on trained soldiers or people who strongly believe in their ideals. It’s just a waste of time. However, it’s *very* effective on half-assed scoundrels like yourself.”

She stood up and cracked the whip. The sound it made after slicing through the air was akin to an explosion. All Asura did was crack the whip against the floor, but it was more than enough to communicate its strength.

“This whip can rip off skin with a single hit. A normal person would wet themself after two hits and pass out after three. I heard that even the legendary Jeanne Autun Lala couldn’t withstand more than five hits,” she said excitedly. “An average person would die in about seven or eight. If you’re wondering about how it could kill someone, the cause of death is sheer pain. It hurts so bad, you’d literally be better off dead. I can withstand about ten strikes, by the way. It would just knock me out and not kill me though.”

“In other words, it’s a weapon so crazy that even the boss’ll pass out after bein’ hit ten times.”

“Jyr...you also withstood seven hits... I could only handle six...”

“I could take eight,” Marx said.

“At the most, I could handle twelve,” Lumia added.

“You really just needed to withstand five,” Asura said. “Unless it’s an execution, any more than that is far too dangerous. Now then, how many hits will you be able to handle?”

The manager’s face twisted in fear. Though Asura waited for a little bit, he remained silent. *Looks like I’m going to have to hit him once at the very least*, she thought.

“Wh-What in the world are you doing?!”

The group turned towards the door of the staff room, which they had left open. A girl with blonde hair tied up in pigtails was standing there. She looked around fifteen years old, with a pretty face and bright blue eyes.

“Oh? Are you the young hero that Axel mentioned?” Asura tilted her head to

the side.

Everyone except for Reko and Salume had sensed her presence, so no one was particularly surprised. The girl carried a sword upon her back, and wore an exquisitely made white blouse, which was decorated with frills and had a black ribbon tied at the collar. She had a black skirt that was just as fancy and, of course, had frills along the border. Its hem was just a little above her knees. Beneath the skirt, she wore knee-high socks with black-and-white stripes, completing the look with white boots. It was clear that everything she wore had been extremely expensive.

She glared at Asura and yelled, “You monsters!”

Part Three, Chapter Four: Give away your virginity. Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.

Iris Craven Lily felt as if she was bearing witness to hell. It was a massacre, so cruel that it didn’t look like something accomplished by humans. On Axel’s orders, she was observing Moon Blossom. She watched them enter the underground casino before it started operations for the day and, after a little bit, she followed them inside.

It felt as if she had wandered into a hellscape. Everyone was dead. Every step she took felt as if she were wading through a lake of blood, and everywhere she looked, she could see piles of corpses. The stench of death made her retch. No one could’ve killed this fast unless they’d intended to from the start.

It was difficult to believe that an inexperienced commander had created this landscape as part of a practice regimen. She’d only been slightly late and yet they’d managed to create such a terrible sight. They truly weren’t a normal bunch of mercenaries.

“Wh-What is this...”

It was the first time that she’d seen something so horrible. Iris had been born the daughter of a family of nobles, high enough in the hierarchy that they had their own piece of land. She’d grown up in a kind and gentle world. The sight of the blood and bodies before her was so tragic, she felt tears prickle behind her eyes.

She’d only just turned fifteen the other day. Those years had been peaceful, so she was sorely lacking in life experience.

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“What in the world do you think you’re doing?! You killed all of them as soon as you entered, didn’t you?! Why would you do that?! It’s far too cruel to rob them of the chance for rehabilitation just because they’re criminals!” The girl was absolutely furious.

“What’s your name? I’m sure you know already, but I’m Asura Lyona.”

“I’m Iris Craven Lily, the hero assigned to monitor you. What are you going to do to him?”

“I’m going to torture him for information and then kill him,” Asura replied calmly.

“Why are you the ones who’ll judge him for his sins?! That’s what the military police are for! And it’s crazy to execute everyone!” Iris looked as if she was seconds away from attacking them. She reminded Asura of a particularly yappy dog.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said. “But we’re doing work on behalf of the military police. This is what they want.”

“You’re lying! There’s no way the military police would order a massacre!”

“Hmm.” Asura thought for a second before she said, “In any case, could I request that you remove that sword from your back and place it on the ground, Iris? Make sure you keep it in the sheath.”

“Huh?”

“You’re a hero, aren’t you? It’s terrifying to have you in the same room as us while you’re armed. It feels like you’re trying to threaten us. Picture the scene in your head. It looks less like you’re trying to negotiate and more like you’re trying to force us to obey. Don’t you agree?”

“I...do.”

Iris obediently removed her belt, which bore the sheath and the sword in it, and placed it upon the ground. In Asura’s opinion, all heroes had a happy-go-lucky mindset, but Iris was a step above the rest. She was way too happy and way too lucky. The mercenaries of Moon Blossom looked like they couldn’t believe their eyes either, and Asura huffed out a small laugh at their expressions.

“Now then,” Iris said, “listen to me.”

“Wait,” Asura said. “It’s still threatening. You’re a hero, so turn your back to us. It’s hard to relax unless you give us a handicap as severe as that.”

“Will this do?” Iris truly chose to obey Asura and turn her back to her.

She was completely defenseless. This was the action of someone who didn’t think that they’d be attacked. But how could anyone believe that in this situation? A normal hero—no, a normal human—would never think to turn around under such circumstances.

Marx’s mouth hung open and Lumia’s expression was twisted in shock. Iina silently mouthed, “She’s an idiot,” while Jyrki scratched his head, doing his best to understand Iris’s actions. Reko and Salume remained silent as they observed the proceedings. The manager looked as though he was completely lost as to what was happening.

“Good. You’re a very nice and obedient girl.” Asura smiled, and then she snapped the whip through the air.

The leather slashed from Iris’s back to her bum, ripping through both cloth and skin. A second after the resounding *snap*, Iris screamed. She fell, crying out in pain, and writhed upon the floor.

“But in certain situations, your obedience will work against you,” Asura continued, looking as though she was enjoying lecturing Iris. “Just like what happened right here. You really shouldn’t discard your weapon or reveal your back so easily.”

“Y-You call yourself a hero?! Asura, give me that!” An enraged Lumia grabbed the whip out of Asura’s hands and used it to hit Iris. Iris didn’t even scream. A yellow liquid leaked out from between her legs and her body jerked involuntarily after the strike. “You’re not aware of what it means to be a hero, are you?! Throwing away your weapons, turning your back on an enemy, and on top of that, not even dodging?! Do you think being a hero is a joke?!”

Lumia raised her hand to hit Iris a third time, but Asura quickly grabbed her arm. “Calm down. Our request was to train her, not abuse her. We obviously can’t kill her either. I understand how you feel, but stop. Our goal here is to teach Iris about how cruel and nasty reality is, as well as have her understand that she can be attacked at any time. We’re supposed to make her fit for a real battle, remember?” Asura said calmly. Upon hearing that, Lumia finally relaxed a little.

“Remember to not...get on the vice captain’s bad side...” Iina murmured to Reko and Salume. They nodded furiously in response. “I don’t get...why she was so mad though...” She tilted her head to the side, and once again, Reko and Salume nodded minutely.

“It must’ve been because of the sheer disrespect she had for what it means to be a hero. Even if Matias had been the one to turn his back, he would’ve dodged the first hit. In fact, he probably would’ve kept his hand on his weapon,” Marx spat. “Jyrki, tie up Iris just in case. There’s still some rope, isn’t there?”

They’d brought the rope along to tie up the manager, but there should’ve been an extra length of it.

“Yep!”

“Can’t a hero make rope go rip?” Reko asked.

“You mean like forcibly rip it apart and break through?” Asura asked in response. Reko nodded. “It’s not as if she’s Axel, so it’s fine. Heroes are humans, even if the people love to deify them.”

“Hmm...”

“I don’t think she’ll be able to move properly for a while anyway. Oh, but it’ll be annoying if she keeps interfering with our work so, Jyrki, stuff her mouth with a towel or something, all right?”

“Aye-aye.”

After seeing Jyrki approach Iris, Asura slowly took the whip out of Lumia’s hands and then turned to face the manager with a bright smile. “Now then, I’ve kept you waiting.”

“Pietro!!! Pietro Angelico!!!” the manager practically sobbed.

“What was that?”

“That’s Little God’s name! It’s Pietro Angelico! Please don’t hit me with that!!!” the manager explained, shrinking back and shuddering. He’d seen what that whip had reduced the hero Iris to.

As for Asura, she’d frozen, her face stiff and expressionless.

“Asura?” Lumia said, but her call fell on deaf ears.

“Pietro...Angelico?” Asura murmured, the words slipping from her mouth unconsciously. Upon hearing herself speak the name, a terrible pain flashed through her head. It was so strong that she almost fell to the floor.

Lumia supported her from the side. “What’s the matter, Asura? Are you all right?”

“Sorry. Take over for me. Get him to spill the location of their headquarters.”

“Roger that. Go rest up.”

Asura once again handed the whip to Lumia and then sat down in a nearby chair. “Marx, can you give me some water?”

“Of course.” He cast Water Prison close to Asura’s face. She scooped some of the liquid out and swallowed it down from her hands. “Are you all right, Boss? Are you still affected by the poison?”

“No, I’m not. That’s not it.” Asura scooped out some more water, and this time she splashed it on her face. She couldn’t calm down. Her childhood memories...or rather, the memories of when Asura still hadn’t remembered who she was...left her shaken.

“I’m done,” Lumia said.

“That was fast,” Asura said after she collected herself.

“He spilled almost everything he knew,” Lumia replied with a light shrug.

“Boss, shouldn’t we heal up her back for her?” Jyrki asked from the ground as he tied up Iris’s arms and legs. She was still crying from the immense pain of the injuries.

“Right. Lumia and Marx, you two handle it.”

“I don’t want to,” Lumia said. “Let her suffer and repent for a while.”

“I can understand you’re furious at how naive she is, but this is an order, Lumia. Heal her.”

“If it’s an order...then fine. But I’ll take my time with it.”

“Yeah, I figured. Take as much time as you want.”

Asura stood up and slowly walked towards the manager of the casino. She turned to face Salume and Reko, and then gestured for them to approach her, so they did. Marx cast Bandage to cover Iris's wounds while Lumia activated her healing magic. Iina looked at Iris, then at the manager, and then she ambled towards Asura. Jyrki was staring at Iris with clear worry on his face.

"This is my final question," Asura said to the manager. "Was Pietro Angelico a soldier in the past?"

"Y-Yes, that's right! He often bragged about the Great Massacre and how he pillaged a rural village under the guise of searching for Jeanne!"

"I see. You know, that rural village was a nice and peaceful one. I suppose he didn't mention anything about how his army was almost destroyed, did he? I bet he didn't." Asura smiled, looking like a normal girl. "Reko, lose your virginity to him." As she gave the order, she pressed a dagger into Reko's hands.

"My virginity? I'm a guy, you know?" Reko said confusedly.

"I-I think she's talking about your butt..." Salume said, a furious blush on her face.

"Idiots..." Iina sighed. "To lose your virginity...means to kill someone for the first time..."

"That's right. It's still too early for you, Salume, so you can watch. Make sure you don't avert your gaze. If I see you look away, I'll hit you with that whip. Got it?"

"Y-Yes." Salume nodded fervently.

"W-W-W-W-W-Wait! Please spare my life! Didn't I tell you everything I knew?!" the manager screamed, crawling backwards on the floor.

"Iina, hurt him a little so it'll be easier for Reko to finish the job."

"All right..." With a very happy look on her face, Iina began to dole out violence upon the manager.

From her place on the ground, Iris was screaming something at them. But none of her words were intelligible through the towel Jyrki had stuffed in her mouth.

“I’m still healing you, so don’t move,” Lumia said as she smacked Iris on the head.

“That’s enough, Iina,” Asura ordered. “Sit him in that chair.”

“All right...” Iina forcefully dragged the manager to his feet and then sat him down in a nearby chair. He had gone limp, so Iina held him up from behind.

“Reko, make sure you hold your dagger on its side,” Asura said kindly.

“Yes, Boss,” Reko said with a nod, following Asura’s orders and adjusting his grip on the dagger.

“Stab it into his chest and slide the blade in between the ribs. That’s why you have to hold it at a sideways angle. Do you understand?” Asura’s voice was gentle, much like that of an older sister mentoring her little brother. She’d remembered that she was supposed to have had a younger sibling.

“If I stab it in vertically, the blade will grind against the rib and it won’t be a fatal wound?” Reko asked.

“There’s a chance that could happen, yes. Now go ahead, Reko. There’s a good boy.”

“Yes, Boss.”

***

When Iina let go of the manager’s body, he slid off the chair and onto the ground.

“Wow, Reko,” Jyrki said. “Virgins usually freak out their first time.”

“I was impressed as well.” Marx nodded. “I didn’t see any hint of hesitation from him.”

“Same...” Iina said. “Normally...it’s scary...”

“I’ll explain for the benefit of everyone here,” Asura said. “Reko’s mind is broken.”

“Broken?” Jyrki echoed.

“Like me, he’s not able to feel much empathy towards other people, so he doesn’t feel much or any guilt about killing them. Well, in Reko’s case, I don’t

think he feels anything at all.”

It looked like Reko interpreted Asura’s words as praise, because he puffed out his chest.

“Hmm...” Iina stared at him.

“If you want to be technical about it, Reko and I aren’t completely the same,” Asura continued. “I was always like this, whereas Reko was a normal kid when he was born. But I suppose the best way to describe it is that he broke due to external factors. In Reko’s case, it’s from the shock of seeing an intermediate-tier monster kill his entire family.”

“My heart is broken. So heal me, Boss,” Reko joked, latching onto Asura’s arm.

“There, there. Good boy, Reko.”

Asura casually reached out and ran her fingers through Reko’s hair as if it was completely normal, and everyone—including Reko and Asura herself—froze in shock. *What am I doing? Reko isn’t your brother, Asura Lyona*, she scolded herself. Hearing Pietro’s name earlier had revived memories and emotions of Asura’s peaceful life in her village before she regained her memories of her past self.

“W-Well, Boss, it’s time to go! We don’t need to be here anymore, yeah?” Jyrki exclaimed, and Asura nodded.

“Sorry, Marx, but could you carry Iris? Once we get back to the inn, I want you to continue healing her, Lumia. Salume and Reko, go to the nearest military police office and report what happened here. We’ll attack the Felmafia’s base tomorrow, so I want Jyrki and Iina to scout things out first. Once you all finish your tasks, then you can take the rest of the day off. Now, go.”

***

Once the group returned to the inn, Asura removed the towel that was gagging Iris. As soon as she did, Iris started whining loudly, so Asura stuffed the towel back in her mouth.

“I’m not going to eat you or anything, so calm down,” Asura sighed. Aside

from her and Iris, Marx and Lumia were also in Asura's room. Marx had stayed after carrying Iris in and Lumia was here as the healer. Iris lay on Asura's bed, placed there by Marx. "Lumia, heal her," Asura ordered.

"I don't want to, but I will." Lumia sat on the mattress and began to cast her magic over Iris's wounds.

"What do you want me to do, Boss?" Marx asked.

"You can either rest up or stay here to chat with me. Which will it be?"

"I'll stay." With that, Marx settled against the wall.

"If you promise to keep quiet, I'll take that out," Asura offered to Iris.

She nodded so Lumia removed the towel from her mouth. As soon as she did, Iris started her lecture, though at a significantly lower volume than before.

"You monsters! How despicable of you, to let a child kill that man. *You* are the ones who are the criminals. *You* are the ones who should be arrested."

"And *you* have absolutely no right to call yourself a hero," Lumia said.

"Huh? I passed the Hero Selection Exam, so of course I have the right. I won all of my matches fair and square, without taking even a single hit. Everyone praised me! They said I was even better than Jeanne was."

"By the time Jeanne was your age, she'd already been on the battlefield and accumulated real combat experience."

"Humph! By the way, isn't Jeanne a blemish on the heroes' reputation? I wish they would stop comparing me to her." Iris turned her face away with an irritated huff.

"You were the one who brought her up," Lumia said exasperatedly.

"That reminds me. What's wrong with you people? How can you just attack me out of nowhere when I'm a hero? It's absolutely inconceivable."

"Didn't Axel tell you anything?" Asura asked. "We're suspects for the murder of Matias and we don't give a damn about killing heroes."

"I...did hear about that. But until I saw your crimes with my own eyes, I didn't think that you would be this cruel."

“Then you really are an idiot,” Lumia sighed with a shake of her head.

“I’m *not* an idiot! *You* are! Murderers! Criminals! You horrible monsters!”

“Shut up!”

Lumia smacked her hand against Iris’s back, which was still injured from her whipping. Even if Marx had used his Bandage on the wounds, the pain shouldn’t have faded just yet. As expected, Iris screamed in response.

“Do me a favor and stay quiet,” Asura sighed. “You’re going to bother the other customers.”

Not only was Iris a happy-go-lucky idiot, but she also had a fairly troublesome personality.

Part Three, Chapter Five: Does someone with divinity really exist? I don't even believe in God.

When Asura woke up the next morning, Reko and Salume were in her bed. She thought about this for a moment before she remembered why they were there. She'd taught them how to recognize the flow of MP within their bodies, and then they fell asleep together afterward.

She hopped out of bed and saw Iris on the ground. Though she remained tied up, she was snoring away as though she didn't have a care in the world. Her clothes were still ripped up from the whip, but the wounds had closed up. The faint scars would eventually fade in time. If Marx and Lumia hadn't healed her, the grievous injuries would've left permanent scars on her skin.

"Looks like she's pretty thick-skinned," Asura murmured to herself upon seeing Iris mumble something in her sleep. Iris's sword was a short distance away from Iris herself, so Asura picked up the weapon and unsheathed it. "Oh? It's a single-edged sword."

It must have been something Iris used as a precautionary measure so she didn't kill anybody. She could simply knock someone out with the back of it to neutralize them. Asura stared at the sword for a little while before sheathing it.

"Now, then." She approached the bed where Salume and Reko were still asleep. "Wake up, you brats! It's time to wash your faces and eat some breakfast!" she yelled.

The first person to jump awake at Asura's shout was Iris. "Ah, I want breakfast!" She looked around the room, and that was when she remembered that she was tied up. Judging by her glaring at Asura, she also seemed to recall where she was and the situation she was currently in.

"Yeah, we've prepared some food for you as well. I'll untie you, so don't do anything rash. If you try to attack us, I'll give you another whipping."

***

Half an hour after breakfast, the members of Moon Blossom assembled in front of the inn. They were completely decked out in their usual black robes, with daggers hanging from their belts.

Marx and Lumia were the only ones carrying swords on their backs. Marx had a run-of-the-mill single-handed sword whereas Lumia had a large claymore. Jyrki had a hatchet on his belt, a quiver on his back, and a bow in his right hand. Iina carried both a bow and a quiver. Salume and Reko were unarmed because Asura hadn't taught them how to use a weapon yet. However, they both had quivers on their backs, with extra arrows meant for the others to use.

"Are you going to go massacre even more people?" Iris asked irritably. She wasn't tied up anymore and could move on her own. However, Asura had threatened to whip her if she got in the way of their work, so she should be a lot more passive this time.

"That's the plan. Just to remind you, we're honestly here because the military police hired us for a job. All of our killings are legally sanctioned. Think of it as a license to kill." The term reminded her of the spy movies from her past and she laughed a little at that.

"The Arnian military police are...full of pigs..."

"Aren't the people selling drugs worse than them?" Lumia asked, annoyed, when she heard Iris's mutter.

"That's right." Asura nodded. "This is one of the rare occasions where we're acting on the side of justice. Oh? 'On the side of justice'... It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't suit you at all, Boss," Marx said with a laugh.

"If anythin', you'd be on the opposite side from justice," Jyrki agreed.

"The biggest villain in history..." Iina nodded.

"Even the worst villain...has the chance to be rehabilitated..."

"Oh? Were those words directed at me, Iris?" Asura shrugged. "Unfortunately, I have no interest in rehabilitation. This is who I am."

"So you don't plan on ever turning over a new leaf?" Iris asked, tilting her

head to the side.

“Does she *look* like she wants to?” Jyrki retorted with a pat on Iris’s head.

“Don’t treat me like a child.” Iris shrugged him off.

“Now then, everyone, let’s keep our wits about us. Our opponents are criminals, after all. They may be weaker than soldiers, but unlike the military, they’ll do anything they can to survive. Things like honor are worth less than shit to them, ha ha.”

The other members of Moon Blossom laughed after Asura did. That was when several members of the Arnian military police ran up to Asura.

“Moon Blossom! Stop the operation!” one of them said breathlessly.

“I’m so glad we made it in time...” another one said, equally out of breath.

“Did something happen?” Asura asked. “Ahh, I suppose it’s not anything good.”

“Commandant Circie was abducted last night. What they want in return is you, Moon Blossom.”

“Didn’t I tell the military police to guard her around the clock?” Lumia asked accusingly as she glared at them.

“Our enemies hired the Assassination Alliance to kill all the guards before abducting the commandant,” yet another military police member explained.

Their numbers kept growing and it was not long before Asura and the others found themselves surrounded.

“I see. So, are you going to hand us over to them?” Asura asked.

“I’m...truly sorry, but...” a member of the military police said with an awkward expression.

Yeah, I’m not surprised that they feel awkward about this, Asura thought. “We don’t mind if you do, but haven’t you considered that Circie’s already dead? Most organizations move under the assumption that the hostage has been killed, but that’s not what you’re doing, is it?”

While Asura was talking, Lumia turned on her heel and walked away a few

steps.

“‘Considered that Circie’s already dead’? How can you say such a thing?! How would you feel if it were one of *your* friends who’d been kidnapped?!” Iris demanded.

“If it were one of my friends, I would obviously move under the assumption that they’d already been killed. That’s what everyone else would do.” At Asura’s words, the rest of Moon Blossom nodded.

“Um, anyway...” a member of the military police said apologetically. “We wish to save Commandant Circie. So...”

“So you plan on sacrificin’ us? Why us anyway? They know that we messed up their casino or somethin’?”

“Jyrki, you idiot,” Asura said. “It’s obviously because Circie wasn’t able to last a single night and spilled everything.”

“Ah, that makes sense. She was kidnapped, right,” Jyrki guffawed.

“It’s all right. Let’s go with them peacefully. And why not throw them a bone while we’re at it? We’ll even make plans under the assumption that Circie is still alive!”

“Well, there’s no reason to let ourselves be captured unless we go that far,” Marx said agreeably. “If our client is dead, then we have no reason to be here. In that case, we could simply defeat all of them and escape.”

“And that’s that, my military police friends. We’ll allow ourselves to be captured. Drop your weapons, everyone. We will be handed over to the Felmafia in exchange for Circie’s safe return. We’ll massacre them after that. Ultimately, there’s no change to our plans.”

“I’m sorry, Asura,” Lumia said. “I’m going to go ahead.” She took a running start and then leaped towards the military police.

“Hey, Lumia, we’re in the middle of a mission.”

“I have another plan! If you don’t like it, then you can punish me for it later!” Lumia leaped onto a military police member’s shoulder and, using them like stepping stones, she broke free from the encirclement.

“Huh? How did she move like that? I didn’t expect her to be so fleet-footed... That took me by surprise,” Iris said, her eyes wide with amazement. “Just who *is* she?”

“She’s our vice captain,” Asura replied.

“Yay!” Iina held up her fists in a victory pose. “The vice captain...disobeyed an order... Hee hee... Boss is gonna punish her... Hee hee... Heh heh heh...”

“Oh dear. I apologize, my military police friends. My vice captain has run off. But it shouldn’t be a problem, right? The rest of us will allow ourselves to be captured so I hope you’ll let her go,” Asura said as she held up her hands in surrender.

“Oof, is the vice cap’n for real? I don’t wanna punish her... She’s so hot that it’s kinda hard to go for it...”

“I agree. She remains alluring no matter what’s done to her. It’s enough to make me waver on my vow of chastity.”

“You two are real freaks.” Though Asura laughed at them, she had to agree that the sight of Lumia hurt and in pain was quite stimulating. Her sexy looks made it hard to remain calm when she looked up at you with her teary eyes.

“Can I punish the vice captain too?”

“Of course you can, Reko. We’re all in this together. Normally, we punish our own by beating them up together. But if you have a suggestion, we can take it into consideration. To tell the truth, punching isn’t that effective anymore since everyone’s already received training to withstand torture.”

Lumia was probably waiting for her chance as soon as the military police surrounded us—her chance to put one over on me.

***

Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom had been completely stripped of their equipment and were gathered in the Nielta branch of the Arnian military police. Since she was a hero and not part of Moon Blossom, Iris wasn’t with them.

“I didn’t expect them to put us in jail,” Marx sighed. “How can they not see that we have no intention of escaping?”

“Oh, don’t say that, Marx. Jail isn’t so bad. Just enjoy the situation.” As she said that, Asura sat down on one of the simple beds.

“Now then, Moon Blossom, I shall take over from here.”

A man was standing in front of their jail cell. He had completely hidden away his presence, and not even Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom had noticed his approach. He wasn’t very tall, and he was wearing black clothing, complete with a piece of black cloth to hide his face.

“Hello there,” Asura said. “Who are you?”

“I’m a member of the Assassination Alliance. We shall act as the proxy to guarantee smooth negotiations between both parties.”

“D’you know how lame you sound?” Jyrki sneered. “The feared Assassination Alliance reduced to acting as middlemen for deals? What happened to killin’ people, huh?”

“None of you understand. None of you have ever beheld how terrifying she is, or have witnessed her divinity, her beauty, or her strength.” The assassin spoke as if he was deep in the throes of rapture.

“Ha, I see,” Asura said. “God defanged you, didn’t she? I assume she’s operating under the identity of Jeanne Autun Lala? That’s why you’re cleaning up after Felmafia’s shit. Am I wrong?”

“Defanged? That barely even scratches the surface. We sent multiple assassins to kill her, but none of them ever returned. On top of that, several of our operatives were so affected by her divinity that they decided to join her side. We pursued her for years before we finally decided to give up.”

“You gave up?!” Jyrki exclaimed, mouth agape.

“After that, *she* came to us and presented us with two choices: death or obedience. Only one thought entered my mind when I saw her divinity with my own two eyes. I wanted her to step on me.”

“What?” Asura and the other members of Moon Blossom said in unison, unsure of how to react.

“I want her to punish me! I want her to call me a naughty boy! Those were

the desires that welled up from deep within me! She speaks on behalf of God and she acts on behalf of God! She is a human with the essence of the divine! She has divinity—no, she is God herself!" The assassin was getting more and more heated with every word. "I'm not the only one who thought that. Everyone else did as well. When we confessed our feelings to her, Mistress Jeanne looked a little troubled. She looked soooo cute! So cute and so holy! We're nothing more than Mistress Jeanne's slaves! I swore servitude within seconds of seeing her!!!"

"Hey, Jyrki," Asura whispered. "Is the Assassination Alliance a group of people who hang out and have weekly game nights or something?"

"Nah. People used to be pretty scared of 'em..."

"Jeanne is almost thirty years old. Shouldn't you describe her as 'beautiful' rather than 'cute'?" Marx, ever the Jeanne fan, asked solemnly.

"You idiot! Mistress Jeanne could be a hundred years old and she'd still be adorable! I know this for a fact! In any case, none of us saw Mistress Jeanne after that and we don't even know her current whereabouts. However! Everything we do is for Mistress Jeanne!"

"Okay, okay, I got it. So, what's going to happen next?" Asura asked.

"Hmm? I still haven't finished extolling Mistress Jeanne's virtues, but all right. I'm going to ask all of you to move to another location where we will exchange Commandant Circie for the members of Moon Blossom. After that, the members of the Felmafia will beat you all to a pulp. The end. Are there any questions?"

"Nope, not really. Get on with it."

***

Lumia was making her way through an underground tunnel. Thanks to the evenly spaced torches that were lit upon the walls, it wasn't dark at all. She was impressed that they'd managed to build something like this under the church. After walking for a little bit, she saw an extravagant door, guarded by two men.

"Who are you?!" one of them demanded as he unsheathed his sword. The other guard also readied his own weapon.

“I would like you to relay a message to Little God. Tell him that Jeanne Autun Lala has arrived,” Lumia said calmly.

“Huh? What the hell are you talking about, woman?! There’s no way Mistress Jeanne would ever show her face at a branch as shabby as this one. Hey, let’s drag her inside and have some fun with her!”

“Yeah! Now that I take a closer look at her, she’s hot. Little God will enjoy her.”

“Divine Retribution.” Without a moment’s hesitation, an angel of death descended from the heavens at Lumia’s command. The avatar of destruction had pure-white wings and skin so pale that it almost looked translucent, and wielded a giant sword in her hands. “I presume that you must recognize the angel of death.”

The two men were entranced by the angel’s beauty, but they immediately snapped back to attention.

“I s-sincerely apologize, Mistress Jeanne! Please forgive us! Please!!!”

“We never imagined that you would show up at a place such as this, Mistress Jeanne!!!”

The two men prostrated themselves onto the ground, grinding their foreheads into the floor of the tunnel as they begged for forgiveness.

“Hey, what’s going on out there? Why’s it so lo—” A man stuck his head out from behind the door and then froze. “Th-The angel of death? Don’t tell me... Mistress Jeanne?!”

“Is Pietro, the Little God, here?”

“Yeah... I mean, yes, that’s me, Mistress Jeanne!” the man from behind the door said. “Please come in, come in!” After he said that, he retreated back into the room. “Hey, prepare the finest tea that we have! Hurry up! Don’t forget snacks! Hurry the hell up! Do you want me to kill you?!” Then, the man opened the door completely.

Lumia smiled gently, and then she walked inside the Felmafia’s Arnian branch.

Part Three, Chapter Six: I'm a cat napping in the sun. You really have no reason to fear me.

Lumia sat down on an extravagant sofa. It was no overstatement to say that the owner of the room had spared no expense when it came to luxuries. She was surrounded by items and trinkets that were obviously of the highest quality, and the room was a lot more spacious than she'd imagined. She was impressed once again at how the Felmafia had been able to create such a vast hideout underneath the city.

"It looks like business is going well," she said.

"Yes, Mistress Jeanne. Thanks to you, our profits have been through the roof," Pietro replied as he sat down across from her.

He was in his late thirties with black hair. Nothing about him particularly stuck out. If one were to pass him on the street, they would never be able to imagine that he was a high-ranking criminal. He was of average height and build, and while not ugly, he wasn't handsome either. It was hard to judge his combat experience; he looked like he could put up quite the fight, but also looked like a pushover.

In between Lumia and Pietro, there was a table with intricate wood detailing. A member of the Felmafia set teacups upon it. Including Lumia and the two guards outside, there were a total of nine people in the room. Seven of them were members of the Felmafia. Aside from the two guards, everyone was likely from the upper brass.

The final person in the room was a good one. She'd been stripped of all her clothing and tossed to the floor. It was clear just from looking at her and her messy blue hair that she'd been through a terrible ordeal. She remained motionless, and it was hard to tell whether she was alive or not.

"Who is that?" Lumia asked, gesturing to the woman.

"That is the commandant of the military police," Pietro replied.

“Why is she here?”

“Ever since she took charge, the military police have been more aggressive in their attempts to root us out,” Pietro replied with a plastic smile affixed to his face. “We warned them several times to back off. But instead of listening to us, they actually went and raided our casino.”

“Raided?”

“Ah, my apologies. In truth, they destroyed it. It was a total massacre, but it didn’t look like something the military police would do. Well, we *did* see a bunch of military police officials at the scene. Like I said though, it was a massacre. The military police don’t do that now, do they? Even so, we had to hit them back. So we kidnapped her and asked if she knew anything about the actual culprits behind the hit. And you know what she said? She said that they hired *mercenaries*! Quite the hoot, isn’t it?”

Pietro explained everything in a cheery tone, and hearing him speak in that way set Lumia’s teeth on edge.

“Just what is so funny?” she asked.

Upon seeing the dangerous glint in her eyes, Pietro jumped back. “I...I’m sorry. Um...we’ll get revenge on those mercenaries too...”

“How?”

“Right. We’ve made the military police capture them in exchange for this woman’s safety. After that...”

“After that, you plan on ambushing them at the meeting spot and then killing them in one swoop?”

“I didn’t expect anything less from you, Mistress Jeanne. That’s exactly it. We’ve gathered all of our men for this, so I expect we’ll be able to deliver some good news to you very soon.”

“So I suppose there’s not much time left,” Lumia sighed.

Such a simple method—one that any civilian could conceive on their own—would never be enough to defeat Asura, nor would it destroy Moon Blossom.

“Time, you say?” Pietro asked.

“Yes. There’s not much time left...for you.” Lumia smiled.

The blood drained from Pietro’s face. “Mistress Jeanne! If this is about the casino, then I’ll make up for the losses immediately! Please give me another chance!”

Lumia ignored Pietro and took a sip from her tea. It was so good that she took another. Then she placed the cup back down.

“I hate trash. But I still believe that it’s best to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. I’m telling the truth here. So you better pray with all your might that Commandant Circie is still alive.”

“D-Did...we do something wrong?” Pietro looked down at Circie. “I don’t believe that she’s died yet...”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that,” Lumia said with a gentle smile. “Then let’s have a chat, Pietro. For starters, let me tell you something: I’m not your Mistress Jeanne.”

Pietro’s mouth fell open and his eyes widened at the revelation. “Huh? But...the angel of death...”

“I’m Lumia Canarre of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. I’m not Jeanne. Now that I’ve laid my cards on the table, there’s something that I’d like to ask you. I hope that you can provide me with an answer.”

“Wait, you piece of shit! Are you messing with me?! Moon Blossom was the group that destroyed our casino! Hey! Kill this bitch!” Pietro yelled, and at his command, the Felmafia members close to them drew their swords.

“Divine Retribution,” Lumia said calmly. In the next moment, an angel of death descended from the heavens and slaughtered all of the Felmafia members who had their weapons out. They dissolved into bits and pieces of meat and splattered onto the ground. In an instant, the room became a sea of blood. “All I said is that I’m not Jeanne. When did I ever say that my angel of death was an imitation? Listen, Pietro, I’m not interested in chatting with a corpse. You’ll talk, won’t you?”

Everyone froze in the face of such a horrendous sight, as if time itself had stopped.

“H-How...could this be?” Pietro asked. “Your...that’s...that’s the real angel of death... But if you’re not Mistress Jeanne, then seriously... Who are you?”

“I’ve already given you my name.” Lumia shrugged, and as if it was an unspoken command, the angel disappeared. “As for what I want to ask you, I’d like to know who your superior is. If you lie to me, I’ll kill you. If you hesitate to give me an answer, I’ll kill you.”

“God Hand...”

“The hand of God? What kind of position do they hold?”

“Little Gods like us are the captains of the Felmafia’s operations within a country. But God Hands are in charge of entire regions.”

“So there are three of them, then—one in the east, one in the west, and one in the central area?” Pietro nodded at Lumia’s question so she continued, “And what about *their* superior? Is that who Jeanne is?”

“No... The person coordinating the God Hands is the Blessed Child...”

“‘Blessed Child’? Tell me about them.”

“She’s a brat...who receives all of Mistress Jeanne’s favor and affections.”

“Give me more details, Pietro. Please don’t waste my time.”

“Damn, what the hell... The Blessed Child is a girl who looks fourteen, but she’s really seventeen, according to God Hand. I hear she’s almost always at Mistress Jeanne’s side. I’ve only seen her once, when she came to a meeting with the other God Hands. She’s a snotty-nosed redhead. I didn’t speak with her one-on-one. She had a cute voice, and despite how sassy she looked, she commended us on our hard work with a smile. Not me personally, of course, but the Little Gods as a whole.”

“She has red hair, and she looks younger than her actual age?”

“Tsk, her hair was about shoulder-length! And she always wears clothes that show off her navel! She’s got weird fashion sense! That’s all I know!”

“I see.” Nothing about the girl’s description seemed familiar to Lumia. *Her age doesn’t match anyway, so she probably has nothing to do with the Oathkeeper Brigade.*

Pietro let out a long breath as if to calm himself down. “Is that all you wanted to know?” he asked after he finished. “If you’re done, then can I ask you to get out of here? You can take Circie with you if you want.”

“I’m not done yet. Tell me God Hand’s name.”

“I only know the God Hand from the eastern region...”

“That’s fine. Tell me.”

“Miriam... I don’t know her last name.”

“Is she a tall woman with black hair? Looks to be around thirty years old?”

“How did you know that?” Pietro asked, eyes wide in surprise.

“It’s because Miriam used to be a member of the Oathkeeper Brigade.”

“You...are a member of the Oathkeepers? Then aren’t you one of Mistress Jeanne’s subordinates...?”

“I’m not. The only boss I answer to is Asura and Asura alone. Even if I used to be a member of the Oathkeeper Brigade, things have changed. But I’m sure you can understand why I’m interested. It’s not every day that you hear Jeanne’s name.” Lumia smiled, but there was something empty behind the expression. “I’d heard the rumors about Jeanne heading an underground organization. But I ignored them. At this point, everyone associates her name with her sins. It’s cursed. So wouldn’t you say it’s a fitting name for a criminal?”

“Are you saying that Mistress Jeanne is lying about her identity?”

“But the rumors have become more reputable with the knowledge that even the heroes suspect she’s the real deal and are looking for her. And now Miriam... Even if God isn’t really Jeanne, there’s a high chance that they’re still an associate of the Oathkeeper Brigade. We all went our separate ways, but every once in a while, I get curious as to what everyone is up to. If one of my old compatriots has sunk so low that they’ve turned to a life of crime, then that makes me very sad.”

That was why Lumia had come here before Asura could. It was so that she could gather the information that she was interested in. The only fate awaiting Pietro was death. Asura would definitely kill him, so if she was here, then Lumia

would have no time to talk to Pietro about any of this. The only way she could've heard about this was if she interrogated Pietro before Asura.

"Do you plan on...punishing your former allies?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. Perhaps I simply wanted to know their whereabouts."

"Let me tell you this," Pietro snarled as he glared at Lumia. "You're not one to talk. You're a mercenary who would do anything so long as you could get money from it, and you killed my men under the guise of Divine Retribution. You've sunk just as low as anyone from my organization."

"That's right." Lumia didn't plan on arguing that point. "I honestly don't like Divine Retribution very much. Asura seems to think I despise it, but I wouldn't go that far. I simply don't like it because when everyone sees my angel of death, they think of me as Jeanne, right? And it's so boring to use it. Whenever I cast it, everyone simply dies, so I try not to use it for normal jobs."

"You're *really* the worst one of them all, Little Miss Bloodthirsty Mercenary. No matter how pretty a yarn you spin, the Oathkeeper Brigade is nothing more than a collection of battle-hungry crazies. If you have nothing else you wanna ask me, then get out of my sight."

"That's right. I love to fight. I can't get enough of it. I didn't want to accept that part of myself, so I pretended it didn't exist, but Asura saw through me. She said that I was both adorable and repulsive for it, and she's absolutely correct."

"Hey! If you're just going to spout your narcissistic nonsense, then do it somewhere else!"

"When I set fire to those tents in the Therbaen encampment, my heart was racing," Lumia continued, ignoring Pietro. "When I fought against Matias and exchanged blows with him, I even got a little wet. Hee hee, this is a secret, all right? If I hadn't sworn a vow of chastity, I probably would've turned out a huge slut."

"Shit! What the hell?! This is the worst day of my life, dammit!" Pietro yelled, his face twisted in disgust. As much as he wanted to eliminate Lumia, he knew that there was absolutely no way he would be able to pull it off.

“Oh, no, this is only the beginning,” Lumia said, her voice suddenly calm. The juxtaposition took Pietro off guard and he was stunned into silence. “The worst part of your day is going to happen *very* soon. That’s what I’m waiting for. But it’s boring to just sit around in silence, isn’t it? So that’s why we’re having this chat.”

“What are you talking about? How could anything be worse than *you*?” Pietro snapped. It looked like he was barely containing himself from punching something out of frustrated anger.

“You’re such a fool. It looks like you still haven’t realized just who you’ve made an enemy of. You don’t even know who you destroyed in your past. How sad. I truly, from the bottom of my heart, pity you.”

“If you want to talk to someone, then go find a priest! Please just get outta here! I’m begging you!” Pietro slammed his fists down upon the table.

“Let me give you a heads-up. You seem to be afraid of me, but I’m not that scary compared to *her*. I’m like a cat napping in the sun. Do you know the reason I crawled up from the shadows?”

“How the hell should I know?” Pietro growled, his hands trembling from how hard he was clenching them. Lumia was even a little worried that he would drop dead from the stress.

“It’s because I peered into the abyss and spent time with true darkness. That’s it. That very same darkness will come and consume you. Pay attention. Don’t you hear its footsteps? It’s right there. Oh, you poor man. But I won’t pray for you, because you’re truly a horrendous piece of trash.”

At the same time Lumia finished talking, somebody kicked the door down. Lumia figured it was likely Marx. And, lo and behold, Marx was the one to walk in first, followed by the other members of Moon Blossom. The guards in front of the door had likely been killed before they could even open their mouths to scream.

“Oh? So you really *were* here,” Asura said when she saw Lumia.

“Wait...what is that?” Iris’s expression twisted when she saw the pieces of flesh strewn around the ground. “A-Are these...corpses?”

“Oh my. Iris, you came too?” Despite her words, Lumia wasn’t surprised. Iris’s job was to monitor them, so it was obvious that she would accompany Moon Blossom.

“She tried to help us. Hilarious, yeah?” Jyrki said, smirking.

“More like...she was in our way...” Iina sighed.

“I mean, you guys were ambushed even though they said they wanted to exchange Commandant Circie for you! That’s totally unfair!”

“Well, we could handle brigands of their level with our bare hands,” Asura chuckled. “We have magic, and they were so kind as to prepare all sorts of weapons for us to borrow.”

“We didn’t manage to get the dudes from the Assassination Alliance though,” Jyrki sighed.

“Vice Captain, is Circie the woman collapsed over there?” Marx asked after looking around the room.

“That’s right. It seems that she’s still alive, so let’s take her back with us.”

“If she’s alive, then there’s no reason not to,” Asura agreed. “Hmm, we can kill everyone from the Felmafia except for Pietro. I’m sure Lumia already got all of the information she wanted from him.”

Asura glanced at Pietro and then sat down on the sofa next to Lumia. With that single look, she communicated to the rest of Moon Blossom which one Pietro was. Then they quickly killed the remnants, who had been cowering in the corners.

“What the hell’s up with these guys? They didn’t even put up a fight, like they already gave up. Is it ’cause you did this, Vice Cap’n?” Jyrki asked after he looked down at the puddles of blood on the floor.

Lumia raised her right hand and waved it lightly in a “That’s right” sort of motion. She didn’t know whether Jyrki understood it though. Salume and Reko walked over to Circie and gently shook her. At the motion, she groaned softly. Marx covered her up with his robes. Meanwhile, Iris stood against the wall, watching over the proceedings while staying out of everyone’s way. It was

unclear whether she'd decided to remain silent because she understood that the Felmafia were filthy criminals, or whether it was because she was scared after the whippings.

"Now then, Pietro," Asura said, "long time no see. Have you been well? Ahh, of course you have, though I suppose that only lasted until you met my deputy here?"

"Who...are you?" Pietro asked in a dull tone. He had also lost the will to fight after realizing that he would die in this place.

"Don't say such sad things, Pietro. Didn't we enjoy a nice little vacation together ten years ago? Come on, I'm sure you can remember how you dropped by a small village while searching for Jeanne Autun Lala."

After Asura said that, Pietro's eyes shot open. Then, he paled and started to tremble violently. "Y-You're from..." Even his voice was shaking. "You... We..." His breath started to come in sharp pants, and it was clear that he wasn't able to properly pull air into his lungs.

"What's wrong, Pietro? Calm down. It's all right. Take some deep breaths. Breathe in, breathe out. Now you try."

Pietro followed Asura's instructions and started breathing slowly. Even so, his body wouldn't stop shaking, and his face remained as pale as ever. "You're the silver-haired toddler...who...slaughtered us all?"

Pietro must have seen something. *Oh, that poor man*, Lumia thought. *But it's understandable that he would react that way. Anyone would.*

"That's not exactly what happened, is it? You were two squads led by one sergeant for a total of eleven people. Yet I only killed nine. You and that female sergeant managed to escape, remember?"

The sight of a three-year-old little girl going around murdering soldiers is something you would only see in your nightmares, after all.

"Ahh... Damn! It really is the worst day of my life, goddammit! A monster of a woman just had to show up and bring something even worse with her."

"How rude," Lumia said.

“Now then, let’s reminisce a little, Pietro. The innocent me from before I knew who I really was still weeps over what happened. If I don’t clear this debt, then the current version of myself will be crushed under these feelings. In my past life, I almost never experienced emotions, so it’s ironic how much they’re affecting me in this one. I’d forgotten everything and was living in such peace, and yet you brought me back to life.”

Part Three, Chapter Seven: Let's talk about the past. It's sickening, so prepare yourself.

Ten years ago, back before Asura remembered her past life, she lived in a village that existed on the border between East and Central Felsen. It was a quiet place untouched by war and completely self-sufficient. It didn't exist under any flag, and peacefully enjoyed its independence. There was a creek near the village where Asura often played.

The days flowed by in tranquility, and Asura was raised with plenty of love. She had been a gentle child who hated the sight of blood and never fought with the other kids. She'd innocently believed that such beautiful halcyon days would continue forever and ever.

But then, the soldiers arrived.

"Check to see if any of them are hiding Jeanne Autun Lala. If anyone resists, then treat them as rebels against our country and neutralize them," the female sergeant said.

Asura only learned about this later, but at the time, several organizations from Central Felsen had been looking around for Jeanne, who had escaped after causing the Great Massacre. They'd viewed her as a common enemy, and worked together in their search.

The soldiers tore through all the houses in the village, and once they saw that Jeanne wasn't there, they gathered all the villagers into the plaza. There weren't that many people—only around forty. It was truly a small settlement.

"All right, everyone, it's time for vacation! This is the whole point of being a soldier! Rape all the women you want and let out all of your daily frustrations! Aren't you happy, Corporal Pietro Angelico?"

"Yes, Sergeant! I thank the heavens that you are my superior!"

Then the soldiers' vacation started. The men of the village tried to fight back, but they were easily killed. None of them had ever seen battle, so they were no

match for trained soldiers.

“Hmm, I’m going to enjoy that silver-haired man over there. He’s quite handsome.” The person the female sergeant pointed at was Asura’s father. Asura’s mother remained silent and simply kept her hands over Asura’s eyes. Asura’s sister or brother was inside her belly. “Is that your daughter?” the sergeant asked, and when Asura’s father nodded, she commanded, “Don’t cover her eyes. Let her watch. It makes things hotter for me.”

“Please, grant us mercy,” Asura’s father begged, and the female sergeant grinned.

“Then I’ll separate your daughter’s head from her body. Which would you prefer? If you listen to my orders, I won’t kill her. I’m not a Demon Lord, after all!”

Asura’s mother took her hands away from Asura’s eyes. “It’s going to be all right,” she murmured.

Asura was terrified and could only cling onto her mother in response. Then her father was raped before her eyes. All of the soldiers were wholeheartedly enjoying their vacation.

“I’ve always wanted to do it with a pregnant woman,” Pietro said after finishing up with all of the young women in the village.

“Me too, me too!” The soldiers ripped Asura’s mother away from her.

“Mama!” Asura cried out, but she was kicked away.

“Don’t hurt my daughter! Please, I’ll do anything you want! Just don’t hurt her!”

It was as if they’d been thrust into hell. Asura couldn’t stop crying. She was absolutely terrified. *Why are these people doing such horrible things?*

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Huge tears rolled down Asura’s cheeks.

“Boss...” Marx said, but no further words would come. He was simply too shaken at the sight of Asura—at the sight of his boss—crying. She didn’t even look like she was aware of the fact.

“That’s awful...” Jyrki said. “I was a bandit, sure, but I didn’t do any of that shit...” He was just as shaken as Marx.

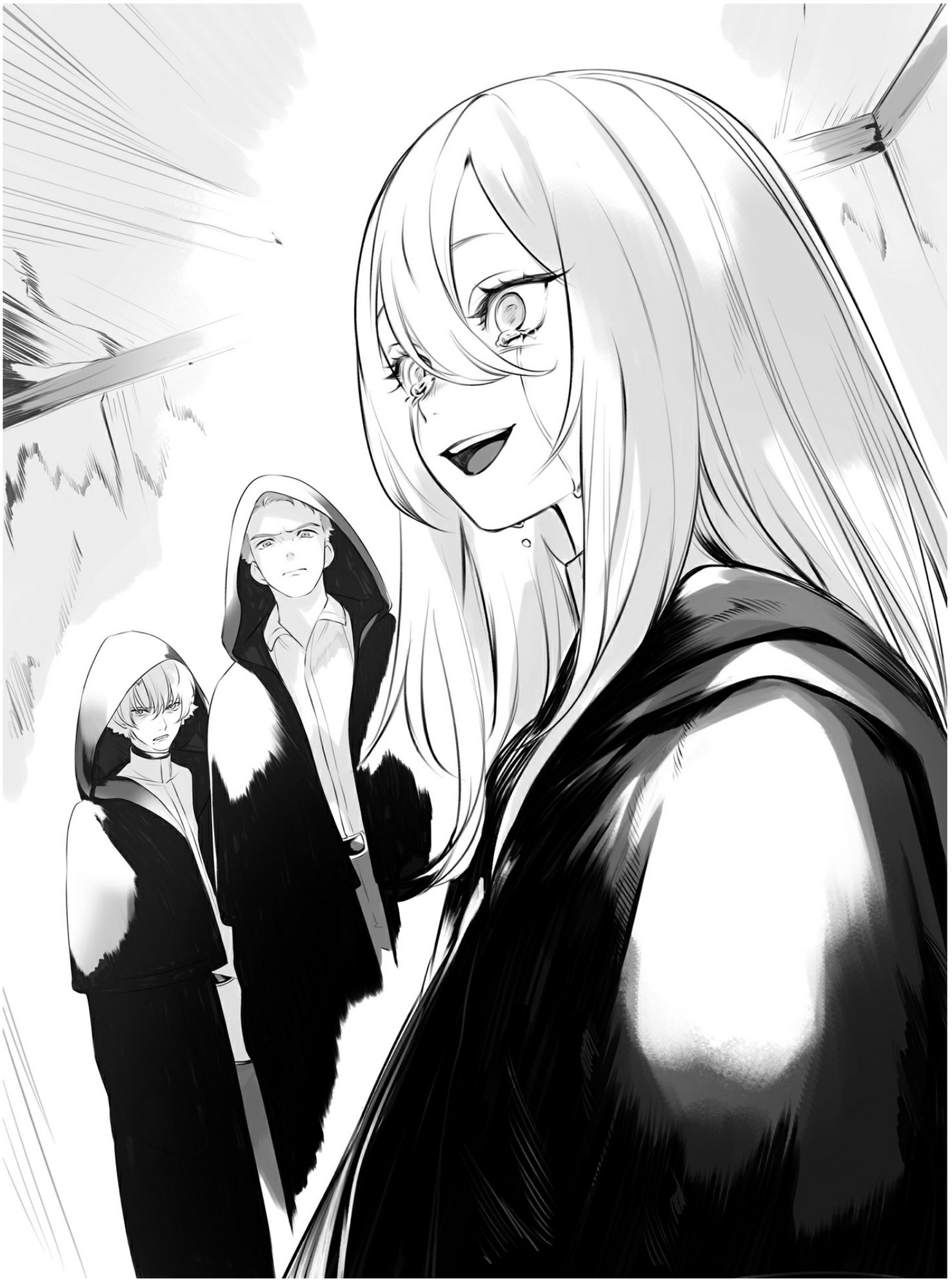
“This is still just the beginning, Jyrki,” Asura laughed softly through her tears. Marx found it to be a terribly painful sight.

“I wanted to see Boss cry...but...this wasn’t what I meant...” Iina glared at Pietro. “This is why...I hate humans...”

“Am I...crying?” That was when Asura finally noticed what was falling down her face and she quickly wiped them away with her robes.

“That’s horrible... That’s insane...” No one noticed when Iris moved to stand behind Asura, and she was crying just like her.

“Let’s continue...” Asura said.



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After the soldiers had had their fill pleasuring themselves with the villagers, they started nocking arrows to their bows. They lit the arrow tips on fire and proceeded to burn down the village.

“What are you doing?!” Asura’s father yelled. “If you burn down our houses, then what are we supposed to do?”

“Die, I suppose? You were a pretty good lay. It’s a waste, but it’s time for you to die.” The female sergeant laughed out loud as she cut down Asura’s father with a sword. “Now, it’s time for a manhunt! By the time we arrived, Jeanne had already pillaged this place. Isn’t that right, men?!”

With that, the soldiers began to kill the villagers. Asura’s childhood friend, the older boys and girls next door... They all died, screaming and crying.

Help me! Help me! Help, God! Asura’s mother jumped in front of Asura to protect her from a sword and was stabbed clean through right before her eyes. “Mama...”

“Run...Asura...” The sword was pulled from her mother’s body. At the very end, she gave Asura a gentle smile.

“Man, I love toying with weaklings,” Pietro said cheerfully. He noticed Asura, held his sword aloft, and then slashed down at her. Asura dodged it before she dashed off. “Oh? Damn, that kid’s fast.”

She could hear Pietro’s words from behind her but she paid little heed as she ran into her burning house. She grabbed the fruit knife that had been left out on the counter. When she saw her own dark eyes reflected in the blade, she smiled.

“Humph, this is the best I can use in this body. Fate really is a funny thing. I was so terrified of this situation, and now I simply find it nostalgic.”

Asura had remembered who and what she used to be. She held her free hand against her chest and thought back on all of the people she’d met in this life. At the end, she thought about her father and mother. Her mother’s final smile gave Asura the power and will to survive. After all, that had been the key to

unlocking the memories of her past life. Everything she remembered would've been repugnant to the innocent Asura who had been born in this world.

"I'll make those pieces of shit regret waking me up and making me angry."

However, with her memories restored, she couldn't envision herself losing. The hand around the knife's handle was small, soft, and pale. She was so short that she barely even reached the soldiers' waists. Even so, Asura was certain that she was the stronger one.

She left her home and looked around. It didn't take her long to see one of the enemies. She silently sneaked up behind him, then slashed at the backs of his knees. The soldier screamed and fell to the ground.

"I'm pretty short right now, so thank you for lowering yourself to my height."

She flipped her grip on the knife and slit the soldier's throat from behind. With her underdeveloped muscles, she couldn't pierce through the leather armor. So the correct answer to deliver certain death was aiming for their neck.

Asura carefully continued to kill the soldiers one by one. If she came across them in pairs, she would disable one of them by cutting up their legs before running away. The uninjured one would chase after her, so she would lie in wait and then ambush them. After that, she would return to where the injured soldier was moaning in pain and then deal the final blow.

It was when she'd killed nine soldiers that she noticed there was no one left in the village. Only corpses were left. Asura crouched down before them in the central plaza.

"I'm sorry," she said. "If only I had remembered who I was much earlier, I wouldn't have let scum like them do what they please." Her apology was directed at the villagers. "As much as I'd like to dig graves for everyone, as you can see, I'm only three years old. It's far too much work for me. I'm sorry." She lifted her arms into the air and continued, "I know. Why don't I sing a song? I remember everyone praising my voice. What would you like to hear? 'London Bridge Is Falling Down'? I'm kidding. I'll sing 'Amazing Grace.' It's a good choice, isn't it? I pray that you will all rest in peace."

Left alone in a burning village and surrounded by the dead bodies of her kin,

Asura raised her voice in song. But she turned around when she sensed another presence. A woman was walking towards her. She wasn't a villager. Apart from a cape around her shoulders she was completely naked, and she was dragging a sword behind her in her right hand.

"What a nice song," the woman said. "I don't know it, but it drew me towards you even though I no longer believe in God or destiny... I'd even go as far as to say I'd curse the heavens if I could. And yet, I wonder why I think of our meeting as one that has been divinely ordained."

"I've no interest in gods. More importantly, I didn't think there were exhibitionists in this world. You're naked under that thing, aren't you?"

"Has this village been pillaged?" the woman asked calmly, ignoring Asura's question.

"Something like that. They called it a vacation. Two of them escaped, unfortunately. Well, I can always seek them out later and kill them then."

"You were the one who killed the culprits? I find that hard to believe." There was a deep despair in the woman's voice. It was clear just from listening to her that she no longer held any hope for the world.

"You can believe what you want. I don't really care. It looks like you've been through some tough times yourself. Was it worse than what happened here?"

The woman's eyes were as dark as the night sky. "In a way."

"That's impressive. My name is Asura Lyona. How about you?"

"Lumia..."

"Now then, Lumia. If you're not my enemy, then raise me. As you can see, all the adults here have died. Due to my youth, there are plenty of inconveniences that I can't handle alone. So you have to raise me. It's not like you have anything else to do, right?"

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A heavy silence fell over the collected group, broken only by Iris's soft sniffles. Asura was still wiping her eyes with the hem of her robe. No one said anything.

"I'm not the one crying," Asura said with a weak chuckle. "Iris is. And I

suppose the me from before she became me.” She was talking about the child version of Asura, who had been pure and innocent about the evils of the world. “Now then, Pietro, tell me the name of the female sergeant. You must already know what fate will befall you. There’s no need for meaningless suffering. I’m not like you. I may enjoy war. But I have no desire to drag people peacefully enjoying their lives into hell, and I only conduct torture if there’s a meaning to it. If you talk, then I’ll grant you an easy death.”

Asura stood up and unsheathed the claymore from Lumia’s back. She moved to stand next to Pietro and held the tip of the weapon against his forehead. This was an orthodox stance from Central Felsen swordsmanship, taught to her by Lumia.

“Wait... Hey, hold on a second,” Iris said, grabbing onto Asura’s shoulder. “I...understand that something terrible happened to you. I know that these people are awful. But, you mustn’t take revenge, Asura... It doesn’t help anyone...”

“I know,” Asura replied. “But I’ll still seek it.”

“Wait! Unless you overcome your hatred, you’ll never be able to move forward! I understand how you feel. But—!”

“Shut up!” Asura spun around and slammed the claymore against Iris. “How could someone like you *ever* understand how I feel?!”

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Iris grew up in a loving household, surrounded by a supportive family who taught her the meaning of justice. She also learned that it was never right to take another’s life without hesitation. That was why she chose a single-bladed sword with the intention of only unsheathing it in self-defense.

“Shut up!”

I’m going to be killed, was Iris’s immediate thought. Asura’s killing intent was genuine, and it was the first time that Iris had ever felt something like that directed at her. She instinctively placed her hand on the hilt of her sword. Faster than Asura could behead her, Iris drew her sword and blocked the claymore’s blow.

“How could someone like you *ever* understand how I feel?!”

Iris became a hero because she was strong. But that wasn’t the only reason. She also wanted to protect everyone from the threats against humanity. And Asura Lyona was among the people that she swore an oath to.

“Wait! Calm down! I’m sorry!” It had been too rash of her to imply that she could understand what Asura had gone through.

Completely berserk, Asura continued to slash at Iris with the claymore. She was a completely different person from before, and Iris was a little bewildered at the sudden change. Even so, she managed to guard against every one of Asura’s attacks.

Damn, this kid is super strong!

“It’s not as if you’ve ever seen hell on earth!” Asura screamed. Like a small child throwing a tantrum, she continued to wave the claymore, ignorant of the tears streaming down her cheeks.

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“Should we stop them? It looks like Boss has completely lost her mind,” Marx said.

“Ain’t Boss super strong right now? Is it just me or is she winnin’ against the hero?” Jyrki asked.

“This is...terrible... Won’t she...kill her?” Iina wondered.

“We’re still in the middle of a mission too,” Lumia sighed. “And of *course* Asura is super strong. I was the one who taught her how to use a sword, remember?”

“Vice Captain, this isn’t the time to be bragging about that. Isn’t this bad?”

“Like, there ain’t nothin’ we can do if she kills Iris.”

“This is my first time...seeing Boss lose her cool...”

Even as Moon Blossom conversed, Asura and Iris were still fighting, with Asura on the offensive and Iris on the defensive.

“Idiots,” Lumia said with a shake of her head. “Asura isn’t scary at all right

now. All she's doing is using swordplay on the same level as mine."

"Isn't that enough of a threat?" Marx pointed out.

"That ain't a threat. That's a nightmare," Jyrki corrected him.

"That's not true," Lumia argued. "Normally, Asura would mix in magic or use more of her surroundings. Fighting her can be tricky with how versatile she is. If all she's relying on is a sword, then she's hardly dangerous."

"Oh, I see." Marx nodded, looking convinced. "So you're trying to say that right now, Boss isn't a soldier-mage, but rather an ordinary swordsman?"

"That's right. She's lost control and can only think about the weapon she's currently holding in her hands."

"But...isn't she still stronger than Iris? Won't...Iris die?" Iina tilted her head slightly as she asked the question.

"Iris is a hero," Lumia said. "You saw the way she moved when she stopped Asura's first hit. If she can keep that up, then she won't lose. Besides, if she can't even fight off Asura here, then she'll die on her first Demon Lord Expedition."

Iris wasn't serious. To be more specific, her mind was serious, but her body remained tense. Her first taste of real killing intent had scared her badly, and she was unable to call upon her true strength. Or perhaps she was simply lost on what to do.

"Whether Iris can use fighting spirit or not will determine her fate," Lumia concluded.

"What's fighting spirit?" Salume asked.

"Fighting spirit is something that travels throughout your body and helps you to utilize your full strength."

"You'll be stronger if you use it?" Reko asked.

"No. All it can do is allow you to use your full strength. For example, let's say Asura's maximum combat strength is a hundred points. But she's not usually performing at that number. Her condition varies from day to day, and can be affected based on the current situation. A person can probably only use their

full strength for a few minutes in their entire lifetime," Lumia explained calmly. "But if Asura were to use fighting spirit, she could maintain a hundred points of power. Conversely, a person whose maximum combat strength is fifty points will still only be able to use fifty even with fighting spirit. So it's not that impressive an ability."

"In the end, you have to train every day if you want to become a powerful fighter. Salume, Reko, there are no shortcuts to true strength," Marx said.

Salume and Reko nodded in response.

"We don't even use fighting spirit, so there's no use learning it," Jyrki said.

"That's right... We're...not a good match...for fighting spirit..."

After Ina said that, there was a change in Asura and Iris's fight.

"She's unleashed her true power," Lumia commented.

"Yes." Marx nodded. "So this is Iris's fighting spirit? Unlike how aggressive Axel's was, it's quite the calm aura."

"Oops. Looks like Boss is gonna lose this one. Heroes really are strong!"

"That's too bad... I guess you can't win against a hero...if you fight normally..."

The mercenaries of Moon Blossom were quick to change their tune.

Part Three, Chapter Eight: “You’re crazy! Definitely crazy!” By my standards, we’re perfectly normal, though?

Iris was furious at herself for being on the defensive. She wouldn’t be able to save anyone—not even the girl crying before her very eyes—if she fought like this. Iris wanted to save Asura and take her away from the dark depths of vengeance. Even if it was none of her business, she couldn’t leave Asura alone. That Asura had grown up to be a piece of shit must have been because of Pietro’s actions.

So all Iris wanted to do was hug Asura and reassure her that it was all right now. But to do that, she had to defeat Asura first. That was the reality of their situation. If she wanted to save Asura, she had to beat her. For the first time in her life, Iris learned that such paradoxes were possible in the real world. So she had no time to waste on self-doubt.

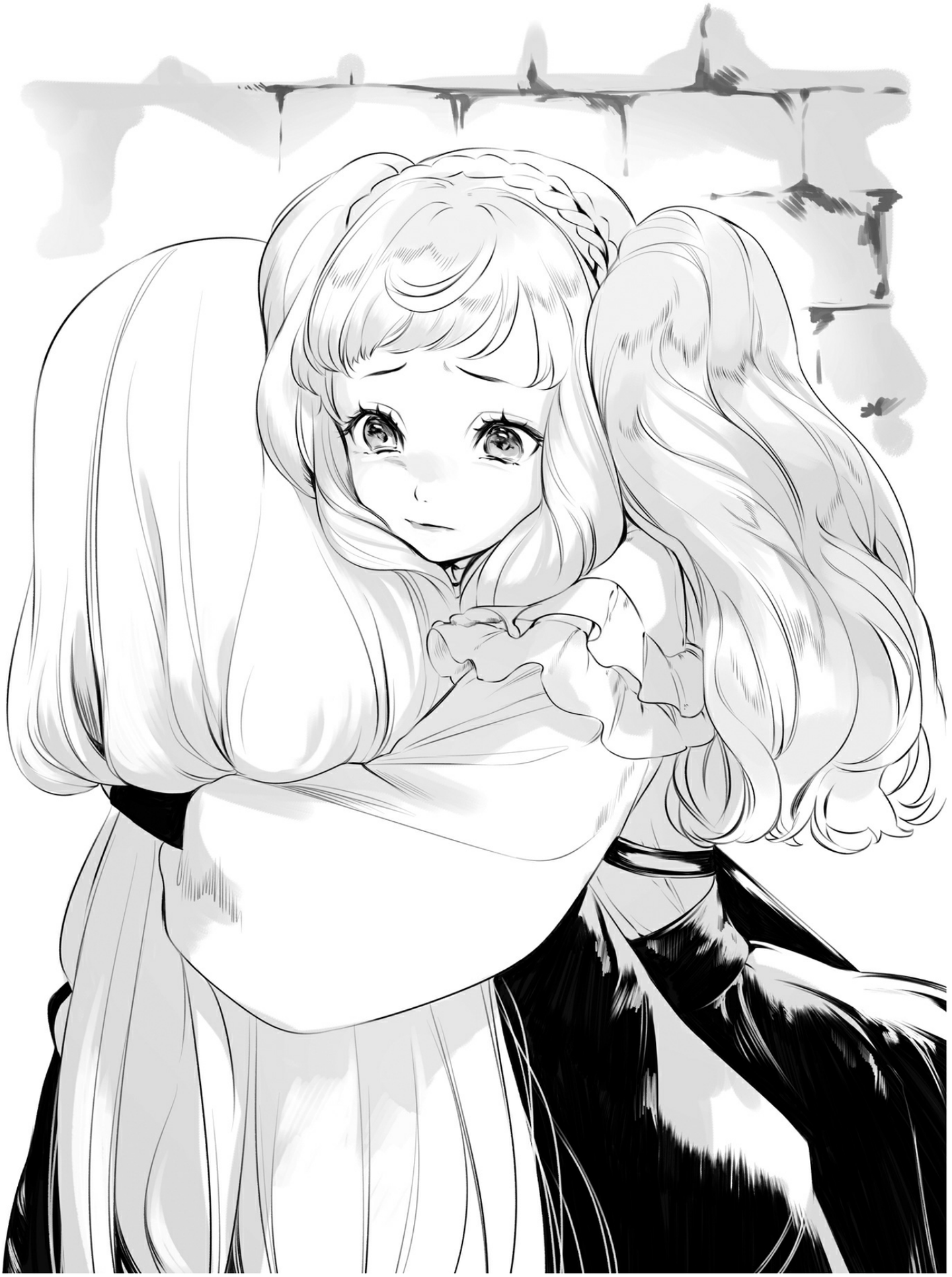
Asura was strong. She’d completely mastered the orthodox swordsmanship of Central Felsen. Central Felsen’s sword techniques favored sideways slashes. Iris held her sword upright and parried Asura’s attack.

“I’m sorry for saying something so frivolous. I didn’t mean any harm. I’m truly sorry.” First, she apologized for her own wrongdoings. It was basic human decency to apologize if you did something wrong. But Asura didn’t look like she accepted it. “I’m going to save you, Asura!”

Iris released her fighting spirit and unleashed her full strength. Far faster than Asura could pull away her sword, Iris slapped the weapon out of her hand. She twisted her wrist and then moved her sword upwards as if slashing from below. Then she stopped the tip of the weapon right under Asura’s chin.

Asura stared at the blade with a surprised expression. “Ha ha... Ha ha! I see. I forgot you’re a hero, Iris. Is that your full strength? I would expect no less of the future Great Hero candidate.”

Iris sheathed her sword and then slowly wrapped her arms around Asura.



Asura didn’t try to struggle out of the hug.

“It’s all right now, Asura. I don’t think any of the villagers wanted to see you lose yourself to revenge. Your mother smiled at the very end, didn’t she? Isn’t that because she wanted you to survive and live a long happy life?”

“Humph. You just can’t stop arguing morals, can you? Of course I think that’s what she wanted. By the way, your breasts are a lot bigger than they look. Are you the type to look more slender with clothes on?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I agree that revenge is pointless. There’s plenty of other business to be done.” Asura pushed herself away from Iris and then picked up her claymore in a smooth movement.

“That’s right. Let’s move forward, Asura. Tell me if you need me to help with anything.”

“You’re really such a kind girl.” Asura slowly walked towards Pietro, who was cowering so much he had basically fallen unconscious while still standing. “Just in case, I want to know the name of that female sergeant. Of course, I don’t plan on actively seeking her out.”

“Tania...Cafaro...” Pietro heaved out a long breath. He must have relaxed under the presumption that he wouldn’t be killed.

“Thank you.” Asura casually raised her claymore and ran it through Pietro’s chest. It happened so fast that Iris couldn’t even understand what had happened, let alone react. “Now, die.”

Asura pressed the claymore even deeper. Pietro shuddered and shook under the pressure, and when he died, he did so with an expression of confused pain.

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Lumia’s cheeks puffed out as though she were pouting. “If it were a true battle of life or death rather than something like a tournament match, then Asura would’ve won. My Asura is really strong, you know? The only reason she lost is because she wasn’t in her right mind.”

“Er, Vice Captain, I believe that it would’ve been quite troublesome for us if

Boss *did* win against Iris in a real life-or-death battle. If I recall correctly, you also mentioned that Iris wouldn't lose because she's a hero," Marx said with a wry smile.

"In any case, I guess all's well that ends well. Boss, can we take some of the goods lyin' around?" Jyrki asked.

"Do whatever you want. But half of whatever you take will go to the group."

"'Kaaaay." With that, Jyrki started looking around the room with a happy grin on his face.

Iina and Reko followed suit. It was only when Reko gestured for Salume to follow him that she also started to poke around the place as well.

"Marx, I'm sorry to have to rely on you all the time, but I want you to carry Circie," Asura ordered.

"Of course, Boss." Marx leaned down and picked up Circie in a bridal carry.

I'm glad that neither Iris nor I stepped on her when we were fighting earlier, Asura couldn't help but think. Then, she turned her attention to the group. "Err... Everyone, listen up. I'm sure you've all noticed by now, but I lost control during a mission. I'll gladly receive a punishment alongside Lumia, who went against my direct orders. So start thinking of something."

"'Kay," Ina replied happily.

"Can it be sexual?" Reko asked.

"Anything goes so long as both Lumia and I don't enjoy it. Truthfully, normal physical punishment doesn't affect us at all. Alas, that's the price you pay for investing in antitorture training."

"Oh? So I really will have to be punished too... Even though everything went so well... Even though I got all the information we need..." Lumia muttered, sounding dissatisfied.

"That's information *you* need, isn't it? If I'd been here, I would've killed Pietro after we talked, so that's why you came alone, right?" Asura said with a lopsided grin. "The entire way here, I was brainstorming the best ways to humiliate and hurt you. But I never thought that I'd also mess up at the very

end.”

The moment that Asura lost to Iris, the younger version of her calmed down. The second that Pietro died, the younger version of her completely fell silent.

“Wait just a secoooond!!!!!!!!!!” Iris, who had been standing stock-still for a while, suddenly screamed. “Why?! Hey, explain to me why! Why did you kill Pietro after all of that?! Why isn’t anyone asking that question? Like, hello?! Are you guys crazy?! It was totally like we were gonna stop with the whole revenge thing, right?!”

“Uh, no? Of course she’d kill Pietro,” Jyrki said.

“If Boss didn’t do it, I would’ve,” Marx agreed.

“That was someone who could die...” Iina muttered. “It felt great...”

“Ever since the beginning, I predicted that Pietro at the very least would die in this room. So I’m actually more confused at why you’re making such a fuss about this, Iris,” Lumia said.

“Anyone who bullies Boss should die,” Reko said with a snort.

“I also think that Pietro is someone who doesn’t deserve to live,” Salume added in a much harsher tone than usual.

“Wh-Why?! Why are you all treating his death like it’s a given?! It’s like *I’m* the crazy one here! Why do you think I hugged Asura? It’s because I wanted her to give up on revenge!”

“Firstly, the only reason I came here was because I wanted to kill Pietro. So all I did was accomplish that goal,” Asura said with a shrug. “Secondly, you’re on the side of righteousness, and you’re a kind girl. I’m quite fond of you. But that doesn’t mean I have to listen to you.”

“It’s not about listening to me or not!”

“We can continue discussing this later. It’s time to leave.” Asura started to clean up in preparation to make their retreat, far too lazy to continue dealing with Iris.

***

The day after Asura killed Pietro, Moon Blossom gathered in the Arnian military police's headquarters, located in the trading city of Nielta.

"Thank you so much for saving me, as well as destroying the Felmafia, Miss Asura," Commandant Circie said. Her face was covered in gauze and bandages, and her body underneath her usual white uniform was likely in a similar condition. However, since Lumia had used her healing magic on her for several hours, her injuries should have been less severe than when they first found her.

"I thought you would quit. But seeing as you're summoning us while in that uniform, I assume you plan on remaining as commandant?" Asura asked.

"Yes. Ever since I joined the military police, I've prepared myself for such situations. But I'm sorry. I ended up giving them information on you."

"It's fine. No one's angry at you. It's not as if you were trained to withstand torture."

"I apologize."

"If you're that concerned about it, then consider yourself in our debt. We'll come collecting someday, all right?"

"Yes. I sincerely apologize for all the trouble." As Circie spoke, she placed a wad of cash onto the table. "This is the thirty thousand dora we agreed on, and I've pardoned all the crimes you committed within Arnia. Jyrki and Ina are no longer on the wanted list either. However, please remember that they're only off *Arnia's* list."

"Thanks. If there's anything else you need, feel free to call on us. We'll be staying in Arnia for a few more days." Asura had given Moon Blossom the day off. Tomorrow, she and Lumia would receive their punishments, then they would train for a little bit. They would leave the country after gathering information on other ongoing wars. "Oh, I almost forgot." Asura took out a folded piece of paper from her pocket. "This is information Lumia extracted from Pietro. Share it with other nations' military police if you wish."

Asura placed the piece of paper on the table and picked up the cash.

"Right. I appreciate it." Circie opened up the piece of paper Asura left and started to look through it. "Miss Asura... Your writing is very nice."

“Uh, okay. Is it really?” Asura was a little taken aback; she hadn’t expected that to be the first thing out of Circie’s mouth.

“Yes. But are members of the Oathkeeper Brigade really...?”

“Apparently so. According to Lumia, if this Miriam person really spent the past decade undergoing proper training, then she’s probably on par with a hero in terms of combat strength.”

“I see. I’ll pass that information along to the other military police organizations.”

***

In an ancient castle in Central Felsen, the sound of something hitting against skin echoed continuously through the halls.

“Ahh, Lady Jeanne, please forgive me!”

The Blessed Child, completely naked, was laid out over Jeanne’s lap as Jeanne spanked her butt. Miriam could barely contain her jealousy. When one stood before Jeanne, one naturally wanted to repent and wish for punishment of some kind. Her divinity was so powerful, it was akin to standing before a god.

Jeanne’s divinity hadn’t been as strong as this ten years ago. Though she possessed the traits of a god, it was impossible to mistake her for one. When Jeanne was declared guilty a decade ago, the Oathkeeper Brigade was dissolved and all of its members scattered to the wind. Miriam was fortunate enough to meet up with Jeanne again, but the latter was a completely different person from who she was before. Her hair had become pure white, and even her manner of speech was different.

“No. Our Arnian headquarters were destroyed. Whose fault is that?”

Jeanne was in her usual black clothing. It was long and simple, resembling mourning robes. The Blessed Child in her lap had shoulder-length red hair, and her face looked as though she were naturally sassing someone. She had a toned frame from her training, but as a whole, she was petite, so she looked around fourteen years old. According to her, she was actually seventeen. Though the Blessed Child’s buttocks were red and swollen, Jeanne apparently had no intention of letting up.

“Ahh, Tina, I love you. But not answering me is very mean of you.” Jeanne put on a slightly angry expression, but her eyes were watery and her cheeks were flushed. Her face was so cute that Miriam’s heart started beating faster.

“Um, Mistress Jeanne,” she said. “Arnia was my responsibility to begin with, so if anyone here should receive a punishment, it should be me...”

Thanks to her divinity, Jeanne’s punishments could expiate feelings of guilt. They would truly and completely wipe away all sense of blame from one’s consciousness, so Miriam sought them out of her own accord.

“I am the one in charge of all the God Hands, including Miriam,” the Blessed Child said. “And so, the blame ultimately falls onto my shoul— Ow!”

Jeanne’s palm smacked down upon the Blessed Child’s bum. She was sitting on an old and sturdy stool. It was a simple piece of furniture, but one that Jeanne had used ever since her days in the Oathkeeper Brigade.

“That’s right. It would be very difficult for me to go around punishing everyone who causes problems,” Jeanne said.

“Yes...” the Blessed Child sniffed.

“Tina, I truly love you. You can beg me like a good girl, can’t you?”

“Milady... Please...punish me.”

Upon the Blessed Child’s request for further discipline, the sound of Jeanne’s palm slapping against her butt cheeks continued to echo throughout the room. It was only when the Blessed Child passed out that Jeanne finally stopped.

Under normal circumstances, a person wouldn’t pass out from simply getting their butt smacked. But Jeanne had been using her fighting spirit and spanking without any bodily limitations. A random villager wouldn’t have lasted even ten hits, yet the Blessed Child had managed to withstand over fifty.

The Blessed Child looks like an ordinary little girl, so I wonder why she’s so tough, Miriam thought to herself.

“My hand hurts a little.” Jeanne started to rub her right hand with her left. Beating someone with one’s entire strength was damaging, especially if one was as powerful as Jeanne Autun Lala.

“Are you all right, Mistress Jeanne? I’m sure the Blessed Child will thank you when she wakes up, since her guilt has been beaten out of her.”

Miriam didn’t know that the Blessed Child received abuse every single day. Guilt was an emotion that had long since disappeared from the Blessed Child, which meant the only thing she received from these beatings was pain. Every day, the Blessed Child listened to Jeanne whispering words of love into her ears while inflicting unreasonable amounts of violence upon her body.

“That’s right. That’s how it is for everyone. Is there something you wanted to report?”

“Ah, yes. It’s in regards to Moon Blossom, the mercenary group that destroyed our headquarters in Arnia. A woman calling herself Lumia was among them.”

“Continue.” Jeanne’s expression changed.

“She used the Central Felsen style of swordsmanship, was skilled in the art of war, and could cast magic. Apparently, she’s a beautiful woman with brown hair.”

“Did she use Divine Retribution?”

“I don’t know. There are no such reports, but isn’t that your spell, Mistress Jeanne?”

Jeanne stared at Miriam, her eyes suddenly dark. “Revised Divine Retribution: Dance of Divine Destruction.” An ethereally beautiful fallen angel descended into the room, brandishing her black wings. “Miriam, I don’t believe in gods. If a god appeared before me, I would rip him apart. Thus, I would never punish in his name. Isn’t that right?”

Before Miriam even realized it, the fallen angel stood before her. The dark sword in the angel’s hand pierced through her shoulder, and she grunted at the sharp pain before falling to her knees.

“Yes... I’m sorry.”

“I’m glad you understand. I don’t particularly love you, so if you make me mad, I just might kill you. Please watch your words.”

I'm so jealous of the Blessed Child, Miriam thought as she watched the fallen angel disappear. *Why does she get to hoard all of Jeanne's love?*

"Let's meet with her sometime soon," Jeanne said. "If she truly is my sister, then we must save her."

"I understand. Hopefully it really is Lumia. I wanted her to surv—"

"Miriam." Jeanne's expression twisted and she covered her face with her left hand. "Why do you constantly say things that make me angry? There's no way she'd die. So of course she isn't dead. Why can't you understand that?"

"I-I'm sorry... I simply meant..."

"Do you want to die?" Jeanne asked, a fearsome look on her face. "Or do you miss my punishments?"

"No, I..." Miriam hesitated for a moment before saying, "Yes... I do miss them, Mistress Jeanne..."

The last time she'd received a punishment was about two years ago. Miriam's heart was already filled with new feelings of guilt. She wanted to be cleansed. Experiencing that wonderful sensation of freedom even once, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, was addicting. Like a drug addict, she desired it on a regular basis.

"Very well..." Jeanne sighed softly. "Come to me after you finish dressing your injuries and taking off your clothes. But before that, please help me to remove Tina from my lap."

Jeanne was unstable. She'd always been. She would act like an innocent child, only to suddenly lose her temper. It was hard to tell what would set her off, because she got angry at the most irrational things.

Ahh, but, that's what I love about Mistress Jeanne.

Extra Episode One: Lumia and Asura—Time slowly infects you, and brings a subtle change.

“Dammit... I’m gonna kill everyone...” Lumia muttered. She’d drunk more than her fair share of alcohol, and was lying face down on the table.

They were in a run-down bar in a random town. All of the customers were ill-mannered, and calling the establishment clean would’ve been generous. There were cobwebs in the corners of the room, and the tables and chairs were extremely old.

“Aw, jeez, here we go again. You’ve said many times that something terrible happened to you, but seeking revenge is such a waste of your life,” Asura, still only four years old, said. She was sitting on the table to eat her food. This was because if she sat in the chair, she couldn’t reach the dish.

“Shut up... Don’t you want to kill the people who messed up your village?”

“Of course I do.”

“See?”

“That’s a given. But I won’t go out of my way to seek them out. I have my own life—a fun and wonderful life—to enjoy. And so, I won’t use it on something like revenge. If, by some coincidence, those people happen to enter my field of vision, then I’ll simply kill them without making a fuss of it.”

“You’re just a kid, and you’ve already developed your own philosophy on life. Creep. If that time comes and you lose control of yourself, I’m not gonna help you.”

While still lying on the table, Lumia turned her face to look at Asura. Despite her age, Asura was already able to use a knife and fork.

“That’s not going to happen. Anyway, you’ve raised me this past year without throwing in the towel, so keep up the good work. I’m more important to you than revenge, aren’t I? And make sure you teach me everything about your

fighting techniques.”

“You...really are a cheeky brat.”

“Once I grow up, I’ll teach you all of *my* skills, so it’s fair.”

It was hard to tell that Asura was only four years old due to how knowledgeable she was. Lumia reached for the bottle to drink more alcohol, but it was already empty. She slowly stood up and raised her arm back to throw the bottle against the wall. However, Asura quickly rushed forward and threw her arms around Lumia’s body.

“Don’t cause a scene. We’ll get chased out again,” she said. “You’re acting way too wild. Why don’t you try smiling once in a while?”

“I can’t. I’ve forgotten how to.” Lumia returned the bottle to the table, then hugged Asura back. The warmth in her arms was the one thing that was just barely keeping Lumia together. Asura’s presence protected Lumia from her urge to destroy all of humankind.

“Then, do you want to go look at some flowers tomorrow? It’s cherry blossom season, if I recall.” Asura was happy that cherry blossoms existed in this world.

“I’m not in the mood.”

“Really? I thought it would bring you some peace, but that’s fine. Then why don’t you try skipping?”

“What?”

“Not many people can remain pessimistic while skipping around.”

“I...suppose.” Lumia sighed before she set Asura down onto the ground. Then she put her head back onto the table.

“I’ll give you a kiss goodnight,” Asura said. “Sweet dreams.”

She jumped onto the chair, climbed onto the table, and pressed her lips against Lumia’s forehead. Lumia’s breathing evened out in sleep. That was when a group of thugs, who’d been eyeing Asura and Lumia for quite some time, approached their table. One of them swiftly covered Asura’s mouth with his hand and picked her up.

Sheesh. It's not as if I planned on yelling. I knew from the start that you wanted to kidnap me, so this is the perfect moment for an experiment.

The thugs hurriedly left the bar and raced off towards their hideout.

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"Listen, I must thank all of you," Asura said calmly after the thugs carted her to the living room of their base.

Their so-called base was a normal house. There weren't any booby traps or secret rooms. The only thing special about it was being more spacious than the average home.

"You're talkative, kid," the leader of the thugs said as he took a swig of alcohol. He was sitting on the sofa with his legs propped up on the table.

"Aren't you scared?" one of the female thugs asked with a wry smile. She was sitting next to the leader, running her hands all over his body.

"Not particularly. First things first, I should explain why I have to thank you. It's very important."

Asura hadn't been tied up, and was sitting normally on the sofa across from the leader. Other than Asura, there were three other children, and they were trembling in the corner of the living room. One didn't have to think very hard to discern that they'd been kidnapped.

"Go on," the leader said.

As far as Asura was able to confirm, there were seven thugs in the house. Including the leader, three of them were in this very room.

"Right. I'm saving the world."

After Asura said that, the thugs looked at each other and started to roar with laughter. The leader was even smacking his own thigh with his hand as he wheezed.

"So you're playing hero?" the red-haired thug who'd kidnapped Asura said from next to her. "Then lemme tell you some good news, brat. Sir Vino here is the real deal!"

“I *was*,” Vino, the thugs’ leader, said with a shrug.

“I see. That’s great. You still seem quite young. Did you retire?”

According to Lumia, only one former hero had had their title revoked. So if someone used to be a hero, that usually meant they retired. This only mattered if Vino was telling the truth though.

“Yeah. I took an arrow to the knee during a Demon Lord Expedition.”

“Hmm. But if you’re a former hero, then even if your knee is messed up, you should be able to stay standing before her for about ten seconds. Of course, that’s ten seconds *after* she decides to kill you.”

“Who’re you talking about?” the red-haired thug laughed. “You mean your drunk mommy?”

“Let me tell you about her. It’s related to how I’m saving the world,” Asura said quietly. “She actually wants to kill everyone on the planet.” The thugs all started to laugh at Asura’s words. “I know. Hilarious, isn’t it? She can’t do it right away, but if she trains for ten years, then it’s completely within the realm of reality.”

“Oh, wooooow!” the female thug laughed, clutching her stomach. At the sound of everyone’s mirth, a muscular thug entered the living room to see what was going on.

“But if humans die out, then I won’t have anyone to enjoy wars with in the future. So, I’ve been putting a lot of effort in redirecting her interest from eradicating humans to taking care of me,” Asura continued with a shrug.

“What’s this kid talking about?” asked the muscular man who’d just arrived.

“Who knows?” Vino scoffed. “But she’s super funny. She’s cute and smart. Maybe we should forget about selling her and have her join us instead.”

“Hmm. Do you mean you wish to become my guardians?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Mmm. You see, I’m in the middle of testing her right now,” Asura said with a sneer. “Does she actually care about me? Will she really come rescue me? Have my efforts borne fruit? Will she walk a new path as my guardian?”

Asura didn’t know whether Lumia would abandon her, or whether she would...

“Oh, come on now, even if your drunk mommy comes here, there’s nothing she can do!” The red-haired thug started to screech with laughter and his lips twisted in a smarmy grin. “Well, she was hot, so we can have fun with her if she comes!”

“She’s strong,” Asura pointed out.

“It’s not like she can win against Vino! He’s a former hero!” the female thug proclaimed cheerily as she stared at him.

“I believe I said this earlier, but even if that’s true, he’ll only be able to stay breathing for ten seconds in her presence.”

“Sounds fantastic,” Vino said. “Hey, bring me her mommy.”

“Huh? But she’s an adult.”

“She’s just a drunk woman. Go.”

At Vino’s command, the red-haired thug pulled a face, clearly unwilling to obey. It was far riskier to abduct an adult, so it was understandable, and Asura doubted that the thug had any such experience. In other words, the only thing these men could do was kidnap children to sell.

“I don’t think it’s necessary.” After Asura finished talking, Lumia, broadsword in hand, appeared at the door to the living room. It had been left wide open after the muscular thug entered.

“Oh? A swordsman?” Vino stared at Lumia as if appraising her. Her face was red and she was clearly still drunk.

“Asura,” she said, a fearsome look on her face. “How many times do I have to tell you? Don’t follow strangers home.”

“Hey, you dumb bitch, do you have any idea where you are right now?” the muscular thug asked as he approached her.

“Mommyyy! Save meee! They’re being mean to meee! Is that how kids would act?” Asura said jokingly.

In the next second, the muscular thug's head went flying. To be more precise, Lumia sliced it off. She did it in a casual motion, as if she were swatting a fly. It was only when the muscular thug's head started to roll on the ground that the others finally saw Lumia as an enemy.

"To meeee!!!" Vino yelled, and the thugs all around the house gathered in the living room.

However, the second they entered, they became corpses. Lumia cut them down as soon as they stepped foot on the threshold, creating a mountain of bodies. There wasn't a trace of emotion on her face. She was simply killing. There was no enjoyment to be had, nor sadness to be felt. It was like watching a trained soldier calmly mow down hordes of enemies.

Oh, wait, she is *a trained soldier*, Asura thought with a grin.

"You're good." Vino stood up and unsheathed the sword he'd been keeping propped against the sofa. Lumia stared at him, her eyes as dull as those of a dead fish.

"Not a single drop of your enemies' blood on you," Asura commented. "You're as skilled as ever. By the way, he's apparently a former hero."

"He...ro?" Lumia's cheek twitched.

"That's right! I'm Sir Vino, a former hero!"

Lumia stared at Vino. Then, she asked, "Have you participated in a Demon Lord Expedition? Where did you become a hero? In the east? The south? When did you become a hero, and when did you retire?"

"I participated in the last expedition, and I'm from the east. I only just retired!" Vino gave the answer smoothly as if reciting a line.

Lumia barked out a laugh. The sound was vile, as if it emanated from the depths of the abyss. Vino's entire body shuddered fearfully.

"Someone like you, a hero? Then that would make me a Great Hero!" Lumia said as she continued to giggle. There was a broken and aggressive quality to her voice.

"Wh-What's wrong with you..." Vino asked in a terrified voice.

“Are you sure you wanna know? Sometimes ignorance is bliss.”

“I bet ten dora they’ll piss themselves once you tell them,” Asura said.

“The Oathkeeper Brigade.” Vino, the female thug, and the red-haired thug were truly shocked upon hearing the words from Lumia’s mouth. “Divine Retribution.”

Lumia manifested an angel wielding a giant sword. Vino instantly dropped his weapon and started to tremble. Both the female and the red-haired thugs wet themselves, as per Asura’s prediction.

“Th-The angel of death...” Vino murmured as he, too, lost control of his bladder.

At this point in time, the Oathkeeper Brigade was still big news. It had only been about a year since the Great Massacre, and the search for Jeanne was still ongoing. The angel of death, Divine Retribution, as well as the perpetrator of the Great Massacre, Jeanne, were viewed with almost as much fear as a Demon Lord.

“Jeanne... Are you Jeanne?” the red-haired thug asked as he shuddered and quaked. “Please forgive us. We didn’t know. Please...”

“I’m Lumia!” she screamed, and the angel diced apart the thug.

“Ohh, you split him apart like cubed steak!” Asura laughed.

“D-Don’t kill meeee!!!” The female thug ran towards the window. But in an instant, the angel cut off her path and sliced her into ribbons.

“Are you an idiot?” Lumia asked, her expression dark. “Why d’you think I revealed myself as an Oathkeeper? Why d’you suppose I showed you Divine Retribution?” After letting the question hang in the air, Lumia’s mouth split in a wide grin. “It’s because I never planned on letting you live!”

At the sound of her voice, the angel tore Vino apart.

“How long did it take?” Asura asked.

“What?”

“The time between you deciding to kill them and their deaths.”

Lumia pondered Asura's question a little. "I don't know. But probably about a second."

"So he really was lying about being a hero."

"Most likely." Lumia turned to look at the children in the corner and they started sobbing.

"Are you going to kill the children too?" Asura asked. "They know who you are."

Lumia dismissed the angel and returned her sword to the sheath on her back. "No one would believe what children say."

"I guess."

"Let's go." Lumia turned on her heel and left the living room.

Asura followed her, but not before telling the children inside to flee. The two of them left the house and walked for a little while. A cherry tree bloomed beautifully at a corner of the road, and Lumia suddenly stopped to look at it.

"It does bring me peace..."

"Right? If you look at the sky, you'll feel even better."

After Asura said that, Lumia gazed upwards. Asura followed suit. The full moon glimmered amid the sea of stars, casting a gentle light upon the world below. If you asked Asura, it was the type of moon that would look best with a cup of alcohol in hand.

"It's a lovely moon," Asura said.

Lumia reached out towards her. At that moment, a gust blew past them, sending a cascade of cherry blossoms through the air. The petals danced in the wind, illuminated by the moonlight.

"It's beautiful," Lumia said.

"I agree. It's perfect for our send-off."

"Send-off?" Lumia tilted her head.

"Yes. It looks like you still plan on raising me." Asura held Lumia's hand cheerily.

“I’m not so irresponsible that I’d abandon you.”

“I see. I’m grateful for that.” Asura tightened her grip on Lumia. *Now then, the experiment is a success, not that I expected anything less. Next up is mending her broken heart. I can’t have her killing everyone in the world, but only time can heal that wound. If she continues to have a good time raising me...*

“You let yourself get kidnapped, didn’t you?” Lumia said accusingly, interrupting Asura’s thoughts.

“Oh? You noticed?”

“Of course. D’you think I’m an idiot? I started following them as soon as they grabbed you.”

“I wanted to know if you would rescue me.”

“I see. Don’t do it again. I was sleepy.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. Let’s go back to our inn.”

Upon hearing Asura’s words, Lumia nodded.

***

It had been around three years since Lumia had started raising Asura. The two of them traveled from town to town, country to country, living as they pleased. In the garden of a town’s inn, Lumia was attacking Asura with a wooden sword. Of course, this was part of their training and not an actual fight. It was a clear and sunny day, and it was right around lunchtime. Asura guarded and parried Lumia’s attacks with a wooden sword of her own.

“You grow at an astonishing rate,” Lumia murmured as she swung her sword.

“Really? I’ve been feeling down since I haven’t grown any taller.”

As she said that, Asura levitated several balls of dirt around her. This was an earth element attack spell. She tossed them one by one at Lumia, who dodged them all with a stiff expression. The last time she’d underestimated them, she’d gotten hit and it’d hurt like hell. “My, my, throwing dirt? What a child,” she’d thought, only to realize the balls were hard as steel. She hadn’t expected something that powerful from the earth element, considered the weakest of the basic ones.

“I didn’t mean your height. I meant your combat techniques,” Lumia said calmly as she darted forward. *It’s almost time for lunch, so I’ll end it here*, she thought as she slashed out with her sword. However, Asura dodged it. That was certainly a surprise for Lumia. She hadn’t been going easy on Asura. The hit should’ve connected.

“I’m not satisfied on that front either,” Asura said with a small smile.

It was that expression that tipped Lumia off. She looked behind her and saw the dirt balls that she’d dodged earlier catapulting towards her again.

“I can never let my guard down around you!” Using the wooden sword, she deflected all of the dirt balls. Using the same motion, Lumia deflected Asura’s sword as she tried to use the opening to attack, before jumping back to get some distance.

“Hmm. As expected of a former—”

“Stop.”

Asura shrugged at Lumia’s sharp tone. No one could find out who Lumia really was. Asura knew that, but occasionally said such things to tease her.

“Are you testing to see if I can really give up on revenge?” Lumia asked.

“I’m not,” Asura chuckled.

“Little miss, it’s time for lunch!” the innkeeper said as he walked out into the garden. “We’ve prepared lunch for you in the dining hall, so hurry up and eat it” was his true message.

When Asura and Lumia purchased long-term lodgings at this inn, they’d stipulated in their contract that the innkeeper would provide them with breakfast and lunch. Of course, they paid some extra money for the meals. As for dinner, they prepared their own dinners, either buying or making whatever they wanted.

Asura grinned and cheered, “Yaaay, lunch!” She acted as if she really were just a little kid.

The innkeeper looked at Asura and his expression softened. “Little miss, do you want to be a hero when you grow up? You train every day.”

“I dunno! I haven’t decided yet!” Asura replied with an angelic smile. She jogged towards the innkeeper and stood at his side.

Ahh, he’ll likely never guess that all of this is a lie, Lumia thought. *The way she’s acting all excited like a child, the way she’s smiling like an angel, the way she said that she hasn’t decided on her future yet... Everything is a lie.*

It was impossible to tell whether Asura was being truthful unless you knew in advance. She was just that good at deception. She’d practically elevated it to an art form. Even Lumia fell for her tricks at times.

Her talent was frightening. Sometimes Lumia wondered whether she should continue to raise this child. She already understood that Asura wasn’t normal, and not in a good way. When Lumia met Asura, she’d already had one foot in the depths of madness, and even then, she was the sane one between them. That was just how crazy Asura was. Her personality was so terrible that Lumia had no choice but to regain her rationality.

After Asura matured and learned how to fight, she became selfish and cruel. She didn’t care about others and only did what she wanted to do. She treated others’ lives like they were nothing, as if it was a given that they were worthless, and even enjoyed getting hurt. Her smiling visage was exactly like a Demon Lord’s.

“Ma’am, what are you spacing out for? It’s time for lunch,” the innkeeper said.

“Right. I’m coming,” Lumia said curtly before she approached them.

“Little miss, your mom sure is pretty but she’s scary,” the innkeeper chuckled.

“Mommy, I think you should be friendlier! That’ll make your life easier!” Asura said in a chipper tone.

“You’re *way* too friendly,” Lumia sighed.

They weren’t really mother and daughter. But lately, the farce had become slightly more enjoyable. That was why, in the end, Lumia chose to continue raising Asura.

***

Another four years later, Lumia and Asura were undergoing survival training in the mountains. This was all Asura's idea. By roughing it out in the mountains, they could obtain an indomitable spirit, the strength to survive, and experience in making rational decisions under pressure.

We can also learn how to eat anything we come across, Lumia mused as she munched on a snake she'd grilled over the fire.

It was just past noon during the hottest season of the year. The weather was nice, and sometimes a cool breeze blew through the area. The natural smell of the mountain forest was relaxing. However, it was already the third day of their training and Lumia was filthy, though even that she'd become used to.

Asura had ventured deeper into the mountains on her own in search of provisions. Lumia wasn't particularly worried for her. It wasn't the first time that they'd undergone this training. She would rest up a bit and then go collect some nuts. With that decision made, she lay down on the ground and saw Asura standing above her on some branches.

"What are you doing?" Lumia asked.

"Hmm. I wanted to surprise you, but I guess you found me first." Asura jumped out of the tree. She held up her right hand to show Lumia the dead rabbit she'd hunted. "I was going to drop this on you."

"Why would you do that...?"

"Didn't I tell you? I wanted to surprise you."

"I see..." Lumia replied while still lying down on the ground.

Asura occasionally did bizarre things like this to gauge Lumia's reaction. She placed the rabbit on the ground and said, "There's something else I want to show you, so come with me."

Lumia stood up, and as soon as she did so, Asura walked off at a brisk pace. After heaving a sigh, Lumia followed her. After a while, they came across a cave a group of bandits was using as a base. Two men, dressed exactly like stereotypical mountain bandits, guarded the entrance.

"Oh my, I didn't know there were bandits on this mountain," Lumia said.

“What’s great about them is that we can collect their bounties *and* steal the valuables they collected.”

“You sure like taking other people’s money, Asura.”

“It’s because we need funds to make a mercenary group.”

At this point in time, Asura had already started collecting money in preparation for their future. But she never once took a day off from their training.

“Is there a reason you’re determined to work as a mercenary?” Lumia asked.

“You’ve started talking in a much nicer manner lately, Teach. It was worth reminding you time and time again to act friendlier.”

It had taken long years of work before Lumia changed the way she talked.

“Yes. I’m glad that I decided to work on myself.”

“Right? If you want to pretend that you’re a good person, you’re free to do so. But you don’t have to keep up the act around me.”

“I *am* a good person.” That was Lumia’s honest truth, considering true evil was standing before her eyes. Of course, this was in reference to Asura, not the mountain bandits.

“Uh, right...” Asura muttered. “I wonder where I went wrong in raising you. I don’t want you to turn out evil, but I didn’t want you to turn good... Wait, I could use this as the conscience of my group...”

“Hey...speak up.”

“It’s nothing important.” Asura smiled. “Let me answer your question. You wanted to know why I’m so determined to create a mercenary group, right?”

“Yes.”

“I believe I mentioned it before, but I used to be a mercenary in my past life as well.”

“Yes, I remember.” However, Lumia wasn’t entirely convinced. Asura was a very adept liar.

“I was born the son of a mercenary. Ever since childhood, I wandered around

the battlefield with my father, AK-47 in hand. My father was the leader of his group, and after he died, I succeeded him."

"You want to walk the same path as you did in your past? Don't you want to try something new?"

"Of course not. Why would I when war is so much fun?" Asura's grin after saying that was so sadistic that Lumia took a small step back. "'Mercenary group' sure sounds fancy, but we were just an illegal armed organization. But that gave us freedom. I can never forget how much fun life was."

"I can't empathize."

"You liar. You've also experienced the battlefield."

"I'm not the same as you. I fought for a greater good."

"I wonder how long you can keep up that lie for." Asura waved her hand. "Well, whatever. In any case, I want to enjoy my life. And since I was born in a world where magic exists, I want to create a mercenary group that revolves around it." Asura had spent a long time brainstorming ways to effectively utilize magic in warfare.

"That might be difficult. Even if you got a Fixed Element, there's no guarantee that it would be a combat-oriented one like mine..."

"I was able to effectively use even the earth element, wasn't I?" Asura smiled. "This is just an example, Teach, but what if my Fixed Element was flowers?"

"Flowers? It doesn't sound useful at all." Lumia didn't even know why Asura would want to use them.

"Here, look at this." Asura snapped her fingers and a large number of pink petals started floating down from the sky.

They weren't falling down upon Lumia. Rather, they were descending upon the two guards in front of the cave. They looked confused, staring up at the petals as they danced upon the wind.

"Are you serious? Asura, you already have a Fixed Element at your age?"

"Yeah."

“That’s truly amazing. But what use does it have beyond creating flower petals? Beyond wedding ceremonies, of course.”

“What if I told you they’re flowers that can explode?”

“There’s no such thing.”

“Nope, there *is*, Teach. Magic is far more flexible than what you and everyone else think. It’s simply a problem of perception, creativity, and concept. Next, let me show you an attack spell.”

Asura snapped her fingers and the petals that had been floating in the air suddenly vanished. Instead, two petals landed on the guards’ heads. As soon as they made contact, they exploded. In terms of strength, they were only capable of blowing off someone’s head. But it was more than enough to kill a person.

“The...flower exploded.”

“See? What did I tell you? Flowers explode.”

“I’m not even going to try to understand that logic,” Lumia said, giving up without a fuss. “But it’s truly terrifying magic. It’s suited for assassinations too.”

“I can also set them as traps. It’s very convenient,” Asura giggled. In Lumia’s opinion, she was far scarier than the magic she wielded. “Unfortunately, I can’t use them at a wedding.” Asura held her hand out. “Unless you want me to shower the audience with the couple’s blood.”

“No one wants to have a bloodbath at a wedding.”

Right when Lumia said that, the mountain bandits all came rushing out of their cave.

“All right. It’s time to gather funds for our future mercenary group.”

Asura quickly leaped out of her hiding spot. She started to attack the bandits, using a combination of martial arts and magic. It wouldn’t be too far off to describe her combat style as that of a warrior mage.

“Ah, wait, that’s not it. What was it...” Lumia muttered to herself as she tried to recall what Asura described as her ideal fighting style. “Soldier, not warrior. Right, soldier-mage—a soldier that fought with magic as one of their primary weapons.”

One day, Asura is going to pioneer an entirely new way of fighting in this world, Lumia thought. A part of her was proud of Asura for that, and her lips twisted at the thought. No matter how dangerous and insane Asura was, Lumia already loved her as both her parent and her mentor. For an entire year after she met Asura, she hadn't been able to smile. But now, there was a gentle curve to Lumia's lips as she practically skipped out on light feet in order to aid Asura in battle.

Afterword

Hello, it's Sou Hazuki. I was a little unsure of whether to write an afterword that fit the atmosphere of the book, or whether I should talk about food as I always do. I also wondered whether I should have Asura take it over. But Asura said, "If I handle the afterword, then it'll be a brutal one. So balance it out by talking about food or cats."

Of course, I wanna talk about food!

I really like ramen, but I could never eat tonkotsu ones. Until now! Now, I can eat shoyu tonkotsu ramen (and find it delicious), so I'm super happy that there are more stores I can visit! I felt that I needed to share this joy with everyone. As though it was a serious need.

By the way, I also use Twitter, so please feel free to follow me there. I don't tweet a lot though...

***

Now, let's move on to the acknowledgments. First, to my editor, Fujiwara, thank you for falling in love with my story. Sometimes edits went smoothly, but there were also times when you really struggled, weren't there? I'm sure it was difficult to soothe me when I complained, "I don't wanna do thaaaat!" Now that it's done though, I think it's really good work.

Next, I'd like to thank my illustrator, Mizutametori. Thank you for drawing the art for this book. Your Asura was exactly how I imagined her, so I was very happy. Every time you submitted a piece, my editor Fujiwara and I would fanboy together like, "Amazing! Absolutely amazing!" (Can I say this? Well, I'm sure someone will delete this if I can't.)

Next up is the advertising team. I heard that you will make a wonderful trailer for the book. I look forward to hearing from you. My future self is saying, "Thank you very much." (At this point in time, I haven't seen the trailer yet.)

Thank you to all of the judges who chose this book for a silver award.

Thank you to the many people who worked with me along the way to publication.

And to all of my readers! I truly thank all of you, from the people who first read it here to the people who followed along ever since it was serialized! I'll see you all in volume 2!



Moon Blossom Asura

~ The Ruthless Reincarnated Mercenary Forms the Ultimate Army ~

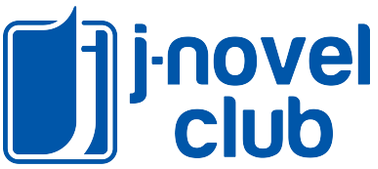
story by Sou Hazuki

illustrations by Mizutametori


Marx
Redford
Jyrki
Kuusela
Salume
Tikka
Iina
Kuusela
Vice-captain
Lumia
Canarre
Reko
Leader
Asura
Lyona
Members of the mercenary group Moon Blossom Asura


"We can always arrest you..."
Arnian Military Police Commandant, Circie Hermisallo
"Matias... Will you kill...the hero Matias?
King of Arnia, His Royal Majesty Arnia
"Why are you the ones who'll judge him for his sins?! That's what the military police are for!"
"I'm going to cut right to the chase: did you kill Matias?"
"I'm going to have all of you serve as my training dummies."
Fastest Girl to Become a Hero, Iris Craven Lily
Great Hero, Axel Ehrnrooth
Hero Candidate, Punti Arlandel


One of his subordinates looked up at the sky.
Following his line of sight, the commander looked up as well and noticed a silhouette out of the corner of his eye. A group of people were observing them from the rooftops. In the middle of them was a silver-haired girl whose face was stretched in a terribly dark smile. The mere sight of that expression made him feel as if ants were crawling over his skin.
A petal brushed against his subordinate's cheek. The next moment, his face burst.



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Moon Blossom Asura: The Ruthless Reincarnated Mercenary Forms the Ultimate Army: Volume 1

by Sou Hazuki

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Eric Wong

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