
SENTENCED
TO BE A HERO
The Prison Records of
Penal Hero Unit 9004
IV
Rocket Shokai
Illustration by MEPHISTO

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Demon Lord Sugaar was chasing them through the wind.

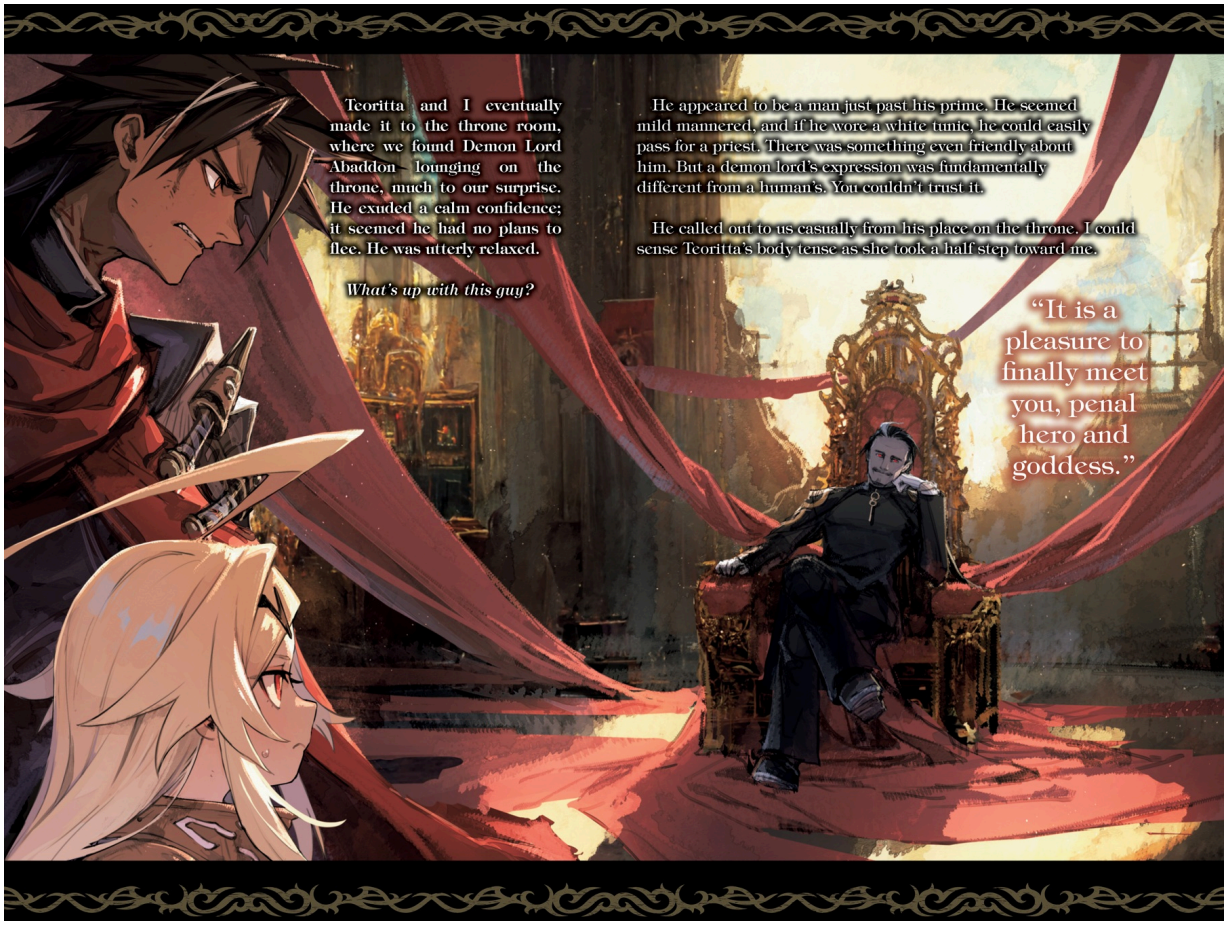
They'd been able to feel his bloodlust for some time now. His target was clear—the two of them. Jayce Partiract touched Neely's neck and conveyed the situation to her.

"It sounds like you're needed, Jayce. It's time," whispered Neely. "They can't start the battle without Jayce Partiract, the hero of the heavens. It's time to go. Don't worry. I know you can do it."

"Yeah. As long as you're with me, Neely."

She grinned. "Of course. I haven't forgotten our promise. Have you?"

"Never. No matter how many times I die, that's the one thing I'll never forget."


Teoritta and I eventually made it to the throne room, where we found Demon Lord Abaddon lounging on the throne, much to our surprise. He exuded a calm confidence; it seemed he had no plans to flee. He was utterly relaxed.
What's up with this guy?
He appeared to be a man just past his prime. He seemed mild mannered, and if he wore a white tunic, he could easily pass for a priest. There was something even friendly about him. But a demon lord's expression was fundamentally different from a human's. You couldn't trust it.
He called out to us casually from his place on the throne. I could sense Teoritta's body tense as she took a half step toward me.
"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, penal hero and goddess."

Sentenced to Be a Hero

IV

The Prison Records of Penal Hero Unit 9004

Rocket Shokai
Illustration by MEPHISTO

YEN ON
NEW YORK



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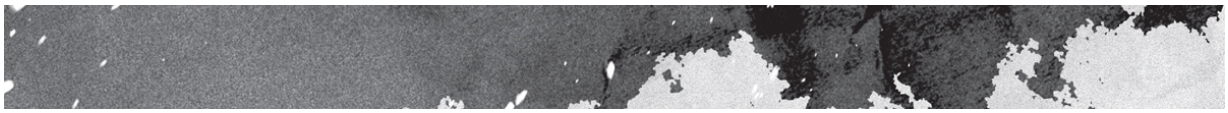
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Afterword





No matter how many times he saw the place, Galtuile's secret meeting room always depressed him. It was steeped in a gloomy, somber atmosphere, and the iron sculpture of the Federated Kingdom's emblem set against the back wall cast an especially disheartening shadow over the interior.

Would it kill them to liven this place up a little? wondered Lufen Cauron.

The sculpture made the windowless room feel even more claustrophobic; it was no wonder that his goddess, Niflaine, didn't want to accompany him here. She wouldn't be allowed to set foot inside, of course, even if she wanted to. Goddesses were strictly prohibited. This room was for secret meetings among the Holy Knights' captains alone, and they adhered to the strict convention of never divulging information regarding their goddesses, even to fellow captains. Nevertheless, Lufen's goddess, Niflaine, always

wanted to interact with the others of her kind, as if such rules meant nothing to her.

"It's simply ridiculous," she would always say. "We're like sisters, right? So what's wrong with having a friendly chat? It doesn't make any sense. I don't have many memories of my past, so I'd at least like to spend some time with my fellow goddesses!"

To tell the truth, Lufen more or less agreed with her. What was the point in concealing the goddesses' abilities from the other captains? If anything, keeping secrets would only hinder the Holy Knights' ability to work together as a team.

Whoever came up with that rule must've either really loved keeping secrets, or they were afraid that one of us would betray humanity.

Whatever the case, it was suffocating, and to make matters worse, the only man Lufen could share his honest opinions with was no longer a member of the Holy Knights. How many years had it been since Xylo Forbartz left? Lufen still wondered from time to time what could have happened to make Xylo do what he did. He had to have a reason for committing such a terrible crime. It must have—

"Lufen Cauron."

The sudden sound of his name made Lufen snap open his eyes. Apparently, he'd unconsciously let them close. The oppressive meeting room filled his vision, with its dreary sculpture and unnecessarily large table. Three other people—all captains in the Holy Knights—were present.

"Captain Cauron of the Sixth Order, did you hear what I just said?" asked a woman who looked to be getting on in years. Wisps of winter-white could be seen peppering her hair, but she was still in tip-top shape and would tower over most men if she stood up straight. "Don't tell me you were sleeping."

This was Mavika Reagar, captain of the Third Order of the Holy Knights. She was a seasoned warrior who served a goddess capable of seeing the future.

"I was awake, of course." Lufen Cauron lowered his head respectfully, though he wasn't a fan of the woman's strict attitude. In

fact, he found pretty much all of the other captains difficult to deal with. "I was just thinking about something."

"…Then how about you give us your opinion on the subject of today's discussion?" suggested one of the others—a young woman with beautiful golden locks. She was younger than Lufen and the newest captain in the Holy Knights. Despite her calm, serious expression, her eyes danced with mirth. She was clearly just messing with him. "If you've been thinking, you must have something to contribute. That is, unless you were daydreaming about some unrelated topic."

She was a prodigy and a former warrior priest named Savette Fisballah who was scouted by the Holy Knights and made the captain of the Fourth Order. Currently, she served a goddess who could manipulate the weather.

"I was obviously *not* daydreaming about something else. You want my opinion on the matter at hand, yes? Hmm…" Lufen appeared to search for the right words and scratched wildly at his head. At times like this, it was best to emphasize one's own stupidity. "Sorry. I guess I *was* sleeping. Looks like deep down inside, I'm just an unmotivated bum. My lazy eyelids close all on their own."





"That's no excuse," barked Savette, immediately shooting him down. She seemed to be enjoying herself. To be honest, she was quite a handful. Lufen pitied her goddess. "I can't let this slide, Captain Cauron. Will you submit a written apology later? Or maybe as punishment—"

"Project Saint," interrupted a third voice—a man in a black robe sitting in one corner of the room. His comment was abrupt, but that was just the way he was. As for appearance, he was sickly looking and gloomy, and reminded Lufen more of an undertaker than of a captain of the Holy Knights.

Once, a man had said of him, "*You've gotta be a savvy individual to be a soldier* and *run a funeral parlor.*" He'd made the comment right to the captain's face, too, and Lufen hadn't been able to keep from laughing.

"Project Saint has been officially approved and will soon be deployed in actual combat. If possible, we'd like to hear your opinion on this operation," he continued.

This man was a Holy Knight as well—Guioh Dahn Kilba. He was supposedly a nobleman from the former island kingdom of Kioh, and his goddess summoned weapons.

"…The Saint is already complete. There is no going back now. The chancellor and commander-in-chief have already cleared the project to move forward," Guioh said in a dismal voice, barely above a whisper. Each sentence resembled a sigh. "I was against the whole idea… Turning an ordinary little girl into a strategic weapon… It's simply not worth the danger."

Of course, Lufen had been briefed on this topic already.

The plan involved transferring the late goddess Senerva's powers into a human by transplanting her right arm and right eye, giving a single person both the ability to see doors and the key to open them.

The one chosen for this project possessed a truly unique stigma known as "Harmony," which allowed her to infect others and make them part of her. All stigmata were rare, but this power in particular was considered extraordinarily valuable, a rarity among rarities.

As Guioh had said, she was once an ordinary girl from a typical farming village in the south. That is, until the Allied Administration Division discovered her special talent. He vaguely remembered her name being…yes, Yurisa Kidafreny.

…Just because of her stigma.

That was all it had taken to seal her fate.

There's a captain in the Holy Knights with a stigma, too, thought Lufen. *I guess you gotta be as strong as they are if you want to survive with one of those things in this world.*

Even the Temple didn't have a firm stance on how to deal with those who possessed stigmata, especially since they were the source of the technology used to create sacred seals. By analyzing the powers of laypeople with stigmata, sacred seals were created that anyone could use. By combining seals, particular phenomena could be brought about, and all someone needed to harness these powers was the energy from sunlight. Some even speculated that this technology had come from another world, perhaps thanks to some goddess long ago who could summon technology and knowledge.

"Don't be so negative, Captain of the Tenth Order. I'm glad they went forward with the project." There was a confident ring to Savette's voice, as if she'd never once doubted her own genius. "There's no telling how useful the Saint and her powers will be, but if she can change the course of this war so we're no longer on the defensive and bring the Administration Division, Temple, and military together while she's at it, then I'm all for it. Even if she's nothing but a symbol or a figurehead, it doesn't matter to me. All we need is an opportunity to go on the offensive."

Her argument was extreme, but Lufen thought she had a point.

The military's stance was the same—they believed that what was needed was a large-scale, concentrated offensive strategy. The only thing lacking was support, and if the Saint could help bring around the Administration Division, the Temple, and the nobles, then there was no reason to oppose the plan. And if she proved useful in battle, then even better.

"We need to concentrate our forces and destroy the enemy's central stronghold, or this will never end," concluded Savette.

"…But during the Third War of Subjugation…a Saint was deployed and a settlement reached…only for mankind to lose in the end. Human culture entered a great decline, and records of that time eventually petered out. What do you make of that?" said Guioh.

"There was obviously some political misstep. It's clear from the records that the Third War of Subjugation ended in military victory and that the Saint helped the war effort."

"Are you sure? …This plan might well lead to failure in the end."

"What do you mean exactly? If we don't win this war, mankind will be wiped out before we even have a chance to succeed or fail."

As Lufen listened to Guioh's and Savette's exchange, he thought.

The Third War of Subjugation and its aftermath… Humanity came to an agreement with the Demon Blight, but then something happened that set our ancestors into a cultural decline. That much is well-known. But the records of that time are vague and unhelpful.

Perhaps the captain of the Seventh Order, a student of history, would have more insight on the matter. *If only she were here*, thought Lufen.

Now that Xylo was gone, she was the one person Lufen could talk to and the only other captain he considered a friend. He found the others difficult to approach, especially Savette, who seemed to find teasing him particularly entertaining.

"All right, allow me to move the conversation forward," said Mavika in a low voice. "I believe you have both made your opinions clear. I have nothing to add. The only one left is you, Lufen Cauron. State your view on the matter."

Mavika's indifference made perfect sense. She served a goddess who could see the future, so she had no reason to conjecture or prejudge. Whenever she participated in these meetings, she merely worked to keep the conversation on track. If her goddess foresaw a future that needed to be discussed, she would merely relay the facts.

"In other words, Captain of the Third Order…" Lufen called Mavika by her title, something he never got used to. "Your goddess didn't foresee anything regarding this plan?"

"That is correct. It is very difficult to see futures involving the goddesses, and when it comes to long-term ramifications, it is nearly impossible."

"Interesting. All right." Lufen nodded, but inside, his mood was dark.

He couldn't overturn a decision the military had already made, so he couldn't actively oppose the plan. There was no choice but to go forward with this and begin using the Saint in battle.

He thought of the girl with parts of the late Goddess Senerva's corpse patched onto her. It disgusted him, but everyone here knew how awful it was. Savette and Guioh were merely being pragmatic by keeping their discussion to how they would proceed with the plan. Mavika was likely the same.

However, Lufen knew of one person who wouldn't have hesitated to take an opposing view. And if Xylo Forbartz were here right now… Well, Lufen couldn't help but wonder how things would have been different. Xylo would have been vehemently opposed, and Lufen could imagine him hurling insults and dishing out sarcastic replies.

Unfortunately, that was impossible now. Xylo would never return to his spot at the captains' table. And Lufen could never be like him. He could never make himself burn with the same rage. The only thing Lufen could do was come up with a slightly better way to handle things.

"Our first goal is to reclaim the Second Capital, right?" he began. "Fortunately, we already have two orders marshaling on the battlefield in preparation, so how about we send the Saint there and see what she's capable of in a straightforward and relatively safe battle?"

Two orders with two captains: the overly serious Hord Clivios and the cynical, superficially polite Adhiff Twevel. Although both rubbed Lufen the wrong way, they seemed like they would make a decent pair in battle.

What's more, Xylo Forbartz and the penal hero unit would be there as well, along with their special goddess who could summon the Holy Sword.

The powers that be still had no idea how to deal with them, but the higher-ups at Galtuile appeared to be considering a change in their treatment. In other words, the penal heroes had avoided immediate punishment and prevented having their goddess put back to sleep. They'd simply amassed too many outstanding military achievements. The new goddess's powers were also highly restrictive, and those at Galtuile were likely still racking their brains over how to utilize her.

If possible, Lufen hoped to ease their burden somewhat. If the Saint was sent to the front line, then those behind the project would have to do everything they could to support her. Perhaps that would benefit Xylo and the others, who were sure to be tasked with reclaiming the capital.

"…If the plan ends up working," Lufen continued, "it would be good publicity for the Saint. If she gets really popular, we might even start receiving donations from the public. Uh… What does she look like? Is she cute?"

"Now, that's what I'm talking about, Captain of the Sixth Order. Sounds like you and me are going to get along real well." Savette nodded cheerfully.

I'd rather we didn't, thought Lufen.

"Appearance is important," she continued. "The people want someone who looks good. I do, too, of course."

"All right," said Mavika solemnly, reining in the others before the conversation got too off track. "I will pass along our proposed strategy to help reclaim the Second Capital. Captain of the Tenth Order, you expressed your disapproval earlier. If you have any further arguments, please make them now."

"…If the matter is already settled and we've decided to send the Saint into battle…," muttered Guioh drearily. He looked down, possibly intending to nod. "…Then I believe that this is the best course of action. My misgivings are about the project itself. I have no objections to this proposal."

"Very well," said Mavika. She stood and began walking toward the door. "I believe it is time you all see the Saint for yourselves. You

will be working together quite often from now on, so make sure to become acquainted with her."

"What?!" Lufen's eyes opened wide. "Is she here at the fortress? Right outside this room?"

"Hee-hee! That was the first thing we discussed today," said Savette. "You really weren't listening at all, Captain Cauron."

"Of course I was. I was simply worried that she might have overheard our discussion."

"There's absolutely no way she could have heard a thing. Where do you think we are? I swear."

Despite Savette's hearty laugh, Lufen was silent. She was right—this room was meant for top secret conferences. Even if someone outside tried to listen in, they wouldn't hear anything.

"E-excuse me!"

They heard a hoarse voice just as the door opened. It belonged to a girl with fiery-crimson hair. Aside from that one feature, she was perfectly ordinary. Except, for some reason, she seemed extremely frightened. She was rather tall but had her shoulders hunched, making her appear shorter.

What stood out most, however, was the eye patch over her right eye and the long, glove-like gauntlet covering her right arm. Those must have been the pieces of Senerva's corpse transplanted into her body.

"Um… My name is Yurisa Kidafreny."

The girl named Yurisa's cheeks twitched. She was probably trying to smile. Lufen felt a pang in his chest. She seemed desperate to please them.

"G-getting the role—being appointed the role of Saint i-is an honor. I will do everything in my power to be of use to you, so… um…" Her left eye had an uncanny luster as she stared at the Holy Knights lined up before her. "I vow…to bring victory to mankind…and glory to the nation."

Lufen had no idea how to react as the Saint vigorously bowed before them, and both Savette and Guioh must have felt the same. Unless he was imagining it, Savette's smile looked a little strained.

This is going to be rough, thought Lufen. *We'll have to start by teaching her how to stand up straight. After that, we can work on her conversation skills.*

PUNISHMENT: ZEYLLENT BLACK OPS, PART 1

The first to crack was Tsav.

Dotta wasn't with us at the temporary fortress, so there was no way to get our hands on any booze, and we weren't receiving any luxury rations, either. To top it all off, there was almost nothing to do for fun.

And so Tsav started gambling. Such activities were illegal inside military encampments, but it was the kind of thing you just couldn't stop people from doing. While soldiers in the Holy Knights were more inclined to follow the rules, those supplied by the local noblemen had no such reservations. In reality, underground gambling was rampant, and Tsav lost everything he had in the blink of an eye. He was really, *really* bad at that kind of thing.

One day, I asked him why he liked gambling so much when all he did was lose. The first thing he said was, "Well, I'm an absolute genius, right?" I immediately regretted asking. He continued, "Like, whatever I do, I'm better than most other people, and I improve

insanely quickly. That means I can't really enjoy the normal stuff people do for fun. And so a game of dice really hits the spot, because I have no idea if I'm gonna win or lose!"

"Seems like you mainly lose."

"I know, right? It's so weird. I mean, if you do the calculations and figure out the odds, I should be winning more often, don't you think? And I'm a good person, so shouldn't karma be on my side? It's bizarre. Do you think I'm being scammed? I don't know, though. I mean, I've made a show of punishing anyone that tried to cheat, so…"

I wanted to tell him that if he was really such a genius, he should put more effort into learning to cook, but I stopped myself. His taste buds were all out of whack, so I figured he'd only end up making something weird. Besides, I was already helping Patausche, our newest member, hone her skills.

Back to the point, Tsav had lost every last military note in his possession at an extraordinarily rapid pace. He was now in debt and being forced to do other people's chores. Rhyno frequently helped him out, since setting up temporary fortresses like these required a lot of heavy labor.

Thanks to the help of such volunteers, the temporary fortress Tujin Bahark was looking quite impressive only a few days after the arrival of the Eighth Order. That said, most of the work was done by shadow servants summoned by the Eighth Order's goddess, Kelflora. These were semitransparent humanoid beings that looked like shadows gathered up and molded into solid form. Each one was roughly the size of a child, and they could understand and follow orders. With enough of them, even heavy objects could be easily carried, and they were nimble to boot. As the shadows grew more exhausted, they became increasingly transparent, yet they never complained. They could even be used as soldiers on the battlefield.

Incidentally, Teoritta had been visiting Kelflora basically every day. The thirteenth goddess had been put under surveillance as punishment, and the Holy Knights had an unwritten rule that goddesses should avoid excessive contact with one another. Nevertheless, she and Kelflora always chatted for five or ten minutes

each time they met, and Teoritta would always return with some sort of small dried confection. This usually happened a little after noon, when I was productively using my precious break time to lie around in our unit's assigned barracks.

"Xylo! I will share this with you as a special treat," she said with a smug smile, as she always did. "Now, be good and share with the others, okay? You must not keep them all to yourself."

"Why would I want all this candy?" She was treating me like some unruly child who didn't want to share with his siblings.

"However, I will allow you to pick out your favorite first. You are my knight, after all, so you deserve a little special treatment… Please do not tell the others, all right?"

Perhaps Teoritta viewed me as a troublesome underling. It wouldn't surprise me if all goddesses saw mankind that way.

Just then, I thought of something I'd been meaning to ask.

"What do you talk to Kelflora about anyway?" I turned my thoughts to the other goddess: her silver locks and blank expression, her stiff face and curt, cold manner of speaking. I couldn't imagine the two of them having much of a conversation. "I mean, she hardly even talks, right?"

"Yes, I am the one doing most of the talking."

"Her expression doesn't change much, either."

"That is where you are wrong, Xylo. You simply lack a keen eye for detail. You should get to work on that. You have a lot to learn."

Now that I thought about it, didn't Senerva use to talk to Kelflora a lot as well? It may have seemed like Senerva was doing most of the talking, but maybe they were communicating in a way I couldn't see. I remembered one conversation in particular. What were they talking about again? I couldn't have forgotten. It was about some animal…

"Excuse me. Xylo, were you in the middle of your break?"

Shortly after Teoritta left, Venetim and Patausche walked in, cutting me off mid-thought. Something felt off. Weren't they supposed to be in a war council with the higher-ups right about now? It was far too early for the meeting to be over. Furthermore,

they both looked extremely depressed, as if spelling out the details of our next doomed mission with their expressions.

"I have some not-very-good news and some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" began Venetim, but I didn't have time to play his little games.

"I don't care. Just talk."

"All right, I'll start with the not-very-good news… It's about Project Saint."

"…The Saint?"

Numerous rumors about her had been spreading through the camp lately. Apparently, she was a human weapon with a unique stigma, allowing her to harbor a goddess's power to destroy the Demon Blight in her body. At least that was the sales pitch from the big guys at Galtuile.

It was absurd. They'd made a human into a weapon and were now using her as a symbol for the war effort. Who would come up with such a plan? There was clearly something wrong with their heads. How could they sacrifice a fellow human like that? It made me sick.

And they claimed she could harbor the power of a goddess in her body. I had an idea what that meant, and it was revolting.

"The Saint's name is Yurisa Kidafreny," continued Venetim matter-of-factly. "And she is officially joining our battle to reclaim the Second Capital."

"…That's a load of crap," I growled. Venetim jolted and hid behind Patausche.

"Patausche! Xylo is acting exactly how I predicted! Could you please explain the rest to him yourself?!"

"Galtuile has made up its mind," she said. "Saint Yurisa will be taking part in this mission. The military, Temple, and Allied Administration probably plan on using her as a symbol of the three groups' united front."

This worked out for Venetim, as I didn't wind up yelling at him. Patausche's tone, which was reasonable, with an undertone of suppressed disgust, eased my anger. She wasn't someone who could feign emotions—that was how she really felt.

"The rumors were true," she continued. "The Saint has Goddess Senerva's eye and arm transplanted onto her body… Xylo, she… She was once your—"

"Yeah." I nodded slightly. There was no point in trying to hide it. "And I killed her. But we don't need to talk about that now."

I made an effort not to think about my feelings. It was fine. This was no surprise. No one could harbor the power of a goddess without using their remains.

I forced myself to smile. It was all okay. This had nothing to do with me. I needed to be even stupider, more thickheaded, and more insensitive, or I wasn't going to make it. If I let myself stop and consider the situation, I'd want to rush straight to Galtuile and start slamming people's heads into walls.

"So? Tell me about this Saint," I said, deciding to ask the stupidest question I could think of. "What does she look like? Is she more cute or more beautiful? I need to know for strategic reasons."

"Hmph. There you go again." Patausche grimaced. A reasonable reaction. But I could tell she wasn't actually disgusted with me. She was simply playing along. I was grateful—the last thing I wanted right now was a serious discussion. "How is her appearance going to affect anything?"

"Appearance is important. She's going to be the face of a battle that will decide the fate of the whole world. If she's going to boost morale, she needs to look good. Are you familiar with the Siege of Vaidas?"

"The one where eighty percent of the castle garrison fought to the death?"

"Yep, that one. Inside one of the castle towers was an extremely beautiful princess who the soldiers devoted their lives to protect. But once the battle was over and they went to the tower to greet her, they found only a life-sized doll."

Whether this old tale was true or not didn't matter. It was the underlying message that was important: There were times when good looks could be used as a weapon, but it wasn't good to make your soldiers die for such things, either.

That's why Project Saint is a load of crap.

"…I swear, the way you talk…," Patausche muttered, a bitter, conflicted look on her face. "It reminds me of someone I knew in the Holy Knights. Savette used to speak like that… You're a little more difficult to deal with, though."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Don't look so angry when you're just joking around. You're scaring Venetim."

I glanced at him. He looked terribly uncomfortable, like he was trying to swallow a hunk of lead.

"Uh… Unfortunately, the Saint still hasn't arrived," said Venetim, dithering. "So we don't know what she looks like quite yet. It seems she won't show up until things settle down a bit more."

"Well, that's unfortunate." Actually, I was relieved. It was for the best if I didn't have to meet her. I might not be able to handle that.

"Y-yes… So we penal heroes…need to help pave a path for the great Saint's arrival," Venetim continued. This was probably the "bad news" he'd mentioned earlier. "We've been put in charge of destabilizing the enemy…from inside the Second Capital. You were specifically mentioned by name."

"Yeah." I'd been informed of this already. The captain of the Eighth Order, Adhiff Twevel, had brought the damn third prince with him and directly asked for my help. Obviously, a penal hero like me had no right to refuse. "I know. I have to work out a plan, right? Is that the bad news?"

"Th-the bad news…is that the mission was moved up somewhat."

"…'Somewhat'? How soon are we talking?"

"We head out tonight."

"'Somewhat' my ass! Get outta here with that crap! What's wrong with you?!" Before I even realized it, I was shouting at Venetim. He was now completely hidden behind Patausche.

She nodded, grimacing. "I have nothing to add. You reacted exactly as we predicted."

"Well, excuse me for not surprising you! Obviously, that is not happening. The plan will depend on Dotta, and I've been waiting for him to get back to figure something out."

"Y-yes, I completely understand where you're coming from," said Venetim, "but it was apparently decided that we would commence operations immediately."

"Who gave the orders?! Adhiff? Hord? Are they really that stupid?"

"No, it was someone even higher up. They were put in charge just the other day… His Excellency, Supreme Commander Marcolas Esgein."

"This is ridiculous!" I had heard that someone with the title "Supreme Commander" had arrived. And it seemed he was trying to win acclaim as fast as possible using whatever high-handed means necessary. "Why the hell did Dotta have to get sent for repairs at such a critical moment?!"

Dotta had suffered a severe injury during the last battle and needed to be fixed up. It would be several more days before he could get back to work. He'd been sent to a repair shop near Galtuile, but as usual, they were prioritizing regular soldiers. Now that we had an upcoming mission to serve as our next punishment, they might get to him a little faster, at least.

"Can you buy us some time, Venetim?" I asked.

"I can try. I have an idea, so let me see what I can do."

"Hey! Don't think you can lie to me! There's absolutely no way you have an idea. I'm guessing you expect to fail."

"…It probably isn't possible to postpone the mission, since the date and time of the Saint's arrival have already been decided. Therefore, I believe our best bet is to come up with a plan that doesn't involve Dotta, since we already lack manpower and resources…"

Without Dotta, our unit was severely lacking in supplies. We needed numerous items for Norgalle to create his handy sacred seal–engraved weapons, for Rhyno to use his cannon armor effectively, and for Tsav to snipe. The only one who could function as an infantryman without any supplies was Tatsuya, and he was out for repairs as well. We were in a real pickle. Jayce…would never leave Neely's side, and he had to save his strength for the attack on

the capital, where we'd need him in the air. We couldn't ask him to serve as a scout.

To be frank, this was the worst sort of mission, to be undertaken under the worst circumstances imaginable. Punishment was a very fitting name for it.

"We don't have much time until the mission starts, but Xylo…" Patausche gazed outside our tent with a grave expression. "The two captains have summoned you. They want to speak with you before we head out."

"…With me?"

"We left the war council early to come get you." She sighed softly, turning to me with concern in her eyes. "I have a bad feeling about it, but there's nothing we can do."

"I couldn't agree more."

"Listen, Xylo. We are a team. If something happens, don't try to handle it all by yourself. Talk to us. I know this mission is reckless, but you've got to rely on the rest of us. Don't come up with a plan that hinges on a desperate solo effort, and—"

"Okay, okay. I got it." I was used to lectures like this, and every time, I gave the same answer. "Don't worry. I'll figure something out like I always do."

"Were you even listening to me?!"

For some reason, my reply seemed to upset Patausche even more.

✦

"Hi, Xylo. So nice of you to stop by."

The moment I stepped inside the tent, the captain of the Eighth Order, Adhiff Twevel, greeted me with a faint smirk and a nod. He was a mild-mannered individual who spoke with a gentle tone, but his eyes were as cold as ice. His record on the battlefield was genuinely impressive. He'd traveled mostly around the east, containing countless outbreaks of Demon Blight and proving himself as a meticulous, well-prepared commander.

"What'd you want to talk about?" I didn't try to hide my foul mood; personally, I wasn't very fond of Adhiff. "Obviously, my opinion means nothing. So if you want to give orders, give them to Venetim. He'll pass them on to me."

"Venetim Leopool… What an interesting fellow he turned out to be." Adhiff wasn't an idiot like most people around here. He probably saw right through Venetim and knew that he was a commander in name only, with no business being anywhere near a battlefield. "There is no one more fit to be the commander of the penal hero unit. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Save the sarcasm."

"I'm serious. He has a kind of balance to him. Actually, let me rephrase that. He's so perfectly off-balance that he somehow miraculously holds you all together. At any rate, I find him fascinating, and a con man like him might be just the person to pull off the impossible."

"Enough about Venetim. What do you want?"

"Well, then… Let's first sort out this situation we're in." He took a seat in a small foldable chair and nodded. "Unexpected circumstances have accelerated things, and the mission will have to start far earlier than initially expected. Allow me to add that this was an order from the supreme commander, so there's nothing we can do about it. Therefore, we need to come up with a strategy."

"It's not like we agree with the supreme commander's decision, either," chimed in Hord Clivios, the captain of the Ninth Order. His usual grim expression seemed even more dreary today. He looked exhausted.

"The Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke, is essential to the mission," he continued. "That is how we will sneak into the Second Capital." Hord cast a melancholy glance at some stacks of paper on the table—evidence of hours of discussion and debate. "I asked the supreme commander to reconsider, as I believe we must exercise more caution, but he has made his decision."

"The supreme commander is itching to make a name for himself as soon as possible. A truly fearless leader." Adhiff's tone was undeniably sarcastic this time—he loved to make wisecracks like this.

"He brought a legion of his own soldiers to serve as the main force for reclaiming the capital. Considering the influence of the leading nobles, he determined that to maintain balance, he would have to place the greatest burden on—"

"I don't want to hear about politics," I interrupted. "You're putting me to sleep. We penal heroes have to follow whatever orders we're given. That's all there is to it, right?"

"Wonderful. That's Xylo Forbartz for you." Adhiff slapped his hands together a few times. It took me several moments to realize he was attempting to clap—that was how empty a gesture it was. "We're lucky you're still so sharp. I've always liked that about you, even back when you were the captain of the Fifth Order."

"Well, I hated you because you always sound so sarcastic. Are you trying to rile me up?"

"Oh my. Not at all. Do I look foolish enough to pick a fight with someone they're calling the Thunder Falcon?"

"Okay, now I *know* you're making fun of me!"

"…Stop with the pointless bickering," said Hord with a sigh. "We're wasting valuable time." He had a point. This was meaningless banter—one of the things he hated most. "Adhiff, quit trying to get a rise out of him. We need to use this time to discuss the mission."

"But of course. We are entrusting the Kaer Vourke to the penal hero unit. In the event something happens, we must be able to retrieve it immediately. Therefore… Kelflora."

Adhiff snapped his fingers and looked back, and someone who had been standing quietly by this whole time suddenly lifted her head. Inside the tent were Adhiff, Hord, me, and one other—a petite young girl with silver hair and a doll-like, expressionless face. This was the Goddess Kelflora.

"Lend him a shadow, would you?" said Adhiff.

"Mm." There was a little hum, so faint it could almost have been the sound of her breathing. "What kind of birds do you like?" she asked, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

"Huh? Birds?"

"Yes. Birds."

She held her hands out, palms toward the ground, as sparks shot into the air. Her shadow began to squirm and billow out like smoke. It floated up into the air and gradually took the vague form of a winged creature.

"What about a pigeon…or a swallow…?" Kelflora moved her finger as if she were stirring the smoke, transforming the shadow into each bird she named. "What kind of birds do you like?"

"I, uh—"

"Falcons. Right, Xylo?" interrupted Adhiff. *What an asshole.*

"Hey." I tried to stop Kelflora, but it was already too late.

"Okay. Falcon it is," she said. Then she stirred the shadow with her finger twice, giving life to a tiny falcon. It was around the size of my palm, and while it didn't have eyes, it did have something resembling a beak. Before another second passed, the shadow silently flapped its wings a few times and came to perch on my shoulder. "Put him in your bag. If something happens, he'll bring the key back to us."

"…All right."

"Do you not like him…? I suppose I could have made him a little cuter…"

"No, this is fine…"

Kelflora furrowed her brow slightly. She reminded me somewhat of a tradesman.

With the shadow falcon still atop my shoulder, I turned back to Adhiff and Hord. Adhiff was chuckling, for some reason.

"So is this what you wanted to talk about?" I asked. "Retrieving the key in case I die?"

"I am truly sorry about all this." Adhiff bowed reverently, but I couldn't take him seriously. This was clearly all an act. "We will have to leave the details of the infiltration mission to the ingenuity of the penal hero unit. I have high expectations of you all."

"Well, isn't that convenient for you."

"You know what? I'm going to be completely honest with you. I was convinced the mission would fail the instant Supreme Commander Marcolas Esgein made his decision to move up the schedule. At that point, the job of a proper captain is to minimize

casualties.” Adhiff shifted his gaze to Hord and said accusatorily, “Of course, there isn’t a single commander in the Holy Knights who would ever gamble away our precious resources on the off chance that the penal hero unit would come out victorious.”

“…Yes, that’s true. This mission in particular could hardly even be called a gamble. It’s impossible.” Hord awkwardly averted his gaze. It sounded like someone wasn’t a fan of our little stunt to defeat Demon Lord Charon. “If the mission is deemed a failure, then the Kaer Vourke must be retrieved as soon as possible.”

“So you’re telling me to either pull out quickly or screw up and die as fast as I can?”

“That isn’t what I’m suggesting.”

“Captain Hord is so kind,” said Adhiff. “I, on the other hand, like to be a little more straightforward.”

“I, too, am beginning to grow weary of your sarcastic tone,” snapped Hord. The two men’s gazes met, but a second later, Kelflora interrupted them.

“Adhiff,” she said. “At times like these, you need to apologize. Do you understand?”

“If that is what my goddess wishes.” Adhiff bowed once more, this time to Hord. The gesture was surprisingly sincere. “I apologize for offending you… And Xylo, there is one way we can support you on your mission. Do you remember what I mean?”

What a condescending shit.

But if *that* really was the only support they could give me, then I couldn’t waste it. The deal was that if I went along with the plan, they’d restore one of the many sacred seals carved into my body, returning one of my old powers.

“One sacred seal,” I said. “I get to choose, right?”

“Of course. Which one will it be? I’m assuming the seal meant for sieges? Or perhaps something like Carjisa to give you a wide-area attack—”

“Neither of those will help me sneak into the capital. Not only would they be poorly suited for the job, but they also consume a ridiculous amount of my internal luminescence.”

Both were powerful seals, but they weren't essential for this mission. What I needed right now was…

"I've already decided which seal I want." I rolled up my left sleeve and held up my arm, indicating a certain sacred seal engraved there. "We're in a hurry, right? Let's get this done."

"I suppose so." Adhiff smirked. "I wish you the best of luck, Thunder Falcon Xylo."

What a load of crap, I thought. Adhiff Twevel was a different sort of liar than Venetim, but he was just as bad.

PUNISHMENT: ZEYLLENT BLACK OPS, PART 2

The Second Capital of Zeyllent, once the heart of the Former Kingdom of Zeal and a bustling metropolis below a towering castle, saw its status shift with the birth of the Federated Kingdom. While its population may have been smaller than that of the Industrial City of Rocca or the Holy City of Kivogue, it boasted an especially solid defense system designed to thwart the Demon Blight. It had robust castle walls, cutting-edge fixed cannons, and even sacred seal–engraved defensive nets and shielding. And all of that protective equipment was still intact.

And now it was *our* problem.

"Sneak inside? I don't think that's gonna happen," remarked Tsav. "I mean, I'm a genius, and I could totally make it happen if I had time to prepare. I'd need to check their security, search out a route, prepare the necessary tools… Planning ahead like that is what makes you a good assassin. Otherwise, you're just some doofus randomly shooting whoever walks by."

"I'm pretty sure you've done just that," I said. "Several times."

"Ah! Now that you mention it… Wow, Bro, I can't believe you remembered something like that. You've got some real talent."

"'Something like that'? You're a notorious murderer!"

"But I only picked people to kill that I thought would be easy. If I could choose any town I thought I could sneak into, there'd be no problem. But we don't have a choice here, do we?"

What an idiotic conversation. But if Tsav said he couldn't do it, he was probably right.

"Dotta's a burglar," he said. "I'm not. I'm an assassin. Like, I don't think he plans out anything he does. That's some crazy skill."

"Yeah, I figured as much."

"I bet Dotta would just straight-up climb the wall with his bare hands. He'd probably find some sort of blind spot, too. That's impossible for someone like me."

"Climbing up the wall with your bare hands is certainly crazy, but are you saying he has some special power that allows him to find blind spots?"

"Hmm… Maybe." Tsav hummed in thought for a moment. "But now that I think about it, I bet Dotta would come up with an even more ridiculous way to get inside. His mind is something else. Like, think about what happens when Dotta steals from someone and then runs away. He always runs toward where the faeries are, right?"

"Huh? Oh yeah…"

Now that I thought about it, that had happened back in the Couveunge Forest. I'd been shocked when Dotta ran into me with that scorched terrain seal right when I was surrounded by faeries. It had seemed almost too convenient. The same thing happened at Mureed Fortress as well. When the mercenaries chased him, he ran right toward me.

Was all of it mere coincidence? Or did he think he had a better chance of escaping if he simply ran wherever there were fewer people? If you ran toward the source of the Demon Blight, people would obviously stop chasing you. But if that was his only reason, then he was just an idiot—beyond human comprehension.

"It's like Dotta functions outside the normal rules of the world or something," said Tsav. "You get me, Bro?"

I did not "get" him, but I understood that sneaking inside Dotta-style wasn't going to work. I had to come up with another way. The man with the closest skill set to Dotta's was Tsav, and he said it wasn't possible. That meant I had to get creative.

Neither Jayce nor Norgalle were any good in situations like this. I had already asked Norgalle if he could think of any tools we might use to sneak inside, but he'd also claimed it was impossible. After all, the penal hero unit was always at the bottom of the list when it came to supplies, and we hardly had any paint or other raw materials needed for engraving sacred seals. Up until now, as long as we could find something valuable to sell, we'd been able to buy what we needed from the Verkle Corp merchants. But without Dotta, that was out of the question.

"I have a novel idea for a weapon we might try, but we have neither the time nor the materials needed to create it," Norgalle declared in his usual solemn tone. "Anyhow, when do we start reclaiming the capital? I still have not reviewed the troops, and I don't remember ever giving permission to carry out this so-called Project Saint, either! Are you saying the high priests at the Temple silently consented to this? Commander-in-Chief Xylo, bring me whoever's responsible this instant!"

"Yeah, all in due time."

The furious yelling had started, so I decided to take off. If any of the higher-ups thought we were fighting, they might lock us up, and I couldn't have that.

But before I left, I made him a promise. "No matter how long it takes, I'm going to find whoever was responsible for all this and bring them to you, Your Majesty."

Jayce was more or less the same.

"Go away. I'm busy," he replied, clearly in a foul mood. He was glaring at a map of the Second Capital and its surroundings with Neely, seemingly trying to formulate a plan. Then again, he might have just been soaking in the sun.

"There has to be a demon lord that can fly. That much is certain, since no ordinary faerie could have stopped the capital's dragons. Dragon knights are the elite of the elite." Jayce was most likely right. "I've been hearing rumors of one named Sugaar… He sounds pretty powerful."

It was unusual for Jayce to describe an opponent as powerful with no other addendums.

"The humans tried to build a base on the front line, but their unit was completely wiped out," I said.

"Every last soldier was killed? I thought they brought dragon knights for protection."

It wasn't often that a dragon knight got shot down. Jayce grimaced before continuing as if he were talking to himself. "The issue is Sugaar's special attack. They're calling it a "Radiant Bomb." Not only can it track targets like our javelins, it explodes and can be used in rapid succession. The blast radius is supposedly massive…"

Jayce crossed his legs, then leaned back against Neely, as if he were sulking. The dragon reached over and bit down on his blue scarf, then fixed it back into place with great finesse.

"We've got to come up with a way to counter that attack, or we're dead," said Jayce.

"We might be wiped out before we even get to the air combat stage. We're being sent on a reconnaissance mission."

"Figure something out," he said curtly. "Neely and I are already handling all air combat by ourselves. Or do you have someone else that can take out Sugaar? Well?"

"If Neely can't do it, then nobody can."

I made sure to say her name and not his. Neely made a rumbling sound in her throat, and Jayce nodded, seeming not to mind.

"Glad we've come to an understanding," he said. "Now beat it."

There was no use trying to talk to him when he was like this. As I left the dragon stables, however, Neely let out a faint roar. Was she cheering me on, or apologizing for Jayce's attitude? Maybe both.

In the end, it was Venetim who found our breakthrough.

Despite being a penal hero, he was strangely well-connected, and not only with our fellow soldiers, but with merchants, war correspondents, and even religious civilians doing volunteer work. Through them, he heard all kinds of stories. One in particular had stood out to him.

"…I heard humans have been seen coming and going from the Second Capital," he told me that evening. I'd just come back to our shared barracks after an exhausting day, with nothing to show for it. "People are delivering livestock products from territories in the north and west ruled by the Demon Blight, and they're even being paid human currency. Supposedly, there are a few merchants mixed in as well."

"…Merchants? So that's how they're managing."

I had considered the possibility before. After all, the Demon Blight had to be getting supplies from somewhere. But I was a little surprised by how straightforward they were being about it. I always figured they had a transportation unit made up of faeries for things like this… But they were using humans? I'd assumed the shipments were coming from military bases and that they had faeries blending themselves in with the transportation units.

Both demon lords and humans needed food. That much was unavoidable, and there was no way that the Second Capital was self-sufficient enough to feed everyone. In other words, they had to get their food from somewhere else, and if it was territory ruled by the Demon Blight, then it was coming from settlements and nobles who had surrendered.

"So you're saying we can sneak in if we disguise ourselves as merchants? But…" Despite this being our only chance, there were a few problems with the idea. "…Without merchandise, we're shit out of luck."

"Well… I believe we could borrow some merchandise and a handcart from Verkle Corp. All we'd have to do is make them some money before returning the cart."

"We'd still need to offer something as collateral, though." At the end of the day, there was no way anyone would hand over their

merchandise or tools without a guarantee. "Or are you saying you can get someone to invest in us just like that?"

"No, Verkle Corp won't be that easy…"

"Right? Plus, you don't really see merchants working alone nowadays. The enemy would find it suspicious if I went by myself, so I'd need someone else to go with me."

"Yes… By the way, if I go with you, I am confident that I will only get in your way."

Venetim wasted no time reminding me of how useless he was, but he wasn't wrong. Just getting inside the capital wouldn't be enough. We needed to fulfill our role as scouts, gather information, and escape. Venetim would just be an extra body, and in a worst-case scenario, he might even slow me down or screw up the whole mission. I immediately did some calculations in my head.

Patausche…probably won't work. Think back to what happened at the Adventurers Guild in Ioff, I reminded myself.

Norgalle was out of the question, and Jayce was busy.

I could have brought Tatsuya with me as a bodyguard if he were here. *Perfect. Right when you need him, he's out of action.* He was a man of few words and always did a perfect job. He was an ideal infantryman…which only made his absence now even more painful.

It wasn't like I could bring Teoritta with me, either. This was a reconnaissance mission where her abilities wouldn't be needed. Bringing her would only put her in unnecessary danger.

In other words…

"I have to choose between Tsav or Rhyno?! I don't want to do this with either of them!"

"Yes… But if you *had* to choose…?"

"Stop! I don't even want to think about it! Besides, we still don't have any collateral for the merchandise!"

"About that… Please don't get mad at me, okay? But someone caught me talking to the merchants…"

"…Who?"

I didn't even need to ask; it was obviously going to be the worst-case scenario. In fact, I could already feel someone's presence

nearby. Without missing a beat, fingers lifted the cloth hanging over our room's entranceway.

"There you are."

It was my ex-fiancée, Frenci Mastibolt. She was a woman with iron-colored hair and a steely expression fitting of a Night-Gaunt, and she was currently glaring down at me with ice-cold, emotionless eyes, making it impossible to guess what she was thinking.

"What a miserable little room you have here," she said. "If you can even call this a room. You're a mess, Xylo. I cannot believe a member of the Mastibolt family sleeps somewhere like this."

She spoke at an even pace, but went on and on without stopping. It was the first time we'd seen each other in quite a while, but I was already tired of listening to her. She was supposed to be deploying more troops to Ioff. How did she catch up with us so quickly?

What happened to the Southern Night-Gaunts' army? Was her father taking command in her place? I supposed it would make sense, as he was their leader. But unlike his daughter, he was no soldier. He seemed to dislike fighting in general, and I imagined he wasn't having a very good time out there.

"I cannot believe this," continued Frenci. "I am going to have to ask them to speed up construction on that dungeon. Even wild animals sleep better than this. Does that former Holy Knight woman sleep in a room like this as well? What about the goddess?"

"They have a shack. It's a bit nicer."

The female members of the penal hero unit—Neely, Patausche, and Teoritta—were treated differently for various reasons. Neely always had a room to herself, Teoritta was obviously special, and Patausche was treated like her attendant.

"Oh. Well, I suppose that's all right. More importantly, we must discuss the mission." She seemed satisfied by my answer, though I had no idea why. "I will be your guarantor for this business. In return, you will sneak into and scout out the Second Capital as my husband. Even that onion-sized brain of yours can understand that this is the best opportunity you are going to get, yes?" Frenci brushed back her iron-colored hair.

Incidentally, onions were one of my favorite vegetables. Was she starting to tailor her insults? Not that it did anything to fix the base problem, of course.

"This way, the only thing you need to lie about is your status as a merchant, yes? Even someone with acting skills like yours should have no problem."

Speaking of acting skills, I had to admit that Frenci was competent. She'd even infiltrated the Adventurers Guild in Ioff completely unnoticed. But before I could get a single word in, she snapped her fingers.

"I even brought a man with me to act as your guard. I'm certain that even you would prefer to work with someone you're familiar with, and he was more than delighted to accept the role. I believe he said he was your partner?"

"Hi!" Without a shred of hesitation, a man popped his head out from behind Frenci and smiled. The expression was as aggravating as it was suspicious and pointlessly pleasant. "I heard the news."

It was Rhyno… I started to feel faint.

"Comrade Xylo, you are going to sneak into the capital, correct? I would very much appreciate it if you took me along."

During our previous battle in the Tujin Tuga Hills, Rhyno suddenly left his post, only to return later, dragging the remains of what he claimed was a faerie's corpse, saying he would use it for some sort of experiment. The results must have exceeded his expectations, because he'd been looking like a new man full of energy ever since.

"I promise to be of use!" he said. "If you need a guard, I'll be there for you. Yes, I shall be a bodyguard hired by Mr. and Mrs. Mastibolt."

"We will need to change the family name," said Frenci, "but let's go with something like that. I'm sure it's an honor, right, Xylo?"

"Wait… We can't have you walking into the capital suited up in your usual armor. Are you sure you can handle that, Rhyno?"

"But of course." Rhyno slapped his chest. "I have been in my fair share of scuffles without such protection. I'm especially skilled with a short spear, I believe."

"You're not sure? That doesn't inspire confidence."

"Ha-ha-ha. It's been some time since I've used one. But I think it will be fine."

Now that I thought about it, I'd never seen Rhyno using a sword or a lightning staff before. In fact, I'd never seen him grapple with anyone in hand-to-hand combat, either. Supposedly, he was once an adventurer, so he must have had some such skills… There was so much about him that didn't add up.

"…Give me a second to think," I said. My gut was telling me to turn him down, so I held off as long as I could. Would Tsav be any better? I didn't know what to think… This was an extremely difficult decision. "The plan itself could work, but we don't have much time to prepare… We need disguises and a solid story."

"Oh, that's my wheelhouse. I came prepared," exclaimed Venetim with a reserved smile. *What a piece of garbage.* "I'll do what I can to buy us some more time. I think I can manage around half a day, so let's use that to fine-tune the plan."

"How are you going to do that? Adhiff and Hord already told me to hurry my ass up. Didn't you say earlier that the time was non-negotiable due to the Saint's arrival?"

"I'm going to lie to them and say you two already left in the middle of the night," he said casually. Lies came as naturally as breathing to this guy. "So please make sure nobody outside sees you walking around."

"Thank you, Comrade Venetim," said Rhyno. "Comrade Xylo, I'm looking forward to working with you!"

"I will handle everything on my end with utmost perfection," said Frenci. "So try not to do anything reckless and ruin the entire mission, okay?"

Great, I thought. *I've got a really bad feeling about this.*

PUNISHMENT: ZEYLLENT BLACK OPS, PART 3

Once we had our cart, I loaded it with nonperishable foods: jerkies, oil-packed fish, dried fruits, and salt. Manufacturing salt had become a national endeavor a few years back, and it was probably pretty hard to get ahold of in the Second Capital. Of course, a great deal of it was likely circulating on the black market, but it was difficult to transport so far out and thus still a valuable commodity. That would be our in.

All that was left was to raise a flag featuring our company name "Bartzmas'," and we would look like real traveling merchants. It was my job to pull the cart, while Rhyno carried his one-handed spear. Meanwhile, Frenci's duty was to sit on her horse, reprimanding me. Hers was a cushy job, but I couldn't complain, since she was the sole investor in our company.

Incidentally, Patausche Kivia was furious when she heard about our plan.

"…What's the meaning of this?" Her voice was level, and her expression remained composed, but her pupils had dilated ever so slightly. "You're going to sneak inside disguised as merchants? Then why didn't you ask *me* for help? Obviously, I'm most suited for the job."

"…Why is that?" I asked.

"Because of my acting!" She slapped one hand against her chest. There wasn't a shred of doubt in her eyes. I wished I knew where that confidence came from. "Did you forget about what happened at the Adventurers Guild? My acting almost had them completely fooled!" she insisted.

"Relax. You need to look at this a little more objectively. You 'almost' had them fooled. In other words, you failed…"

"I did not!" Patausche looked like she was about to grab my lapels in a rage. "Didn't you repeatedly insist that Frenci was merely your ex-fiancée? And yet look at you now, all giddy that you get to be a couple while you play pretend in the big city."

"I am in no way looking forward to this."

If the idea of sneaking into the capital sounded fun to anyone, they ought to get their head checked out. Patausche, however, wasn't interested in what I had to say.

"At any rate, you need to recast this little play at once. I'm going with you. The plan will obviously fail without me."

"Xylo, what are you doing?" Frenci had gallantly appeared right in the middle of our heated exchange, already on horseback and dressed in merchant attire. "You do not have time to be playing with a woman like her. We must leave. Or do you want the mission to fail?"

"Wait. Frenci Mastibolt, I have an objection," snapped Patausche, pushing me out of the way and stepping toward the woman atop the horse. "For the sake of this mission's success, I want you to switch roles with me immediately. We need someone who can both fight and act, and I—"

"Unfortunately for you, I, Frenci Mastibolt, provided the money for all the merchandise you see here," she said, as if announcing her victory. "Furthermore, allow me to assure you that I am just as

skilled as you at both fighting and acting. Now, if you will excuse us, we have work to attend to." Frenci brushed back her iron-colored hair before offering the other woman a reverent bow. "Take care, Lady Kivia."

I could practically hear Patausche's teeth grinding as we headed out. Apparently, she was even more competitive than I'd thought.



Traveling northwest alongside the river from Mount Tujin took us to an old highway stretching from Mureed Fortress to the Second Capital. This route, known as the Horseshoe Trail, got its name from the countless soldiers and warhorses that had packed down the dirt beneath their feet. We would follow this trail along a rather lengthy detour to the east, leading us to the Second Capital's west gate, where merchants could supposedly gain entry.

The gate only opened in the early morning, and there was already a huge line. Security was tight and made up of humanoid faeries like knockers and dunnies. It seemed these troops were being led by a handful of humans.

I was actually surprised by the Demon Blight's handling of the gate. It was exceptionally crude. Soldiers typically considered logistics, and I'd assumed they would put together a transportation unit to handle things like this, but it seemed I was mistaken. The way they were operating was way too risky. Reflecting on the enemy's actions so far, I'd noticed they had a tendency to seize control of remote regions and then gradually expand their territory. This was the first time I'd seen them attack a major city in a central area. Perhaps they'd simply never had to deal with transporting goods on this scale before.

"If this is how they're getting supplies, then perhaps we should simply take out every last merchant, farmer, and noble who has dealings with them," suggested Rhyno. "That way, we could starve every demon lord and faerie in the Second Capital. I believe that's a rather good idea. Just thinking about it excites me. The only issue…

would be that the citizens of the Second Capital would have to suffer, too…," he went on, essentially talking to himself. I listened as he thought up this plan, then realized the implications halfway through and abandoned it. "What a cruel world…"

I was a little put off by how genuinely distressed he sounded. Regardless, having both Frenci and Rhyno made slipping through the castle gate almost disappointingly easy.

"We are merchants by the name of Bartzmas," stated Frenci, giving a deep bow to the inspectors at the gate. She had none of her usual confidence or noblewoman's elegance, proving just how skilled she was as an actor. She even wore a faint smile. "We sell preserved foods from the east, and we would love to do business if you agree to pay in the currency of the old kingdom."

"Preserved foods are always welcome here. You need human food to keep the humans alive, after all," admitted the inspector. He spoke in a detached manner, despite being a human himself. Maybe he had to think like that if he wanted to survive.

"…Stay calm, Comrade Xylo," whispered Rhyno, standing by my side. "Killing this soldier in a rage would only make the situation worse."

"I know… Wait. What kind of person do you think I am?" *I'm not pissed all the time for no reason.*

"How rude of me. I have a hard time predicting what will make you angry. Comrade Dotta and Comrade Tsav said the same thing when I asked them, so I'm close to giving up."

"You guys are all assholes."

Meanwhile, Frenci and the soldier continued their exchange.

"From your appearance, I assume you're a Night-Gaunt?" he said. "Who are these two men with you?"

"The one with the spear is our bodyguard. He goes by Noor, Devourer of Hearts."

I couldn't imagine a more unsettling name. Rhyno leaned against the cart, assuming a crude attitude.

"And this is my husband, Lloyd Bartzmas. If only he wasn't so unfriendly… Honey, please greet the soldier."

"…Hey."

She wanted unfriendly, and she got it. Only when she smacked me on the back did I show some respect and bow.

"My apologies," she said. "He's always like this. It makes our business much more difficult."

"Yeah, I bet," snorted the soldier, clearly mocking me.

I'll remember his face, I told myself.

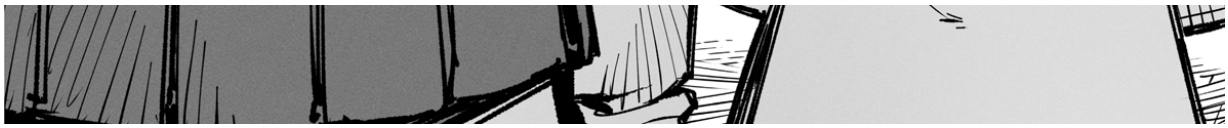
"You better be grateful that you have such a kind, hardworking wife," he said to me. "I know I am. I would have never gotten a nice, cushy job like this if it wasn't for my wife's sharp wit."

So working as a gatekeeper was a nice, cushy job? At the very least, he wouldn't have to worry about becoming some faerie's dinner, so I imagined it was one of the better jobs for humans in the capital. Rhyno patted me on the shoulder, as if to say, "Don't let it get to you." I wasn't even angry.

Frenci said a few more words, then our cart was manhandled by the inspector. They found the salt rocks we were trying to smuggle inside, which worked perfectly. All Frenci had to do was hand them a small pouch of salt rocks as a bribe, and they immediately gave us permission to enter the city. The only thing left was for them to inspect Rhyno's weapon. The entire process was anticlimactic, to say the least.

As soon as we received clearance to pass through the castle gate, the soldiers hurried us along. Judging by the crowd, it was going to take them at least several hours to interview all the people and inspect their goods. In fact, it was probably going to take all day.





For a merchant, it was only reasonable to want to make a few purchases while you were in the city. The biggest sellers in the Second Capital seemed to be crafts, especially tools engraved with sacred seals. From what I'd heard, the craftsmen's guilds were still functioning normally and producing goods in spite of the circumstances. Of course, they might be working under duress.

At any rate, we received permission to stay in the capital for three days and would soon be escorted to our temporary living quarters. We were supposed to be staying in an inn near the capital's central square.

"Frenci… There's one thing bothering me," I said.

"What's that?"

"Can't you be that friendly all the time?"

"…Excuse me?"

"I feel like you're always putting me down. Can't you try to be a little nicer?"

"That's because… I mean, I can't help it. After all, I'm always…"

"Always what?"

"Never mind." Frenci awkwardly turned away from me. "It's nothing. I'll keep trying to improve."

This was her trying to improve? She must have really despised my behavior.

This is gonna be a rough mission.

I had to make sure I was ready for whatever insults she hurled at me, no matter how terrible. Ever since we'd met, I had always disappointed her, and becoming a penal hero was no doubt the worst thing I'd ever done.

◆

Frenci was not happy when she found out we would all be sharing the same room. But there was nothing we could do about it, since they'd never allow her a room all to herself, and we didn't want to complain and wind up looking suspicious. Besides, it wasn't like we were going to be staying in our rooms all day. Rhyno had already

vanished, and Frenci and I split up and scouted different areas while keeping a low profile. I ended up covering a lot of ground under the pretext of purchasing new products to sell, though at one point I wandered down a strange alleyway, only to be shooed away by a faerie. When I finally returned, Rhyno was already waiting in our room.

"Greetings, Comrade Xylo! Welcome back."

Frenci was there, too, sitting on her bed with a hot, steaming cup of tea in hand. From the smell, I could tell it was the good stuff. She took a sip and glanced in my direction.

"…Welcome back. How did the scouting go?" It was very like Frenci to ask for the results first. "You are much more familiar with the Second Capital, yes? Is anything different from what you remember?"

"Small differences here and there, but nothing's really changed."

The Second Capital, also known as the Old City, had strict regulations meant to preserve its historic look, and major repairs and alterations to the streets were prohibited. That was probably why it was almost exactly as I remembered it.

Back when I was a Holy Knight, I'd go out on the town with Lufen or my men whenever we got leave around here. I had a lot of memories of the eastern redevelopment area, where we'd gotten into brawls at cheap pubs, secretly taken on dangerous missions from the Adventurers Guild, and tried our hands at exploring near-ancient underground passages.

That all feels like forever ago.

Everything was different now. But this was no time to be getting sentimental.

"I mainly checked out the eastern side of the city. Unsurprisingly, movement is restricted, but it looks like there are still some businesses running as usual. People need to buy daily necessities, after all. I doubt anyone's happy with the situation, but everyone is remaining quiet for now. However…," I said, slightly lowering my voice. "I heard rumors of a resistance."

"You too? I heard the same thing in the west." Frenci looked out the window.

It was incredibly dark, probably because most of the sacred seal–engraved streetlamps weren't functioning. The Second Capital used to be far brighter at night, with a downtown area that never slept. But now everything in sight was wrapped in a blanket of darkness.

"The demon lords appear to be searching for this resistance as well," she continued. "I don't know who they are, but the enemy appears to believe they are a threat."

"Let's just hope they're not completely useless."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they were imperial guards who escaped and are now in hiding. Knights of that caliber would certainly come in handy."

"It's still too soon to say. The enemy could have made up the entire story to weed out subversive elements." If we tried to contact them, we might wind up in a trap. It would be better to continue our mission independently. "What about you, Rhyno? You checked out the northern parts of the city, right?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have much to report. The main street to the north was closed off, and the only way to get there was to pass through a checkpoint… So I wasn't able to see much. It makes sense, though, since the castle is that way. I assume the demon lords are currently occupying it."

The north side of the Second Capital seemed even darker than the other parts. Maybe it was due to the shadow of the castle—now the lair of the demon lords, if Rhyno was right.

"So you just went for a walk?"

"Basically. I also checked out the south, however. Movement there is restricted as well, but there were a few facilities still operating. The entrance to the bathhouse seemed especially lively."

"Yeah, there are a lot of bathhouses in this city. They pump up hot water from a spring underground, and they've got sacred seal–engraved equipment to heat additional water, too. You saw those massive chimneylike towers, right?"

I pointed toward the numerous pillars visible outside, piercing the night sky. What made them fundamentally different from chimneys was the fact that no smoke came out of the top. Instead,

they were covered in glowing sacred seals, which made them stand out vividly even in the darkness.

"Those are heating towers used to generate hot water."

There were a few nearby the castle in the north that had collapsed. They must have been destroyed when the Demon Blight overtook the city. *They really did a number on this place, huh?*

"The biggest one is the whitish one in the central square. That one is called Kytre.

The word apparently meant "Tree of the Sky" in an ancient language predating even the old kingdom. *Yeah, I know. The paint may be peeling a bit, but it does look like a massive tree stretching up toward the sky, right?*

"It's a popular tourist attraction, and you can take an elevator almost all the way to the top. If you go on a holiday, though, the elevator gets way too crowded, and you have to take the stairs. It's one hell of a climb, too."

"Wow. Human culture is so interesting," mused Rhyno. "I had no idea admiring scenery from up high was such an important form of entertainment."

"You have no idea how to have fun, do you?"

"…You sure know a lot about the capital, Xylo," Frenci said peevishly. She'd been in a bad mood ever since we got to the inn. Had she been acting like this even while scouting? If so, she must've seemed extremely suspicious. "Did you go out every day and goof around like that?"

"It wasn't every day."

"But it was every time you had a day off, yes? And you went out with other women, despite being engaged to me?"

"I didn't go out with any women…"

"Can you say with absolute certainty that you never went out with one of those girls at your little military academy?"

"Actually, I can."

That was the truth. I'd never formed any close relationships with the girls at the military academy. In fact, I even had a hard time finding a partner for the mandatory dance at the palace.

"Really? Because I am going to look into the matter, and if I discover that you aren't being truthful, you will never hear the end of it. Am I clear? I know I have told you countless times already, but your lack of awareness when it comes to relationships is—"

"Hold on. We're getting way off track."

I stopped her before she made any more unproductive threats. She was still glaring at me skeptically, but we simply didn't have time for this.

"Allow me to summarize our findings," I said. "The citizens of the Second Capital are living under tight control, and the entire area around the castle in the north is heavily guarded. Additionally, there are rumors of a resistance."

"Whoever they turn out to be…" Frenci blew on her hot cup of tea dejectedly. "…I hope they do not do anything rash, since it would severely limit our options. It could even affect our planned attack."

"…Speaking of our attack, how would you do it?" Rhyno, who had been listening in silence the entire time, suddenly leaned forward with interest. He flipped open his ever-present notebook and began drawing a map of the city. The man was weirdly good at drawing, or at least his lines were abnormally precise. "Our objective is to take out the demon lords currently occupying the castle, right?"

"Yeah," I replied. "According to Adhiff and Hord's plan, we're supposed to break through either the west, east, or south gate and head toward the castle in the north from there."

I pointed out each of the gates on the map in Rhyno's notebook. There was a gate in the north as well, but it was far too close to the enemy's base, and far too small for a large army to pass through, so there was no reason to even consider it.

"So these three gates, yes? Then, Comrade Xylo, how would you proceed?"

"All the gates are heavily guarded…so the deciding factor has to be the situation once we break through. In that respect, we should probably avoid the west gate at all costs. I'm sure you've already noticed, but not only is it the most heavily guarded, but the terrain would also put us at a major disadvantage."

Merchants entered through the west gate, so there were countless soldiers stationed there, and the surrounding area was crowded with craftsmen's workshops. Put simply, there were too many tall, sturdy buildings. If the enemy set up a defensive line there, it would be a struggle to break past.

"On the other hand, the east side has an area called the 'Ash Tray.' It's officially known as the redevelopment area, but in reality, it's the slums. There aren't many tall buildings, and it has numerous small alleys going every which way. If I was going to strike, I would use the east gate or attack them head-on from the south gate."

The road from the south was exceptionally wide and suitable for deploying a large force. They could simply head straight north through the central square toward the castle and attack from the front. Once broken through, the south gate would likely be the easiest to handle. I figured either Hord or Adhiff would want to strike from the south. But regardless of our choice, there was a lot of groundwork we needed to lay first.

"I agree," said Frenci, nodding. She probably already had a map of the Second Capital in her head. "But I would like to do a little more scouting before we make any decisions."

"Of course. We'll continue tomorrow. We've managed to sneak inside, so we might as well get as much information as we can. Anyway, I'm going to report our findings to headquarters. I think we can ask for a little more time, so let's split up and see what we find."

"About splitting up… I have a proposal." Frenci glared up at me with a spine-chilling gaze as she sipped at her tea. "We are a couple, so shouldn't we work together?"

"Probably. We don't have that kind of time, though."

"I'm sure we can squeeze in an hour or so. Take me to that tourist attraction you were just talking about. You have enough sense to do that, right? Or do you have a mind as small as a snail's, incapable of being considerate?"

There she goes, I thought. I was about to get slammed with insults. Most of the time when this happened, I eventually caved.

She has a point. There's no guarantee we're not already under suspicion. Plus, I had good reason to want to avoid my stuff being

searched. *Should I spend some time with Frenci? We should probably bring Rhyno with us as well…*

As I thought this over, Frenci opened her mouth to hurl another insult at me, when—

Boom! A roar echoed in the distance, causing the ground to tremble so violently that the products we'd stacked on the floor began to sway, toppling a jar of pickles.

"…Oh?" muttered Rhyno. He turned to look out the window at the night sky. "An explosion? …It sounded similar to a cannon being fired. I wonder what it could be?"

Something appeared to be unfolding at the south side of the city. Smoke billowed into the sky as flames began to spread. The other visiting merchants staying at the inn with us began to panic. Peering out the window at the city square, I saw guards rushing outside, blowing their horns in alarm.

"It's the Resistance! Don't let them escape! Capture every last one of them!" shouted a soldier. Once again, I got a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach…and I was soon proved right. "Close the castle gates! Arrest the merchants staying at the inn! Somebody sneaked in some explosive sacred seals! Check everyone's belongings, and don't let anyone escape!"

Frenci, Rhyno, and I all exchanged glances.

"…This is bad, isn't it?" I said, gesturing toward the bag I'd been carrying all day. It held the Kaer Vourke and the shadow falcon I'd received from the Goddess of Shadows, Kelflora. We couldn't afford to let it be searched.

"Yes, this is terrible," agreed Frenci with a deep sigh.

Dammit. What's more, this was happening in the south, which meant attacking from the south gate was about to get much more difficult. We'd have to use the east gate. I had to relay this information back, no matter what.

"It appears the Resistance or what have you has taken action," Frenci concluded. "Xylo, have you been a good boy lately? Or is karma catching up with you for acting like a savage sasagane bear, cranky before its winter hibernation?"

"We shouldn't allow ourselves to become pessimistic, you two," said Rhyno cheerfully. "This could actually be an opportunity!" He held up one index finger. "It's chaos out there. What better time to take action than while everyone is distracted? How about we get out of here and try to make contact with the Resistance? If they're capable of this much destruction, then they must be a spirited bunch, and more than willing to join our fight."

Even Frenci was taken aback by this. "Xylo, is it me, or is this bodyguard extremely weird?"

"You're just now noticing that?"

It was always too late by the time you realized these things.



Tovitz Hughker watched the flames from a castle tower. The fire and smoke from the explosion were spreading out from a residential district in the south.

"It looks like everything's going according to plan," he said, looking back at his current boss. "This will stop the flow of merchants into the city. And with the annihilation of the Resistance, we can re-form the supply chain."

Standing behind him was the demon lord Abaddon. Although he appeared to be a well-built man in the prime of life, Tovitz knew this appearance was nothing more than a facade.

"Do you suppose we made it in time?" asked Abaddon, his voice flat. "I imagine you think we're a bit late, hmm?"

"Yes. Relying on merchants for supplies was never a good idea, since it allows anyone a way inside the city. We should form our own transportation unit to handle things from now on."

Even Tovitz was surprised at first by the demon lords' carelessness. Perhaps they'd simply never had to worry about such things before, since the faeries mainly got supplies from raiding. They would decimate every living creature in their path, then move on to the next settlement without any problems. This was the first time they'd taken over a large city and held it for any time. Now that

they were keeping humans as livestock, they were encountering new issues.

But they were being far too sloppy. Tovitz couldn't imagine Abaddon overlooking something like this. Perhaps he didn't plan to hold on to this city for much longer.

He's waiting for something. The Federated Kingdom's attack, perhaps?

Tovitz had no idea as to Abaddon's motives, however, and so all he could do was fulfill the role he was given: to protect the capital from subversive humans.

"I took the necessary measures, but they won't help against anyone already on the inside. So I stirred up the Resistance into acting. They're no threat, of course, but if there are any subversive agents among the merchants, I believe this will smoke them out."

"Very well. I'll leave the rest to you."

"It will be my honor. But…"

Tovitz hesitated a moment, before at last deciding to continue. His boss, Abaddon, hated secrets.

"If their trump card—their elite force—has already infiltrated the capital, then we're in trouble. I'll certainly lose to them in a fight. Could you lend me someone just in case?"

"Very well." The answer was instantaneous. *I guess he likes my work so far.* Abaddon's lips curled into an approximation of a smile. "What sort of person do you need? I will lend you whoever I can."

"…Aren't you worried I might betray you?"

"You won't. That much I can say for certain. Just one of my many powers."

Can he read minds? wondered Tovitz. *Or is he bluffing? Not that it matters. I don't have any thoughts I need to hide.*

"Then I guess I'll take you up on your offer. Can it be someone from the dungeon?"

"Of course. You are free to pick whomever you'd like. In fact…" Abaddon's eyes shifted to one corner of the room, where a man was hunched over by the window, reading a book. He'd been silent ever since Tovitz arrived, turning page after page. "You could even use him if you'd like. Boojum, you have no objections, correct?"

"Correct," the man replied, never looking up from his book. "Though I feel disrespected by your lack of trust."

"You have a worrying tendency to side with humans. It concerns me, even if you *are* the king's favorite."

"The king himself asked that I study and comprehend human culture. Abaddon, you must understand His Majesty even better than I do."

"Mm…" Abaddon gave a slight nod. He appeared to think on Boojum for a few moments, but Tovitz saw no change in his eyes. They reminded him of an insect's. Or perhaps they were more like mirrors, simply reflecting back the subject of their gaze. "Boojum, perhaps it is because you are something of a heretic that you are better able to meet the king's expectations. I can see why he calls you special."

"I hold no such views on myself, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps my worries are unfounded. I will leave this to you. I suspect you are more correct than I on all sorts of things."

The relationship between Abaddon and Boojum was hard for Tovitz to understand. Though Abaddon supposedly ranked higher, he seemed strangely hesitant when addressing Boojum. Perhaps he was wary of him.

"Well, then. I suppose you ought to get to work," Abaddon said, addressing the other demon lord. "Make sure to follow his orders."

"Of course," Boojum replied. "Tovitz, I await your command."

"…And there you are, Tovitz. Can you do it?" Abaddon smirked without warmth. "If necessary, you may order me around as well."

"Nice one."

"Ha-ha." Abaddon's flat laughter was accompanied by a few claps of his hands. "I'm so glad you got the joke. The man who previously held your position never understood my little quips. At any rate, I'm counting on you."

"I won't let you down… But, Your Excellency, please do not forget the promise you made me."

"But of course." Abaddon was a generous man, and his kindness was transcendent. He didn't care what his livestock got up to when he wasn't around, as long as nothing happened to hurt the quality of

the meat and nobody ran away. “I will tell Anise to stop by your room, so enjoy your time together.”

“You have my utmost gratitude.”

Tovitz thanked him from the bottom of his heart. In truth, he was practically bursting with joy.

PUNISHMENT: ZEYLLENT BLACK OPS, PART 4

Fire curled into the sky, quickly spreading to nearby buildings. The enemy struggled to douse the flames. Did the Demon Blight even have infrastructure for such things? Maybe they didn't care and deemed it a human problem. The scene was chaos.

Fortunately, this made it slightly easier for us to get around. We managed to leave the central square before the roads were blocked, and although it was a risky move, it sure beat having our belongings searched. Both Frenci and I were now holding the modest weapons we'd hidden beneath our merchandise. The four palm-sized knives and short sword I'd packed weren't much, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances. Frenci was wielding her usual curved swords, and Rhyno still had his spear. All we had to do now was continue to run without getting caught.

We hid in an alleyway and observed the soldiers' movements.

"They're a bit slow," said Frenci, "but it seems they're determined to seal the area off thoroughly."

Her curved swords were already unsheathed. Engraved into the blade of each was a sacred seal that emitted lightning when touched —a classic weapon of the Southern Night-Gaunts.

"The more thorough they are here, the looser security will be elsewhere. Let's make our way to the east side." I drew up a map in my head. We knew the commotion had started in the south. We should probably avoid that area and lie low in the east. The enemy might already have noticed our absence at the inn. And in that case, we needed to be quick. "It shouldn't be too hard to get through right now. We'll just have to take care of four or five guards."

"And we'll need to do it all in the blink of an eye," said Frenci.

"Think you can handle it?"

"Of course. Can you? You haven't been slacking on your training, have you?"

Frenci set her eyes on me and smiled. She seemed in a better mood, for some reason. *What a baffling woman.*

"Rhyno, back me up. You're the only one with a decent weapon, so you handle the faeries before they call for help—"

"Comrade Xylo, wait. What about that?" He said, suddenly grabbing my arm.

Toward the back of a narrow alley to one side, I could see someone shouting and running. He seemed to be fleeing, and I soon saw what was chasing him—faeries. These were the mid-sized, horned creatures known as bogies. A single, armed man was leading the charge. He looked like a security officer chasing after a criminal.

"Help…!" shouted the one running away. He was filthy and unkempt, covered in cuts and bruises. He must have tripped several times. Was he asking us to save him?

"Xylo, we are busy. We have a mission to take care of," warned Frenci.

I was in complete agreement. We were still pretty far away from this troublesome bunch; we could easily lose them if we ran. Rhyno, however, continued staring at me, apparently deep in thought.

"I've heard her opinion, but what do you think, Comrade Xylo? Is this where we go our separate ways?" His tone was casual, but he'd

just made it clear he was going to try to save the guy no matter what we did. Even Frenci was taken aback.

"Surely he is joking. Xylo, how is this man still alive? Even worms have better survival instincts."

Don't ask me. Rhyno was just like this—it was something I'd known for a while. He was the kind of guy who would ignore orders on the battlefield to save settlers left to die by the higher-ups. He liked to take risks for little gain; if he was a regular soldier, he'd probably have been executed long ago. *Go get yourself killed, for all I care*, I wanted to tell him. *Don't get a bunch of poor conscripts mixed up in your stupid schemes! Asshole.*

I never should have brought this guy with me. I should have picked Tsav. I wasn't any happier with that piece of crap calling for help, either. He could have chosen any direction, and he just had to run toward us.

"Frenci, I want to know why they're chasing him," I said.

"Have you lost your mind? Think of the mission."

"I know. Our mission is…" I paused for a second before letting out an amused snort. "To reclaim this city and its people. And that includes that random dumbass over there. We penal heroes aren't allowed to disobey orders, so unfortunately, you're gonna have to go ahead without us."

I unsheathed my short sword and dashed past the fleeing man, straight into the pack of faeries. I counted four of them.

"Thank you, Comrade Xylo. This is why I respect you so much."

Who needs respect from a freak like you? I thought, sensing Rhyno close behind.

I slipped past a bogie's horn, then shoved my blade into the back of its neck. The short sword, with its wide, single edge, was hefty enough to lop off a human arm—flesh, bone, and all. A bogie's soft neck was nothing.

One down.

The next enemy was more cautious and tried to slip into my blind spot. But just as it leaped to the side, I activated my flight seal, Sakara, and propelled myself up above the creature's head. *Good luck finding a blind spot now*, I thought as I swung my blade.

Two down.

Rhyno had already taken care of the others. The tip of his short spear was curved in the shape of a thick leaf, and when he swirled it, it cut as well as a blade. It seemed his weapon wasn't only good for thrusting. As he sliced into the bogies' bodies, he stabbed each of their hearts two or three times for good measure. It was a vivid, gruesome sight.

Only the human soldier was left… But I could tell the battle was over without even looking.

"Do you have any idea how pressed we are for time?" grumbled Frenci. "You two are unbelievable."

The Southern Night-Gaunts were masters of the curved sword. One touch of their blade discharged a lightning shock so powerful, any opponent was instantly neutralized. I couldn't be sure if she'd used the lightning this time, however.

"Xylo, Rhyno, I cannot even find words to express how foolish this was. What were you two thinking? Especially you, Xylo! Not only are you a member of the Mastibolt family, you are the leader of the penal hero unit in all but name! Do you call this solid judgment? How are you going to explain—?"

"Wait." I slammed my left fist into the alleyway wall, halting Frenci's stream of insults. "This isn't over yet."

I could hear a shrill roar cutting through the night. This sound, however, had been tuned so that only I could hear it.

Loradd, a probe seal, was developed primarily to find enemies via echolocation. However, there were several nonstandard ways to make use of it as well. This was the sacred seal I had chosen for this mission. It seemed much more useful than something geared toward destruction, and at the moment, I felt justified in my decision.

"There's something coming from above."

I could sense them drawing near. Loradd—the seal on my left arm that emitted the vibrations—and another for detection, engraved on my back, were a pair meant to be used together. Their maximum range of effectiveness was around two hundred steps, allowing me to accurately detect anything the vibrations touched in that radius.

That was how I'd noticed the two humanoid faeries above us, each the size of children. *Brownies, no doubt.*

They leaped down from above, swinging their sharp claws. They were surprisingly quiet, but they weren't much of a threat in such a narrow alleyway, as long as you noticed them before they ambushed you.

"*Sigh*. Unbelievable."

Frenci continued to complain, but she quickly took up her swords again. Her iron-colored hair painted a crescent in the air as she disposed of one of the incoming brownies in a single swing. She didn't even have to activate her lightning seal. I used my short sword to promptly take out the other.

"I'm impressed. I was worried they might call for backup," I said, paying Frenci a compliment. I figured she wasn't interested in any explanations.

As expected, she merely narrowed her eyes, a sour look on her face. "We'll discuss your actions later."

"Yeah. I'll be sure to punch Rhyno then, too," I said, turning to him. "Don't try to dodge."

"Wh-what? Me?" Rhyno's off-putting smile faded, and he appeared to think about something. His expressions were always exaggerated, but I got the feeling he really was racking his brains this time. "…It doesn't make any sense. Why would Comrade Xylo be angry with me? We just worked together to save a citizen from being slaughtered by faeries, did we not?" He seemed genuinely confused, which only made me angrier.

This wasn't part of the plan. It was obviously a mistake, and yet I felt like trying to explain that to Rhyno would only waste more time.

"Xylo, I am not finished with you. Listen to me." It sounded like Frenci wanted to start arguing again. She poked me right between the ribs, something I always found particularly painful. "Are you penal heroes always doing things like this? I thought that incident at the Adventurers Guild was a one-time screwup. There truly is no time to waste. We must have you pardoned as soon as possible."

"Leave it… I don't want to cause your father any trouble."

"'Trouble'? How can you say that with a straight face? You are already causing trouble for everyone around you. What you need are prudence and human judgment. Even insects have better risk management instincts than you!"

That comment had given me a chance to strike back, and I had a lot of things I wanted to say to Frenci.

"Hold on a minute. You're the one who needs to work on risk management. First off, stop walking ahead of us. What if you get hurt?"

"H-huh?"

"From now on, stay back. Don't underestimate the enemy. Your life is far, far more important than ours, and if something happens, I have to protect you."

"…Guh. Why does he have to act like this now?!" Frenci muttered. She covered her face with her hands and fell silent. Had she finally started listening? If something happened to her, I could never face Frenci or her father again. Rhyno and I were penal heroes, so it didn't matter how badly we got hurt. Even if we died, we could be brought back to life. But Frenci was different. That was all there was to it.

During this exchange, Rhyno was helping the man we'd just saved sit up.

"Hey there," he said with a smile. "You okay, sir? Any injuries? You hurting somewhere?" There was something off about his demeanor, though…

Oh right. He's pretending to be a bodyguard. He must still be trying to keep up the act.

"You're lucky you ran into us," he went on. "We're traveling merchants. Just arrived at the capital, so we're not too familiar with __"

"Rhyno, drop the act. Look around you. It's over, and we need to go."

"Hmm? Really?"

I patted Rhyno on the shoulder to stop him before he wasted any more time rambling. More importantly, I had a good idea who

this terrified citizen was. Why else would a soldier and a bunch of faeries have been chasing him?

"I heard a soldier yell something about the Resistance the moment he saw the explosion. And I've heard the rumors." I peered into the man's eyes. They reminded me of a deer's, as did the rest of his face. "Are you part of it?"

"…Who are you?"

Caution immediately clouded his expression, but there was still a chance he might trust us. He was skeptical and suspicious. After all, we'd just effortlessly slaughtered the faeries pursuing him.

I was still hoping to get some useful information out of him, however. That was the whole reason I'd agreed to save him. I wasn't doing charity work like that idiot Rhyno, so Frenci really had no right to complain. I swear I wasn't just looking for excuses for my actions, either.

"We're here to save you," I said. "We're secret agents working for the Federated Kingdom's Ninth Order of the Holy Knights."

I imagined Hord's glum expression as I casually lied, gently wrapping my hand around the back of the man's neck. It probably looked like I was trying to calm him, but I was actually just making sure he couldn't run away.

"If you're a member of the Resistance, then we need to talk," I continued. "I want you to take me to your base."

He looked away, tears welling up in his eyes. "…I—I can't. The Resistance has fallen."

"What?" This was not how I expected this conversation to go. It felt like someone had poured a bucket of ice-cold water over my head. "Excuse me?"

"I am the head of the Resistance. That explosion you saw—that was the warehouse we were using as a hideout. We just burned it to the ground." As he spoke, I began to grow dizzy. "There's a place we promised to meet up if something happened, but who knows how many of us are still alive? Th-things can't get any worse…," he muttered through tears.

So this was our reward for saving him. I clicked my tongue in frustration, but Rhyno seemed pleased.

"How lucky for us. One member of the Resistance is still alive, and if things can't get any worse, then it's time to turn the tables and fight back. Let's get to it, Comrade Xylo!"

"Xylo, I know I was the one who chose this Rhyno fellow." Frenci looked at me with a straight face. "But I am starting to worry that I made a very, very bad choice."

"You're as sharp as a tack, Frenci. I only wish you'd figured that out yesterday."

But we didn't have time to dwell on the past. When I looked up, I saw that the chaos was gradually spreading out from the central square. They must have been widening their search area and blocking off all routes of escape—perhaps even this one.

"At any rate, we need to get out of here," I said. "Take us to the meeting spot."

"I—I told you! It's over!" The deer-faced man's voice had become nasally. He was practically sobbing now. "There's nowhere to run… I bet they've already blocked off every possible escape route."

"Then we'll use a path they can't seal off, and I'll make sure they can't track us, either." I patted the small bag on my back containing the Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke. This would allow us to lock and unlock any sacred seal–locked door in the Second Capital—a true master key. We'd been given a real handy item, and I was going to make full use of it. "Let's take the underground waterway. I know of a few maintenance entrances for the hot springs."

"What a brilliant idea," said Rhyno, smiling. His expression was so pleasant, I wanted to punch him right in his stupid face. "It's so refreshing to finally do something spy-like, especially since almost nothing has gone according to plan."

And whose fault do you think that is? I thought as I jammed an elbow into Rhyno's side.

✦

The repair shop was some distance from Mount Tujin, and Dotta Luzulas was already tired from the moment he and Tatsuya were released.

Can't I get a few days off to rest up? he thought. *Maybe I can take an especially long route back and check out a few villages and towns alongside the great river of Kinja Sheba.*

His plans were ruined, however, when a woman arrived saying she was there to pick them up. She had smoky-red hair and a strangely sharp gaze. Her right arm was wrapped in bandages.

"Time to go, Dotta Luzulas," she said. "Or should I say 'Hanged Fox'?"

The woman's name was Trishil. She was a former mercenary-turned-soldier, and the scowl on her face sent a shiver down Dotta's spine. He didn't recognize her. Maybe he was suffering memory loss from all those times he'd been brought back to life.

"You're rejoining your unit, right? Get on your horse. I was told this Tatsuya fellow can ride a horse, too, as long as he's ordered. Is that correct?"

"Um." Dotta stared at Trishil, puzzled. "Uh… I don't mean to be rude, but…" At last, he made up his mind and asked: "Who are you?"

"I am Trishil. I already introduced myself to you earlier. I'm Trishil of the Burning Eyes."

"Oh… Uh… Sorry, I don't remember you."

"I figured as much. It's humiliating, but no matter. My only goal is to get you back onto the battlefield as soon as possible."

"Wh-why?" squeaked Dotta. "This makes no sense. What kind of evil organization hired you to do this?!"

"I'm forbidden to say. I wish it didn't have to be this way, but there's nothing I can do. Dotta, do you remember being interviewed by a man with a vile smirk when you were sentenced to become a hero?"

"N-no… Who are you talking about? Some big shot in the military?"

"Then forget about it! You wouldn't understand even if I told you!" She twisted her lips and squeezed her horse's reins with her bandaged right hand. Dotta caught a flash of her sharp canines.

“I have a personal stake in this as well,” she went on. “Listen, Dotta. I’m gonna train you, because I refuse to believe that some pathetic, third-rate petty thief bested me!” Trishil glared at him. A murderous rage burned in her eyes. “But first, we need to head back to the battlefield. Don’t even think of trying to run away, unless you enjoy pain! I can find you, wherever you are, as long as I have this stigma…” She pulled down her collar, revealing a black birthmark-like pattern near her collarbone. “There’s no way you can escape me. I won’t stop until I’ve made you a man. I’m gonna turn you into the greatest warrior in all of history!”

“Uh…”

“Now hurry. It seems you’re needed for an undercover mission in the Second Capital.”

“That sounds like the last thing I wanna do. Can’t I just go home?”

“Do you even have a home outside the penal hero unit?”

“No, but still.”

After losing the will to argue any further, Dotta glanced to his side. Tatsuya had fallen asleep with his eyes half-opened. He was making a strange, throaty gurgle.

“Geh-geh,” he groaned. The frog-like noise sounded almost like a laugh.

PUNISHMENT: ZEYLLENT BLACK OPS, PART 5

The actual state of the Resistance was far worse than I had imagined. In short, I was disappointed. That was my main impression. There were barely twenty members, and that included people still in hiding somewhere in the city.

There was an issue with the quality of the members as well. I was hoping for a group of soldiers and city police who had the ability to strategize. At the very least, it would have been nice to have some public officials who had worked at the castle or big shots from the world of commerce and industry.

But according to the deer-faced man…

"…I used to be an adventurer," he admitted, stunning both Frenci and me. He introduced himself as Madritz Keynan—a name associated with the former Kingdom of Meht. He was also the leader of the Resistance, aka the Mole's Nose. "I got together all the ruffians and people I knew from my time as an adventurer…and created the Resistance."

Once we reached the aforementioned meeting spot, we were finally able to settle down and relax. It was in one corner of a residential district meant for the less fortunate classes and far from the main shopping district. In other words, we were now in the Ash Tray on the east side of the city.

We decided to hear the man out and were taken to a room in a communal apartment. The space was cramped, to put it mildly.

There, Madritz explained how the Demon Blight had greatly reduced the population and how a mandatory reassignment of the city's housing had left this place practically empty and free for them to use. That was how they'd avoided the guards and stayed hidden for so long.

We blocked up the windows and used sacred seal talismans for light, then we boiled some water in the basic cookware we'd brought along and ate a simple dinner while listening to Madritz's story. Our food consisted of flattened wheat dumplings, sprinkled with salt and spiced with a little sleewak powder, which was certainly better than nothing.

"So the resistance movement was made up of adventurers, huh?" I said, while sipping some leftover juice from the dumplings. "But why would people like you join a resistance movement? Wouldn't it be better to have some soldiers or government officials?"

"Yes, but they all either turned into faeries or ran away or were assigned roles watching over their fellow humans for the Demon Blight…"

There was a hint of desperation in Madritz's smile. It sounded like there weren't any soldiers loyal enough to the royal family to join in a revolt.

But that made sense. Those people had probably all died trying to protect the capital when the Demon Blight came, and the survivors had sacrificed themselves to help the third prince and princess escape. In short, we couldn't rely on the remaining soldiers for anything.

"At the end of the day, we adventurers were seen as a reserve food supply, since the Demon Blight seems to prefer using criminals

and outsiders first. If we didn't do something, we'd just be waiting our turn to be eaten."

In other words, the Resistance was a group of thugs and rogues.

"That's rough. So there aren't any regular citizens in your group?"

"All of them…are just trying to protect themselves and their families. They'd rather buy time by letting us get eaten and wait to be saved by the military…or else they're doing their best to impress the Demon Blight into giving them an administrative position." Madritz sucked in a breath, then made a throaty sound I suspected was meant to be a laugh.

Interesting. It seemed the Demon Blight was working out a rather clever way of managing the humans. They'd let the rebellious and the weak die out, leaving only the obedient and smart ones. It was a good strategy, and it pissed me off. I didn't even know why it made me so angry.

"To be honest," said Madritz, "we were just a group of outcasts desperate to survive, who secretly banded together…"

"It sounds like your group was not so secret, though, was it?" Frenci pointed out. Her harsh tone and blank expression made Madritz shrink back. "They took care of you in one fell swoop. There must have been a traitor among you, yes?"

"…There was. A father named Kevil. He ratted us out… Was it that obvious?"

"Of course. In fact, I could come up with numerous ways to expose a sloppy little club like yours. You were essentially doing no more than playing pretend."

"U-um." Madritz shrank back even further and shifted his gaze toward me in desperation. He looked like he was about to cry. "Um… Excuse me. This woman really frightens me…"

"Listen," I said. "She's being a lot nicer than someone who just pats your back and gives you a few vague words of encouragement. She's pointing out what you did wrong. You know your group was garbage."

"Urgh…" Madritz groaned and turned to Rhyno. But here, too, he received no warmth or kindness.

"Mm. I'm not surprised by what happened at all. You're quite lucky you ran into us." Instead, Rhyno offered his special brand of over-the-top optimism, with a dash of the unsettling. "Now you'll have another chance to reclaim the capital and ensure victory for mankind. You should be thrilled! We won't let your bravery or your life go to waste."

Madritz looked troubled. Or maybe he was simply staring hard at Rhyno's face. Come to think of it, Rhyno had said he used to be an adventurer. By some chance, did Madritz know him…?

"Hey, uh… Are you…?" Madritz began hesitantly. He was staring at the spear by Rhyno's side. "Are you the Slithering Shark? Rhyno Molchet, the Slithering Shark?"

It seemed I was right. My gaze naturally shifted to the man in question. He was by far the most mysterious member of our unit… Well, I supposed everyone had a past full of mysteries, but Rhyno was certainly no exception. And "Slithering Shark"? That was quite the nickname.

"Wow, Rhyno," I said. "I had no idea you were called something like that. How'd it happen?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes… In the past, I was an adventurer, and I spent a lot of time in the ruins. I often got into scuffles with other adventurers down there. Perhaps people saw me as some sort of vicious creature lurking underground?"

"I don't think most people would call those 'scuffles'…" Madritz stared at Rhyno with a look of pure terror. "You were famous—er, *are* famous, for killing other adventurers. Anyone who's done business in the north knows your name… There are even rumors that you killed people you were working with."

"I see…" Rhyno placed a hand on his chin, as if he were deep in thought. For a moment, the atmosphere grew tense. I got the feeling he hadn't wanted anyone to find out about his past. "You must have known me back then. Perhaps we met somewhere before? I must admit, I don't remember you."

"We haven't met… I've just heard of you. There were rumors you were going to raid the ruins at Origin's Gate, right? I was just a

rookie back then… But I saw you and that huge party head off from some distance away."

Origin's Gate. I vaguely remembered a ruin by that name, located in a territory already under the Demon Blight's control. So Rhyno had gone to raid the place? The more I found out about him, the more confused I got.

"What happened to the team you went with?" asked Madritz. "Like Dica? And Sedon? …Did they all die there?"

"Yes, something like that," Rhyno replied ambiguously, then he put on that suspiciously pleasant grin of his.

I bet he killed them all, or something equally nasty. Maybe he even lied about volunteering for the penal hero unit.

"Who cares about this man's past?" Frenci interrupted coldly. "Right now, we need to discuss our next steps. Madritz, you and your men being exposed so easily has made it extremely difficult for us to act. Xylo, is there any way you could explain the situation to our allies outside the city?"

"Actually, it's just about time for us to report in."

I touched the sacred seal on the nape of my neck. Its range wasn't exactly unlimited. Norgalle could probably ramble for hours on how it worked, but I only knew two things about it: The weather affected the call's quality, and distance mattered. For that reason, Venetim was supposed to move closer to the city at set times so we could be sure the signal would reach in case anything happened.

"I'll relay our findings and tell them what we're up to. That's all I can do, though."

We needed to think, and I was already feeling a headache coming on. A group calling itself the Resistance had fallen apart because the members had been incentivized to rat one another out. I got the feeling this strategy hadn't come directly from the Demon Blight. At least, no demon lord I knew of had ever tried something like this before. That meant there was someone capable of strategizing willingly helping the enemy. Things were looking worse and worse.

"I doubt they'll change their strategy no matter what I tell them," I said. "Our goal is still to sabotage the Demon Blight while

our allies attack from outside. The only question is how we're going to do it."

"Which means we have no time to loaf around here," said Frenci.

"We have the Kaer Vourke, so we can open any gate, but we'll need to be able to hold it until our allies attack. As for sacred seal weapons… Even I could probably come up with something if we had the base materials, but…"

When I joined the military, we learned how to engrave simple sacred seals, but even the most basic seals required special varnish, materials, and a lot of patience and time, especially if you wanted to craft something as intricate as a throwable explosive. Norgalle's skills were truly remarkable, since he could do such an amazing job so quickly.

"Frenci, Rhyno, how good are you guys at engraving sacred seals?"

"I know the basics," replied Frenci, "so I should be able to help, but do not get your hopes up."

"…I'm guessing I'm about the same," said Rhyno. "I won't be able to do anything complicated."

It was clear neither of them would be much help, but I had no choice but to play the hand I was dealt.

"I need more information on the capital's security measures. What can you tell me?" I asked Madritz.

"There are human soldiers and small faeries… I never see any of the demon lords around town." His face was clouded with fear. He must have been terrified every day, no matter what he was doing. Considering how sensitive and unprepared he was, I was impressed he'd managed to put together a resistance at all.

"The security inside the city isn't very tight. We're not allowed to move freely, but we were able to use a series of unguarded underground passages."

"…The sewers again?"

Frenci's expression was as blank as always, but her disgust was clear. She wasn't the type of woman to meaninglessly repeat what others said. Although she'd willingly come with us through the sewers to get here, she'd covered her mouth the entire way, and I

doubted she was thrilled at the prospect of walking through filthy water again.

"But all the routes leading outside are thoroughly monitored," Madritz continued, "and that includes the ones underground. A demon lord patrols them… A most unholy creature…" He trembled. "Demon Lord Afanc. Everyone who tried to escape was ripped to shreds by that thing."

"They're using a demon lord as a guard, not a faerie?" I asked.

"Did you see the towers in the north? A few of them were smashed, right? That was Afanc's doing. It sliced right through them while shredding the escapees… All in a single strike."

"Seriously?"

I was more taken aback than terrified. Was the demon lord putting no thought at all into its attacks? I supposed it had served as a decent warning. Either way, it was clear this guy was strong.

"Afanc would be extremely difficult to take head-on," Rhyno said suddenly. "He's sluggish, but carelessly getting too close could prove fatal. As you saw, his claws are powerful enough to slice through buildings, and there's essentially no way to block them…"

"Are you familiar with that thing?" I asked.

"Well, yes. A little. Um… I believe I heard about a unit of humans that headed into the northern woodlands and were completely wiped out. Apparently, around a thousand men were ripped to shreds along with a great number of trees."

I could see all the color drain from Madritz's face. What was the point of scaring this guy to death? I waved a hand to cut Rhyno off.

"We need to review what we know. How many demon lords are in the capital? What do you—?"

It happened before I could finish my sentence. Rhyno was the first to notice and casually grabbed the spear standing to his side.

"Comrade Xylo. Outside."

His quiet warning was followed by some footsteps and a knock at the door. They knocked twice, stayed silent for a few seconds, then knocked four more times. It sounded like a special rhythm.

Without blinking, Frenci silently placed a hand on the hilt of one sword. I unsheathed a knife, then slammed my left fist into the

ground, creating an echo with my probe seal, Loradd. I sensed eight people outside.

"Hey, Madritz," I said. "Did the enemy find us?"

"N-no, that was the signal!" He stood up, flustered. "The plan was for everyone to meet up here if something happened. We agreed on how we would knock… You people are crazy. Were you going to attack first and ask questions later?!"

We heard a voice from the other side of the door, proving Madritz right. It was low but desperate.

"Madritz! You're in there, right? Help. Kevil betrayed us! We surrendered, but he still tried to turn us into faerie food!"

"Yeah, I bet that bum just didn't want to pay back all that money I lent him!"

"I don't know what I'm gonna do! Kevil found out that I tried to bang his wife. He's gonna kill me for sure!"

There was no telling if there were more traitors among the people outside, and we had no time to worry about it, either. If we let them keep making noise like this, someone was going to find us.

"…Madritz, do you have it in you to keep going?" I looked at him, and he recoiled in fear, as if I was glaring.

"Keep going…and do what?"

"Lead the Resistance. I know this is sudden, but I'm gonna make you guys into the best damn saboteurs this capital ever saw.

We were severely short on manpower, and we needed all the help we could get. We had to put these guys to the test and determine how useful they were and how much we could trust them in the process.

"Please, Madritz. We need your help."

"Xylo, you are a member of the Mastibolt family. This is no time to beat around the bush." After belittling my approach, Frenci stood up and continued sharply, "We are taking over your resistance. You will now follow our orders."



PUNISHMENT: ZEYLLENT BLACK OPS—FINAL REPORT

There were too many things getting on Jayce Partiract's nerves. The mood at the temporary fortress of Tujin Bahark had done a one-eighty the moment Xylo Forbartz left on his mission.

Stop distracting me, thought Jayce. He had to focus on the battle ahead, but there was too much noise in the fortress. Right now, he had three main problems.

The first one was the Saint. Yurisa had finally arrived at the temporary fortress. Jayce couldn't have cared less about her, but he kept having to listen to people gossip all day long. Not even the dragon stables were safe from her rumors. Apparently, she was very young. He'd been forced to see her for himself during a ceremony where she held up the flag of the Federated Kingdom and stood in front of the troops, leading them around in a parade.

Saint Yurisa never spoke, but even from afar, you could see she stood with firm resolve. Her scarlet hair burned like fire, and her right eye sparkled. But other than that, she seemed like an ordinary

girl. Then again, Jayce always had a difficult time telling humans apart.

Nevertheless, she seemed to inspire all the soldiers who saw her. She would stand boldly, her collar unbuttoned to expose the stigma by her collarbone. Jayce had heard people enthusiastically claim this mark was proof of her sainthood, and many of the soldiers seemed to have high hopes for her.

How idiotic, he thought. But he kept that opinion to himself.

Up until a decade or so ago, stigmata were considered curses. Before the Demon Blight became the threat it was today, some even claimed they were portents of calamity. After all, those with stigmata could see and hear what others could not.

It was only in the past few years that people began to view stigmata in a completely different light. The Temple, which had previously refused to comment on the matter, suddenly made an announcement, claiming that stigmata marked the descendants of the heroes from the First War of Subjugation. Ever since, the bearers of these marks were treated as if they were blessed.

Seeing how the Saint raised the soldiers' morale put Jayce in a cynical mood. If Xylo were here, he could at least have complained to him to blow off some steam. But now he couldn't even do that.

The second issue was Goddess Teoritta. She had been in a foul mood ever since Xylo took off.

"What blasphemy! How dare he leave me behind!" she would say whenever she came to the dragon stables to voice her complaints. "I shall not forgive him for this! It is a serious act of betrayal! This is even worse than the crimes he committed against me in Ioff! He did not even ask my permission, much less bid me good-bye…!"

It seemed Teoritta wanted everyone to know how furious she was. Sparks discharged wildly from her hair.

"Neely! You agree with me, right? He deserves divine punishment the moment he gets back. What kind of sanctions do you think would be reasonable?"

The goddess realized that Jayce wasn't going to pay any attention to her and began talking to Neely instead. But the dragon

simply whined and lowered her gaze, looking to Jayce to rescue her. Unable to keep ignoring the goddess, Jayce decided to humor her while he worked on saddle maintenance.

"…Would you have been able to help if he'd brought you along, Goddess?"

"Yes. I am an excellent goddess, and karma is on my side for always doing the right thing."

"Uh-huh." There wasn't much else Jayce could say to such a confident statement. *Typical Teoritta*, he thought.

As he listened to her endless complaints, he recalled a rumor he'd heard from Venetim. When Xylo wasn't around, Venetim would bother Jayce or Tsav instead, sharing a bunch of nonsense information from who knows where. It was a real pain in the ass.

"It seems they plan on having Goddess Teoritta fight alongside the Saint."

Venetim had stopped by the dragon stables and shared this bit of gossip while Jayce was busy trying to come up with a plan.

It's like they're taking turns trying to bother me, he thought. But then again, he always found other humans a bother.

"They seem to have set their sights on Goddess Teoritta's ability to summon the Holy Sword, and you can imagine the publicity a Saint would get from wielding the ultimate weapon, capable of wiping out the Demon Blight in a single swing."

"Don't care."

"In other words, we are going to be the Saint's underlings from now on. 'We' being the penal hero unit, of course. Well, we'll be more like her meat shields, I suppose."

"Don't care."

"It appears we'll be doing just that during the mission to reclaim the Second Capital."

"Knock yourself out."

Venetim gave up trying to talk to Jayce after that.

When it came down to it, protecting the Saint was going to fall to those on the ground. If they wanted support from the skies, they were going to have to wait for every flying enemy to be eliminated, especially Demon Lord Sugaar.

Plus, according to what Jayce had been told, there were at least three demon lords in the Second Capital. Maybe even four. So eliminating Sugaar would fall to those in the air. Specifically, to Jayce and Neely. He doubted anyone else could handle it.

As he let his mind wander, Jayce felt something heavy pressing down on his lungs. He would always feel this pressure before he took to the skies. There was no doubt in his mind that he and Neely were mankind's greatest weapon when it came to aerial combat. But that also meant that, should they fail, mankind would lose their command of the sky. And if something were to happen to Neely—well, Jayce didn't even want to think about it.

The third issue was Patausche Kivia. She tended to her duties and took care of the horses as usual, but there was something off about her. Unlike Teoritta, however, she seemed to be quietly pouting to herself. Normally, her former subordinates from the Thirteenth Order would come by to talk to her. But these days, not one of them dared approach her. Jayce didn't have time to get involved in her problems, but now that Xylo was gone, Patausche was their de facto commander.

If he let this continue, Jayce was worried they'd suffer catastrophic losses. That said, some people performed better in a foul mood. It was similar to how a person could push themselves harder when they wanted to show others that they were capable. Which kind of commander was Patausche, though? That was the sort of thing that only became clear in actual combat.

From what Jayce could see, she was a sharp commander. Occasionally, he would glimpse her from the skies as she led her cavalry, and she was always one step ahead of her opponents. In addition, the worse the situation got, the more precise her actions became. Perhaps a little pressure would do her good. With that in mind, Jayce decided to give her a small warning.

"Stop being so grumpy," he said. "Or at least hide it a little better."

"What?"

"Xylo's an idiot, I know. But don't let it upset you so much. If you're mad about him going on a mission with that woman Frenci,

don’t be. I’m sure he put no thought into it whatsoever.”

The air around Patausche was so tense, Jayce thought she might unsheathe her sword and attack him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, speaking all at once. “It’s true that Xylo is an idiot, but that doesn’t mean I’m in a bad mood, and even if I were in a bad mood, it would have nothing to do with Xylo, and if anyone’s going to complain about someone being in a bad mood, it shouldn’t be you.”

“…Oh. Well, all right.” All Jayce could do was shrug.

Patausche was extremely skilled in close combat without the aid of sacred seals, especially when it came to the sword. She was probably even better than Xylo and Jayce. He suspected that her overall skills were second only to Tatsuya’s. In short, Jayce didn’t want to fight her. It would be way too much trouble.

While these three problems plagued Jayce, the only human he enjoyed talking to was Norgalle. Not that he wanted to chat about just anything, of course. He needed Norgalle’s knowledge and skills for the upcoming battle. And, at least from Jayce’s point of view, the man was a lot easier to talk to than the others. You just had to ignore his delusions.

“…If I were to make an educated guess…”

Norgalle was in the middle of analyzing some ideas Jayce had posed to him. Jayce had taken detailed notes on the testimony of dragon knights and their dragons who had either fought or witnessed someone fighting Sugaar. When it came to things like this, he was quite thorough.

“These guided rays of lights that Sugaar fires should be no different from the technology used by a dragon knight’s javelins and some of our cannons. The homing functions are most likely exactly the same.”

“That means there’s no way to block the attacks. I’ll just have to outpace and outmaneuver them.”

“No. Considering the homing function and the blast radius, that will be quite difficult. It will be hard to find a break to attack as well. Therefore…” Norgalle had already taken out a brush and a piece of

paper and begun drawing a complicated diagram. "We must adopt appropriate countermeasures."

"A new weapon? Is that really going to help?"

"If I finish it in time, it will. Listen, Jayce Partiract. You have a lousy attitude for a retainer, but you are still a brave dragon knight supporting my kingdom, and I have no doubt that you are the greatest of them all." As Norgalle's brush glided across the paper, a sacred seal began to take shape. "Losing is not an option. I shall personally pave a path to victory for you, so you must bear the pressure and fight."

Those words were like a weight filling Jayce's lungs.

You don't have to tell me that. I already know.

Jayce continued speaking with Norgalle a bit longer, before returning to Neely in the dragon stables. She had been waiting for him with her wings folded, and he sat down by her side.

"I'm back," he said, just as he always did. "What an exhausting day. There's so much crap to deal with," he muttered, rubbing his neck. "And it's all because Xylo's not here. That dumbass really knows how to ruin my day. He's causing a lot of trouble for you too, Neely."

"What? He's not causing me any trouble at all," the dragon purred. Jayce was able to hear her voice. This power was apparently called "Attune" and came from Jayce's stigma. The mark, present from birth, gave him the ability to interpret any living creature's vocalizations as words.

"You must be exhausted, too, right?" he said. "I'll tell Teoritta not to stay too long."

"No, no, no. I actually enjoy her visits. She's a real cutie."

"You don't need to be nice. You covered your ears halfway through her rant last time, didn't you?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Neely cackled, though to anyone else, it would probably just sound like random, high-pitched cries. "It was a little tiring having to listen to so many complaints, but it's not her fault. It's Xylo's."

"I'll make sure to give him a good ass-kicking next time I see him."

"Be gentle. From what I can see, Xylo is going to be…" Neely paused, as if she were having a little trouble finding the right words. "Either an amazing hero or an utterly wicked villain. He reminds me of you. A little."

"We're nothing alike."

"I said 'a little.'"

"We're completely different. Give me a break."

Jayce recognized he was being teased and leaned back against her to get some rest. The day had drained him with all its pointless tasks, and with the Saint's arrival, he knew they could be sent out at any moment. His gut told him it would be soon, too.

What a pain. Why now, of all times?

What was Xylo Forbartz doing? Although Jayce had denied it, according to Neely, Xylo was the only man in the world who was anything like him. And if that were true, then Xylo had an important duty to take care of.

For Jayce, all that mattered was protecting the dragons, or at the very least, protecting Neely.

But Neely won't let me stop there, will she?

Jayce had no desire to become a hero. Even as he shut his eyes, the pressure in his chest continued to bear down on him. An unsettling sensation gnawed at his nerves. Something big was about to happen. Xylo and the others were already in the city preparing for the mission. And once preparations were finished on both sides, it would be time to take action.

And that's probably gonna happen…

They were going to have to risk their lives. He felt a headache coming on.

…any moment now, huh?

And his gut ended up being right.

The very next day, those in charge announced it was time to reclaim the Second Capital. It would be the first battle with Penal Hero Unit 9004 fighting alongside the Saint.

✦

He glared down at the Second Capital from up in the castle tower. The cool night breeze felt good against his skin. Below, the city lay shrouded in quiet darkness, as if devoid of human life.

If they're going to attack, it'll be tomorrow or the day after, thought Tovitz Hughker.

He'd come to this conclusion after hearing the faerie scout's reports. Human scouts would have brought him more precise information, but he didn't have any humans to send.

Many of those in the city still struggled to sever their ties with humanity. Foolishly, they clung to the hope that the Demon Blight wouldn't eventually dominate the entire world. And if they still believed that, and he sent them out to spy, they wouldn't return. And what would be the point of that?

"…Tovitz," came a voice from behind him. "I have finished looking into it."

The voice was deep but thin as a whisper. Tovitz didn't even turn around. The one behind him wouldn't show himself anyway. That was just the kind of man he was.

He went by the name "Soola Od"—clearly not his real name. In the days of the ancient kingdom, the words referred to a particularly deadly insect, so toxic that a single bite could fell not only a human but a full-grown bear. It was a fitting name for an assassin.

Soola Od was a well-known "tradesman" mastering in the art of murder, and he'd been conveniently imprisoned in the Second Capital's dungeon. He was skilled, of course, but Tovitz had selected him for his past record. As long as you paid him, Soola Od would never betray you. He was so loyal, in fact, that he'd taken the fall for the person who'd hired him and gone to prison in their place.

Tovitz had tried numerous other prisoners, but Soola was the only pawn he'd found useful.

"The rumors about the Saint working alongside the military at Mount Tujin were true," said Soola. His voice was so soft, it was nearly inaudible.

"Then that will be our focus," said Tovitz, still looking out over the city. "Since the Ninth Order of the Holy Knights uses poison, it's

safe to assume another unit will be protecting the Saint. Maybe the Eighth Order or their fabled special unit. Maybe both…”

He thought for a moment. If such a special unit existed—if mankind’s secret weapon was as he imagined it, then some of its members were probably already inside the capital.

He’d rendered the Resistance mostly powerless, and he doubted there were more than thirty adventurers left. Those pathetic thugs were hardly a threat to him.

Nevertheless, there was a chance this special unit would use them to their advantage. Tovitz had done his research, and it seemed they’d been adopting the same kind of strategy since the battle in the Zewan Gan Tunnels. It would be best to tread carefully.

“You were right about another thing,” said Soola, snapping Tovitz out of his trance. “I saw Jayce Partiract at the camp, and he was with a blue dragon.”

“I figured.”

Tovitz could hardly contain his joy.

What wonderful memories. Leading dragons into a rebellion…

The impetus had come when a plan was announced to use dragons as powerful living weapons. Sacred seals engraved onto their bodies would serve as shackles, and they would be made to carry scorched terrain seals and crash directly into the Demon Blight’s base. The idea was that, if they sent one hundred dragons, at least one would be successful.

That was all they needed to allow them to switch from defense to offense. The general who came up with this plan claimed it would form the base of an all-out counterattack—what was his name again?

The plan was being seriously considered. Though looking back, Tovitz figured it was probably the idea of the coexisters. Either way, that was the plan that inspired Jayce’s rebellion. He hadn’t hesitated for a second.

“Be careful around him,” said Tovitz. “I’m sure he’s a member of the enemy’s special unit.”

“Is this Jayce Partiract guy really that tough?”

"He was the strongest dragon knight there ever was. I'm sure he still is."

Tovitz recalled Jayce's foul expression. They'd never be able to defeat him in battle. What should he do? Though he knew it was pointless, Tovitz turned to look behind him. Unsurprisingly, Soola was nowhere to be found. He must have been lurking somewhere in the shadows.

"Do you really believe you stand a chance against the Federated Kingdom's military?" Soola's voice held a hint of ridicule. "Because I'm not going on a suicide mission with you if that's what you want. I'm going to get the heck out of here before we really start losing, so from now on, I'll be taking my payments in advance."

"Yes… I don't see how we can win this battle…but His Excellency Abaddon appears to have a plan."

"He has a plan? He's a demon lord. He may look human, but he probably has the brain of an insect."

"Maybe," Tovitz replied ambiguously.

Under the current circumstances, there was almost no chance Abaddon would be able to keep control of the Second Capital. He had to have some sort of ace up his sleeve. Or perhaps he was after something else entirely. At the very least, Tovitz found it hard to believe that he didn't have a plan. This was the same demon lord who had taken the Second Capital so effortlessly.

He has to be hiding something. But what?

Tovitz wasn't interested in winning or losing, however. Even if they lost, all he needed to do was help Anise escape to safety.

"We'll simply have to prepare for the worst. Soola, I have a favor to ask of you. I want you to strike first before the special unit makes a move."

"You sound scared."

"I believe they're our biggest threat right now, and I'm positive we won't be able to defeat them if we fight them head-on. We need to keep them busy—stop them from moving around. I'm counting on you."

"Sounds more like a personal favor. How much are you willing to pay?"

“As much as you want.” Tovitz had been given more money than he had ever seen in his life, but it had almost no value to him. If anything, Soola was the unusual one here. He was working for the demon lords and yet still saw value in human currency. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Tovitz would do anything for her—for Anise. Even if that meant fighting the strongest dragon knight in the world.



Jayce thought his wings were just late to sprout.

He couldn't breathe fire, and he didn't have horns, either.

His fangs and claws were weaker than others'. He was a slow runner, and he didn't have tough scales, so he had to wear the flesh of dead animals. At times, he had to put on thick furs to survive the harsh winters of the Great Plains of Southern Giscomb.

For all manner of things, he was taught to pretend to be a human.

Why am I different from everyone else?

That thought plagued him. The others in his family had wings, claws, fangs, and scales. They could breathe fire and soar through the sky.

Once, Jayce had tried to copy them and had jumped off one of the rocky crags they lived on. He truly believed he would grow wings. Everyone else could fly as a matter of course, so surely he would be able to as well. But instead, he fell straight down. Luckily,

he was saved before hitting the ground, but he received a harsh scolding and had to promise never to do it again. Ugruf, the dragon that raised him, was a man of few words. But back then, he was very clear.

"Idiot," he growled, baring his fangs. Jayce could vividly remember it even now. "You…cannot…fly alone."

That's ridiculous, thought Jayce. He really believed that one day he would grow wings and fly, just like the others.

His childhood was never lonely, and he suffered no abuse. Even though he couldn't fly, even though he looked different from the others, his family was still his family, and his friends were always there for him. They played in the fields together and hunted side by side. Jayce learned how to create fire and everything else he needed to survive in the grasslands.

When did I first learn that I was an animal known as a human?

It must have been when he told Ugruf about his dreams. All of his same-aged friends yearned to become a knight's dragon one day. It was their greatest ambition. Knights' dragons took to the skies with a human warrior atop their backs and bravely fought against the faeries and the Demon Blight. They were the world's protectors.

Of course, Jayce was eager to become one himself and often imagined a human riding on his back as he soared through the sky. Unfortunately, he didn't have any wings. So he asked Ugruf when his wings would start to grow, and the dragon finally explained to Jayce who he really was.

Jayce was a human, despite his friends and family being dragons. He was abandoned in the grasslands soon after he was born because of the strange birthmark called a stigma on his back. Ugruf further explained to him that he would never be a knight's dragon.

"Just as we…cannot…become human," he began, trying to be as clear as possible. There weren't many dragons who could speak, and Ugruf was particularly skilled. Jayce later learned this was why Ugruf had been chosen to raise him. "Humans…cannot…become dragons." He gave a sad, powerful roar.

Jayce was in no mood to sleep at home in the craggy mountains that night. Instead, he wandered the grasslands alone until he arrived at a stream created by melted snow. There, he spoke with Neely.

Among the dragons living in the plains, Neely was the most skilled at speaking. What's more, she was the smartest, quickest, strongest girl he knew. Despite her young age, no adult could keep up with her.

Ugruf once told Jayce that Neely was a special dragon—the only true dragon, born to fight back against the Demon Blight. Ever since departing from the land known as Tír na nÓg, the others of her kind were slowly withering away. She was the only one among them who still possessed their primordial power. According to Ugruf, she was a descendant of the dragons' great leader, Kukulkan.

Jayce often talked to Neely. He could still recall nearly every conversation they'd shared—at least for now. And he remembered what they'd said that night beneath a moon as blue as her shimmering scales.

"…That just means you're special, Jayce," she'd said quietly, after hearing him out. "I can tell. In fact, I have special powers of my own."

Even now, Jayce wasn't sure if she'd been telling the truth about him or not. He knew *she* was special, though. She possessed the powers of the dragons of old, back when they were even smarter and stronger than they were today. Maybe she really could tell if he was special. And besides, if Neely said something, Jayce had no choice but to believe her. If he didn't, who would?

"You can do things that others can't," she continued. "You're better at speaking than anyone else, for example, and you're more skilled with tools, too."

"But I can't fly or breathe fire." He sighed, producing only a white cloud. Neely could have scorched the grasslands with a single breath.

"Then leave things like that to those who are good at them."

"But I can't protect you like this, and I don't want to leave that to someone else."

"Oh," said Neely, before falling silent.

She seemed to be thinking about something, but the quiet frightened Jayce. He felt like she might flap her wings and fly off at any moment, leaving him behind.

"Then…what if I let you ride on my back?" she said at last. "I could breathe fire for you, too. In return, you could come along and protect me."

"You'd let me do that…?" He was so shocked that he forgot how to breathe. "…Really?"

"Really. I promise. I want you to fly with me."

"That makes me so happy… All I want is to protect you. As long as you're safe, Neely, that's all that matters. And I'll protect the dragons that live in these plains, too. If—"

"That's not enough." Neely suddenly cut him off, much to his dismay.

"Huh?"

"That's not enough if you're going to fly with me. I need you to promise me something."

"What?"

"My battles are not mine alone… So you can't just fight for me or the others in the Great Plains. You have to fight for the world. You have to fight for everyone alive—for strangers you may never meet or know." She made a sad sound deep in her throat. "The wisdom of the dragons is slowly fading. Fewer and fewer are born who understand language."

That much Jayce knew. There were numerous dragons he couldn't converse with. Many could use only basic words concerning battle and hunting.

"…But the Demon Blight is a threat to all living creatures," said Neely. "So we must fight alongside mankind, or there will be no future."

"Hold on." Jayce stopped Neely, feeling flustered. "I don't get it. Why would I fight for someone I don't even know?"

Jayce couldn't wrap his head around what she was saying. Even now, he didn't completely understand what she'd meant.

"You're saying we should risk our lives for humans, too? I can't do that."

"Then I can't bring you with me," she replied. "If you're going to fly with me, then you have to make that promise. But…to tell the truth, I'd be happier if you refused." She seemed unusually hesitant. "After all, you'll have a much harder life if you go with me."

That's not fair.

It wasn't fair to put it like that. How could he refuse now? He couldn't ask Neely to face those hardships by herself. She was essentially asking Jayce to go through hell with her.

And he'd never once refused her.

"…Do you think I can do it?" he asked.

"You can. You're special. I can feel it."

"All right."

"You're going to become an amazing hero. That or an amazingly wicked villain. And I know you can do more than just protect the things and people around you. You'll save the whole world, which is much bigger than you can imagine."

Jayce didn't have any interest in that. How was someone who couldn't even protect the ones in front of him going to save the world? Or was the power to do that what made him special? Either way…

"If you really believe that, Neely, then I'll trust you."

"…Yes, trust me, Jayce."

"All right. Then I promise."

When he looked up at Neely, he found the dragon, with her shockingly blue azure scales, staring right back at him. Perhaps she'd been doing so the entire time.

"I promise," repeated Jayce. But in his heart, he added that he was doing it all for the world in which the dragons lived. If protecting humans and every other living creature was what it took to accomplish that, he'd do it. He couldn't be any more charitable than that.

Only a month later, Jayce was "discovered" by humans.

The Partiract family found him during the Dragon Seeking Festival, and he came under their care. The Partiracts were the

leaders of a group of nomads and one of the noble families of the Federated Kingdom. For a while, he became famous in the area as the boy raised by dragons.

He joined the Partiract family and, sometime later, learned of General Delph Hugorlin's plan for the dragons. And that was the catalyst for his rebellion.

Many humans lost their lives in the battle, but Neely agreed that they couldn't allow hundreds of dragons to be meaninglessly sacrificed. Mankind would have lost their control of the skies.

And so they revolted and succeeded in killing General Hugorlin. But after that…



"Jayce, we're up!"

An irritating voice roused Jayce from sleep. Sunlight streamed into the dragon stables; it seemed morning had arrived. Neely rumbled her throat, already awake.

"Sounds like you're up," she whispered, as she always did. Apparently, she didn't consider this her problem. "You have a noisy visitor here to see you."

"…So it seems."

Jayce sat up slowly as a certain someone stomped through the stables. The dragons on either side turned their heads to watch as the newcomer passed by. It was Tsav…followed by a hesitant Venetim. The dragons clearly frightened him.

"Quiet down," demanded Neely, calming the others. She had complete control over them. One, however, couldn't suppress her curiosity.

"Friends of…Leader?" asked a youthful dragon. Jayce silently nodded back. Neely must have ordered the others to call him that.

I don't care what they call me, thought Jayce. Besides, anything was better than "Lord Jayce" and "Your Excellency." Neely must have put them up to that as a joke.

"Jayce, they said it's time to take li'l Yurisa and head out!" said Tsav. "They're about to start the meeting, so we need you to, like, come with us."

"…Yurisa?" The name sounded familiar. Jayce knit his brow in thought. "Who's that?"

"What?! Did you already forget, man? We went to meet her together!"

"We didn't 'meet' her," corrected Venetim. "She was reviewing the troops… Or was that more of a parade? At any rate, Tsav, calling her 'li'l Yurisa' is extremely rude, so please don't do so in public… She's a saint…"

Despite Venetim's little tirade, he didn't seem too sure of what he was saying himself.

On the bright sight, Jayce now knew that Yurisa was the Saint. In other words, Venetim's shady information had turned out to be right: The penal hero unit had been assigned to protect her.

"Anyway, she's, like, stupidly cute, right?!" said Tsav. "Of course, Teoritta's cute, too, but she's a different kind of cute. Like— Oh, hey! We'll get the chance to talk to her, since we're gonna be fighting together, right?"

"Of course not!" shouted Venetim frantically. "Tsav, you cannot speak with the Saint, no matter what! The Holy Knights already have it out for us as it is!"

"Wait. Do you think they hate me? Well, that sucks. Man, it's always been like this. I don't know what I'm doing, but sometimes people start acting like they find me really annoying. But you know me. I trained myself to have nerves of steel, so I don't care at all! You don't need to worry about a thing!"

"I wish you *did* care…" Venetim rubbed his stomach. It probably hurt from stress.

Jayce sometimes envied Tsav. If Jayce had nerves of steel, maybe he wouldn't feel this crushing pressure. It followed him everywhere, like an ever-present shadow, and it was the real source of his constant foul moods.

And yet…

"It sounds like you're needed, Jayce. It's time," whispered Neely. "They can't start the battle without Jayce Partiract, the hero of the heavens. It's time to go. Don't worry. I know you can do it."

"Yeah. As long as you're with me, Neely."

She grinned. "Of course. I haven't forgotten our promise. Have you?"

"Never. No matter how many times I die, that's the one thing I'll never forget."

Jayce grabbed Neely's shoulder and hauled himself up.

PUNISHMENT: BATTLE AT SILVER

STREET ASGARSHA, PART 1

There were three public roads in the Second Capital of Zeyllent, but the most commercially active one was probably Silver Street Asgarsha, located on the eastern side.

The largest road was called Majesty Street and was used by the nobles, and Enlightenment Street, which ran through the school district, was impressive as well. But Asgarsha was slightly different from the other two. Beginning at the eastern gate and extending directly to the capital's central square, it was the very heart of commerce in Zeyllent.

What's more, there were two sides to Asgarsha. Due to its location in the east, it had an indelible connection to the Ash Tray. If you left the flourishing main road, you would soon find yourself in back alleys frequented by adventurers and other ruffians and outcasts.

Whenever I had a break from my duties, I would head to this road for fun. There was a grand bathhouse nearby, with water from

a natural hot spring, and a recently opened theater. Unlike the First Capital, where I was somewhat well-known, I was nobody here, and I found the anonymity refreshing. I spent many nights wandering the streets, drinking until dawn with the captain of the Sixth Order, like we were students without a care in the world. That was why I had a pretty good knowledge of the area.

But "pretty good" was all it was.

When it came to the finer details, we couldn't just rely on a map; we needed to scout out the areas ourselves. And I couldn't leave something so important to those Resistance bums. So from sunset until dawn, when human and faerie patrols were lightest, Rhyno, Frenci, and I ran around the city as quietly as we could.

And what we learned was…

"…There aren't enough materials." There was no other way to put it. "At all."

I was in a basement in the Ash Tray, which was serving as the Resistance's new hideout, looking down at all the materials we'd managed to find for crafting sacred seals. We knew we'd never get our hands on decent base materials, so we'd done our best to find non-rusted iron plates, or at the very least, iron fragments. We had luminous paint, varnish, solution, equipment for engraving, and a good amount of paper scraps for the design phase.

But even with all this, I was still anxious. There was a high chance I'd mess up and make something completely useless. I didn't have any faith in my own skills, and it took a lot of talent to improvise like this. But most people would be in the same boat as me in this situation. Norgalle was really a special case.

Rhyno was still out with several members of the Resistance, searching the city for more crafting materials. Unfortunately, they couldn't just waltz into storage areas filled with supplies. The enemy would be guarding those more heavily, and we couldn't send a bunch of civilians to die. They just didn't have the skills to handle something like that. All I could do now was pray for their success as I put everything I had into engraving sacred seals.

"I had better see those hands moving, Xylo. Your hesitance does not inspire confidence."

Frenci glared at me blankly. I stretched out the tense muscles in my back, then returned her stare.

"Look who's talking. You're sure taking your time."

"…I have come to realize that I, too, am lacking in skill."

She had been focused on mixing the liquid paint for some time. You had to be extremely careful when diluting and mixing luminous paint, as an incorrect ratio could shorten the duration or even weaken the effects of a sacred seal. To my surprise, Frenci seemed to be struggling.

She'd already created numerous failures. Looking back, I recalled Frenci was never that great with her hands. She didn't like work that involved a lot of details, and arithmetic seemed to especially aggravate her. As a child, she would get so frustrated while studying arithmetic with her tutor that she would sneak out and flee to the house where I was staying. I often caught her hiding in the garden.

"I like poetry a hundred times more than math," she once claimed. That, at least, was a sentiment I could get behind.

Even so, she was far better than an amateur. I trusted her more than the adventurers, at any rate. I briefly considered getting Rhyno to help instead, but as it turned out, he was unexpectedly skilled at covert operations. When I thought about it, it kind of made sense. After all, he frequently abandoned his post and seemed to disappear into thin air. He had the ability to sense danger and run, too. We'd be better off leaving him on scouting duty. Besides, Frenci was determined to do this, and she could be extremely stubborn. She despised when others underestimated her.

"…I sure hope they can find some more crafting materials," I muttered, knowing it was unlikely. "I feel like we're wasting a lot of time being extra careful to reduce waste."

"Complaining about it is not going to help," she snapped. "We have to use the hand we were dealt. Is that not what you always tell me? Or do you have some wonderful idea about how to get more materials?"

"Nope. I've got nothing."

"Then be quiet or come up with another strategy. I would be happy to listen to any of your ideas and list off all the problems with them."

I closed my mouth. She'd already listed all the flaws with my current plan the moment I came up with it. Even so, we had to try, since it was the best idea we had. At the very least, it had a higher chance of success than starting an armed revolt and hoping people would join in, and it definitely beat trying to assassinate the enemy's leader.

…The main problem now is that we lack manpower and material.

I drew a map of the city in my head. As soon as the forces outside launched their attack, it was our job to start sabotaging from within. We needed to cause as much destruction as possible, and if we could create chaos simultaneously in multiple locations, that would be even better.

I had already decided what we were going to blow up. We would avoid residential areas and target their military strongholds, such as storage facilities and garrisons.

It probably wouldn't take them long to figure out that what we were doing was nothing more than a distraction, but even then, they couldn't ignore us. They'd have no choice but to send some of their troops to the targeted locations while we took advantage of the chaos and headed to the city gate to help our allies make it safely inside.

And to do all this, we were going to need sacred seal–engraved time bombs. Time bombs were a bit more involved than simple grenades, but it was either that, or we'd need a strategy involving a large number of disciplined soldiers with excellent timing. And as for the men at our disposal, well…

"Ahhh!" someone shouted from the neighboring room.

I wished these people could keep their voices down, just in case, but it seemed that was too much to ask.

"Ugh. Another damn crack!" cried another. "This isn't working."

"Yo, this is hot as hell. You used to work like this every day? I can't take it anymore."

A few members of the Resistance were making a fuss. One, who had once been a blacksmith, had agreed to forge some knives for me. I hadn't exactly been expecting masterpieces, but things seemed to be going even worse than I'd imagined. As it turned out, the man had probably quit blacksmithing for a reason. He was constantly complaining about a lack of proper tools, and all he'd come up with so far was a series of disappointing failures.

"Master, I'm sorry!"

As if that wasn't enough, I had to deal with people walking right into the room where I was working, without so much as a courtesy knock. They'd been barging in nonstop for ages, and for some reason, they kept calling me "Master." Just who did they think I was? Some sort of martial arts teacher? It was extremely distracting.

"Old Man Ordo got completely hammered and fell asleep again!"

"…Who was hiding the alcohol? I thought it was all gone."

"That dolt Herb. Apparently, he gets the shakes if he doesn't drink, so he needed it."

"This isn't a game, dammit!" I yelled. The man hid behind the door, frightened, like he thought I'd start throwing things at him. "Ugh. Forget about Old Man Ordo. It's not like he was doing anything productive anyway."

"I guess you're right. Back in the day, he used to be some incredible mercenary or adventurer or something. But he's been like this since morning, saying there's nothing for him to do without a sword."

"Then go make him a sword. You used to be a blacksmith, right?"

"Heh-heh. I'll see what I can do. I'm trying my best, I really am. But…"

"All you've gotta make is one damn sword! If you can't do it, I'll snap your bones and turn those into weapons!"

"G-got it!"

He rushed out the door and closed it behind him. I fought back a sigh and clicked my tongue instead. Frenci seemed to feel the same way I did.

"…Do you really think those lowlifes will be of any help?" she asked.

"I don't, but we've got no other options."

"One of them might betray us."

"I get the feeling we can trust the former blacksmith. Apparently, he made a move on the original traitor's wife, and he'll be killed if he tries to surrender. It's sad, but that actually makes him the easiest to trust."

"Unless he's lying, of course."

"Sure. But you can't start doubting everything. Besides, I'm not telling anyone the plan until right before we start."

People who got the shakes without alcohol and old drunks would just be turned into food if they surrendered. The others were outcasts as well. Ironically, such people were the most trustworthy and useful types we could have asked for.

"What a mess this has become," said Frenci. "Perhaps you are being punished for neglecting your duties."

"I'm already being punished." We were penal heroes. This was our punishment, and I suspected the gods hadn't liked us much to begin with. "Sorry, Frenci. This is a terrible situation to be in. You must be pissed."

"I am not mad at all."

"Liar." I'd noticed something about Frenci. Ever since we'd gotten trapped inside the city, she'd been constantly touching her hair. "You're touching your hair again. You do that whenever you're mad."

"Huh? …You are mistaken. Why would you assume I am angry just because I am touching my hair? It makes no sense. You are less perceptive than moss growing on a rock. I am appalled."

Frenci uttered all this in a single breath, yet more proof she was angry with me. I was sure of it now.

"If anything, I am enjoying this," she said.

"Now, that's a lie for sure. Look around you. We're trapped inside a city ruled by the Demon Blight, and our only allies are Rhyno and a bunch of thugs. There's almost no hope our plan will succeed."

"No, I *am* enjoying myself. In fact, this is the most fun I have had in years." Frenci pointed the brush she'd been using to mix paint at me. I wished she would put that down—there were some awfully dangerous chemicals in that stuff. But her eyes were dead serious. It was hard to read her expression, but I could tell from her gaze that she wasn't lying. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Is this entire situation nothing but suffering for you? Or are you having a little fun?"

I gave this some thought. I couldn't possibly say I was having fun. It was wrong for a soldier to enjoy his job.

"To tell the truth, Xylo, being together with you—"

"Aguh!"

A sudden scream cut her off, and the door flew open. Frenci furrowed her brow. I figured it was just some guys from the Resistance making another mess for me to clean up, but when I saw who was at the door, my jaw dropped.

Standing there was the last person I expected to see.

"…Ouch. You didn't have to be so rough," said a small man, groaning and clutching his back.

"Dotta?" I called out the intruder's name, still taken aback. I could hardly comprehend what was happening. "What the hell are you doing?"

"More importantly, I would like to know why you are here," said Frenci, as confused as I was.

"Hey, Xylo. Looks like you've gotten yourself into a bit of trouble. Me too. I was forced to rush straight here from the repair shop…" Dotta smiled weakly. He looked scared. "…After that, I was made to sneak into the city and meet up with you guys."

"How the hell did you get inside?" I asked. "Every gate has been sealed off. Did you scale the walls or something?"

"S-scale the walls? Is that even possible?"

"Probably not…"

"That sounds way too hard… Anyway, some local military forces got into a scuffle with nearby faeries, and there were a ton of

human corpses. I slipped in between some of them and let them cart me inside."

What the hell? I thought. *That was an option?*

Wasn't Dotta afraid a faerie would get hungry on the way back and start chowing down on the corpses? It sounded incredibly dangerous. Personally, I wouldn't have risked it unless I had someone on the inside watching out for me.

"Actually…I have a sort of collaborator who's really good at pretending to be a faerie," Dotta continued. "She's like a prison guard or something. Anyway, she helped me out."

"I'm not your collaborator or a prison guard. I'm your adjutant."

I heard a deep, controlled voice coming from somewhere outside the door. A woman emerged with smoky-red hair and a bandaged right arm. She looked vaguely familiar. Wasn't that the woman who'd carried Dotta back during the battle at Tujin Tuga?

"You must learn to introduce your adjutant properly." She glared down at Dotta. He was so frightened, he visibly flinched.

"Huh? Adjutant? Since when? I don't remember hearing anything about that."

"…Forget it," the woman said sullenly. "I'll introduce myself. My name is Trishil… My role is to supervise this man and provide him with guidance."

The military had probably gotten fed up with Dotta's sticky fingers and sent someone to keep an eye on him. In that case, she really was like a prison guard. Still, her dark gaze gave me pause, though I had no time to worry about stuff like that at the moment.

What mattered was that Dotta was here, and that would drastically increase our chances of finding supplies. He could help us scout and spy as well. With him, our options had expanded tenfold. But the most efficient way to use Dotta was…

"All right, Dotta," I said. "Time to get to work."

"Huh? But I just got here. More importantly, I have a message for you from our allies…"

"They can tell me whatever they have to say during the scheduled call. Right now, I need you to help gather supplies. Oil. Weapons. And the more blades, the better."

I looked at the weapons I'd constructed so far. Though a few might be usable, quite a lot of them were basically garbage. I couldn't test them out, and I didn't want to just trust that they'd work. But with Dotta, we no longer had to rely on time bombs. We had better options now.

"Rejoice, Dotta. You're going to be a star."

"Yippie."

Trishil's mouth twisted aggressively, for some reason. "Now we're talking. Give him something big."

"Why are you encouraging him?!" Dotta cried. "Listen—!"

"We'll head out after eating something," I said. "Frenci, let's use that jerky we've been saving. Now that Dotta's here, we won't need to worry about finding food for dinner."

"Finally, some good news," she replied. "Shall we use the cheese as well?"

"Hey!" Dotta yelped. "Is no one here going to listen to me?!"

PUNISHMENT: BATTLE AT SILVER

STREET ASGARSHA, PART 2

According to Venetim, the people in charge were arguing over what strategy to use right up until the last moment.

There were two main problems. First, the capital was surrounded by walls. While there were underground passages and gates to the east, west, and south, they'd first have to decide which route to take. The north gate, designed as a means of escaping the castle, was heavily guarded and too narrow to accommodate a large army, so it was out of the running from the start.

The second problem was the Saint. There was disagreement over how to use her in the fight.

Fortunately for those of us on the inside, the nature of our sabotage mission meant we had ample discretion. As long as we aided our allies' attack, we could choose what we did and how we accomplished it. Our only mandatory objective was to occupy one of the gates using the Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke, thus creating an opening for our allies to get inside.

But the gate they eventually chose—the south gate—posed something of a problem. Apparently, the newly appointed supreme commander intended to stage a head-on attack from the front. I took another look at the gate in question and found that the south gate, which was by far the biggest, was unsurprisingly also the best guarded. Storming this gate would be like rushing into the middle of an ambush. It was practically a suicide mission.

Personally, I thought the east gate was a better choice. There were fewer guards, and while they had a garrison to compensate, we were prepared to cause a commotion and distract the troops.

Venetim relayed my opinion to our allies on the outside, but the orders we got back ignored everything I'd said. We were told that they would "boldly storm the enemy from the front with a great force, strike fear into their hearts, and soothe the terrified citizens of the Second Capital." Of course, there was always the possibility that Venetim hadn't accurately conveyed my message. But even so, the whole plan sounded ridiculous. Could demon lords even feel fear?

As a result, I was forced to take a bold approach.

"We're going to occupy the east gate. Meet us on Asgarsha Street," I told Venetim. We were already in the middle of preparing a few disturbances around the Resistance's new hideout in the eastern district, and we could improve our chances of survival if we utilized the mazelike back alleys and underground sewer passages as well.

Obviously, nowhere in the capital was safe, but I still had to do what I could to increase our chances of survival, even slightly. The members of the Resistance weren't soldiers. They might be social outcasts just looking to save their own skins, but it would be wrong to purposely sacrifice them. That was how I felt, anyway, though I wasn't going to tell anyone else. And when Rhyno was the first to agree to my plan, I felt even more hesitant to admit what I was thinking.

To be honest, it feels like we're being baited into attacking the east gate.

The explosion at the south gate had only further convinced me. And yet we had no other choice. No matter how many traps awaited us at the east gate, it was still a better shot than the south or west

gates. We simply needed to find the traps and deal with them as soon as possible. Either that, or sacrifice ourselves to demonstrate the danger. That was our duty as spies on the inside.

"Interesting. The east gate, huh?" muttered Venetim. He sounded troubled. *"That's going to be difficult. Very difficult. They've already decided on the overall objective, too."*

When it came to Venetim, "difficult" was code for "I don't think it's possible, but if I tell you that, you're going to get mad at me and think I'm useless, so I'll just say 'difficult' instead." But situations like this were when Venetim shone the most.

"I mean, thanks to you, they have all the information they need on what's going on inside the capital, right? I believe you confirmed that there are at least three demon lords, yes?"

He was right. We didn't have any details on their supreme leader, Abaddon, but we knew that Sugaar, who was in charge of aerial combat, had a projectile attack that could track its target and explode. And as for Afanc, who was busy patrolling for escapees, we knew that he was a sluggish yet brutal demon lord with razor-sharp claws powerful enough to slice through buildings. I suspected there were one or two more still keeping out of sight.

"First, the Ninth Order and the goddess of poisons will be in charge of the underground passages, since they excel in narrow, closed spaces."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

The Ninth Order, led by Hord Clivios, was devastating in such environments, so I figured they'd be fine.

"…And the main troops, led by the Saint, will attack the enemy head-on from the south gate. That's the plan."

"Way too optimistic. Who came up with that?"

Concentrating our forces was fine. We had enough soldiers to occupy the underground passage as well, so both teams had favorable odds. Plus, if they used the whole force all at once, they had a good chance of breaking through even the south gate.

But at the cost of how many lives?

They were acting like soldiers grew on trees, and they were going to use up as many as necessary to achieve their goals. This

strategy relied completely on brute force, and the longer it took, the more likely those inside the capital would become hostages. Mercenaries were a problem, too. They wouldn't just flee the battle, they'd plunder the place first.

The best way would be to neutralize the enemy in one fell swoop.

I pictured the two men set to take command during the upcoming battle.

The captain of the Ninth Order, Hord Clivios, was an arrogant man who always wore a serious expression.

The captain of the Eighth Order, Adhiff Twevel, was famous for his cold, mocking smirk.

Could either of these men have come up with such a plan? I didn't know Hord that well, but Adhiff and his army of shadows had managed impressively against the Demon Blight in the west. I had once fought alongside him, and his tactics, while not particularly clever or courageous, were always well-thought-out and well-prepared.

Would he really have approved such a sloppy strategy?

"Um… It was the supreme commander sent from Galtuile."

It was just as I feared.

"Marcolas Esgein, the governor-general of the Northern Second Area Army… He's a noble and a big investor in the Holy Knights' entire operation, so he has a lot of sway…"

"Esgein? That asshole's back?"

I clicked my tongue so loudly, even Venetim could probably hear it. This Esgein guy was a real pain.

Within Galtuile, there was an official position known as "governor-general of such-and-such area army," right below commander-in-chief. It was more or less equivalent to a "general" in the old kingdom. There were seven or eight of them when I was a captain, probably more now. They oversaw the fighting in each area, and even when I was in the Holy Knights, Esgein was well known for having a good family name and not much else. It seemed he still hadn't fallen from power.

His family provided a lot of the funding for the military, so it was hard for anyone to complain. But this was a guy of the worst type. Sometimes, you got investors who liked to make war into their own little production. They'd cast all the parts, write the script, and play the lead role in their own show. Only a few prodigies could pull something like that off, however. Maybe one person in a hundred years would have the talent.

And Marcolas Esgein truly believed he was one of those people.

"If we're going to attack, it has to be from the east gate. Change the plan."

"I wish I could, but it won't be that easy…"

"If you can't send the whole army, then just get the people from our unit. Send Patausche and Teoritta this way." I was asking for the bare minimum. "Especially Patausche. I know she can pull it off."

I was sure she'd be able to break through and make it here. Patausche Kivia knew how to handle cavalrymen, and back during the battle at Tujin Tuga, she'd proved that she could break through the enemy's defenses countless times in order to help her men regroup. What we needed right now was a reliable soldier we could count on to turn things around when we were at a disadvantage.

"With them, we'll have a chance. Maybe… If we're lucky."

"Uh… And how do you expect me to pull off the impossible?"

"Talk to Adhiff. He's the kind of guy that might understand if you explain things to him and he's in a good mood."

"Um… Is it just me, or was your phrasing just now a little ambiguous?"

"Just shut up and do it. And tell them not to forget Rhyno's armor when they come. All right, I'm counting on you."

"Ah! Xylo, I…"

Venetim apparently had more to say, but I wasn't interested, so I cut off the call and turned to Rhyno and Dotta.

"Venetim said, 'Everything's going smoothly, so let's do this, guys!' His words, not mine."

"He clearly didn't say that!" shrieked Dotta.

We'd worked him to the bone over the past two days, and he was sickly pale and completely exhausted. We'd finally reached a

point where we could take a break a little earlier, and we'd eaten some half-decent porridge and pork grilled with herbs.

"The day Venetim says something like that is the day I stop trusting him, and the fact that you said it makes me even more skeptical! That's two points of suspicion."

"Two suspicious things cancel each other out, so you oughtta trust me."

"Well, I don't!" Dotta's face twisted in despair. "Why did this have to happen to me…? I just got back from the repair shop! I'm still recovering!"

"I'm so glad to see you doing well, Comrade Dotta," said Rhyno, missing our teammate's point entirely. Wearing his usual fishy smirk, he continued to drink a glass of warm wine with dried fruit thrown in it. He never seemed to get drunk, no matter how much he drank, and he was throwing it back like it was water. "Anyway, you found yourself quite an interesting soldier to be your adjutant. What was her name again?"

"Trishil… Oh, and that's just what she said, so we're straight. Personally, I have no idea who she is or what's going on," he said desperately.

Fortunately, Trishil was out using the underground bathing facility with Frenci and wasn't here. One of the good things about the capital was that it had access to clean water. Incidentally, Trishil had taken a liking to Frenci. Maybe they had similar personalities.

"Ah, yes. Trishil," muttered Rhyno. He was staring into the distance, as if something was on his mind. "Her right arm intrigues me. It doesn't appear to be human."

"Oh yeah. Uh… She apparently got a faerie's arm transplanted onto her body. It helps her blend in with them and go undetected. That's how we got inside."

"Huh?" I said loudly, unable to suppress my surprise. "The hell? You can transplant faeries' arms onto humans?"

"Apparently," said Dotta. "She said her right arm is stronger now, too."

"And you just believed her?! Be more skeptical!"

"It isn't impossible, Comrade Xylo," said Rhyno. He was irritatingly calm. "Faeries were originally living creatures corrupted by the Demon Blight. They have the ability to devour other creatures and assimilate them as well. Sometimes, however, a living creature's power to resist—their life force, I suppose you could call it—or perhaps their soul? Anyway, that power fights back, stopping them from completely assimilating."

"You sure know a lot. Did you figure all this out from your experiments on faerie corpses?"

"Yes, basically."

"Really…?" asked Dotta, his tone reserved. "Hey, uh… Rhyno… I've been meaning to ask you this for a while now, but… Aren't some of the corpses you bring back human?"

"You must be imagining things. What need would I have for a human corpse?"

"Well, when you put it that way, I have no idea… Maybe you could dissect them? Or eat them…?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I—I don't know. It just seems like something you'd do."

"Why would you think that?"

"Oh, uh… Just forget about it…"

"Ha-ha-ha! You are so funny, Comrade Dotta, with your novel ideas and views of the world. They're so interesting to listen to."

Rhyno laughed pleasantly, and Dotta shut his mouth. I couldn't blame him, and it was probably for the best, too. No good would come from learning any more about Rhyno's sick habits. There was something about him that made a person want to give him and his business a wide berth. But none of that really mattered anyway. He could save human corpses to snack on and dissect faerie corpses as much as he pleased for all I cared. You couldn't trust the guy, but he was the best artilleryman I knew. No one else in the world could do what he did.

"Rhyno, Venetim's gonna try to pull a few strings to have them attack the east gate instead. At the very least, they'll bring your cannon armor with them, so get ready to work."

"I will do my best. I wouldn't want to embarrass myself in front of Comrade Xylo or Comrade Dotta, after all."

"I'd rather not work if I don't have to…," muttered Dotta.

"Listen, we have one objective," I said, ignoring Dotta and pointing at a single spot on the map. Beneath my finger was the castle in the north of the capital. "To kill their leader, Abaddon. That's how we're going to end this."

"Yes… Yes, how wonderful…" I noticed Rhyno licking his lips. "I will follow you until the end, Comrade Xylo, even if it kills me. It is an honor to fight by your side."

"Gross!" Dotta groaned. I couldn't agree more.

PUNISHMENT: BATTLE AT SILVER

STREET ASGARSHA, PART 3

The tent was in even more of a mess than Venetim had imagined—unfit for someone with the title "Captain of the Eighth Order."

Initially, he'd imagined Adhiff Twevel was a well-prepared, even elegant man. And so when he saw the captain's private tent, he was taken aback. Unidentifiable junk was lying all over, drawers were half-opened, and clothes were balled up on the floor. That said, Venetim suspected the clutter had something to do with the man's goddess, Kelflora.

When Venetim stepped inside the tent, he found her doing an archaic puzzle made of thick, interlocking wire. Rather than playing with a toy, she had the air of someone in the middle of an intense battle.

"I have something I would like to discuss," he said.

Adhiff told the goddess to go play outside. But rather than an order, it sounded like a gentle suggestion from an older relative. Kelflora quietly nodded, grabbed a handful of dried sweets from out

of a half-opened drawer, then exited the tent. If you ignored her refined features and transparent, icy expression, you could easily have mistaken her for a child.

"…All right. Let me get this straight," said Adhiff, leaning back. He had heard Venetim's request and was now looking up at him from a foldable chair. There was a mocking contempt in his eyes, or else that was just the face he was born with. "You object to the plan that Marcolas Esgein, the governor-general, sent straight from Galtuile, has proposed, and you want us to take the advice of the penal hero unit and change our objectives at the last minute?" He sounded almost amused. "It takes guts to come in here and say something like that."

He's right about that, thought Venetim, but he didn't have any other choice. There were only three people involved in the overall plan to reclaim Zeyllent: Marcolas Esgein, the governor-general of the Northern Second Area Army; Adhiff Twevel, captain of the Eighth Order of the Holy Knights; and Hord Clivios, captain of the Ninth Order of the Holy Knights.

Out of these three, Venetim would never be allowed to speak with Marcolas. He'd be sent away at the door and might even be reprimanded. Hord Clivios would be easier, and he even seemed to respect the penal heroes in his own way. However, that respect was limited to the battlefield, and he was far too serious to hear Venetim out.

In the end, there was only one person Venetim could turn to: Adhiff Twevel.

Plus, according to Xylo, he was the kind of guy that might understand if you explained things to him and he was in a good mood. Personally, Venetim wished Xylo would stop making him work with such ambiguous information, but when it came down to it, he was desperate. He didn't want to die, and if Xylo said they should attack from the east gate, he was probably right.

"…We need to concentrate our forces and attack the east gate. After deploying a separate force for the siege, of course," Venetim said, repeating his request. "It would be foolish to attack from the south gate. The projected casualties are far too great, and it would

put us at a disadvantage in future battles. We must rethink our strategy, because…"

Venetim inhaled, trying to think of the best way to deliver his message to someone like Adhiff. He considered the man's tone and subtle expressions. The truth wasn't important. All Venetim needed to do was win over whoever he was talking to.

"To be entirely honest, I believe Governor-General Marcolas Esgein's strategy is flawed. There's no other way to put it." Even Venetim knew he was being harsh, but he had to keep going. He needed to be even more provocative. "And so I would like you to consider the penal hero unit's advice. We need your help to prevent mankind from making a fatal mistake. Yes, we are hoping to use you…because we don't want to die, either."

Adhiff's expression showed almost no change. Nevertheless, Venetim felt the man would appreciate such self-deprecating humor. He usually took a cynical tone, and Venetim suspected he was quite self-aware.

"…Being honest is a good trait. Of course, there is a time and place for everything." Adhiff sipped at his tea. The gesture was elegant and befitting of a noble. "Allow me to be honest with you as well. I completely agree with your opinion. The current plan will result in far too many casualties. That said, I'm not interested in putting my job at risk, either."

Venetim suddenly felt as though he were being tested.

"This is the head of the Esgein family we're talking about, "Adhiff continued. "Opposing him could greatly disadvantage me politically and in future battles. He could come up with any number of reasons to cut the Eighth Order's funding as well."

This made sense to Venetim. It wasn't simply a matter of losing face. Someone in Adhiff Twevel's position objecting to Marcolas's decisions could be viewed as an attack against the Esgein family itself.

"I am the captain of an order of the Holy Knights, and I have a duty to protect Kelflora and my soldiers. In fact, I consider that my most important duty, and I don't wish to threaten their livelihoods by angering the Esgeins." Adhiff looked up at Venetim once more. "So,

Captain Venetim, are you claiming there is an advantage to helping you that would outweigh the risks? Or do you have some scheme to satisfy the Esgein family that this is not an attack?"

"Of course." Venetim replied at once—something he instantly regretted. There was nothing he could do about it now, though. The words had slipped right off his tongue, binding him to his promise. Lying came naturally to him, but it also tended to leave him feeling ill.

Adhiff narrowed his gaze. He was almost smiling. "I cannot imagine what advantage there would be to helping someone put in the penal hero unit for fraud."

"…Yes, I was imprisoned for fraud, but swindling people is very difficult without a little capital. Before he can do anything else, a con man needs to raise money." Venetim could feel his throat drying out as he spoke. If only he had a glass of water. Even Adhiff's tea would be better than nothing. "Fortunately, I have funds that I can use freely, which I secured in the past."

"Are you suggesting that you have a hidden fortune? Something akin to buried gold? Well, now I have completely lost interest. Did you truly believe you could fool me with such groundless claims? I'm insulted."

"It's not buried treasure. It's in the Verkle Development Corporation's vault."

Venetim then rolled his left sleeve all the way up his forearm.

On his skin was a tattoo consisting of four distinct lines. Adhiff closed one eye and observed this carefully.

"Verkle Corp is an extremely enthusiastic organization when it comes to finding talent. They often adopt promising children, and when one of those children becomes skilled enough to stand on their own two feet, they provide funding in the form of a loan. They even pay in gold coins—the currency of the old kingdom. Furthermore, the amount is determined by how many lines the child has."

The tattoo was proof of how much money was borrowed, and someone with four marks was extremely rare. They would have enough money to immediately hire people and start a large business.

"I still have the capital, and Verkle Corp is currently managing it for me. Although my personal fortune was confiscated when I was imprisoned, they weren't able to touch the money in the corporation's vault."

"Legally, that should have been confiscated as well," said Adhiff.

"Verkle Corp would never allow that. And I still have the right to that money."

"Even though you're a criminal?"

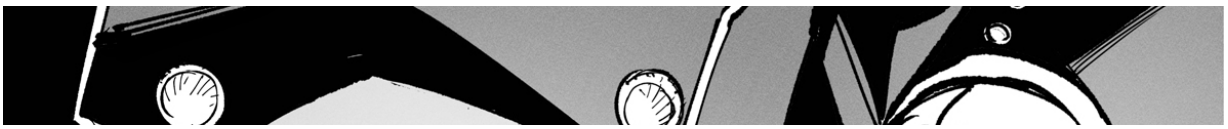
"Even though I'm a criminal. That's the kind of organization Verkle Corp is. Besides…" Venetim made sure his next words sounded as natural as possible. "I wasn't adopted by the organization. I'm the biological son of the president… If you accept our request, then I can guarantee political and economic support from Verkle Corp."

Silence filled the tent for several seconds. Adhiff had once again closed one eye. Perhaps it was a habit of his whenever he was deep in thought. Almost a minute went by before he spoke again.

"…Your last name doesn't match, though. It's Leopool."

"Indeed. That's what it says on my official family register anyway." Family registers were easy to fake. In fact, for a time, Venetim had held three different family registers at once. "Please feel free to look into it yourself. I have told you nothing but the truth."





"Interesting." Adhiff gave a slight nod. "I am familiar with those tattoos, and yours matches the ones I've seen… However, there is no time to look into it to see if you're telling the truth."

"Yes. Because countless soldiers under your command would be killed in the meantime." Venetim rolled his left sleeve back down. He didn't want anyone else to see the marks on his arm. "You said you wanted to protect your men and avoid damaging their livelihoods. That means you'll want to avoid sending them on a suicide mission. Rather than future political conflict, your concern should be whether your men will live through tomorrow. For their sake, please reconsider."

"…So you first rattle a person, then appeal to their emotions and use their own logic against them. Hmm…" The corners of Adhiff's lips arched into a grin. "Not bad. Even if you're lying, your conclusion makes sense. You used my responsibility as a captain in the Holy Knights against me, leaving me no choice but to agree with your logic. In other words, I can use you. You've proven that much at least."

Venetim had a bad feeling about this. Adhiff appeared to be enjoying himself.

"Venetim Leopool— No, if your story is true, then it would be Venetim Verkle. I believe we can force a revision of the current strategy, and I am positive the third prince and princess will agree to it. After all, they both have a high opinion of the penal hero unit."

Venetim pictured the royal children's faces. It was hard to believe that Dotta's saving them had been anything more than a whim, but his actions were already paying off.

"And yet at the same time, opposing the Esgeins will turn the whole family against me," said Adhiff. "All of the Holy Knights could wind up their enemy. Once this battle is over, we'll have a political war on our hands."

"Yes, I imagine so." Venetim nodded, though he didn't understand any of what Adhiff was talking about.

"And so I'll need to use you, or more specifically, the entire penal hero unit." Adhiff stood. He was much taller than Venetim had imagined, and his gaze was overwhelming. He looked completely

different than he had mere moments ago. “I’m going to put that silver tongue of yours to good use, so don’t forget that you are now in my debt.”

“I would be more than happy to help.” Venetim smiled uneasily. He knew this attitude sometimes made people nervous. “I have my own goals, and won’t hesitate to use you as well.”

This was an outright lie. He didn’t have any goals, but he was sure such a line was exactly what someone like Adhiff wanted to hear. Because even if Adhiff could see right through his lies—no, precisely because he probably could—this captain seemed to like people who weren’t afraid to play the fool.

◆

When Venetim withdrew from the tent, Tatsuya, Patausche, and Jayce were waiting outside.

This seemed odd. He’d asked Patausche and Tatsuya to wait for him so he could explain how the negotiation went. But why was Jayce here?

Well, this is unusual.

Jayce hardly left the dragon stables and was even less sociable than the other members of the penal hero unit. Just about the only person he ever spoke with was Xylo, and that was all competitive banter. And yet here he was, chatting with Patausche.

“What brings you here, Jayce?” asked Venetim.

Jayce glared back at him with his usual sour face. He looked like a rebellious teenager. “I’ve got news, and it’s bad.”

“How can things get any worse than they are now?”

“It’s one of the enemies we’re up against. This one might be an even bigger pain in the ass than Demon Lord Sugaar,” Jayce snarled. His tone was different from when he was half-jokingly complaining to Xylo. There was genuine disgust in his eyes. “When I was patrolling the skies, I got into a few fights with flying faeries from the Second Capital, and it was clear their tactics had changed.”

"Apparently, there's been a major shift in their strategy," said Patausche, sounding even gloomier than usual.

Venetim had no idea what was going on, but he nodded anyway. "All right. So…? What kind of enemy are we up against?"

"The faeries have started to hide behind clouds and ambush their opponents. It's a strategy we've never seen them use before."

"They surrounded us," added Jayce. "They seemed determined to kill us then and there. If it wasn't for Neely and me, the entire squad could have been wiped out." Jayce removed the storm goggles from his head and showed Venetim an unusual sight: The lenses were cracked, clear proof of how much they'd struggled. It was extremely rare for anything of Jayce's to break. "Their strategy is one I'm familiar with. I learned some things from it myself. You remember how I started a revolt way back when?"

"Y-yes, I… I am familiar with the story. You carried out a surprise attack on a fortress and ended up seizing it, correct?"

"Exactly. I had a guy who was basically my adjutant named Tovitz Hughker."

This might well be the first time Venetim was hearing any details about Jayce's revolt. He was vaguely aware that there were human officers fighting by his side and not just dragons, but that was all.

"Well, he was thrown in prison in the Second Capital, so it's possible he's behind this. And if he joined the enemy, then we're going to have trouble both on land *and* in the sky."

"Oh."

"Your half-hearted reply tells me you have no idea what this means," said Patausche with a sigh. "This isn't as simple as the appearance of a powerful faerie or another demon lord. Their overall strategy is going to improve drastically, and all battles going forward will be much more difficult. That includes our upcoming effort to reclaim the Second Capital."

"Oh…"

"Hmph. This idiot is never going to understand," Jayce said, snorting. Venetim actually appreciated how easily the man had given up on him. "At any rate, it'll be a lot harder for me to back you up from the sky. So don't get your hopes up, Patausche."

"I know. Of course, I was never planning on relying solely on your squad to back us up. More importantly, does this Tovitz person have any weaknesses? If he has any habits or inclinations, knowing them could prove beneficial."

"'Weaknesses'?" Jayce seemed to rack his brains for a moment before muttering in disgust, "He isn't a risk-taker… I don't know if that counts as a weakness, but he only takes action when he's positive he can succeed. Either that, or when he has a backup plan for when things go south."

"But in that case, why did your revolt fail?"

"…There are some things not even he can predict. He never thought he'd be caught, but the humans' intelligence was too good, and they got him in the end."

"And that's his only weakness?"

"Pretty much. That's all I know about him. I didn't have anything to do with him outside of the revolt. Honestly, I didn't really like the guy." Jayce's expression soured even more as he spoke. "He lives like he's just trying to kill time until he's dead. He has no attachments to anything. Then again, if he came out of his cell to fight for the enemy, maybe he…"

Jayce stopped himself before saying any more, then turned his back to the others and started to walk away. His irritation was clear in his long strides.

"…It doesn't matter," he muttered. "What I need to do now is come up with a strategy. I'm gonna talk to Norgalle. I'll leave the fighting on land to you guys. Make sure you get that idiot Xylo back as fast as you can."

"Understood," replied Venetim. "I will do my best."

"You'll have to do better than that," said Patausche, a trace of anxiety in her usually serious expression. "Reclaiming the Second Capital is crucial. And I see you've finished your negotiations with Adhiff Twevel. How did it go?"

"It went well for the most part. They're going to change the strategy, though it seems I owe him a favor now. At any rate, it appears we will be attacking from the east gate. The mission starts tomorrow evening."

"I see. That's good news." Her mouth relaxed into a smile. "I suppose that settles it. If Xylo needs my help, I'll just have to break through the east gate."

"…O-oh, good."

"They're giving me full command over the cavalry from the former Thirteenth Order this time, too. Once we get past the gate, we will charge straight through the enemy. I won't let anyone get in my way."

"I have high hopes. Xylo was telling me about how much he was counting on your cavalry."

"That's no surprise," she exclaimed, puffing out her chest.

It appeared that a little exaggeration went a long way with Patausche. His words dramatically improved her mood as well as the atmosphere of the entire unit. Jayce still looked pissed, but no more than he did whenever Venetim stopped by and got showered with the usual complaints.

"All right, I'm going to start preparing to move out," announced Patausche. "You better not be late. We don't need someone like you dragging us down."

"Yes, I know."

I wish you would simply leave me here if you're worried about me getting in the way, thought Venetim. But he'd now done what Xylo asked, so hopefully they were more likely to survive.

Though I suspect I'll be paying a rather high price.

Venetim patted Tatsuya on the shoulder and headed off. The infantryman was still fresh from repairs but was supposedly ready for battle. "Let's go, Tatsuya."

"Guh."

Tatsuya made a soft grunting sound, which was immediately followed by the battle cries of countless soldiers behind them. Soon, the Saint would appear to boost the troops' morale.

…What are they going to make me do next?

Would Xylo hit him again if he knew the secret agreement he'd made with Adhiff? That would be awful.

I wonder if my dear brother Fidius will be mad when he figures out that I lied?

Venetim suddenly realized that he was squeezing his left arm. There was something he had kept from Adhiff during their negotiations about his loan from Verkle Corp. In truth, the organization hadn't seen four lines worth of promise in him. He'd added three of those lines himself to back up his bluffs. That said, he *was* the son of the company's president. But he was such an embarrassment to the family, they'd secretly cut ties with him.

Someone else with the same birthdate and history up to the age of fourteen remained on the Verkle family register in name only, so no one would ever find out he'd been sentenced to become a hero.

I don't want Fidius to yell at me. Maybe he'll just ignore me and pretend I don't exist. That would be a lot better than being yelled at.

✦

That day, Tsav witnessed something very unusual.

He found what appeared to be a young girl curled up into a ball. The tents assigned to the penal hero unit were almost at the edge of the camp, but the place he'd spotted her was a temporary hut for storing supplies that was even farther out. He'd noticed the girl wedged in between the clutter. She had fiery-crimson hair, and she was holding her head in her hands.

What the hell?

Tsav stopped in his tracks. He was exhausted. He had a huge basket slung across his back filled with metal plates for sacred seal engraving, and it was ridiculously heavy.

"What are you doing, Tsav?!" shouted Norgalle, walking ahead of him. "We have no time to waste! We must return to my office and start engraving immediately!"

He's always so full of energy, thought Tsav. But of course Norgalle wasn't tired. He wasn't carrying anything. Since he refused to help, Tsav was stuck carrying a double load. *He is the king, after all.*

Tsav understood Norgalle very well. The king would rather die than soil his hands with such trivial duties, so threatening him was

pointless. What's more, Norgalle was one of the most valuable assets the penal hero unit had. He was worth far more than the ability to kill even a hundred faeries. Therefore, Tsav was more than willing to carry a double load of supplies, though that didn't make him any less exhausted.

"Please wait, Your Majesty." Tsav put down his basket and pointed at the young girl at his feet, partly as a ploy to get a moment's rest. "There's, like, a little girl here, and she's not lookin' good. I think she needs help."

"What?!"

Norgalle approached the young girl in a fluster. Just as Tsav had hoped, he was completely distracted. Tsav took the chance to rotate his aching shoulders and relax for a moment.

"Uh… Hello?" Tsav squatted and peered into the girl's face. "What are you doing here? Find something cool? Like a rare bug or an ant or something? Or do you just like the ground?"

"N-no…" The girl with the crimson hair shook her head without looking up. "That's not it… Thank you for asking, though…"

"Hmm. Are you not feeling well?" Norgalle looked down at her and gave a firm nod. "Can you walk?"

"I-I'm fine… I'm sorry. I'm not sick… I'll be all right…as long as I get a little rest… So please don't worry about me… I'm okay. Really…"

"Hmm. It appears you need some help to walk." Norgalle wasn't listening to her.

What's up with this girl anyway?

Tsav thought she looked quite feeble as well, though she didn't seem injured. Maybe she was just exhausted mentally and physically.

"Tsav, carry her and be gentle. She is most likely from a nearby village. We must get her home safely."

"What are you talking about, Your Majesty? No commoner could get into our temporary fortress."

Tsav rolled his eyes. Since the girl was inside the fortress, she had to have been a low-ranking soldier in some unit. No civilian was

stupid enough to be living this close to Mount Tujin, and it was even less likely a survivor would wander in here.

Still, the girl seemed far too frail to be a soldier. Hadn't they put her through basic training? But if she wasn't a solider, who the heck was she? The only thing he could think of was that she was out of her mind like Dotta and had sneaked into the fortress to steal.

"She has to be a soldier," he said, turning back to her. "Hey, young lady. Who's your squad commander? If it's someone from the Kurdel family, I can take you back to where you belong. If you work for a Dasmitur, though, I'll have to kick your ass."

"Are you an imbecile?" snapped Norgalle. "She is clearly no soldier. How dare you spew such vile garbage at this young farmer—the foundation of my country?"

"Like hell she's a farmer. How could a farmer sneak inside the fortress? …Hey, I'm sorry about this guy. He's a little…well, you know."

"…I don't have a squad commander," replied the girl.

"…You don't?"

"But…I'm not an ordinary villager, either."

The girl with the crimson hair finally lifted her head. Tsav was shocked. Her eyes were swollen from crying, but he instantly recognized her. He had a great memory, after all.

"You're li'l Yurisa! The Saint!"

"Excuse me?" Norgalle raised an eyebrow, just as surprised as Tsav. "Interesting. So *you* are Yurisa Kidafreny. I believe…we were supposed to meet here… Yes…a private meeting."

Norgalle spoke haltingly, stringing together ideas in his head as he interpreted the scenario before him. Tsav could empathize with the girl. Perhaps to Norgalle, the way she was curled up on the ground made her appear to be kneeling.

"You do not have to bow," he said. "Relax. You have my blessing."

"I'm sorry, but… Uh… What are you talking about…?" she asked.

"Oh, don't worry about him," replied Tsav. "This guy—ahem, this *distinguished gentleman*—is King Norgalle, and he is glad to finally have a chance to speak with you, li'l Saint."

"O-oh… Yes… Because…I'm a saint." She smiled faintly. It was a self-abasing expression, and clearly forced. "I have to pull myself together. Everyone is waiting for me… I need to deliver a speech before the battle commences."

"Ha-ha. Talking in front of so many people can be nerve-racking, huh? I'll let you in on a little secret that always helps me. I just imagine how easy it would be to slit their carotid arteries from behind! That way, I lose all respect for the pathetic worms I'm talking to and stop caring! What do you think? Pretty clever, huh?"

"Huh? U-uh… That's… Ha-ha-ha. I'm not exactly nervous, though…"

For some reason, Yurisa seemed rather troubled by Tsav's comment. She took a few seconds to reply, and when she finally did, it seemed she was trying to convince herself it was some sort of joke. *Well, that wasn't the response I was expecting*, thought Tsav.

"…I'm sorry. I'm afraid to fight… And I'm even more afraid to ask —to order everyone else to fight with me…"

"You're scared?" Asked Tsav. "Why? That sounds like a lose-lose situation to me."

"Because it's terrifying. People might die because of me… No, people *will* die."

"Oh, that? Yeah, I totally know what you mean! I have a strong sense of responsibility, and I'm a really good person, too! But, like, I don't really feel scared. I kinda just feel bad for everyone! But even then, I still fight through the pain, overcome it, and do everything I can to win. Pretty impressive, huh?"

"O-oh…" Yurisa blinked a few times, like she was a different species, unable to understand human words. "You overcome the pain…? I'm sorry. I don't see how that's possible…"

"Well, I am a genius, so I guess it might be hard for normal people. But anyone can do it if they really try!" Tsav winked at her. "Just believe in yourself!"

"Uh…?"

"Pay no attention to this buffoon's ramblings. Listen, Saint Yurisa." Norgalle pushed Tsav out of the way and stood in front of the girl, proudly puffing out his chest. "A commander is responsible

for the life of every single soldier under their command. That is a fact. However, never forget that the commander works for the king."

He took a knee and crouched uncomfortably, then placed a hand on Yurisa's shoulder. It was a kindhearted gesture, rare for a king. At any rate, Norgalle had never treated Tsav like that.

"The king stands at the top of the nation's hierarchy, and so he is responsible for every action and mistake the commander makes. And so if you ever truly wish to give up and run away, you may curse me and lay all the blame at my feet. I will accept responsibility for all your mistakes."

"…The king?" Yurisa repeated the words, her gaze swimming. Now she was *really* confused.

I don't blame her, thought Tsav. He chuckled deep in his throat. Who wouldn't be confused when faced with some random guy claiming he was king all of a sudden. The fact that she didn't know who Norgalle was only made him sound even crazier.

"You're so funny, li'l Yurisa!" cried Tsav. "Your reactions are, like, hilarious."

"…Huh?"

"I wonder what my bro Xylo would say if he were here. Actually, he might get mad… Yeah, he probably would. I bet he'd be furious they made some ordinary girl into a saint. Stuff like that always sets him off, doesn't it? Right?"

"Huh? Um… Your brother…? I'm sorry. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yurisa." A voice suddenly came from behind. Tsav turned around to see a woman in armor with a lightning staff hung at her waist. Her hair was tied back, giving a full view of her exhausted expression. Was she the Saint's guard? "I've been searching everywhere for you. It's time."

"Tevi… I'm sorry." Yurisa awkwardly stood back up. "I—I got a little lost…and I needed to think."

"I was worried about you. Please allow me to accompany you whenever you go out from now on."

"…I will. I'm sorry. But…I'm okay now." After inhaling softly, Yurisa straightened up and began to walk away, bowing once to the

penal heroes before leaving. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I… I’m sure I’ll be fine now. I can do this. I will guide everyone to victory… because that is my duty.”

“Good,” said Norgalle. He nodded firmly and brushed his moustache with a fingertip. “I am counting on you, Saint Yurisa. Go and fulfill your duties in my name.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Hilarious.” Tsav started laughing on reflex. Norgalle glared at him, to no avail. He kept cackling as he watched Yurisa leave, and her female guard shot him a quick, cold glare as well.

What was that about? But Tsav was too amused to care. *And that girl… All she did was apologize. That’s the Saint, huh?*

If the girl he’d just met was really the Saint, then this whole thing was like one big, hilarious, bad joke.

PUNISHMENT: BATTLE AT SILVER STREET

ASGARSHA, PART 4

I didn’t need to be told to know when the attack began. I could tell by the sound of explosions and the sight of rising smoke outside the south gate.

It began in the evening; we were waiting atop the roofs of the wooden houses in the Ash Tray. Below us, Asgarsha Street ran straight to the east gate. As I watched faeries and human soldiers pass by beneath us, I slammed my fist into the roof below me, then closed my eyes and listened to the echoes.

I could feel the topography of the surrounding area along with every living thing moving through it. By the gate, there were around a hundred enemies, including small faeries, but on the city walls, there were over a thousand. I figured this was probably standard formation for defending the gate, which opened and closed using sacred seal technology. The soldiers gathered inside the gate were probably just reserves. The battle would open with the larger force

atop the city walls picking off the enemy and defending against their approach.

In other words, now was the time for us to strike.

Looks like we're up.

It was a clear night without a cloud in the sky. As the white moon illuminated the ground below, I looked back at Rhyno. "It's time. Let's destroy the gate from the inside."

"Our first objective is to meet up with our comrades in the hero unit, yes?"

"Exactly."

Rhyno had his spear in hand, ready for battle. Frenci, her curved blades already unsheathed, looked blankly toward the north. "…I wonder if Dotta will be able to pull it off."

"You don't need to worry about him," I said.

I wasn't the least bit concerned. The enemy wouldn't be expecting Dotta, so there was no way they could prevent him from sneaking inside. Besides, this was the same idiot who had stolen a goddess and made a mockery of the Thirteenth Order's security.

"You really trust him," said Frenci. "Rather than failing, I'm more worried he'll simply run away."

"Actually, that kind of worries me, too."

"But I suppose Trishil is there to keep an eye on him, so it should be fine."

"Oh yeah…his 'adjutant,' right?"

After a little prying, I'd learned she was a mercenary hired by the military. She even had a sacred seal talisman to prove it. From what I could tell, she appeared to be working for an order of the Holy Knights, and I thought assigning someone to watch Dotta was a pretty good idea. It'd be nice if this prevented him from stealing anything that might get us in trouble, but there was something about Trishil that interested me even more.

"Frenci, you and she seem to really get along. What's up with that?"

"We bonded over discussing what it feels like to supervise someone with numerous flaws."

"…Oh."

Asking any more seemed like a waste of time. I'd probably just wind up listening to a never-ending list of complaints about me and Dotta.

After giving up on prying, I turned to the others: the leftovers from the Resistance. There were twenty-four of them—so few I wanted to cry. Their faces clouded with anxiety, fear, and a hint of excitement. The only exceptions were the guy who drank too much booze before we left and Old Man Ordo, who looked like he was sleeping. He probably *was*.

"You lowlifes ready?" I asked.

"I guess so, Master," replied Madritz.

Even he was calling me that now. I wished they'd all stop.

I scowled and roared back, "What do you mean you 'guess'? You better be readier than you've ever been in your life!"

"Ah! Uh… I-I've never been readier…!"

"What about the rest of you?"

Their timing was all over the place, but each gave a reply that more or less meant "yes." This was pretty much what I'd expected. After all, these weren't soldiers. But as long as they could pretend, that would have to be enough.

As I inwardly grimaced, a massive fire started up in the north. There was no explosion. The sacred seals we'd made were only meant to start fires, not to explode. Dotta and Trishil's mission was to use the flames with a little oil and set warehouses full of supplies and military posts on fire. A brilliant distraction.

"He really did it," muttered Frenci, surprised.

"Yep."

Sending Dotta around to set fires was a far more reliable strategy than using time bombs. It wasn't exactly efficient, but it would force the enemy to split their forces to deal with the disturbance.

I slammed my fist into the rooftop again. We could ignore the enemies on top of the city walls. The guards inside the gate, however, had begun to move toward the fires. A few faeries had gotten excited and left their posts as well, prompting even more human soldiers to expend energy restraining them.

I counted the remaining enemies on the ground still ready to fight. There were fewer than sixty.

"Let's move out," I said quietly, but still loudly enough for everyone to hear. A pack of faeries was passing by directly below us: bogies and scale-covered humanoid faeries called dunnies acting as their tamers. These were nimbler than knockers, whose bodies were eroded by minerals, but they lacked their high defense.

"Fire!"

The Resistance members obeyed, shooting their arrows in unison. It was the best I could've hoped for from a group of adventurers unused to lightning staffs and unreliable in close combat. A few arrows even hit their targets.

Rhyno, Frenci, and I lunged off the rooftop the instant they fired, and the result couldn't have been more perfect. Rhyno skewered a bogie with his spear, while Frenci's curved blades decapitated one of the dunnies. I did my part as well, swinging my hatchet-like short sword straight across another dunnie's chest. Then I spun around and kicked off a charging bogie, activating my flight seal and shattering its skull as I propelled myself through the air.

How many left?

When I looked back in search of my next target, something caught me off guard. It was Old Man Ordo. Apparently, he'd found a sword somewhere and jumped down after us. He'd just sliced a dunnie's arm and head clean off.

"Hey! Who gave Old Man Ordo a sword?!" I yelled. "He just jumped off the rooftop!"

The Resistance was making a fuss up above, but Old Man Ordo paid this no mind and kept swinging his blade like he didn't have a care in the world. This time, he sliced a bogie in two.

"That old man sure knows how to fight," said Rhyno, full of praise.

It was too late to stop him, so I decided to just let him do his thing. I wasn't thrilled about the insubordination, but it wasn't anything new.

I tapped the ground with my right fist and activated my probe seal, Loradd. This gave me a good idea of our surroundings for two

hundred steps in all directions. I wanted to know how many enemies there were and which ones to prioritize. I quickly made my decision.

"We're going to break down the east gate! Back us up!" I shouted to those still on the roof.

With that, I sprinted down Asgarsha Street. We had set up collapsible ladders to make it easier to travel across the rooftops in the Ash Tray along our path, and it was the Resistance's job to back us up from above as we fought on the ground. However, the enemy was really putting up a fight. I threw one of my precious knives and managed to blow up a few faeries, but it wasn't enough to get us to the east gate. A massive enemy stood in our way, though I'd seen it coming, thanks to Loradd.

"A troll," muttered Frenci, lowering her stance.

The troll was a bipedal faerie as tall as the merchant shops lining the street. In its hand, I saw what I could only describe as a club made of wood and rock, though calling this crude weapon a club might have been giving it too much credit. And standing by the troll's side were a few bogies, shaking with excitement.

But if we could get through this, we were home free. Nothing else stood between us and the east gate.

"Rhyno, I want you and Old Man Ordo to take out the bogies by its feet," I said. "There are seven in total."

"It would be my pleasure. I'm so happy that you trust me."

It was during times like this that Rhyno's creepy nature actually made him seem somewhat reliable.

Everything after that happened in the blink of an eye. As Rhyno skewered bogies and Old Man Ordo swung his sword, I kicked off the ground, leaped horizontally onto the wall of a large shop, and raced toward the troll's head. Dodging its wild swing was almost too easy, though it destroyed the shop's wall.

I wasn't going to waste one of my knives, either. Instead, I placed my left hand ever so softly against the side of the troll's head. I didn't need to hit it. I simply set my palm against its skin, and its eyes immediately rolled back. This was another way to use Loradd. The developer of the seal probably never imagined its vibrations being used to rattle the inside of faeries' skulls, but giving opponents

a concussion was a great alternative to using Zatte Finde when it was inconvenient, such as in close combat or during covert operations.

The colossal troll wobbled and then collapsed to its knees as Frenci's blades, gleaming white and sparking, sliced deeply into its Achilles tendon. Once the troll fell flat onto its face, Frenci glanced back, and our eyes met.

"I'm impressed," I said.

"This is nothing. I am a lady of the Mastibolt family, after all," she said, smiling slightly.

After that, we were able to reach the east gate. I used one hand to take out the Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke. I already knew how to use it. I shoved it into the hole right in the center of the sacred seal engraved in the gate. All that was left was to say the magic words. The sound-based authentication mechanism activated with a faint glimmer.

"…Requesting crest activation. Please execute the contract. The embodiment of radiance, the sculpted sacrament. I am…"

From what I was told, these were set phrases used in ancient times, though not a single member of the royal family still understood what any of it meant. I figured it didn't mean anything. That was the way secret codes worked, after all.

"…I am the successor of Vladd. The true king has returned."

That was the password to activate the seal. The east gate was suddenly swallowed in a radiant light as intricate treelike seals glowed and flashed and the gate began to creak. The sound grew louder as the gate slowly opened.

"We did it!" Madritz yelled in delight. "We really did it! Your secret weapon really worked, Master! Everyone's going to be okay now!"

The other adventurers were visibly relieved as well. Around 80 percent of the job was done. All that was left was to wait for the others to storm the city…

But something didn't feel right. The gate was taking far too long to open. In fact, it looked like it had stopped moving altogether while the creaking only grew louder and louder. What was going on?

"Xylo, do you see that?"

All of a sudden, Frenci was standing behind me, pointing up at the device used to open and close the gate. It was clearly broken beyond repair. Everything made sense now. So *this* was why they were baiting us to attack from the east gate.

"The mechanism to open the gate is broken," she continued. "It seems they anticipated our actions and took the initiative!"

"You've gotta be kidding me."

This was bad. Alarm bells were sounding in the back of my mind. I turned to shout to the members of the Resistance.

That was when I saw her. There was a woman on the rooftop. She looked like a doll in the fading sunset. Jet-black hair hung over her expressionless face. She looked as if she'd never felt a single emotion in her life. What stood out even more, however, were the horns on her head and the black wings growing out of her back. She clearly wasn't human.

"So destroying that device and waiting at the gate actually worked," she muttered coldly. Her voice was flat but carried well. "That human was right."

A chill ran through me, and I knew right away it wasn't just the winter cold. The air around us was freezing, penetrating the pores of my skin. I could see white frost spreading out over the shop's rooftop at her feet. One of the members of the Resistance nearer to her screamed and clutched his throat, then dropped to his knees.

A demon lord…! Is that its main body?

I clicked my tongue. She could speak, and from how she was consciously lowering the surrounding temperature, it was obvious she was no normal faerie. She'd been sent here for a reason. It seemed a real pain in the ass had joined the enemy.

"Everyone, spread out!" I shouted. "Get as far back as you can!"

Was I quick enough? The air kept getting colder. I had to take this thing out, no matter what. I couldn't expect any decent backup, either. We had no idea what we were up against. Did we even stand a chance?

"Xylo." Frenci took a few steps toward me, her breath white as she whispered, "You're a mess. I have never seen a more unsightly

expression in my life."

"This is how I always look."

"I am glad to see you are still your usual self. I'll say this now. If something happens, I will make sure you get out alive. I am prepared to—"

"Wait. Stop right there," said the demon lord. "What is this? What are you?"

She'd interrupted Frenci, seemingly caught off guard. It was only a subtle twitch of the eyebrow, but it was the first time her doll-like face had showed any change.

"You…" She was looking behind me. Was she speaking to Rhyno? "…Are you really human? There is something strange about your body. Who are you?"

"Who am I?" said Rhyno. "Why, I'm an ally of mankind."

He swung his spear in a wide arc while hopping nimbly, as though dancing. He looked truly happy. *Disgusting*, I thought as his spear pierced the night sky and soared toward the heavens.

✦

The attack began right at dusk.

The east gate had opened only slightly before stopping, but there was no time to wait for word from Xylo.

Command concluded that the black ops unit had failed due to unforeseen enemy interference and quickly moved on to a new strategy.

Unbelievable…

Venetim gazed up at the walls of the Second Capital. They had to be ten times as tall as he was, and they weren't just made of stone. Inside was a framework of steel bars, and sacred seals had been used to increase their defense even further.

It was no surprise the Federated Kingdom's forces were having so much trouble knocking them down. After eliminating the faeries outside the capital, numerous siege weapons were lined up at the wall, and each attack made a horribly loud sound. Some weapons

used a massive log to slam into their target, while others used colossal sacred seal–engraved boulders. Venetim had never seen either before.

Humans had set up the equipment, but soon humanoid shadows joined them, as if from nowhere, and began backing them up. The Eighth Order's goddess had summoned them, and each held a shield as they ran around defending against strikes from the city walls. Sometimes, they used their own bodies to block attacks.

Even Venetim could tell this was a powerful unit. The Eighth Order was said to be skilled at fighting alongside these shadow warriors. Some of the shadows were even larger than an adult human and could help out with physical labor.

"Man, this is incredible," said Tsav, yawning. "Looks like they don't even need our help, huh? Think I could take a nap? I get so bored when there's nothing to do. They're saying the others failed, but it's my bro Xylo we're talkin' about. I'm sure the gate'll be open before long. Plus, we've got Jayce handling things in the sky, so that'll be finished soon, too. Then, once the gate opens, Patausche's gonna rush in with her squad, and it'll all be over! Today's basically a day off for us."

"Don't talk such drivel, you imbecile." As expected, Norgalle was furious. He grabbed Tsav by the nape of his neck and stood him up straight. "They are taking much too long to break down those walls. Use my sacred seals and blow up the gate! That will be far quicker."

He had been saying this the whole time. Apparently, he'd created a new sacred seal with explosive power beyond anything they'd seen before.

"My loyal subjects are trembling in fear inside the Second Capital," he continued. "They are waiting for my return! Yes, I am sure they long to see my face."

"I—I don't know about that…"

"Are you claiming my people won't be excited to see their king?!"

"N-no, that's… Uh… That's not what I'm saying at all. I just…"

Tsav glanced at Venetim, looking for help. Venetim turned away, uninterested. Just then, the sound of a horn pierced the air, followed by a shout.

"It's the Saint! The Saint is here to join us in battle!"

Yurisa Kidafreny took a step out from the line of soldiers. She wasn't alone, of course. Shadows stood to either side, their shields up to defend her, but the way she walked and stood were still very saintlike. She looked straight up at the city wall, then extended her right hand into the air.

A flash of light was followed by a dry pop, and just as her crimson hair began to spark, a large staircase suddenly appeared before her, as if it had always been there. It led straight up the wall, sending the guards above into a panic.

"Now, my knights!" Her voice carried as if amplified by a sacred seal, striking awe into her listeners. "My miracle has laid out a path to victory. The time has come to march into the Second Capital together and save our fellow humans!"

Voices rose up from the army, and it was hard to differentiate between cheers and battle cries.

Venetim thought this might be the first time he'd heard the Saint speak. But something about her voice bothered him. Behind the volume, he sensed a twinge of fear, or perhaps…

"Whoaaa. That was crazy," said Tsav. "So this is what li'l Yurisa can do? Incredible. I mean, she looks so ordinary, right? We'll have no problem getting inside now!"

"Yes, she did an impressive job creating a path for my return," said Norgalle.

"Y-yes," Venetim added tensely. He was suddenly anxious. After all, this meant…

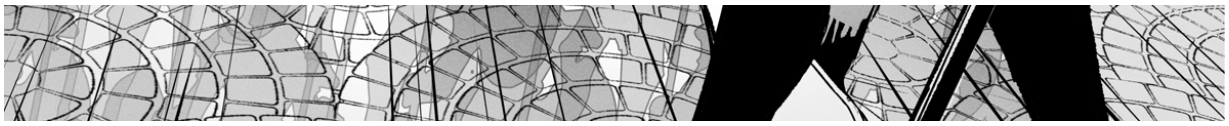
"*Penal Hero Unit 9004, it is time for you all to join the Saint*," ordered a voice through the sacred seal on their necks. It was the captain of the Ninth Order, Adhiff Twevel. *"You are to lead us into the capital while protecting her."*

I knew this was coming, thought Venetim as he exchanged a glance with Tsav. The latter laughed easily as Norgalle lifted his massive lightning staff then shoved it into the ground.

"Move out! It is time for us to make our triumphant return!" he shouted. His eyes were already locked on the royal castle in the distance. "It is time to free my loyal subjects! General Tatsuya,

annihilate all enemies who stand in my way! We must meet up with Commander-in-Chief Xylo and eliminate the Demon Blight!”





Tatsuya alone gave a triumphant roar, like the crashing winds of a violent storm.

PUNISHMENT: BATTLE AT SILVER STREET

ASGARSHA, PART 5

Rhyno’s spear pierced the frigid night air and headed straight for the female demon lord.

She leaped swiftly away to a neighboring rooftop. She was nimble and moved with clear intention. She must have seen me earlier when I threw one of my exploding knives and assumed that Rhyno’s spear was similar. She seemed to be trying to escape the blast radius… But that was all part of our plan.

“You’ve got the wrong idea,” said Rhyno.

His spear sparked and changed course midair, tracking the girl in black. It was the same type of javelin that dragon knights used, with the tracking seal Vaunir. It was developed to be a projectile and essentially disposable, but that allowed it superior homing abilities and greater destructive power.

And now it was after the female demon lord.

“Hff.”

She exhaled, allowing a puff of white breath to escape her throat. A sharp, heavy sound followed as white claws extended from the fingers of her left hand and sliced through the incoming javelin. Despite this, the impact threw her off-balance, and she stumbled. Using this momentum, she leaped down from the building.

"Fire! Hit her!" I shouted.

Two or three adventurers responded, and a few arrows shot through the air. I didn't expect much, and the demon lord easily evaded the attacks with minimal movement. But that was more than enough. We just needed to keep her off-balance until Frenci and I closed in.

"Frenci, I'll strike from above."

"Very well."

After deciding on a strategy, I rushed forward. Freezing air enveloped my body. I could feel it seeping into my skin. Lowering the surrounding temperature must have been one of this demon lord's abilities.

I need to end this quickly.

I leaped into the air and threw a knife with as much force as possible, while Frenci swept her blades toward the enemy's feet. The demon lord had no trouble dealing with our attacks. She swung her left hand and knocked away my knife with her claws as she jumped to dodge Frenci's swords. She must have seen Frenci use lightning to knock down the troll. She was learning.

Plus, the cold air was making it difficult for us to move, while it appeared not to affect her at all. *Isn't that a little unfair?* I wanted this to be a quick battle, but it looked like close-range combat would be far too risky.

"Don't blink, Frenci. You won't be able to open your eyes again."

"Roger."

Frenci tried to follow up with another attack, but she coughed and wound up staggering. The air was so cold, it was freezing the membranes in our throats. It didn't help that the ground was now wet, too. Did a water pipe burst? Did *she* do this?

When I landed, I noticed the heels of my boots sticking to the ground.

This isn't good.

The demon lord swung her right arm next, sprouting white claws on that hand as well. Was that ice? I had to stop her attack.

Think fast. I could use Zatte Finde to disrupt— No, that won't work.

In the past, I'd fought in the north, where it was much colder than here. I could still remember when one soldier carelessly touched frozen metal with his bare skin, and it had peeled right off. In other words, Zatte Finde would be far too dangerous, since I would need to touch the metal to infuse it with my sacred seal. It was time for a change of strategy. I used Sakara to kick off the ground as hard as I could, shattering the pavement and pelting the demon lord with gravel.

"*Tch*."

I saw another rare change of expression: Her cheek twitched. Still, she easily blocked the gravel with her ice claws. Was she going to try to lunge forward? I was prepared for that.

"Attack!"

A black shadow flapped its wings and shot out of my breast pocket. As it turned out, keeping Kelflora's little bird there was a good idea. It raced straight forward, slicing the demon lord's forehead open and sending blood trickling into her right eye.

That blood should freeze you, too!

But just as I was sure I'd managed to block her vision, the cold air warmed a bit. *Dammit.* It looked like she could rapidly make fine adjustments to the temperature. The shadow circled the air briefly before returning to my shoulder.

"What a bunch of eyesores," muttered the girl as she leaped away. "How many more little tricks do you have up your sleeve? That man was right. It isn't smart to get too close."

She put some distance between us, and it appeared she intended to keep it.

This puts us at a disadvantage. It looks like she's given up on aggressive pursuit, and that means she plans on dragging this fight out as long as possible.

"Xylo, widen the distance. At this rate, we—"

Frenci suddenly had another coughing fit, then regripped her curved swords. The biting cold was numbing her fingers, and I wasn't doing much better. I wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer. I had to come up with something fast.

"I will not allow you to get in Lord Abaddon's way," muttered the woman, before she lunged at me. The painfully cold air became a gale that seemed to roll against me in waves. "This capital already belongs to us."

She swung her white, icy claws, and I moved to block them. Frenci yelled something, but I figured she was just insulting me. My blade was about to lock with the enemy's. With a tight grip on my weapon, I readied myself to deflect her claws and counter.

But the instant that thought crossed my mind, a massive shadow slipped in between us. It was Rhyno. With the speed of a savage beast, unbelievable for a man of his size, he rammed into the woman in black, then pushed her all the way into the wall of a building, his enormous right hand clenching her throat. It was a disturbing sight—a colossal man was squeezing the life out of a delicate woman.

Rhyno seemed unaffected by the cold, even this close-up. What's more, her white, icy claws were stuck deep into his sides.

"I have a question for you," he muttered. He wore a relaxed, gentle smile. It was as though he felt no pain at all. "Tell me your name. I wonder what name you were given?"

"You…!" I had no idea what Rhyno was talking about, but the woman was clearly shaken. Her once perfectly blank expression had twisted. "How are you still moving? No… That body…"

That was when *he* appeared.

"That's enough, Anise. Fall back," came a hoarse voice from the rooftop.

So her name was "Anise." But more importantly, why did that voice sound familiar?

"That's the unit," the man continued. "Tovitz said we won't be able to defeat them yet."

"Rhyno, get back!" I shouted.

Though I had no idea what was going on, I knew something bad was about to happen.

But I was too late. A white mist shot into the air by Anise's and Rhyno's sides. Was there a water pipe nearby? Did she somehow manage to break it? In mere moments, Anise and Rhyno were completely concealed within the mist. I was briefly taken aback, but I soon realized it was just ice fog from a broken pipe. Anise must have frozen it.

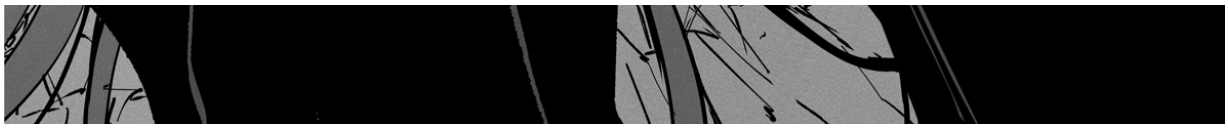
Immediately, dark crimson blades came crashing down from above, slicing through the mist four or five times. I didn't even have a moment to wonder if Rhyno had managed to dodge.

I had seen an attack like this before: coagulated blood.

"It's him…!" I shouted. Atop the roof stood a gloomy man with an awfully hunched posture. "Boojum! How the hell are you still alive?!"

I unsheathed a knife and threw it with all my strength, but Boojum simply swung his arm down in silence, creating a crimson shield to block the explosion. Crimson blades continued to rain down from above, destroying water pipes and creating even more ice fog.





I couldn’t see a thing… But I wasn’t done yet.

I slammed my fist into the roof, using the echoes to register Boojum’s movement. He was dashing across the rooftops as if to run away, but before I could give chase, more blades of blood flew through the air in our direction. They were larger and coming even quicker than before. I had no choice but to roll out of the way.

“Dammit! Rhyno!”

As if in answer, I heard something heavy collapse to the ground. When the ice fog cleared, Anise was gone. Instead, I found Rhyno, curled up, white frost covering his body.

“Gah! Hff!”

Rhyno coughed dryly. His sides were injured, as well as his shoulder and his back. The crimson blades had pierced deep into his body.

“Cut the crap, Rhyno.” I grabbed his good shoulder. “I can’t have you injure yourself like this before you even have your armor! Were you trying to save me?”

“…Yes, it is a bad habit of mine…that I must fix… But look at this.” He showed me a dagger in his left hand, dripping with blood. He must have inflicted a deep wound on Anise as well. “Not bad, right, Comrade Xylo? Perhaps I’m due for a small compliment?”

“Like hell I’m gonna praise you for that, you idiot,” I snapped. I grabbed his collar. I wanted to punch him. “I told Teoritta the same thing, and I’m gonna be even harder on you! Nothing pisses me off more than people sacrificing themselves to take out the enemy. Stop acting like some low-level hero.”

“Did I not help?”

“No, you didn’t. My plan calls for you to join in the battle after your armor arrives. We’re gonna need you then, and you almost got yourself knocked off without my permission! I’m gonna kill you!”

“I feel like you’re contradicting yourself…”

“Not my problem. More importantly—”

“Xylo. Enough,” hissed Frenci, interrupting my lecture. “You can straighten that man out later. I have at least ten issues with how you handled things as well, but *I* am kind enough to wait until we are done.”

She was still coughing and opening and closing her right hand. It seemed her fingers were gradually starting to loosen up.

"We're surrounded," she said. "It appears that woman was only meant to slow us down until reinforcements arrived."

"Looks that way."

I'd noticed as well. While we were fighting the female demon lord, we didn't have time to attend to our original objective—stopping the reinforcements. In short, we were completely surrounded by the gate guards and their faerie reinforcements.

"Master! Wh-what should we do?" I could hear Madritz's pathetic voice coming from the rooftop. "This is nothing like what we planned for!"

"Hmph… We'll just have to cut 'em down one by one, kid," muttered Old Man Ordo, sounding half-asleep. He'd been holding his own with the faeries so far. *How the heck does he have this much energy?* "Looks like we're gonna have to split 'em up, fourteen each. What d'you say, Master?"

He didn't even sound fazed. He must've been quite the adventurer back in the day.

"Let's hope that'll be enough," I said.

I unsheathed a knife and threw it at a group of charging faeries. The explosion wiped them out, and the battle commenced. The men on the rooftop shouted nonsense sounds, firing themselves up as they loosed their arrows.

Their aim was embarrassingly bad, but it was better than nothing.

"I am sure you realize this, Xylo, but we are at an undeniable disadvantage," said Frenci. She cut down a faerie, then backed up until our shoulders were touching. "I think we should pick a point in the enemy lines and break through it to escape."

"…No."

I looked down at Rhyno, curled over and unable to move on his own. I couldn't even tell where he was bleeding from. Logic was telling me to leave him behind, and that's exactly what I should have done. He did this to himself, and I should have let this freak rot

here. Besides, he was a penal hero, so they'd probably just resurrect him later. He might not even remember any of this.

All he's done is cause me trouble, I thought. *What the heck am I doing?*

And yet…

"We've done enough, Frenci. They made it in time."

For some reason, the east gate was now wide open, allowing our allies to charge in. It was Patausche and her cavalrymen.

"You look bored, Xylo. You must have gotten tired of waiting for us," she said. She even had the wherewithal to joke around. A panicked faerie came charging toward her, and she skewered it easily. "I decided to grace you with my presence, since you kept begging for my help!"

Someone else was riding with her, gripping her back tightly.

"My knight!"

Swords rained down from above, skewering the nearby faeries.

Interesting, I thought. So this was how Patausche had originally planned to fight alongside Teorritta. The former, in her full suit of armor, would act as a moving shield, protecting the goddess as she attacked. It was an extremely effective strategy.

"You will not be forgiven for leaving me behind." Teoritta pointed at me while making easy work of the faeries. "However, I am a great goddess, so I have come to rescue you! You may thank me now." She then hopped off the horse.

"Ah! Goddess Teoritta!" gasped Patausche in a fluster.

What was Teoritta planning on doing if I didn't catch her? Her golden locks faintly sparked as she landed in my arms, pricking my skin.

"…You two sure are close," muttered Frenci, half fed up, half relieved. She sounded like she was griping, but how could we complain? We'd been saved. Patausche's cavalry were mowing down the packs of retreating faeries.

"Heh! I knew my knight would be in trouble, so I hurried all the way here with Patausche." Teoritta shot me a reproachful glare. "But the only reason you were even in trouble was because you left me behind, you know! Repent!"

"I didn't leave you behind on purpose. I didn't have a choice."

"What a terrible excuse, even for a fool like you," said Patausche, laughing through her nose. "Now, how about you thank us?"

"You really saved us. Thanks."

"That didn't sound sincere."

"Give me a break."

The two of them really did save us. I was relieved. We'd always had a good chance of success, and the loud roar from the east gate told me my prediction wasn't too far off the mark. The device for opening the gate may have been broken, but our allies had simply burst right through.

The Demon Blight—or rather our enemy's tactician—had clearly underestimated the power of human siege engines. Then again, this was the first battle of its kind, so that made sense. How could anyone who hadn't set foot in the military's technology office ever predict something like this?

Siege engines had been evolving throughout history as humans fought one another, and once the Demon Blight appeared, sacred seal technology had rapidly come to the fore. Combining the two had improved the former's effectiveness tenfold. The military's technology division had gleefully poured their hearts into the work for just this kind of scenario.

The battering seal Milgnis and the ramming seal Yak Leed were two examples. It was hard to believe that level of destructive power had been developed by someone in their right mind. Thanks to all those powerful weapons and the massive amounts of luminescence fueling them, the gate had been opened with extraordinary speed.

And it wasn't only the siege engines. I had no idea how they did it, but there were already Federated Kingdom soldiers atop the city walls, bringing them under our control. *Did they develop some sort of ridiculously long ladder or something?* At any rate, the east gate was ours, and all that was left was to eliminate the humanoid faeries desperately trying to reclaim it.

"Patausche, listen! It's Rhyno! He's been badly hurt. We have to take him somewhere safe."

"Rhyno was injured?" Patausche furrowed her brow skeptically. "Where?"

"…I'm fine, Comrade Xylo," came a calm voice. When I turned toward the sound, I saw Rhyno already standing up. "My injuries aren't that bad. I can still work."

I was astonished. More than astonished. I glanced at his side, then at his shoulder. There were cuts, but they weren't that serious. But how could that be? I saw how deep that demon lord's claws had dug into his body. And was it me, or were his wounds faintly wriggling?

"I'm sorry, Comrade Xylo," whispered Rhyno, too low for anyone else to hear. "There's a little secret I've been keeping about this body of mine. It's special. I wasn't planning on telling anyone… But I wouldn't want to thwart any of your strategies, so I decided you should know about this secret weapon of mine."

This already sounded suspicious, but that was nothing new for him. And for some reason, he sounded a little frustrated. Perhaps he felt genuine regret over his actions.

"…You sure you can keep working?" I asked.

"I'm a little tired, but it shouldn't be a problem. At any rate, please don't tell the others about my secret. It would probably creep them out, yes?"

"Probably."

We made an agreement. I didn't know how I'd explain this to anyone anyway.

Who was Rhyno? Simply saying his body was special didn't explain what had just happened. Did he have one of those stigmata I'd heard so much about?

Because if he doesn't…

The instant I thought of another possibility, the sky lit up with rays of brilliant light, as though it were the middle of the day. This was followed by explosions and roars signaling the beginning of aerial combat.

It was going to be a noisy night in the Second Capital.



Hord Clivios of the Ninth Order had finally realized what was bothering him.

However, it was too late. They were far too deep underground and already in the middle of combat. He had no choice but to focus on the faeries in front of him, creatures born from minerals and plants, both with a resistance to poison. He should have noticed this sooner.

The enemy must have known his order was coming. There was no other way to explain this.

"Pelmerry." His voice was muffled by his mask as he called out to his goddess. "It appears we ran right into an ambush. Switch to corrosive poison. I suspect most of the faeries here will be resistant to neurotoxins. Bring out White Number Three."

Hord wiped his sword with a cloth while holding the blade before Pelmerry.

"First, I need enough for twenty people," he said. "We'll use that to organize a shock squad. Can you do it?"

"Yes… I can do it." Pelmerry was already touching Hord's sword, her fingertips sparking as she summoned poison to coat the blade. "Hord. The ambush… How…? What is going on?"

"They understood how your ability worked and gathered enough forces resistant to poison to fight back. This is going to be a difficult battle, so stay close behind me."

"They saw right through our plan… This will be difficult…which means…" The goddess smiled—an expression Hord always found dark and somewhat wild. "Once we make it out of here…will you praise me even more than usual?"

"Noted. As long as I may use my discretion."

"…I would really like…a new hair band, too…if that's okay."

"Noted. I will apply for one."

"…Hooray."

Out of the corner of his eye, Hord saw Pelmerry clench her fists. His goddess was much more cheerful than her demeanor implied, and she loved to collect various objects.

A hair band, huh? Piece of cake.

If that was all it took to make Pelmerry happy, then he would make sure to get it for her. She would have to keep fighting, perhaps even after the Fourth War of Subjugation came to an end. Many years in the future, her struggle would start again.

But for now…

Hord focused on the battle before them. Perhaps he should gather his men and keep everyone close. Letting them spread out could leave them vulnerable to being picked off one by one. They had to be careful.

But the most difficult fight would be the one fought above, on the ground. The demon lords were probably avoiding the goddess of poisons.

At that point, Hord thought of two people in particular: Adhiff Twevel and Xylo Forbartz. Both Adhiff's derisive smirk and Xylo's joking were like torture for Hord, and the two of them had a bad habit of bringing a pointless sense of humor to the battlefield.

I have to get us out of here as soon as possible and shut their foolish mouths.

◆

The impact was powerful and extremely sudden. Dotta Luzulas nearly rolled off the rooftop. In a stroke of luck, he just barely managed to grab ahold of the edge with the tiny talons on his gloves. Unfortunately, he was now dangling in midair.

What the heck was that?

He desperately pulled his body back onto the roof and attempted to regain a stable position. He was atop a two-story building with a slight slant, on the outskirts of the main road—probably an inn before they turned it into a warehouse for military supplies.

Dotta had slipped into countless buildings like this before, moving across ceilings and rooftops as easily as walking on solid ground. He could jump down without trouble, too. He knew how to fall properly and had never so much as sprained an ankle.

But he was in a bad situation right now.

"Hmm? There's a person up on the roof," said someone from below. There were three—no, four—soldiers in the road. "Hey, do you think that's the guy who's been setting all those buildings on fire?"

"It has to be him! Hey! Look at the wall in the back! There are flames!"

"Dammit! Get down here, you!"

When Dotta glanced at the ground, he felt a chill run down his spine. The soldiers already had their swords out.

Oh wow. Yeah, they're angry. I guess that makes sense.

After all, this was the fourth building he'd set on fire. He was just dousing them in oil and using a sacred seal to ignite it, but the guards were already on high alert, with soldiers sprinting all over the city.

Xylo had said, "It's safer to spread the fires out across the city, and it'll create a bigger disturbance, too." But Dotta was beginning to suspect Xylo had just wanted to make him run around.

He wanted to head straight back and ask Xylo if any of this was necessary. How much was he even helping? He had no idea. Nevertheless, he had a few reasons not to give up. One was that he enjoyed getting to mix his hobbies into his work. It helped him satisfy his urges. Another was that if he went back without doing anything, Xylo would punch him. And last, but not least…

"Hey, idiot. What are you doing?" From atop the roof, he heard Trishil click her tongue. It seemed the building's wild shaking hadn't even fazed her. "…How many people are down there?"

She glared at Dotta. His supervisor's gaze was eerily frightening. With her around, there was no way he could escape.

"F-four! Four soldiers. What are we going to do? We can't go back down from here!"

"It'll be fine." Trishil put on a grim expression and unsheathed the sword at her waist. It was a single-edged weapon with a thick blade. "You need to get some practice in with your lightning staff, Hanged Fox. When this is over, I'll help train you."

"Huh?! No thank you…"

"You don't have a choice," she replied.

Dotta had no idea why she was so adamant about training him and even more confused about why she kept calling him "Hanged Fox."

"How long do you plan on staying there? Hurry up and jump." Trishil leaped down from the roof. "I'll make easy work of the soldiers below."

She wasn't exaggerating. The moment she landed, she slashed two of the men's throats. Her right hand bent in bizarre directions and cracked like a whip.

"Who *is* this woman? Did you see that?! Where did she come from?!"

The other two tried to fight back, but they were far too slow and much too weak.

Trishil's blade appeared to lock with one of the soldier's, but she didn't let that stop her. She pushed forward, then kicked him away, only to plunge her sword into his chest and twist. She yanked it back out and swung again as she turned. From her lowered position, she made her last strike—an upward stab that silenced the final soldier.

"Whoa…"

By the time Dotta landed on the ground, it was already over. It appeared Trishil was an accomplished swordsman. Her unique right arm had probably helped. The way she'd overpowered the third soldier, then immediately spun around to take out the fourth, was extraordinary, especially considering the unorthodox angle. Having her as a bodyguard would make anyone feel safe. The issue was…

"Time to head to our next destination." Trishil brushed back the scarlet hair hanging over her forehead. "No time to rest. You still have enough energy, right?"

"…Yes. Hold on, though. I wanna talk about why I almost slipped off the roof… What was that shaking?"

"Hmm." Trishil tilted her head to the side. "Yeah. It's not like you to mess up like that. That shaking was pretty powerf—"

"Ah!"

Dotta's eyes darted around until he finally saw it. Thanks to his exceptional eyesight, he could make it out even at this distance.

There, lit by the flames of the inn Dotta had just set fire to, was a shadowy figure. It was small, but human-shaped, and it was covered in rags. It had a strangely powerful presence. Its tattered clothing fluttered in the wind as it slowly staggered down a narrow alley.

There was something very suspicious about this figure. It almost looked to be sleepwalking. And it was currently heading toward a group of human soldiers who had just arrived. It seemed the Federated Kingdom's army had already made it this far.

Dotta could see cavalry and even artillerymen. They were ready for anything and carrying flags with the emblem of a skylark flying through a tempest. But something about them worried Dotta. They looked somehow helpless.

"Enemy spotted! It's Afanc! Contact headquarters at once!"

"Don't stop! Keep marching forward and attack!"

"Fire! Back up the cavalry!"

Multiple men shouted, and the cavalry charged, rushing down the road like a great flood as artillerymen supported them from behind.

But the shadowy figure held its own. Its rags began to shake and tilt. Then the hem of its cloak touched the building to its side. A loud crack shook the air as the building was split in half diagonally. Dotta heard the screech of metal, and then the building came down, crushing a few nearby soldiers.

"Dammit! The cavalry! Is anyone still alive?!" shouted someone from across a curtain of dust. "You've got to be kidding me. Just how long are Afanc's claws?!"

There were even soldiers with lightning staffs trying to shoot the demon lord, but to no avail. Its ragged black cloak fluttered in the air, deflecting each bolt and causing them to fizzle out. It was a few moments before Dotta realized the demon lord had launched a counterattack.

A few of the charging soldiers were suddenly split in half. It didn't matter if they were heavily armored cavalry, infantry, or artillerymen. All of them were sliced right through the trunk.

What is going on? Is it cutting the lightning bolts before they can strike it?

As he watched the human soldiers get ripped to shreds, a chill came over Dotta.

"Infantrymen, spread out and attack!" shouted a man in especially beat-up armor. That must have been their commander. "Listen up! The skylark of House Kurdel flies stronger in the storm! Do not fall behind! Push forward! If I fall, then Llored shall take command! Now charge!"

The infantry rushed forward, attempting to use the rising dust and buildings as cover to get closer.

But it was all in vain.

"Eee!"

The bundle of black rags screeched, and a gust of wind suddenly cleared the dust.

Immediately, the daring infantrymen were under attack. Blood spewed into the air. The lucky ones only lost a limb or two. Others were split right in half. The captain, who had taken the lead, lost his right leg from the hip joint down.

"Eee… Heh-heh." The rags were laughing. "You're too weak… Stay away from me. I hate…filthy things…"

A few infantrymen somehow managed to evade the attacks and continued their approach. Just as the tips of their spears, the blades of their swords, and the bolts of their lightning staffs closed in on the demon lord, another disaster struck.

A reddish-black tornado blew in from an alley to the side, tossing away every one of the soldiers. Dotta could hardly even tell what had happened. All he knew was that thorn-like weapons had pierced the men's armor, knocking them to the ground.

"…You're wide open, Afanc." Another shady individual emerged from the alley. Unlike the mass of black rags, this one was pale and hunched. "Don't stop attacking until every one of them is dead. Tovitz Hughker was worried about you, so I came to help. It seems you still have a lot of learning to do."

"S-s-sorry…" The black cloak-like creature called Afanc appeared flustered. "This is the first time…I've done this…so I'm nervous… I'll be more careful…n-next time…"

"Are you really trying? I don't see any improvement."

"I—I—I am! I'm working hard…!" Afanc groaned as cracks appeared on the ground. It seemed to have swung something about, part of which hit Boojum in the neck but bounced off with a metallic sound. Boojum grabbed it—part of Afanc's body—with one hand.

"No, you don't seem to be trying at all. It's fine if you're not good at it, but at least make an effort."

"I don't want to learn… It's pointless. You're weird, Boojum."

"…First, I'm ordered to back up Anise, now you. I'm beginning to feel like I'm being made to do all the work nobody else wants to do. I'm not a babysitter."

"What are you talking about? And l-let go of my claws already…!

"Then stop swinging them around randomly. It's a bad habit." Boojum's voice was strangely serious. "Suddenly attacking others like

this is rude. Only strike if you're going to kill."

"Guh… Ah… Fff…" Afanc groaned uncomfortably.

These two were having a seriously disturbing conversation. Before he realized it, Dotta was bent down and clinging to the roof, holding his breath. If either of them noticed him, he'd be done for.

"…Hey," he muttered, his throat convulsing. Trishil was at his side, lying low and holding her breath as well. "What are those two? Are they faeries?"

"No," she replied immediately. She seemed familiar with them. "Don't let them see you. Those are two sources of Demon Blight. The demon lord in the black cloak is Afanc, while the hunched one is called…'Boojum,' I believe."

"Seriously? Th-those things are ridiculously strong!"

"Yes. This is bad. I wasn't expecting them to be so powerful." Even Trishil saw the demon lords as a serious threat. Dotta had never heard her sound so tense. "This is a real mess. If our allies send their forces here, they're going to be completely destroyed…!"

✦

The Federated Kingdom had the road leading in from the east gate entirely under its control.

There was a break in the fighting, finally allowing us to rest. I even managed to find the time to send Rhyno to get looked over while I chowed down on some of my field rations. If only I had something a little better than mystery meat and wheat gluten…

"You're taking me with you on all subsequent covert missions," said Patausche. She was being particularly haughty, for some reason. "You need a more reliable companion."

Frenci's reply essentially boiled down to "Shut up. I'll kill you," but was delivered in a more roundabout, polite way.

At any rate, things had calmed down. Now that we'd met up with the others, the penal hero unit was ordered to build a new base in front of the east gate while the Ninth Order's shadows got to

work. Jayce was the exception, of course, since he had to prepare for the upcoming aerial battle.

Apparently, the so-called Saint had arrived with the others, but we weren't able to see her. She was under heavy guard in a canopied, armored carriage engraved with sacred seals, keeping her away from the low-level grunts. This made sense, of course. They needed to be cautious, in case the Demon Blight attacked.

Besides, I was glad I couldn't see the Saint. I'd probably want to grab her by the collar and punch her in the face. She'd supposedly created an absurdly large staircase to surmount the city wall. Did she know what would happen if she kept performing such massive summonses?

"You look pissed, Bro," Tsav said point-blank. Venetim had been blatantly avoiding me, so my feelings were probably written all over my face. "I totally get it, though. You wanted to be part of the attack force, too, right? Defense is so freakin' boring! We don't get to move around or do anything!"

"Whatever." I was fed up with Tsav's flippant attitude. "If you're really that bored, why don't you go to the front lines and get killed for disobeying orders? 'S not like we have the right to compla—"

I stopped midsentence. Some piece of crap with a cynical smirk was walking this way: Captain Adhiff Twevel of the Ninth Order. I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Why, hello, Xylo," he said. "You seem to be doing well. I'm surprised."

"Can't say the same for the mission."

Not only had we failed to open the east gate, we hadn't gained control of the area inside it, either. That said, we'd kept the reinforcements at bay and had driven off one of the demon lords. Still, that was only about half of our objectives. A 50 percent failure rate was grounds to have us all executed, but I doubted a guy like Adhiff would do something so wasteful.

"Ah!" Teoritta, who was sitting by my side, suddenly raised a hand and stood up. "Kelflora! Did you see how much I helped during the battle?!"

"Yes." Kelflora's response was quiet and brief, her expression hardly changing. "I saw. You were strong, Teoritta."

"Right?! Heh-heh. Next, I'll show you how I fight alongside my knight. We will tear those demon lords apart, crush them, and turn them into fish food!"

"Tear apart… Crush… Fish food…" Kelflora repeated those words, then looked back at Adhiff. "What is she talking about, Adhiff? Are they going fishing?"

"Goddess Teoritta seems to be using unique turns of phrase to express herself. Xylo's mannerisms must be rubbing off on her."

"Well, excuse me," I said. It was true—Teoritta was gradually starting to pick up my speech patterns. Personally, I'd rather the higher-ups at the Temple not find out. "So? What do you want? Did you come all this way so Teoritta and Kelflora could hold a tea party? Nothing better to do with your time?"

"Of course not. I came to give you your next mission."

"…I figured. What is it?"

"You're to forge a path into the demon lords' base—the Second Capital's castle. Your unit will lead the charge."

The usual. There was nothing special about this command. It was always our job to run blindly into the enemy's base where the Demon Blight would be waiting for us. The only difference was that this time, our destination was the royal castle. It was what Adhiff said next that ruffled my feathers.

"However, you must do so while protecting the Saint and her unit as well."

"The Saint?"

"Yes, the penal heroes will clear the way for Saint Yurisa Kidafreny's arrival. You have been ordered to charge into the castle from the east and kill Abaddon immediately. That is all."

I didn't say a word, but I could see Teoritta's hair sparking.

"…The Saint," she muttered. Her voice was unusually quiet. "I heard parts of a certain goddess were transplanted onto her body. Is that true? Are the eye and arm of Senerva, Goddess of Fortresses, hers to wield?"

There was nothing I could say. It was the truth, after all.

"If this is some cruel way to punish my knight…" Teoritta took a step forward, placing herself in between us as if to protect me. I could feel heat radiating from her body like a roaring fire. "Adhiff, I will not allow you to hurt my knight and desecrate the memory of someone so important to him."

"Stop," I said. "That's not what this guy's trying to do."

"I don't mind playing the bad guy," said Adhiff, "but it was Supreme Commander Marcolas Esgein who came up with this plan. He enthusiastically declared that he would enter the castle alongside the Saint, take command himself, and reclaim the castle."

"…Things are gonna get really dangerous if Esgein takes command."

"Yes. Unfortunately, he lacks the talent needed to command an army. At this rate, the poor Saint and the soldiers who volunteered to fight alongside her are doomed." Adhiff was asking me if I could turn a blind eye to this. That was the kind of guy he was. "Furthermore, I received a message from Captain Hord. They couldn't find any source of the Demon Blight in the underground passages. Instead, they ran into numerous faeries resistant to poison. In other words, it was an ambush. There seems to be someone on the enemy's side who can read our every move."

"…Looks that way."

I had already considered this possibility, I was just hoping it wasn't true. Afanc had been let loose in the city, I had just fought Anise and Boojum, we had Sugaar in the sky, and to top it all off, there was Abaddon. There were five demon lords in total, and trying to take all their abilities into consideration was making my head spin. I needed time to process it all.

"Whoever it is, they're a real pain in the ass," I said. "We're attacking them from all sides, and yet they're showing no signs of breaking down. It's like they have genuine military experience. But now that they're surrounded, how do they plan to break free, I wonder?"

"Good question. We still don't know what Abaddon is capable of, either. Some demon lords are able to charge their power if given

enough time, then unleash it to cause massive destruction. Maybe he's simply trying to buy time."

"In that case, we have to hurry before things get worse." The longer this battle dragged on, the more forces we would have to pull from other fronts. Maybe that was exactly what they were after. "Adhiff, what are you and the Eighth Order going to do?"

"Our mission is to protect the city and its civilians. My goddess's shadows and the soldiers of the Eighth Order aren't equipped to break through enemy lines, but we can provide backup by sheer force of numbers."

"Esgein probably doesn't want to let you guys take any of the credit, either. He hates people from the Temple."

"You know him well. We were also given a rather special duty to take care of."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"My apologies, it's strictly confidential. That said, can I tell you something?" He was no longer smiling, but I knew that this cheerless, dead expression was an indication of his utmost goodwill. *What an awkward guy.* "Personally, I believe that you, Xylo Forbartz, and Goddess Teoritta will be much more crucial to our success in the upcoming battle than the still unstable Saint. If possible, I would love for you to reject your orders. Should you do so, I believe I can use the Noble Alliance to make a few adjustments to the mission."

"Teoritta."

I looked at my goddess as sparks flew from her hair and fire roared in her eyes. I was about to drag this goddess down to the depths of hell with me. I was asking her to risk her life to save strangers we would never meet. If I truly respected her and wished to keep her safe, I wouldn't force her to join me on such a reckless mission.

But of course, this goddess could read me like a book.

"Allow me to bless you." Teoritta touched my back encouragingly. "You will take me with you into the jaws of death and fight by my side. That is the greatest form of respect. And so, once we have vanquished the Demon Blight and provided guidance to the Saint, you must pat my head like never before."

"…This is nothing new, but shouldn't you ask for something a little bigger? You sound ridiculous."

"That is rich, coming from you, Xylo." Teoritta smiled, flames burning in her eyes. "You ask for no reward at all."

"Sure, but it's not like I have a choice in the matter. I feel sick just thinking about all the smartass remarks I'd have to suffer through from this guy if I refused. I'd rather die."

"Very well." Teoritta sighed like an older sister fed up with her naughty little brother. "If that is your story, I shall play along."

"Thanks."

I turned around and glanced at the flippant guy behind us. He was lying down, using a bit of rubble as a pillow. I could tell he'd been silently watching our conversation. I doubted he could understand why I was doing this.

"You got that, Tsav? We're gonna be guarding the Saint."

"I can't believe you're agreeing to this… But you look pretty enthusiastic, so I guess I don't have a choice." He sat up, rolled his neck dramatically, then let out a single sigh. "Eh, I guess this beats stayin' here and being bored outta my mind. Plus, I'm sure you guys would have a hard time without your genius sniper. Let's go play hero."

"Shut up."

"Oh, come on, Bro. You know you'd be lonely without me! You need someone cheerful and full of life around."

"Seriously, shut it. Idiot." I swore that if he said one more word, I was going to punch him. "Gather the others so I can tell them the plan. This is going to be all hands on deck, so trust me: No one's gonna be bored."

PUNISHMENT: RECLAIM ZEYLLENT, THE SECOND CAPITAL, PART 1

I had to sort out the situation immediately.

Time was running out; I stared at a map of the city, racking my brains. While the other penal heroes were resting, I had to think with everything I had.

First, the demon lords roaming the capital: Afanc and Boojum.

I'd received word from Dotta that the two of them were currently moving along the main road toward our primary encampment in the central square. We couldn't ignore them. This was bad.

Anise's whereabouts are unknown, but she's probably lying in wait for us somewhere. Meanwhile, Abaddon is in the castle. We can probably assume he's the leader of the occupation force.

Then we had Sugaar menacing the skies. Jayce and Neely had said they'd handle it. While this was no doubt a powerful foe, there was no use worrying about it for those of us on the ground, since we couldn't even reach it.

"…Patausche, come here. I need to discuss strategy with you."

She was the only one I could talk to about these things. I grabbed her by the shoulder, dragged her over, and shoved her toward the map.

"Wh-what? …Strategy? Oh. We're discussing strategy, yes?" She recoiled slightly, but I ignored it. We had business to take care of.

"Yeah. We're going to lead the Saint into battle. Obviously, our destination is here." I pointed at the castle on the northern side of the map.

The main issue with attacking the castle was the moat surrounding it. There were two bridges you could use to cross the moat. The first one, which led to the main entrance, could be accessed by heading straight north from the central square. The other one was at the back of the castle, along the road heading toward the north gate. If we had to escape, we would use this second bridge.

"There's a front entrance to the south and a rear one to the north."

Patausche knit her brow. "Which side will the Saint's unit attack from?"

"Neither. They'll be approaching from the east."

"The east? Are they going to make their own bridge? If they try to bring one with them, they'll be sitting ducks."

"No. I suspect they'll have her summon one. With the goddess of fortresses' right arm, she has that power."

"Ah, I see. And you…" Patausche started to say something, then thought better of it. "No, never mind. More importantly, that's quite a large summons. Will the Saint be all right?"

"I don't know," I replied dismissively. "I doubt she knows, either."

The only thing we could do for her was reduce her burden. If she was going to perform a large summoning, we'd simply have to keep her energy expenditure to a minimum and make sure she didn't stand out front.

"I suspect this attack will be especially aggressive and heavy-handed, since Esgein's in command," I said.

"I know. So I'll take the vanguard." Patausche nodded as she gazed at the map. I'd expected her to say that. "Leave this to me and my cavalrymen. We'll open up a path for the rest of you."

"All right. Your mobility and skill for breaking through the enemy line should rattle even the demon lords. For that reason, I'd like you to act as decoys."

"Decoys?"

"Yeah. We only need to land one attack on Abaddon to end this battle. Don't forget, we have Teoritta's Holy Sword."

"Yes! Exactly!" Teoritta poked her head in between Patausche and me, forcing me to lean back. "I shall guide you to victory, Xylo! The time for glory is here! So you better not leave me behind again!"

"I know, I know. We get it." I had a hard time not laughing. "Tsav, Teoritta, and I will lead the Saint's unit into battle. The three of us will be handling the real mission."

"Oh?" said Tsav. "I'm part of the real mission?! Wow, I'm starting to get nervous!" He stretched out both arms and yawned.

What a load of crap, I thought, but I kept my mouth shut. His sniping would give us the opening we needed to strike Abaddon.

"…But we still need people on defense and others creating a diversion. First, we need to protect the central square. Two very powerful demon lords are currently approaching our main forces, and if we lose to them, it's over."

According to the reports, the demon lords in question were Afanc and Boojum. If we wanted to go up against these two, we couldn't slack off. We had to use the best artilleryman and infantryman in the business.

I swept my finger along the map from our position at the east gate all the way to the central square.

"I'll let you guys decide the specifics. I just need you to keep them busy or, if you can, kill them. Tatsuya, Rhyno, and Norgalle, I'm counting on you three. And I guess I'll send Venetim along for good measure."

"Guh."

"Roger!" replied Rhyno. "You can count on me. Comrade Norgalle, together, we hold the key to victory—"

"Not so fast!" Norgalle, however, wasn't so thrilled. "You are telling me to sit around guarding these soldiers? Is it not my duty to triumphantly return to my throne?"

"But isn't protecting your people more important?" I knew he was going to object, so I decided to use a simple method to force his agreement. If you were able to convince Norgalle that his people were in danger, then he would usually agree to do whatever you asked. "Citizens from all over the city are evacuating to the central square with the main forces. If you don't go to them, who will?"

"…Hmm. Fair point. I shall follow your suggestion, Commander-in-Chief. This seems like a job for the king."

"I'm counting on you. All we need now is a distraction." I slid my finger from the eastern district to the north, around to the rear of the royal castle. "Patausche, I need you to go around the castle and attack from the rear. Do you think the former Thirteenth Order will help you out? We need your cavalry's mobility."

"…It's possible, but many were injured in our last battle. Only around three hundred can still fight. It won't be enough."

Patausche frowned. I knew exactly what she wanted to say. To create a distraction, we needed enough soldiers to make the enemy worry. They had to believe the cavalry was our secret weapon—our true main force—and three hundred soldiers wasn't going to cut it.

"I would need double that, Xylo," she said. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"If we just need more soldiers, then maybe Venetim can help. If it's only numbers, he should be able to find a way."

"Huh?! M-me?" Venetim looked up from his tea. His face was as haggard as a corpse's, and the light was gone from his eyes.

"Yeah, you. We need three hundred more soldiers. You've got an hour. Can you do it?"

"Wh-what? There's no way I can get that many."

"…You're a mess, Xylo." Frenci's voice suddenly seemed to descend from the heavens. I looked up, and there she was, straddling a gray horse. *When the hell did she get a horse?* "Surely, asking me for help would be far more practical, no? You are as dull-

witted as a sleeping seal. It is clear you are asking too much of that woman."

"*You*—!"

"Frenci," I interrupted, before Patausche could start a war. "Who'd you steal that horse from?"

"Do I look like a thief to you? Do not insult my integrity. More importantly, did you think I came all this way alone? That I crossed Mount Tujin by myself, on foot?"

"Wait… What are you trying to say?"

"You are so slow. What an utter fool."

Frenci raised a hand into the air and snapped. The gesture fit her personality to a tee. Immediately, men and women with hazel skin and iron-gray hair emerged from the alley behind her in droves, each carrying a curved sword at their waist.

"With me are four hundred warriors of the Southern Night-Gaunts. Xylo, these warriors came all this way to fight under your leadership, well aware that you are a penal hero and that they shall gain neither honor nor wealth by fighting at your side."

That sounded terrifying. Four hundred warriors? Was she serious? But there they were, standing right in front of me.

"The reason I stopped by the base on Mount Tujin was so that I could bring them to you."

"It's good to see you again," exclaimed one of the warriors in a deep, rumbling voice. He was particularly muscular, with a receding hairline. "I wish I could have come sooner."

I recognized both is face and voice. His name was Isidrig, and I'd known him since I was a child. He'd taught me martial arts and how to read and write. He was my mentor, and my body still vividly remembered his intense training—especially when it came to reading and writing.

"We've all been waiting for you to return home as our commander and lead us into battle."

He had a very serious face, but his mouth was curved in a faint smile. Isidrig had always been expressive, for a Southern Night-Gaunt. But it was rare for his smile to be so apparent that even I could see it. Was this really such a happy occasion? I felt rather

gloomy. The weight of their expectations was overwhelming, and I had no way to pay them back for their service. After all, I was only a penal hero.

What the heck am I doing? What the heck are they *doing?*

Maybe these Southern Night-Gaunts weren't just here as members of the Mastibolt family, hoping I'd help build a solid, powerful clan. Could it be that some of them actually liked me? Maybe I was just full of myself.

Whatever the reason, it was already too late. I couldn't go back to them, and while I felt guilty about it, I didn't really want to. I couldn't let myself. Involving them would only damage their position, and more than that…

I'll wind up dragging them to hell with me.

That much I knew for sure. No good would come of this.

"Every one of us always planned on fighting by your side one day," said Isidrig. "I'm the same. So go on, give us your orders. My only regret is that our first mission won't see us fighting side by side."

"What's wrong with you people?" I asked. "Have you lost your minds?"

"I have news for you," he replied, with the blankness typical of a Southern Night-Gaunt. "You have inspired far more people than you can imagine. That's why we've come. Would you like to hear everyone's reason for volunteering? I'm sure they'd be more than happy to tell you."

I didn't reply. I had no right to. "…Frenci, what does your father have to say about this?" I asked, unable to soften my voice. "I don't want to cause him any more trouble."

"He told us that, should we choose this path, we must succeed at all costs." Her tone was all business, but I thought I glimpsed something beyond her blank mask—something I would never be able to reason with.

It was always like this. The Mastibolts—the people who raised me—had never once changed their mind because of something I said. None of them belonged to me, and I had no say over their

thoughts. So if they wanted to fight alongside me, I had no right to stop them.

"Patausche." I turned away from the Southern Night-Gaunts toward the former captain of the Holy Knights. I didn't want it to look like they'd fought according to my commands. I had no idea how much that would hurt their position. And so I wordlessly asked Patausche for a favor. "…Take good care of them for me. Looks like you got the soldiers you wanted."

"You're asking me to work with this woman?" Patausche grimaced visibly.

"You are free to refuse," replied Frenci. "If you lack confidence, then you may wait in the rear. We Southern Night-Gaunts are capable of fighting alone if necessary."

"…For no particular reason, I find this woman especially unpleasant." Patausche was already squeezing the hilt of the her blade. "But I will do what I must…because it is the right thing to do." She patted me on the back. "So make sure you win. Hurry up and put an end to this battle."

"…Yes, yes," muttered Frenci as she nimbly hopped off her horse. She slapped me on the back, too, even harder than Patausche. "Go, my beloved. I know you can do it."

She struck me so hard, I stumbled forward a bit. But just as I was about to complain…

A ray of light shot through the air, followed by an explosive roar. Then a massive shadow crossed the moonlit night sky. It was thickset, with transparent wings, like an insect. Was that Demon Lord Sugaar? It seemed to be chasing a figure with vivid, azure wings.

"It's getting noisy over here," I muttered as a few more rays of light soared over our heads, followed by more explosions. I placed a hand on the sacred seal on the nape of my neck.

"Hey, Jayce. Sounds like you're having some trouble up there."

"*Shut up*," came the reply. A group of other dragons used their fire breath to cover for the azure-winged silhouette as it twisted and turned in midair, barely dodging more explosions of light.

"We'll handle the sky… So hurry up and finish things down on the ground."

"All right. You sure you'll be fine without us?"

"Of course. Don't even think about trying to help." The signal turned to noise as Jayce and Neely made a sharp turn in the air. *"Or I'll make sure you regret it."*

They dodged another beam in the nick of time. I had no idea how they were avoiding Sugaar's homing strikes.

"You got it."

I decided to leave the skies to Jayce and Neely. Worrying about them would just be a waste of time. But since they were busy facing off against Sugaar, we couldn't count on their help on the ground.

Our defense force protecting the main troops would consist of Tatsuya, Norgalle, Rhyno…and Venetim. They would be responsible for handling Afanc and Boojum.

Patausche and Frenci would lead the decoy mission. I suspected they'd wind up facing Anise.

Teoritta, Tsav, and I would lead the Saint's squad into battle, but our real mission was to kill Abaddon, just the three of us.

There's not much else we can do. I'd like to call Dotta back to help, but with this level of chaos, that won't be possible.

The demon lords were doing a good job of controlling the situation. They must have had quite a cunning, nasty strategist on their side. It felt almost like they were buying time. But whatever their plan was, I was going to tear it down.

And after that…

I hesitated for a moment, then decided to hedge my bets a little. This was the ace up my sleeve, my last resort.

"King Norgalle." I turned toward the man's large back and held out a small bag.

Adhiff hadn't taken it back. Did he forget? That seemed unlikely. He must be telling me to make good use of it. What once served as proof of a royal's right to succeed was now no more than a weapon. In that case, it made sense to leave it with the person best able to use it. I felt the same way, and that was why I was giving it to Norgalle.

"Take this," I said. "I think you'll make far better use of it than I ever could."

"Hmph." Norgalle grabbed the bag and glanced inside. Then he nodded, as if this were no big deal. "This is the Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke."

"You can tell just by glancing at it?"

"Of course. This is proof of my kinghood. I was concerned about its whereabouts. It's usually kept in a hidden room within the castle where only the royal family can find it."

"Yeah, sure…"

"You doubt me, you insolent buffoon?!" Norgalle snapped. As he did so, he traced his finger along the key's shaft.

All of a sudden, the Kaer Vourke began to glow, wrapping Norgalle's body in a faint light. Was I hallucinating?

"Good," said the king with a dignified nod. Then he lifted the key into the air. "The key has returned to the hands of its rightful owner. Now it is time to reclaim my capital!"

I wasn't sure why, but this scene felt like it was meant to be. *I have to be imagining things*, I thought.

Just then, the sky flashed, followed by two or three explosions. Something was falling to the surface.

It was a dragon and its knight—or what was left of their corpses. They landed right in the middle of Asgarsha Street. The impact turned their bodies into mush; they'd never even had a chance to scream.

"Xylo…!" Teoritta grabbed the hem of my coat. She was pale with fear, but she bravely looked on. I wished she'd act more like the kid she was.

"Things are getting serious up there," I said.

It was Demon Lord Sugaar. Up in the sky, I could see its colossal figure, like some distorted insect, bathed in moonlight, alongside a group of sinister-looking faeries. It was like something out of a nightmare, and only the dragon knights were capable of handling it.

Among them, the azure dragon was maneuvering with exceptional talent, making the others look dull and slow. Her striking

scales caught the eye as she rushed through the pack of faeries at unbelievable speed.

"I'm counting on you guys," I said. *You'd better win.*

But as I watched, Sugaar used its explosive rays to slaughter another dragon knight who got too close. Then it shot a beam toward the surface, almost as an afterthought, turning a portion of the eastern district into dust. It was a powerful blow. We felt the vibrations under our feet as an unruly gust of wind blew through.

"Ah!" Teoritta screamed and latched on to me.

That must have been the "Radiant Bomb" Jayce told me about. What a terrifying power. If it weren't for Jayce and Neely, the ground troops would have been wiped out before they even got close.

"Hey, Xylo…," said Teoritta. "Could you reach that demon lord in the air if you jumped?"

"I wouldn't even come close."

And so there was only one thing to do.

"We'll just have to pray."

"To Jayce and Neely?"

"To Neely."

We just had to hope that Jayce was right, and that no one stood a chance of defeating him and Neely in the air.

PUNISHMENT: RECLAIM ZEYLLENT, THE SECOND CAPITAL, PART 2

When was the last time he'd visited the Second Capital? He'd been on the battlefield for so long that he couldn't even remember. However, taking command on the front line was how a king should rule in dangerous times like these.

Norgalle Senridge believed that a king's duty was to protect his people, not to hide in his castle while his people protected him.

"Do not fear!" he roared, allowing his voice to echo throughout the central square. He was speaking to the citizens who had evacuated here from all over the capital. "I, your king, have come to save you all. I vow to protect each and every one of you."

He could feel the skeptical gazes of the soldiers. But that was no surprise. None of them had ever seen their king. He had been fighting continuously for so long that he'd never gotten the chance to greet his people properly.

So Norgalle gave a generous nod and raised his voice even louder as he lifted the Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke—proof of his position

as king—high into the air.

"I am the guardian of these lands! I am the one who governs the law and the people! I am Norgalle Senridge the First! Ruler of the Federated Kingdom of Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh!"

After a short silence, the crowd began to stir.

"U-um… Your Majesty?"

A man at his side named Venetim Omawisc spoke up. He ran the nation as chancellor. The Omawiscs were a prominent family who had been occupying important posts in the Allied Administration Division for generations, and the next in line to take over was Venetim. Though the man was less than competent, Norgalle believed he was a skilled politician, especially considering his natural talent for interparty negotiation. Furthermore, he was blessed with a silver tongue and could convince others to do almost anything.

In Norgalle's kingdom, the chancellor didn't have to be smart or particularly skilled. The talent to delegate to more capable individuals and to use negotiation to keep things running smoothly were more important. Not that Norgalle believed Venetim was aware of any of this.

"I—I do not mean to offend you, King Norgalle," continued Venetim. "But I suspect the soldiers are having a hard time believing that the king himself is here. So perhaps…we should focus less on firing up the soldiers and more on setting up defenses in the square."

"Fair point." Norgalle began to march forward. He had far too many tasks to attend to. "Has my commander-in-chief started the mission?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Xylo is already heading toward the castle."

"Very well. I will leave reclaiming the castle to him." Norgalle strolled leisurely ahead, stroking his moustache.

Xylo Forbartz was an exceptional tactician with a sharp mind. He was even skilled enough to lead the kingdom's most elite unit himself. Of course, Xylo hardly used his brain for anything other than combat, and he had a rough attitude and lacked respect for his king. Nevertheless, his demeanor was of little importance, since he always delivered remarkable results on the battlefield. Norgalle had no

doubt he would successfully reclaim the castle. And until then, it was the king's duty to protect his people.

"Follow my orders, men! We have a lot to do. We must keep the evacuees safe while luring as many enemies in this direction as possible!"

"…Just as I thought." Venetim had gone completely pale. Norgalle was dumbfounded that anyone could be so nervous before they had even begun. "So a bunch of enemies are going to come this way, yes? …And we're purposely luring them here…?"

"Precisely, Chancellor Venetim. Are you ready for your orders?"

"Huh? Me? Are you expecting me to fight, too?"

"Don't get cocky. You would be slaughtered in minutes. It's that silver tongue of yours that I need. Console the evacuating citizens, and give them weapons to protect themselves. The last thing we need is panic."

"Ugh," groaned Venetim, clearly not excited about his job. "I—I, uh… I'm the chancellor, so if possible, I would prefer to work somewhere a little safer…"

"Silence! The fate of our nation rests on this battle! We must do everything in our power to succeed, regardless of our social status."

"But, uh… Oh! Right! There's a new law that states that the chancellor has to wait at a specified location—"

"I have never heard of such a law. At any rate, I am the king, and I hereby repeal it! Now go!"

"…Yes, Your Majesty."

Norgalle sped up, leaving behind a dispirited Venetim, his head low in resignation.

In the heart of the square stood a clock tower that offered a clear view of the entire northern stretch of the main road. Norgalle hurried up its spiral staircase two steps at a time. At the top, he found Rhyno already waiting; his dark crimson armor looked almost wet in the moonlight.

"Rhyno! What's the situation to the north?!"

"Hello, Comrade Norgalle. I'm afraid it isn't good," Rhyno announced calmly as he gazed northward.

The man had the absurd habit of calling him "comrade," but he was good at his job, so Norgalle overlooked this insolent behavior. But that wasn't the only strange thing about him. Norgalle thought for a moment. How had Rhyno ended up joining his elite unit of heroes anyway? It must have been the head of intelligence…

The head…of intelligence…

Did such a person exist? Norgalle suddenly felt as though he were standing on the edge of a dark pit. But just as he looked down, Rhyno pointed north with his left hand.

"Look there, Comrade Norgalle."

Ah, right, he thought. *I must focus on the battle ahead.*

"Countless soldiers are retreating from the north. Comrade Tatsuya is dealing with the waves of faeries on the street, but…"

Rhyno was right. Norgalle could see soldiers and civilians fleeing with faeries hot on their heels. If it weren't for Tatsuya furiously swinging his battle-ax, most of them would already be dead.

Tatsuya's movements were positively inhuman. He got down on all fours like a beast, then lunged at a troll and sliced it in half at the trunk. He evaded packs of bogies, snapping their necks with his bare hands. Norgalle knew of no one else who could pull off such feats.

And yet there was only so much one person could do.

"I suspect we're having such difficulties because of the demon lords Afanc and Boojum," explained Rhyno. "They've already eliminated our advance forces and are currently heading south. They lack sophisticated strategy, but they're both quite powerful…"

Norgalle got the feeling Rhyno was smiling beneath his helmet. He was always filled with glee when they came up against demon lords. Perhaps he was a born hunter, or simply obsessed with the thrill of danger.

"I would love to provide backup," said Rhyno. "We must save them."

"Can you pull it off on your own?"

"I'm not certain, but I think it would be difficult. They're both truly powerful… So much so that I can barely contain my excitement."

"Then bring Tatsuya with you. Slow them down for as long as you can."

"You seem confident. Do you have a plan?"

"I cannot share the specifics, but I promise you this: As your king, I will guide you to victory." Norgalle then touched Rhyno's shoulder with the tip of the Kaer Vourke. It was the gesture of a king honoring his knight. "I put my trust in you. Buy me time. Can you do it?"

"Yes, of course!" replied Rhyno cheerfully. "I am thrilled you believe in me. Truly thrilled. I will be sure to dispose of those demon lords. After all, I am a hero."

"Very well. That just leaves—"

The instant Norgalle looked up to the sky, a ray of light burst through the air, as if the enemy had timed it just for him. Demon Lord Sugaar flew through the night on its thin wings, its massive beetle-like body wrapped in a jet-black shell. It appeared that the rays of light were coming from the three horns on its head.

Those rays must have been the homing explosives he'd heard about. Sugaar was attacking Jayce and the other dragon knights, and those who weren't able to dodge were being blown away right before his eyes.

He had already given Jayce a weapon to fight back against this attack, but there had been no time to fine-tune it, and it was a crude piece of work. If only he'd had a little more time, he could have increased its precision. Thanks to this, Jayce was having a hard time finding a chance to counterattack.

In short, Jayce was in need of backup as well.

"I suppose there's no avoiding it," he muttered.

His subordinates seemed to love giving him headaches like this. Wasn't it their job to protect their king?

But he couldn't find it in him to be upset. Instead, his heart felt light and clear.

"When all's said and done, taking care of my loyal subordinates is my duty as king."

◆

Demon Lord Sugaar was chasing them through the wind.

They'd been able to feel his bloodlust for some time now. His target was clear—the two of them. Jayce Partiract touched Neely's neck and conveyed the situation to her.

"The enemy's after us, Neely. Are you tired?"

"Not in the slightest," she replied with a sharp call. She flapped her wings, as if to prove her point. "Even if I were tired, who would protect you and the world if I stopped flying? Should I ask someone else to let you ride them?"

"That's not happening," said Jayce with a wry grin. It was during tense moments such as these that a little relaxed banter was most helpful, and Neely must have known that instinctually. "But that thing's sure keeping us busy. Here comes another attack, Neely. Focus on dodging."

"Agreed."

A bright light shone behind them, and three beams came flying: Sugaar's homing bombs. They weren't that fast, but the demon lord could shoot three at once, one from each of its horns. Because of this, it was proving very difficult for them to switch to offense.

"That thing just doesn't give up. And there are too many other enemies in the sky," complained Neely as she tilted her body in a turn.

The rays of light homed in on her tail as three oberons charged her from the front. These massive beelike faeries used the stinger on their tails to attack. This, too, could become a projectile.

"Hey! Three faeries are heading right for the princess!"

Jayce could hear a muffled voice from the sacred seal on his neck. Dragon knights used sacred seals to communicate in the air, and the seal on Jayce's neck sometimes picked up their calls.

A lot of dragon knights had been sent here to reclaim the capital—perhaps as many as fifty, a number unprecedented in the history of the Federated Kingdom.

"Which one of you idiots messed up? Don't let the enemies near her!"

"Kiske! Morton! Stay on top of your targets, dammit!"

"I'm sorry, Princess. Jayce, please take care of them for us."

"Princess" was what the dragon knights called Neely. They'd originally called her all sorts of silly nicknames, like the "Azure Reaper" and "Guardian of the Skies" until Jayce had a word with them. "Princess" embarrassed Neely, and she'd asked them to stop, but once the latter nickname had spread, it was too late to do anything about it.

Dragon knights were special in that they didn't treat the penal heroes like garbage. That was probably due to the profound respect they had for Jayce, or rather for Neely, who allowed Jayce to fight alongside her. The sky was a lonely battlefield, and you had to respect anyone who could guide you to victory.

Jayce glared at the oberons ahead. "Let's charge right through them," he suggested. "I'm more worried about the exploding light rays, so let's get to the other side, then turn around."

"All right." Neely began to speed up. "I'm counting on you, Jayce."

They rapidly approached the oberons. Neely reduced the first one to ash before it could make a move, while Jayce hurled a lance, skewering another.

"Incredible! Where did Princess's rider learn to do that?"

"I heard that Jayce is a master of Western combat."

"He learned from that master in the Partiract family, right? What was his name again? That ogre of a man…?"

Whatever, thought Jayce. He didn't want to think about his mentor. None of those memories were pleasant. He'd even had a near-death experience due to that man's so-called training.

Just one more to go…!

Jayce evaded the incoming oberon's stinger and skewered it with a second lance; then he and Neely got into position to turn. Sugaar's homing beams were rapidly approaching from behind.

"All right, Neely."

Jayce grabbed the tool fastened at his waist. It might look like a few rocks tied together with rope, but Norgalle claimed it was a weapon that could counteract the enemy's attacks. The man had

wanted more time to refine it, but according to him, it should still be effective. Jayce had already tested it, and a measly three beams shouldn't pose a problem.

"It's time to end this."

Still, he could feel himself trembling with anxiety. Sugaar was right before his eyes. The beams were still headed right for them, but if he could take them out…

Just then, Sugaar's horns began to glow again. Light flashed before Jayce's eyes.

What…?

He hadn't expected this. There were now six shots they needed to dodge. Up until now, there had been no indication the demon lord could fire another round so quickly. Jayce had thought everything would be fine as long as he could handle three at once. His strategy didn't account for any more.

"Dammit! Neely, just focus on evading! Sorry. It looks like this is going to take longer than I thought."

"Where are your manners, Jayce?" whispered Neely. "Is Xylo starting to rub off on you?"

"Quit it. I'm sorry, okay?"

"It's fine. You'll make it through." Neely's movement smoothed, and she picked up the pace. "I'll protect you, and you'll protect me, okay? Together, we're shouldering the whole world, so that much should be simple."

Easier said than done, thought Jayce. He clenched his teeth to keep himself from seizing in fear. As the six beams chased after them, he filled his head with images of the two of them killing Sugaar.

There was a way to win this. There had to be. Because if he failed, he'd never be able to face the other penal heroes again, especially that pain in the butt, Xylo Forbartz.

✦

There were approximately two thousand soldiers under the Saint's command. Far too many, if you asked me.

Nobles were providing soldiers in droves, particularly to the main forces under Supreme Commander Marcolas Esgein, hoping to back the winning horse. That way, they wouldn't need to march into battle or win military fame themselves. As long as they had their names associated with the Saint's unit, their contribution to reclaiming the castle would assure cushy treatment for them in the near future.

No one was more obvious about this than Hawin Dasmitur, head of the Dasmitur family.

"Saint! Sir Esgein! Please feast your eyes on the soldiers from the Dasmitur family!" exclaimed Hawin, sucking up to them as best as he could. He had brought knights in heavy armor, polished to a mirror finish.

Incidentally, although Esgein was on horseback, the Saint was still inside her personal carriage and surrounded by a sacred seal barrier, completely protecting her from outside forces.

"I vow to bring victory to you both!" shouted Hawin.

"Good." Esgein nodded, evidently satisfied. He gave Hawin a firm pat on the shoulder. "This is why they call the Dasmitur family a pride of lions. I'm impressed. The Saint and I are counting on you."

"It is an honor, Sir Esgein! …Men, rouse yourselves! Prepare for battle!"

What kind of pathetic joke was this? Battle cries rose up from behind me, but I wasn't about to join in on this nonsense. I kept my gaze forward, my mind on the route we were to take: We'd go up the eastern district's main street, cross the bridge, then enter the castle. We had a long road ahead of us.

"Do not fear, Xylo. I am here for you," Teoritta said confidently, just as I was about to sigh. "No demon lord stands a chance against my Holy Sword!"

"I know. The issue is that we can only use it once. Tsav, it's your job to deal with any enemy that gets in the way of our objective."

"Yep, yep. No problem." Tsav lifted his sniping staff into the air before skillfully spinning it in one hand. "I should start thinking

about what I want as a reward once this is over. I mean, we're totally getting something, right? Since we'll be the first ones inside to reclaim the castle and all. What about you, Teo? Maybe some sweets?!"

"Sweets! Good idea! I could have a tea party with Kelflora. You are invited, of course, Xylo!"

"Not a care in the world, huh?" I checked the handles of my knives to make sure I could unsheathe them at a moment's notice. "If we fail, there won't be any tea parties, so you'd better be ready."

I crouched, then lightly hit the ground three times with my left fist, using the echoes to survey our surroundings.

"They're almost here. About two hundred enemies straight ahead, fifty each on the roofs to our left and right."

"Not much of a welcome. Hmm… Think we're not very popular, Bro?"

"Patausche and Frenci are creating a diversion in the north, so let's finish this before the enemy figures out something's up. We'll crush the faeries in front of us and push forward. The soldiers in the back can handle the leftovers."

Glancing back, I spotted familiar faces among the Dasmitur infantrymen—the same poor, unlucky saps forced to bring up the rear in the Tujin Tuga Hills. They'd been tenacious, relentlessly moving even when the enemy caught up with them. I figured it would take a lot to wear them down. It was nice to have soldiers I could trust to take out the trash faeries. That would make my job a lot easier.

"Xylo, listen." Teoritta looked at me, her eyes full of expectation. I already knew exactly what she wanted to say. "Please promise me that when we win—"

"I know. We'll have a tea party on the balcony once we've taken back the castle."

I lifted Teoritta into my arms, then kicked as hard as I could off the ground.

PUNISHMENT: RECLAIM ZEYLLENT, THE SECOND CAPITAL, PART 3

Majesty Street Cheltegarsha stretched from the northern end of the Second Capital all the way around the castle. It was the largest public road, with the longest history, and was developed many years ago to be used by nobles.

But now, Cheltegarsha Street was overrun with faeries.

Fuathan, bogies…dullahans…and even trolls.

Patausche fixed her eyes on the horde of enemies blocking their path. It appeared to be a mixed unit composed of bipedal humanoid faeries and those that walked on all fours. The dullahans were their main forces, but if the trolls blocked her unit's path, they'd have to deal with a bunch of fuathan and bogies.

The biggest problem was what was happening above their heads. Jayce and Neely had their hands tied fighting Sugaar, leaving the dragon knights too busy to help with the faeries. Every once in a while, some oberons would fly down at them, and they'd have to

assume formation and fire a volley of shots to take them down, losing soldiers all the while.

However, this effectively drew the enemy's attention, which was exactly what they wanted as decoys. All they had to do now was hold the enemy back and keep them busy for as long as they could. If successful, they would reduce the burden on both the Saint's unit and on everyone in the central square.

…We can't fail.

Patausche tried not to think too hard about how many enemies were coming out of the castle to stop her forces. Her mission was simply to eliminate any threat that approached, and that was what she would focus on.

"Soldiers, prepare for battle!" she shouted, raising her spear into the air and galloping off. "Charge!"

"Roger," replied the chief officers of both the cavalry and the sniper units. This was followed by the familiar cries of the soldiers.

The former Thirteenth Order transformed into a single lance shooting down Cheltegarsha Street as the snipers fired their lightning staffs from atop their horses. The attacks themselves weren't devastating, but they were more than enough to cause chaos in the enemy lines, creating an opening for the cavalry to strike.

That's Siena for you. Impressive as always.

Siena, the chief officer of the sniper unit, fired into a dullahan in front of Patausche seconds before they collided. The shot pierced right through its head, knocking it out of the way like a doll.

"Nistagis."

With this brief chant, flames began gushing out from the tip of Patausche's spear. This was yet another skill provided by her Strike Seal Compound, Niskaphol, and it allowed her to mow down the enemy's vanguard and intimidate the rest as she gave her next command.

"Flank the enemy!"

Patausche headed right, while the cavalry and sniper officers veered left. Cheltegarsha Street was once a grand avenue used for parades celebrating the military's triumphal return to the capital, and

the side roads branching off it were comparatively wide. This allowed the soldiers on horseback to take shelter there after clashing with the enemy and evade reprisals. In fact, they'd memorized the terrain for exactly this reason.

From one side, the silhouette of a horse emerged. Atop it sat a woman of the Southern Night-Gaunts, her iron-gray hair fluttering free. She raised her curved swords overhead, giving the signal. "It is time to hunt under the Mastibolt banner."

The infantry raised a flag with the crest of an elk leaping among waves, marking them as separate from Patausche's men. These lightly armed warriors leaped down from the rooftops into the alleyways, swinging their curved swords and delivering lethal blows to each of the faeries pursuing Patausche's forces, eliminating the threat of pursuit.

"All right." Patausche exhaled a cloud of white fog. The temperature had dropped precipitously once the sun had fully set.

"Are you tired, Patausche Kivia?" Frenci approached her on horseback. "You are free to rest if needed," she added coldly, with her usual arrogance.

"Same goes for you." Patausche's spearhead sparked as she lightly swung it. "The battle is far from over. We need to keep the enemy busy until that man—until Xylo Forbartz and Goddess Teoritta eliminate their leader. My soldiers and I will be fine, but what about you all?"

Frenci Mastibolt—Patausche always got aggressive around this woman, and in a different way than she did with Xylo. She couldn't quite articulate why, but it was likely due to a simple clash in personalities. For example, the way Frenci spoke just didn't sit right with Patausche. Nor did her constant reminders about how she'd grown up with Xylo.

"We will be able to hold out as long as it takes," Frenci replied. "We Southern Night-Gaunts never give up, and certainly not during a minor skirmish such as this. Surely, Xylo Forbartz is no different?"

"…Then prove it. Come on."

Just as Patausche looked away, Frenci grabbed her by the arm and tugged her so hard that she almost knocked her over, horse and

all.

"What do you think you're—?!" Patausche began, then stopped.

There was no way Frenci would do something without a reason, and she would never physically harass Patausche. Something must have happened, and Frenci had no time to warn her. Quickly reaching this conclusion, Patausche swung her spear and chanted the words to activate her defensive sacred seal.

"Niskeph!"

A pale barrier of light surrounded the two of them a split second before something white slammed into it and shattered. Ice? It was hardened into the shape of an arrow or a spear.

Which means…

Patausche could feel a chill air seep into her mouth through her parted lips, and it wasn't just the cold of the night. The temperature around them was dropping at an alarming rate.

"Which of you is the captain?" came a voice from above. A lone girl stood atop the roof of a noble's mansion. "I see one of you is a human from *that* unit… If I kill you here, it would remove one of His Excellency's worries."

The girl wore black clothes and had long white claws growing from her fingertips. Patausche swiftly concluded that she was a source of the Demon Blight.

"That's Demon Lord Anise. I fought her once already," said Frenci. She'd covered her mouth with a cloth, hoping it would help keep her throat from freezing. "She can lower the temperature of the surrounding area."

"I see," replied Patausche. "Do you have a strategy to defeat her?"

"But of course."

"Then allow me to assist. You and I will handle her alone." Patausche wrapped a cloth around her mouth as well. "Men! Return to the main road to continue the fight! I'm transferring command to Zofflec! I will stay here to deal with the demon lord."

After giving her orders, she swiftly hopped off her horse. It would be easier to fight this opponent on foot. She then pointed her spear at the ground, activating its sacred seal with a simple chant.

"Niskeph Rada."

A pale, glittering barrier came to life below her feet, shooting Patausche straight up into the air. More followed, carrying her all the way to the rooftop.

"…I think we've had enough of you and your cavalry…," said Anise, spreading her arms to attack.

As her white claws grew longer, the temperature dropped even further. Patausche could feel her eyes beginning to freeze. But she had come prepared.

"Don't be late, Frenci."

Patausche twirled her spear overheard as flames gushed from its tip; the extreme heat hit the cold, generating a small gust. She stepped forward and swung her fiery spear at Anise. The blade met her white claws, and the girl, with her delicate-seeming frame, leaped backward, black wings fluttering. She was more agile than she appeared, and she'd put a good distance between them.

Frenci, however, wasn't about to let her escape.

"Good work."

Frenci had made her way onto the roof and was now dashing across it, swinging her curved blades right where Anise was about to land. The demon lord had no choice but to defend. She wordlessly blocked the swords with her claws—first two, then three times, creating sparks with each hit.

"Hmph." She let out a cold breath, maintaining her guard. "You are quite the eyesore."





Her black hair and wings spread to either side, as if blown by a strong wind. Instantly, the rooftop turned white as a cold gust ran across it. The attack was probably meant to freeze the ground under her opponents' feet.

"That isn't going to work anymore," said Frenci coldly.

The ice trying to wrap around her boots was melting before it could form. Patausche quickly pieced together what had happened: Frenci must have been using bisties. These were small rocks and scraps of metal engraved with sacred seals that caused them to emit a steady warmth. Frenci must have attached them to her shoes, hidden them in her clothes, and even stuffed them in the hilts of her curved blades, which were already cutting into Anise's shoulder, causing the demon lord's impassive face to twitch slightly.

"Eegh!" she screeched, wildly swinging her arms as her claws grew to absurd lengths. They began to resemble the talons of a bird —perhaps that was Anise's true form.

We can handle this, thought Patausche. *The enemy has already shown us her secret weapon.* She hated to admit it, but Frenci was an exceptional warrior and someone you could depend on in battle. *We'll attack at the same time.*

She kicked off the rooftop, sprinted forward, and was about to launch her fire spear at Anise. Instead, she immediately twisted her body and spun out of the way.

She'd just sensed bloodlust. Patausche didn't believe in such things, of course. But she had enough experience on the battlefield that she was able to sense danger the way others claimed to sense an opponent's bloodlust. She felt it as a strange sensation in her gut —a change that she couldn't immediately put into words.

"Nis…keph…!"

Patausche swung her spear, putting her faith in the gut feeling. Her sacred seal immediately activated, conjuring a pale shield of light that swiftly repelled the incoming force.

"Kee! Eeghee!" Anise let out a series of bizarre shrieks as her black wings transformed into numerous armlike appendages. They reached out toward Patausche only to ram into her barrier of light. "I

will eliminate you… I won't let you inferior beings near His Excellency…"

Anise dropped down on all fours, like a wild animal, as white claws grew from each of the black tentacle-like arms on her back. This appeared to be her unique fighting stance.

"Those things remind me of a wasp jellyfish's tentacles," said Frenci, jumping to safety. She had gashes on her right arm and cheek, but they were relatively shallow.

Either way, this fight had just gotten a lot more difficult. The enemy's options for both attack and defense had expanded significantly, and Patausche was no longer so sure they could win.

What should I do now? Is there a way to beat her? Can we lead her into a trap?…Wait.

Out of nowhere, a sound split the air, followed by a flash of light.

Anise's body shook, and she narrowed her eyes in exasperation. She was unharmed, but looking closely, Patausche saw she had grown another tentacle, which had blocked a bolt of lightning.

"Captain Kivia!" came a familiar voice. It was Siena, the chief officer of the sniper unit. She'd fired her lightning staff from atop a calvaryman's horse as it sprinted down the main road. "I'll back you up, so keep the enemy where it is."

…Right. I'm not alone.

Patausche recalled her true mission. She wasn't here to defeat the enemy, just to keep them busy while Xylo Forbartz and Teoritta turned the tide of battle. She believed in them—that they could pull it off.

"Frenci, this is going to be a long fight, so you'd better not quit on me."

"Likewise. Feel free to rest when you get tired, though." Frenci leaped as the frost at her feet melted. "I would have been disappointed if my opponent wasn't at least a monster of this caliber."

Now it all makes sense, thought Patausche. *Raised by people like this, it's no wonder Xylo Forbartz became the man he is.*

◆

“Out of the way! This is an imperial order!” shouted Norgalle Senridge. His tone was unusually threatening.

What am I going to do? This man is truly something else…

Venetim cast Norgalle a sidelong glance, wishing he could disappear. It wasn’t clear which noble house they were from, but Norgalle was clearly yelling at a group of proper full-time soldiers. The ones on horses were probably officers, or worse—nobles.

There were twenty of them. Xylo or Jayce might’ve been able to force their way through, but it was too many for Norgalle and Venetim to handle alone.

“I must use this tower, so begone!” shouted Norgalle. “Provide protection to the areas in need!”

“…What’s this geezer babbling about?” The soldiers exchanged bewildered glances.

This was no surprise. From their point of view, some random man had come out of nowhere, claimed he was the king, and started trying to take command. And that wasn’t all. He was demanding they leave the area. Who would just go along with an order like that? He hadn’t even given them a reason.

I have no idea what’s going on, either, thought Venetim. But he kept that to himself as he looked up at the structure before them.

It was a giant chimneylike white tower, and apparently very old. The cracks in the paint on its surface looked like cuts. This tower was known as Kytre. It was both a tourist destination and a facility powered by sacred seals. In fact, it served the all-important purpose of warming the Second Capital.

“And I’m telling you I have no idea what you’re talking about,” one of the soldiers said patiently. “What reason do you have for entering this tower? And on whose authority?”

“Reason? Authority?” Norgalle stroked his moustache at this very reasonable question. “I cannot disclose the reason, since it involves the highest of royal secrets. And I have no need to borrow someone else’s authority!”

He then loudly declared: “For I am Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh, the king of this country! Now, out of my way, you insolent fool!”

Oh great…

Venetim reflexively covered his face. He’d seen the soldiers’ expressions go blank. They might as well have said, *Who cares anymore? Let’s just throw this crazy old man into a cell.* That must have been what they were about to do.

I can’t let that happen, thought Venetim. *If they throw* him *in a cell, they’ll throw me in with him. And then they’ll yell at me.*

That was the last thing that Venetim wanted. He hated being reprimanded more than anything else in the world. Ever since he was a kid—ever since he was Venetim Verkle, he’d done whatever he could to avoid being scolded. No lie was too much.

And this moment was no different.

“I apologize, Your Highness, but…,” he began to say, his voice dripping with confidence as he used every last bit of his willpower.

It was working. The soldiers, who had been about to seize Norgalle, shifted their gazes to him.

Now, how am I going to fix this? he thought. He didn’t have many options. Ultimately, the only thing he could do was lie, and so that was what he did.

“These fine soldiers don’t seem to know who you are,” he continued. “While I understand your reluctance, maybe it would be best if we showed them proof.”

“Hmm?” Norgalle raised an eyebrow.

This was the obvious response. After all, Venetim hadn’t prepared any proof. But he did have something close.

“This man’s full name is Lawtzir Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh.” Venetim used a name he’d once heard—that of the successor to the throne who had supposedly gone missing some time ago. He had no idea if any of that was true, but that didn’t matter. Venetim didn’t care at all. “He is the owner of this tower and the rightful heir to the throne. This is proof.”

Venetim raised a small earring over his head. This golden earring in the shape of the royal guardian bird was, without a doubt, a piece

of jewelry that only the royal family was permitted to wear. Legally speaking, it belonged to the third princess, Melneatis.

Venetim had no idea how much this item was worth on the market; to him, jewelry was no more than a means to an end. Dotta was the same—such items were merely his quarry, and he'd stolen this particular piece during the battle at Tujin Tuga without even thinking. And now it was in Venetim's hands.

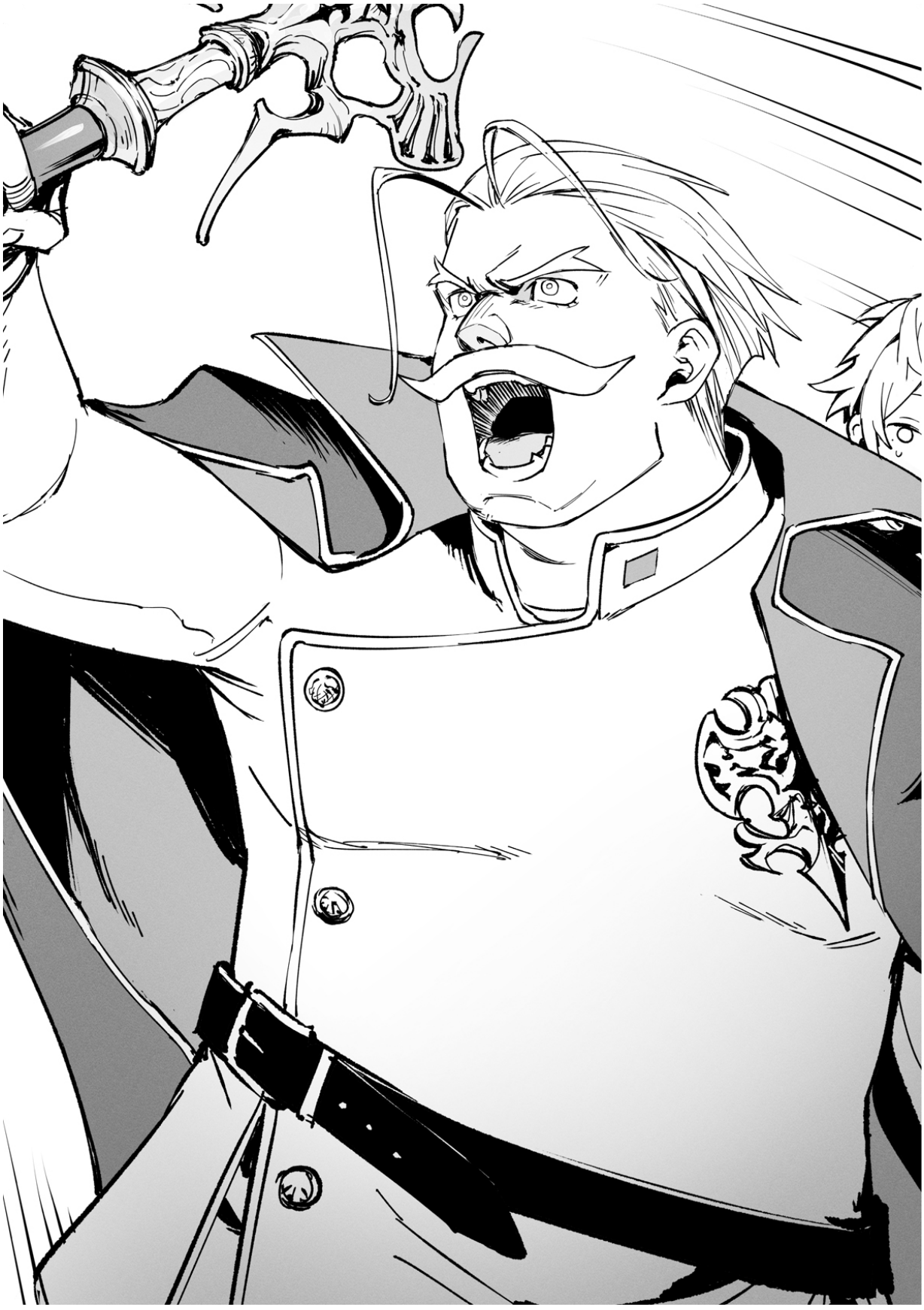
"This man is royalty, working undercover to help us win," continued Venetim in a clear, ringing tone. "And he wishes to use this tower to reclaim the Second Capital. Men! Now is the time to demonstrate your loyalty!"

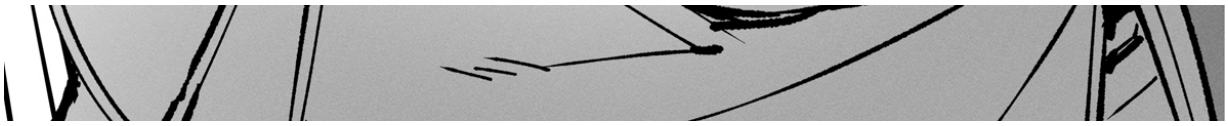
"Hmm. Yes… Lawtzir. It is now time for me to keep my promise."

Norgalle appeared to be suffering from a headache. But after a light shake of the head, he lifted his chin back up and once again wore the expression of a king.

"I am the true king. I must use the hidden power within this building…"

He raised the Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke, high over his head.





A stir instantly passed through the soldiers. Some of them must have recognized the key as proof that the man before them had a right to the throne.

"…and reclaim both my capital and my castle. Follow me, my loyal subjects!"

There was nothing anyone could say. All the proof they'd shown was genuine. Both the Sacred Key, which proved one's claim to the throne, and the earring, which only royalty was permitted to possess, were real.

Why do people become so gullible whenever they're shown such things?

This baffled Venetim, because to him, it didn't matter whether something was real. Such designations held no value. And so he couldn't understand why an item warranted favorable treatment just because it was genuine. Regardless, the soldiers around them were visibly shocked, and that was all Venetim needed.

"Anyway…" He raised a hand into the air, sending *them* into action. "Get to work, men."

"Huh?!" shouted one of the knights on horseback as a lasso flew in from the side and seized him, dragging both him and his horse to the ground.

The other soldiers suffered similar fates. Some were smacked on the back of the head, while others were knocked unconscious using anti-personnel lightning staffs. It was the perfect ambush.

They must be extremely used to this kind of work, thought Venetim, a little frightened. *Kidnappings and robberies must be a daily thing for them…*

The people Venetim had called were adventurers—essentially lawless bandits and criminals.

"All done! What do you think, Captain Venetim?" said the adventurer who'd lassoed the horse. He sounded eager to please.

If memory served, this was Madritz, their leader. It seemed bringing them along had been the right idea. Xylo had found them in the Second Capital working as some kind of resistance. To be blunt, they were a pack of outcasts from who knows where, and to

Venetim, they just looked like a terrifying band of ruffians. But he couldn't deny that they were good at what they did.

"Heh. You think this tower has any booze in it?" one asked.

"I hope there's food! I'm sick of processed meat scraps."

"Ah! Old Man Ordo! Where have you been? …Inside? Huh? How many people were in there? Ten?"

They might not be good people, strictly speaking, but they'd really saved the day.

Venetim turned back to Norgalle. "Let's go, Your Highness. We have reclaimed the tower."

"Good work, Chancellor!" Norgalle nodded as if all this was just business as usual, then stepped inside the tower. "Follow me! We must protect our army. We will gain command of the air, and then we need only hold out a little longer until our commander-in-chief claims victory."

Both Xylo and the king have no idea how much this stuff wears me down, thought Venetim.

He leaned against a wall, resisting the urge to drop straight onto the ground. After all, he didn't want to be left behind in the middle of a battlefield.

They have no idea how much energy I use every time I lie.

Life would be so much easier if he simply told the truth—if only that were enough.



From the castle balcony, Tovitz Hughker had a perfect view of the Federated Kingdom's forces. Their strategy was clear: They had established their main base in the central square and had already retaken the west side. Two units were maneuvering around the castle from the east and north, and while it wasn't immediately obvious which group was intended as a diversion, the cavalry advancing north seemed the more likely candidate. Nevertheless, their movements couldn't be ignored.

Anise headed north to stop them.

If he was permitted, Tovitz would have loved to back her up. The situation was looking grim—they were completely surrounded, and it was only a matter of time before the enemy took over. Once you barricaded yourself in a castle, with no reinforcements on the way, there was only one outcome waiting. Tovitz knew that well from when he'd been part of Jayce's revolt.

The human soldiers here can't betray us. They'll fight to the death.

They'd chosen humans with family for their soldiers, and they had plenty of hostages. Plus, they'd made examples of those who had betrayed them in the past and made their direct superiors carry out the executions. Their shared guilt had brought them together like nothing else could.

I figure they'll hold out for another few hours. But I can't expect much more.

They couldn't hold the skies, either. Not when their enemies included Jayce Partiract and his dragon, Neely. As long as they were alive, Sugaar would never prevail. Even now, when the winged demon lord appeared to have the advantage, Tovitz was sure of it.

Their only hope was Abaddon. His abilities as a demon lord, whatever they were, might be able to turn the tides, but…

"You believe we're going to lose, don't you, Tovitz Hughker?"

Tovitz spun around at the sound of his name to find Abaddon approaching the balcony, wearing a tolerant smile. The way the demon lord spoke and carried himself suggested an uncanny ability to read minds—a skill Tovitz was now almost certain that he possessed.

Abaddon even nodded, as if to confirm his suspicion. "Yes, the castle will surely fall at this rate. It's only a matter of time."

"Then do you have a plan?" Tovitz placed a hand on the lightning staff at his waist, even though he knew the gesture was pointless. He'd never catch this demon lord by surprise. Still, he needed to protect himself. "I tried everything I could, and I bought you time, just like you ordered, but there is only so much I can do."

"I know. Shall I start making arrangements for your funeral?"

"Good joke, but I don't plan on dying."

“Ha-ha! I’m happy you knew it was a joke. Yes, you’re human. You’re afraid to die.”

“And you’re not?”

“Buying time is what’s important.”

Abaddon peered out past the balcony toward the ground below. Thanks to all the fighting, the Second Capital was much brighter than usual. Flames roared, scared seals flashed, and bolts of lightning soared across the city. The enemy was even firing cannons toward the castle.

“The battles in the north and east seem quite intense.”

Abaddon narrowed his eyes and checked each direction. The attacks were brutal, especially in the east. The enemy hadn’t brought an artillery unit, and yet now and then he could see explosions of light.

A human-shaped figure bounded across the rooftops, and each time he passed over a group of faeries, the creatures would scatter, be blown to bits, or wind up skewered by glittering blades—perhaps swords or spears. Whenever a larger faerie tried to rush ahead to stop him, it would be shot precisely in the head, falling to the ground and blocking its allies’ advance.

“Truly impressive, isn’t it?” Abaddon was right. Whoever it was, he was creating a pathway for the army behind him. “It appears they’re trying to sneak into the castle from the east, despite there being no gate.”

“It looks like they have the Saint with them. She’ll probably have no trouble summoning a bridge to cross the moat, since she can manifest buildings. I can still buy us a little more time, though.”

The faeries patrolling the air currently had control of the sky in this area and should be able to slow down the enemy. If they tried to push on, they would have to counter attacks from above as well. Furthermore, the castle had weapons of its own to protect against an invasion.

Aside from those at the vanguard, led by the man hopping across the rooftops, the rest of the troops to the east were mere poorly trained grunts. The commander in the rear was constantly sending out smaller units to hide in narrow alleys to flank the

faeries, but it wasn't proving very effective. The small units kept getting crushed, only adding to their losses. If that commander was the only one the Demon Blight had to deal with, they might have stood a chance. But that man jumping across the rooftops was more than enough to make up for the commander's lack of skill.

What incredible power.

Calling him and his fellows an elite unit was underselling them. This must be the enemy's secret weapon—the thunderstroke soldier Xylo Forbartz and his goddess. They were the ones behind the Demon Blight's recent losses.

Fighting them head-on would surely lead to defeat. For now, at least.

"Yes. As things are, we don't stand a chance," said Abaddon, proving that he really could read Tovitz's mind. "Therefore, I have a favor to ask of you… Now, now, there's no need to tense up. I know what you want, and you deserve to be rewarded for everything you've done for me."

"Then what is it you need, Your Excellency?"

"It's simple, really. I'd like you to go on a scavenger hunt." They heard a roar, followed by a flash of light as the castle shook. A cannon must have struck it. "If you succeed, then you are free to do whatever you want after that. You could even take Anise and run away."

What Tovitz wanted was obvious—he wished to take Anise and escape the Second Capital this very instant. The forces in the north were strong, and he suspected she was having a difficult time of it.

Yes, for her…

He didn't care what Abaddon or the other demon lords did, as long as he had her. He would even give her his life. All he wanted was to protect what was dear to him.

"So will you do me this favor?" asked Abaddon.

"You already know my answer." Tovitz finally removed his hand from his lightning staff. "I would do anything for Anise."

"Good. I expect great things from her. She will surely learn from this experience and live up to the king's expectations…just like Boojum. It's something I could never achieve."

Abaddon grinned, but it was a hollow gesture, mere mimicry.

"And so I need you to escape through the castle's rear entrance, head to a specific location, and find something for me." Abaddon pointed to the northwest corner of the city. "Behind that small temple is a cemetery. It should be there. You can see the Eighth Order of the Holy Knights' shadows trying to access it, yes? Though they're doing a magnificent job of disguising what they're up to."

"…Yeah, that little temple doesn't seem like it would be a strategically significant location, and it's too far from the castle for them to simply be using it to attack from the rear."

"The cemetery is their final destination. We already tortured a knight from their order and confirmed it. The contents of that cemetery is the entire reason we conquered the Second Capital. This attack was merely a means to get ahold of it."

That was when Tovitz realized Abaddon's real plan. He'd conquered the Second Capital specifically to lure the Federated Kingdom into launching a full-scale attack and showing him where this "thing" he wanted was hidden.

He had been looking for an area away from the fighting but that the enemy persistently tried to access. A place they clearly didn't want to destroy but were desperate to control. That would be the spot where humanity had hidden something critical to their survival.

Now I get it. Only then did Tovitz understand what Abaddon was doing here. *He wasn't sent to lead. He was sent to* scout*.*

And his goal was to find something hidden inside the capital. In other words, his actual purpose was only to gather information. That was why he wasn't a competent commander. He was simply borrowing human knowledge by using people like Lentoby, Trishil, and Tovitz. It didn't matter if someone was likely to rebel. He could simply read their mind and use the knowledge and strategy already present in their head.

He never needed my help to begin with.

"That isn't true," replied Abaddon with a smile. "I had a lot of fun talking to you. I personally consider you a friend."

"Good joke."

“Ha-ha-ha! Yes, it was! It isn’t possible to be friends with a human, after all.” Abaddon clapped his hands and gave a boisterous laugh, though the gesture was nothing more than a movement of limbs and air passing through his throat. “Now, once you find what I am searching for, you are free to take Anise and escape.”

“Sure. What are *you* going to do, though?”

“Buy more time.” He gave a generous nod. “I am the king of this capital, so I must act like one and wait for the enemy atop my throne.”

Then again, perhaps all of this was simply one big, perfect joke he’d been saving for just this moment.



Demon Lord Boojum's first memory began with doubt.

"Why am I me?"

It was a compelling yet difficult question for him, and it was something he couldn't ignore. He wondered how he could be alive if he couldn't figure out who or what he was, but as far as he knew, he was the only demon lord who had ever questioned his existence.

And so he was drawn to human culture. Many humans had the same question as he did. That was why he read. His journey began with philosophy, but his interests eventually gravitated toward literature. Stories and poems tackled the question from a different vantage point than mere theory, providing powerful stimulation for his mind.

He understood, too, why these actions were condemned and seen as a betrayal. To the others, how could it look like anything else?

“Your thoughts are becoming too human. You’re a threat,” said Abaddon. His words began the denunciations.

After barely escaping capture, Boojum was hunted by his own kind. The most troublesome of his pursuers was a demon lord known as Nuckelavee, who nearly killed him. But Boojum bore no grudge toward his fellows. Their judgment was sound.

He hid himself in a small cave and curled into a ball, woozy from blood loss. He was battered and wounded, and yet the thing that troubled him the most was still that same doubt:

Why do I question my existence?

What made him different from the other demon lords? Why did he exist in this state?

It seemed impossible to go on without obtaining that answer. How was one supposed to do anything without knowing the reason?

Soon, I will die.

That he was sure of. He had bled far too much, and for Boojum, blood was necessary both to keep living and to keep fighting. He wouldn’t survive another attack.

What a wretched end, he thought. He’d let a doubt of his own making lead him astray, and now he would die a traitor. He doubted another demon lord would ever feel the same way he did.

And that was when the king appeared before him: the king of the demon lords—the Absolute.

The king expressed interest in Boojum’s curiosity, validated him, and praised him as someone who could achieve their kind’s true goal—something impossible for the others.

“Take pride in your achievement,” he said, as he eliminated all of Boojum’s pursuers. “You have the ability to accomplish a miracle that no one else can.”

“…And in return? You would ask my loyalty?” questioned Boojum. He did not yet respect the king. “I understand human culture. A king robs from his people.”

“You misunderstand. I have no need for that,” said the king with a laugh. “A true king’s role is to grant everyone’s wishes and give them what they need. That is my duty. I vow to be loyal and

devoted to you all. Now, tell me your desire. What is it that you wish?"

It was at that moment that Boojum decided that he would never betray the king.

The king had offered himself as a servant to all, and that solitary path was something Boojum could relate to.



Overpowering the Federated Army's forces as they headed north along the city's central street was a simple task. Boojum knew his enemies stood no chance.

Heavily armored infantrymen formed a line and fired their lightning staffs to prevent the black, raggedy creature called Afanc from advancing. But all that did was slow him down; they had no hope of stopping him.

"D-do you think…?," mumbled Afanc, extinguishing a bolt of lightning with his black cloak before it could touch him, "…that you could stop that…? I-it's pointless…and annoying…"

He flapped his cloak, letting loose an ear-piercing sonic boom that shredded every soldier on the front line. The attack also took out a few buildings that happened to be in its path, though the rubble only wound up falling into the street and blocking Afanc's advance.

"Ughhh." Afanc shrank back, as though irritated by the dust. "Come on… How annoying… Why does everything humans make have to be so…?"

The demon lord began shredding the rubble. This didn't seem particularly difficult, and he rapidly turned the heaps of debris into pebbles, as if cutting dry wood with a hatchet.

Afanc's claws are exceptionally powerful.

Boojum had been watching all this from a rooftop.

The sharp weapons Afanc used were actually his arms, stretched out until they became extremely thin. Their tips became hard and

sharp, allowing him to use centrifugal force to wield them like whips. That was his ability as a demon lord.

His claws indiscriminately shred anything in their way, be it metal armor or massive buildings. How sad. The only way the humans could stop him would be…

There were few effective methods, but Boojum was wary. That was why he noticed right away.

His emotionless eyes caught a flash of light. This wasn't a bolt from a lightning staff—it was fire from a cannon. Boojum had expected this. It made sense for the enemy to use an attack that would destroy Afanc's surroundings, so that, even if the demon lord used his claws to intercept, there was still a good chance he'd be caught up in the barrage.

Indeed, this was probably the easiest strategy.

"Afanc, get down!" Boojum warned, swinging his arm.

Blood flowed to his feet, pouring over the roof's edge to the ground and becoming a torrential barrier.

There was a roar, then a tremor, and debris danced in the air. The blood barrier was destroyed, but Afanc, who had ducked, was unharmed.

"G-guh… Come on… Th-th-that wasn't very nice…" Afanc cursed his assailant. His black cloak was slightly singed.

I blocked the attack…but this artilleryman…

Boojum opened his eyes wide and peered into the darkness. There was someone there—someone dressed in dark red armor, firing from the rooftop of a large house. The man was rather far away, which meant he must have been quite the marksman, especially since he would have hit his target, no bigger than a human, if not for the barrier.

This artilleryman was a threat and had to be stopped at any cost.

"Afanc, eliminate the remaining ground troops as swiftly as possible," Boojum said.

Then he dashed across the rooftop, manipulating the blood pooled at his feet to launch himself forward.

"Surging Blood."

This was one of the many ways Boojum could use his powers.

The artilleryman in dark crimson armor instantly switched targets, aiming for the spot where Boojum would land. No matter. Boojum could block the shot by transforming his torrent of blood into a shield, allowing him to deflect the artillery shell as he picked up his pace and closed in on his enemy from the front.

"Oh?" said the artilleryman with a note of admiration. "So you can manipulate blood. Are you Boojum, perhaps?"

"You know who I am?"

The artilleryman held out his left hand as a sacred seal began to shine. He was equipped for close combat as well?

"Who are you?" said Boojum. "Introducing yourself is common courtesy, is it not?"

He used a skill called Blood Transmutation to form a blade of blood and launch it at his enemy's outstretched arm. The attack, however, bounced off a thin azure barrier— some sort of defensive sacred seal, no doubt.

In other words, Boojum was going to have to use stronger attacks to get past his opponent's defenses. He'd need time to condense more blood.

"I'm Rhyno," replied the artilleryman, "but I doubt you've ever heard of me."

As he spoke, he shot countless bolts of lightning from his left gauntlet. While this attack could be used at close range, it lacked the power of an artilleryman's cannon. Still, Boojum's blood shield wasn't able to block it completely, and he could feel his legs burning. They were being shredded from the thigh down.

It appears this artilleryman's weakness isn't close combat.

The next attack was coming. This time, the artilleryman moved his right arm—he was going to use his cannot at close range. Boojum instantly used Blood Surge to leap back, twisting in midair. As expected, however, the blast grazed his left shoulder. The brief impact was enough to tear his flesh.

But Boojum's dodge also served as a counterattack.

Blood Transmutation… I've condensed enough. I can do this.

The blood gushing from his shoulder stretched out into a spear, and he launched it in a spiral motion with even more penetrative force than before. The enemy's sacred seal wouldn't be able to block it. It pierced straight through the artilleryman's armor at the stomach until it was halfway poking out of his back.

"Ha-ha!" Yet the artilleryman simply laughed, and then he grabbed the spear and ripped it out of his body. "I've been getting stabbed a lot today. I bet everyone would be so surprised if they saw these wounds."

"Were your organs not damaged?"

Boojum tried to use his opponent's voice to speculate about his condition, but the man didn't seem affected by the wound at all. Boojum had been sure he would have the upper hand if he traded his legs for the man's internal organs, but that didn't seem to be the case. There could be only one explanation.

"I see," he said. "You're not human."

"Correct." There was amusement in the artilleryman's voice. "I was once given the name Puck Puca, but now I go by Rhyno, a name entrusted to me by a human hero."

"Hmph. So it's you." The name instantly rang a bell. "You're the killing enthusiast, Puck Puca? You are a traitor, the first one since Chernobog to sever their connection to Tír na nÓg."

"I'm so happy you've heard of me. Who told you? What did they say?"

"Abaddon. He said that you slaughtered your brethren during your mission to conquer the north and ran away."

"Oh, I despise that fellow. He's far too logical. No different from an insect. Wouldn't you agree?"

"What a disrespectful thing to say… I don't understand you."

Boojum used his blood to seal the wounds on his legs, while his left shoulder regenerated. He needed to buy more time. He needed to talk. Fortunately, that aligned with Abaddon's orders, and right now, the passage of time was their greatest ally.

"Why would you kill our brethren?" he asked. "Your actions are incomprehensible."

"For my own gratification, of course." Rhyno's tone made it easy for Boojum to imagine his expression, currently hidden beneath his helmet. He must have been grinning from ear to ear. "You all believe you're unstoppable, and seeing you begin to doubt that as your faces twist in agony brings me joy beyond words."

"…So hurting others is what brings you happiness? Humans would find that horrifying, would they not? You would be regarded as a detriment to society."

"Yes, you have been studying well, I see! I believe the two of us could have a wonderful conversation. You're nothing like Abaddon!" Rhyno seemed to welcome Boojum's criticism. "But to humans, my actions and urges are commonplace, even boring. Surprising, isn't it? To them, I'm just a run-of-the-mill killing enthusiast."

"No human will find your actions 'run-of-the-mill.' I pity you." It didn't make any sense to Boojum. To him, the artilleryman was nothing more than a monster. "What is your goal? When you've killed every last one of us, then what? Will that satisfy you?"

"No, there is only one individual whom I wish to kill with all my heart."

Boojum felt as though he was finally reaching the core of this monster.

"Your king," said Rhyno. "Or should I say *our* king? I just know killing him will bring me bliss like nothing else. Aren't you interested to see how our true king's face would twist in agony, how he would beg for his life, and—?"

"I cannot allow that." Boojum felt an immediate sense of disconnection. This might have been the first time he'd ever experienced such a feeling. He never dreamed he'd meet someone who made him feel such intense disgust. "I will protect the king. I won't let you touch him."

"Oh? And how will you do that?"

"I—"

That was when Boojum realized what was going on. He had been trying to buy time—time to heal his legs, and more importantly to keep Rhyno from firing his cannon while Afanc wiped out the enemies below before rejoining him. So where was Afanc?

Boojum shifted his gaze toward the ground below. And that was when he saw it.

"…What is that?"

He saw Afanc topple over. He'd been knocked back with such force that he was rolling across the ground. He was being pushed back. Someone had crossed swords with him and had already gained the advantage. A man, wild as a beast, raised his battle-ax into the air and let out a fierce cry. Then he charged forward with inhuman speed.

"Comrade Xylo calls him the strongest infantryman there ever was, and I completely agree," said Rhyno quietly. "To be honest, my only goal was to lure you away from them. Afanc is strong, but even he can't win against an opponent like that one-on-one in close combat."

The man let loose a savage roar, as if to back up Rhyno's claim.

"Guh." His battle-ax flashed as Afanc extended his body to counter. "Ooovaaaaaah!"

But Afanc's claws were easily deflected. The reason was simple. He was unable to extend his arms far enough to muster the required centrifugal force. His opponent was far too close and far too quick for him to launch a proper attack.

"Y-y-y-you…"

The demon lord managed to evade the man's ax, but the tides had already turned. The beastman continued to slam his weapon into the ground, sending bricks flying as Afanc defended with his claws, unable to attack.

"What is this…? This doesn't make sense. A-a-a-are you really human?"

Afanc was losing ground. He blocked the ax, only to be kicked backward into the wall of a building. The beastman dashed after him, howling bizarrely and digging his ax into the ground as he swung upward at his target.

"N-n-nooo—"

Afanc extended his claws as far as he could and twisted his body, just barely managing to block. Their weapons clashed, producing an ear-piercing ring.

"No! Wh-wh-what a-a-a-are you?!"

But the man's battle-ax didn't stop. It deflected Afanc's claws and then carved straight into his body.

"D-d-d-die already! Come on…! If you're human…! You should be more fragile! So come on, break!"

Afanc extended another arm, aiming for Tatsuya's back. It should have been in the man's blind spot, yet even that was blocked by his spinning ax. His movement seemed somehow automatic, like a machine that struck anything within range.

"Ahhh! Ah! No!" Afanc's shrieks echoed as he staggered back, swinging his claws as he tried to put distance between himself and his opponent.

"What a wonderful scream… What do you think, Boojum? Hard to believe, isn't it?" There was something almost like respect in Rhyno's voice. "That is Comrade Tatsuya—a man I deeply admire and a butcher of your kind."

His left gauntlet clicked, and there was a flash as he fired another bolt of lightning from midrange. Boojum dodged, using his torrent of blood to help him leap away.

So he planned this from the start? It wasn't only Boojum who was trying to buy time. *I still have much to learn.*

Boojum lowered his stance. Afanc needed backup at all costs, and although it would consume copious amounts of blood, Boojum had to eliminate this artilleryman with his next attack. He needed a strike powerful enough to cut through his armor and deliver a fatal blow.

"Spiraling Blood…"

"You would have had a chance if you had used that ability of yours sooner. Were you trying to avoid exhausting yourself, perhaps?" Rhyno's voice was completely calm. "I believe the reason you lost was due to ignorance. And more importantly, because you didn't consider the fact that we work as a team… And that was all the time I needed."

The sky flashed, and a dazzling bolt of white lightning soared down from the heavens.

What is that?

Boojum didn't have time to comprehend what he was seeing as the bolt of lightning came crashing down between them, demolishing the rooftop. No choice but to defend, he curled into a ball and rolled along the roof as he dodged and used his blood shield to deflect two, then three more bolts. What was happening? Only when Boojum looked up into the night sky did he finally realize what those bolts of lightning were.

It's a clear, bright night, and I can see the white moon above. This is no natural phenomenon. Then wait, is that *what's causing this?*

Standing in the center of the capital was a white tower, taller than the others. Its spire flashed, unleashing yet another bolt of lightning. Was the tower itself some sort of lightning staff? But Boojum had no time to wonder how it worked.

It isn't that powerful. I can handle it. But…

Afanc couldn't. He was still fighting that beastman and had no time to worry about anything else. And just like that, a bolt of lightning soared down from the sky, hitting Afanc and frying his cloak-like body.

"Kah…" He groaned dryly.

Another bolt of lightning pierced his body. He staggered, unable to defend or evade, and it was this moment of weakness that cost him his life.

"Giii!"

The beastman called Tatsuya tore through the demon lord's body with his battle-ax, practically slicing him in half.

"That's Comrade Norgalle for you. This must be what he needed all that time for," said Rhyno with a laugh.

It didn't make any sense. These bolts of lightning were all part of someone's plan?

"Are you feeling regret, Boojum? Cursing your own foolishness, perhaps?"

The enemy's right gauntlet flickered, and Boojum dropped to the ground as a flash of light soared over his head.

Rhyno's target, however, was Afanc. The demon lord had no time to dodge before the shell had erased half of his body. The other

half was not so lucky. Tatsuya grabbed hold of the remains with his left hand.

"Grrruuuaaaaaah!"

With a scream, he slammed it into the ground and began relentlessly swinging his battle-ax, smashing what was left of the corpse into tiny pieces. As Boojum rolled across the ground, he thought idly that the scene was like a child playing with a toy.

"I won't kill you yet, Boojum!" exclaimed Rhyno. "You're incredible! And the fun is only getting started!"

Boojum looked up at the man in the dark red armor. Inside was an unimaginably wicked creature. He should have retreated earlier. He began running, practically crawling on all fours, desperate to escape.

"I wonder what kind of face you'll make when I kill our king? I am looking forward to it," Rhyno said with a laugh.

I've lost. It was no contest.

The man called Rhyno was like a sick joke, or maybe a nightmare. Boojum couldn't let him anywhere near the king.



"Uh… What is that?" asked Venetim when he saw the flash of light.

He was inside the Kytre, the oldest out of all the heat-generating facilities used to warm the Second Capital. Just now, a bolt of lightning had shot out from the spire at the top of the tower, and the one who had fired it was none other than the man before him: Norgalle.

The instant they stepped inside the tower, Norgalle had dashed up the stairs until he'd reached the observation platform, where he'd approached a large gatelike engine. It seemed he already knew how to use the device. He'd inserted the Kaer Vourke into what would have been the gate's lock, and the tower immediately began to rumble, heat up, and glow white.

And now this.

"Your Majesty, are you sure this is okay? I hear metal screeching somewhere in the tower!"

"I'm not surprised," Norgalle replied. "This isn't how the tower is usually used, after all. Only members of the royal family know how to operate it for military purposes. During emergencies, the tower itself can be transformed into a giant lightning staff to protect the capital."

"Th-this tower can be used as a weapon?"

"The principle is the same as an ordinary lightning staff. It generates enough heat to release a powerful attack. Did you see the towers scattered throughout the capital? The lines connecting them function as an auxiliary sacred seal. A few of them have been destroyed, but, well, that will only decrease the output a little… They must not have had time to use it when the capital was overthrown, or they were too busy evacuating the royal family…"

Norgalle gazed up at the sky with a serious expression. Above, an azure dragon deftly dodged the explosions as it faced off against Demon Lord Sugaar.

"The drawback is that it consumes a vast amount of stored luminescence. Put simply, every shot counts. However, I believe I've already gotten the gist of it."

"Y-you're still not done with this thing?"

"Of course not. Just like Xylo, that man always tries to handle things all on his own… And so sometimes, kindhearted kings such as I must look out for my people."

A cheerful note in Norgalle's voice contrasted with his words. Venetim couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Requesting crest activation." Norgalle tightened his grip on the Sacred Key and once again inserted it into the large gatelike device. "Please execute the contract. The embodiment of radiance, the sculpted sacrament…" The Kaer Vourke began to emit an intense light. "I am the successor of Mio Vladd. It is time to wield your power in the name of the true king."

✦

Neely soared through white moonlight. Her smooth movements were so quick, she outpaced even the wind. And yet she couldn't escape those cursed homing beams. Once they got in range, they'd explode in a wide-area attack, so she and Jayce had to be sure to keep clear of their allies.

But…

Jayce needed to make a decision. If he waited too long, the enemy would fire yet another round of beams. Sugaar kept its distance, taking precise aim and keeping its targets pinned. Jayce could see its three horns begin to glow as it prepared for another attack.

I need to act fast.

He only had two of the weapons Norgalle had given him left. Still, he had to do this.

Jayce grabbed one. It looked like a bunch of stones tied together with rope. Norgalle called them pseudo-phosphorous seals, while Tatsuya referred to them as flares.

The idea was extremely simple. It was just a normal bistie connected to other stones to reinforce its effects. The only difference was that it produced more heat—a bit more than the body heat of a human or a dragon. Once activated, they would explode midair, emitting a powerful burst of heat.

This was how they would stop the homing beams.

Sugaar's attacks were basically the same as the lances Jayce and the other dragon knights used in that they tracked sources of heat. This was easy to surmise. But Sugaar's attacks had a blast radius that was simply too massive. Once he activated one of the pseudo-phosphorous seals and dropped it, he and Neely only had a moment to dash away to safety.

And that's when I need to attack.

Once he'd made his decision, Jayce placed a hand on the sacred seal at his neck and shouted, "Everyone, move back! I'm going to do it again. You better not let any dragons get hurt! Protect your ladies, or I'll kill you myself!"

"Hey, Princess and Jayce are going to do that thing again."

"Roger. Lure your enemies away as soon as possible."

"You about to put an end to this, Jayce?"

Jayce felt a cold, tingling sensation run down his spine. The pressure to take out Sugaar with his next attack was almost unbearable.

"Don't worry. Just leave everything to me," Neely reassured him. "I will get you close enough, no matter what. Everything's going to be okay."

"All right… I'm going to finish this."

Jayce was only replying to Neely, but the others could still hear him.

"There goes Jayce, talking a big game again."

"We're countin' on you. I'll handle the little guys in the meantime… Actually, sorry. There are too many. I need backup! Anyone!"

"Be right there. Men, this is an order. Do not let a single faerie near Jayce."

"Look at you, Mr. Popular," Neely teased.

"Still not as popular as you, Princess."

The banter helped ease his tension. Jayce swung the pseudo-phosphorous seal in a circle over his head, then threw it as hard as he could. Instantly, it burst into sparks in the sky, casting a radiant glow. Each of the six homing beams took the bait, exploding one after another, while Neely sped away from their blast radius before making a wide turn and charging toward Sugaar.

I can do this.

As Jayce got into position with his next seal, the horns on Sugaar's head began to glow. It was preparing to attack. To make matters worse, numerous oberons and wyverns moved to intercept them. There were simply too many faeries for the other dragon knights to handle.

But Jayce was ready. He'd affixed the seal to a lance, and he hurled it with precision.

The lance blazed with heat and light as it streaked through the sky toward Sugaar, drawing the homing beams as it went. An oberon dived into its path, taking the hit. This triggered a blinding explosion that eradicated all the faeries in their path. Neely narrowly veered

around the shock wave, furiously flapping her wings until she could see Sugaar on the other side of the dazzling light. The demon lord was making a similar maneuver.

They spiraled toward each other with increasing speed.

"Let's do this, Neely," said Jayce.

"With pleasure."

Neely had the advantage in both speed and maneuverability. Jayce knew this. He believed it.

The demon lord opened its insect-like jaws and made a wet chirping sound, some of which Jayce could understand.

"Calamity…is…coming. Calamity… Calamity…"

It must have been referring to Neely. All three horns on its head flickered and sparked, but one was glowing especially brightly. Was it trying to concentrate the power of three attacks into one?

It can do that? thought Jayce. *I might have made a mistake. I…*

He was always afraid that one day he would screw up.

He'd collected evidence and listened to testimony, made speculation after speculation. His strategy was built on careful analysis and thought. And yet it was always a gamble. No matter how much effort he put into increasing his odds, it was impossible to keep succeeding forever. That feeling of doubt always followed Jayce.

Was this where it all ended? There was no way Neely could dodge such a massive explosion at this speed and distance.

"Neely—"

Jayce was about to apologize. That would have been his real mistake, but somehow, he was spared. A white light illuminated the ground below.

Lightning? From a lightning staff?

That was all Jayce had time to comprehend.

A sniper? But it can't be Tsav. It's far too powerful—

A beam of light tore through the night sky. Sugaar didn't have time to dodge as the ray shattered its shell, shaving off parts of the creature's body along with half of its head. Its glowing horn snapped in two, still sparking.

This was the only chance they were going to get, and Neely wasn't about to let it slip by. She rapidly closed the distance and latched on to the demon lord's side with her supple claws. Sugaar writhed in agony, still moving somehow, despite losing half its head. It was even using its knifelike talons to block Neely's fangs and claws.

"That was a direct hit…right?" Jayce could hear Venetim's terrified voice through the static. *"The king did it. Not me. I apologize for interrupting your battle without your permission, but if you're going to get mad at anyone, it's—"*

"Shut up," barked Jayce.

He didn't know what Venetim was babbling about, but he could feel himself smiling. Everyone in his unit was like this. If they weren't, the pressure would have crushed him by now.

"I'll save my complaints for later," he said. "Right now—"

That was when Jayce realized something. Sugaar still had one horn remaining. And it was already starting to spark.

Give up already, you jerk!

It was planning on shooting at random. It didn't care what it hit, and its horn was pointed right at the surface—at the central square. Xylo had said there were civilians there in need of rescue. Or maybe it was aiming at the tower that had launched that bolt of lightning. There was no time to think about any of that. It didn't matter what happened to those humans or the other penal heroes. It didn't matter, and yet…

Dammit.

Jayce had discussed many times with Neely what they would do in this situation. They could recover from this.

"Neely, I'm sorry. I'm counting on you."

He removed the gear affixing him to Neely's back, then reached for his weapon. Not a lance this time but a thick-bladed cleaver-like sword—something dragon knights used only during emergencies. And with his sword in hand, he lunged onto Sugaar's head.

"Let's talk later. I want you to tell me if I forget anything…" He used the momentum to bring his sword down on Sugaar's last horn. "…and help me remember."







A crack ran through it. He could break it.

I can do this, Jayce reassured himself.

He had learned the sword and spear from a master of Western martial arts—an eccentric human by the name of Alasbis Ordo. He'd taken an interest in Jayce, who only knew how to fight like a wild animal, and trained him hard.

There's nothing that old man could do that I can't do now!

He put his weight into the blade and pushed it deep into the horn. At the same time, Sugaar swung one of its legs out. It had incredible mobility at the joint. With Jayce latched on to its head, it managed to plunge the tip of its talon into his side, tearing his flesh.

But Jayce didn't give in to the pain. He shoved his blade even harder until the sparking horn was cut clean off. Only then did Jayce feel something inside him rupture.

"I will, Jayce," said Neely's gentle voice.

They had spoken about this numerous times. He was the only one who could do this, and he was the only one in the world who could protect Neely.

And yet I can see that look in her eyes. I know exactly what she wants to say without any need for words.

Jayce's thoughts lasted only a moment.

Neely crushed the base of Sugaar's head with her jaws, ending its struggles.

"I'll tell you the same stories as many times as it takes. Thank you for protecting me… I'm sorry."

And just like that, flames burst forth from Neely's mouth—flames so powerful, they reduced the demon lord's body to ash. Jayce listened to Neely's furious roars as his consciousness faded away.

Jayce greeted death for the first time in a while. But he'd gambled and won once again. He had no choice but to continue winning in order to protect Neely and the world she lived in. How many victories was this? How many more battles would have to be won before it was over?

We did it. The rest is up to you, Xylo. You better not disappoint me.

The white moon shone above.

PUNISHMENT: RECLAIM ZEYLLENT, THE SECOND CAPITAL, PART 5

Saint Yurisa Kidafreny was impatient.

She could hear the clash of metal and the firing of lightning staffs from outside her armored carriage, accompanied by the occasional explosion. People were shrieking and shouting. The carriage was shaking.

Saying that none of it frightened her would be a lie. She was terrified of stepping out into the middle of a battlefield, but she was even more afraid of others dying in her name.

Once this is over. If *this ever ends*…, Yurisa Kidafreny couldn't help but wonder, *Will everyone fighting out there despise me?*

After all, she was the Saint, and she wasn't even trying to participate. She had a unique and powerful ability, and yet here she was, safe in her carriage, taking none of the risk and feeling none of the pain.

There was a reason for this, though. She was forbidden from joining in. She had her own role to fulfill, and sending her to the

front line with the other soldiers would be far too dangerous. Instead, she was ordered to stay put in the rear, where it was safe. The person who gave this order was none other than Marcolas Esgein, the supreme commander.

He's someone important. Really *important.*

Only two months ago, she wouldn't have been allowed to even talk to such a man, let alone be near him. But soldiers still frightened her. It wasn't anything specific that scared her. It was something in the way they moved, in their demeanor.

"Is it done? How much longer is this going to take?!"

She could tell that it was Marcolas Esgein shouting outside the carriage. He was irritated, and Yurisa recoiled on reflex.

"This is taking forever. I already promised Galtuile victory by dawn!"

"Yes, sir. But, uh… We still haven't gained control of the sky…and the sacred seal weapons at the castle are still—"

"I'm not interested in excuses. All I want are results," hissed Esgein. "Send in the penal heroes, and let them handle it. What's the goddess killer doing?"

"That man is accompanied by a goddess. If we go too far, it could strain our relations with the Temple."

"And it's your job to find someone we can pin the blame on!"

Yurisa listened to their exchange, clenching her fists so hard that they began to hurt. She only stopped when she realized that her fingernails were digging into her palms.

It sounds like they're really struggling out there.

The outcome seemed to hinge on the success of a penal hero known as the goddess killer. Penal heroes were said to be prisoners who had committed terrible atrocities in the past. But was that really true? Esteemed men like Esgein seemed to have low opinions of them, but what the other soldiers were saying made them sound completely different.

They would stand at the front line of even the most difficult of battles and fulfill the most dangerous of roles. They'd rescued numerous people. Some claimed that Xylo Forbartz was a true hero —a savior, even.

And if that's true, then I… I need to do it.

She was the Saint. That was the role she'd been given. She heaved a heavy sigh.

Yurisa could count on her fingers the number of times people had needed her for something. Because of her stigma, she had been handled with kid gloves her entire life. Ever since she was born, she could share sensations with all sorts of things, from insects and trees to inanimate objects like rocks and iron. And if she concentrated hard enough, she could even move them as if they were a part of her body.

However, her parents had warned her never to use her abilities. She counted herself lucky that she'd been permitted to stay in her village, even if she wasn't allowed to interact with the other villagers. She had to study, play, and even work in the fields all by herself. She would have been overwhelmed by loneliness, if not for the words of her village's only priest:

"The day will soon arrive when your sacred mark will be needed."

It was a gift from the gods that would one day benefit all those around her. It was the mark of the blessed—the same one possessed by the Saint of yore who led mankind to victory against the Demon Blight. After hearing that tale, Yurisa used to imagine herself wielding her power for others, wondering if she would ever be like the fabled Saint.

But I always thought that was just a fantasy… It wasn't supposed to be real.

The night the Demon Blight came, everything changed. Faeries rampaged, slaughtering the villagers. They killed the owner of the fields she worked in, her parents, and even the priest—the only person to ever show her kindness. Yurisa hid inside the small temple in her village and prayed the Demon Blight would pass.

And somehow, that wooden temple survived the onslaught. It was as though her prayers had been heard. And that wasn't all. The next morning, when she was rescued by the Holy Knights, she learned that the trees themselves had moved to keep the faeries from reaching her.

Apparently, Yurisa had powers she'd never even dreamed of. It was a miracle born from her stigma. At least, that was what the Holy Knights had claimed. Her power, called Harmony, could instill her beliefs into people and things, allowing her to manipulate them. And, they said, she could even harmonize with the remains of a goddess.

If I'd been able to use this power properly…

Maybe she could have saved the villagers, her parents, and even the priest.

Wasn't this the time to try? Wasn't this just like the old tale of the Saint she used to dream about—the tale that had given her the will to go on?

"…Yurisa." A voice called out to her from the side. "Are you okay? You look awful."

"Huh? Oh… Yes, ma'am. I mean, yes, I'm fine… There's nothing wrong."

Yurisa corrected herself in a fluster. She had been strictly coached on how she should speak. There was no need to say "ma'am" or "sir." She needed to be proud and bold. But she couldn't fool the woman sitting next to her.

"I'm worried. You don't look like you're feeling well at all."

"Th-thank you, Tevi. I… I was just thinking about how pitiful I was."

The woman next to her was called Tevi. She served as Yurisa's bodyguard and attendant, but she was originally a warrior priest who worked for the Temple. Yurisa had finally gotten comfortable enough around her to have casual conversations.

With Tevi, she could open up about some of what she was feeling.

"I'm the Saint, and yet…" She looked out the window of the carriage at the bolts of lightning and fire soaring through the air. "All I can do is sit here and watch. Even though I have the ability to protect everyone… It makes me feel so pathetic."

"The fact you feel that way is proof you are worthy of the title of Saint. That's what I believe anyway."

Tevi spoke exactly like a priest. She was trying to persuade Yurisa to stay here, where it was safe. But Yurisa couldn't quell the

fear that plagued her heart.

"…But feelings can't change anything."

"You are a saint, Yurisa. You are a symbol of hope, not a warrior who fights on the front line."

"I—I understand that…"

"Good," said Tevi with a sigh. "You need to take care of yourself. I'm worried about you."

Yurisa didn't say another word. Ultimately, she was just trying to escape her fears. She didn't want to be blamed for not doing anything. That was probably all this was.

And yet…



A flash crossed the sky, and the endless rumbling came to an end.

A brief moment of silence followed before Neely roared. I heard anger in her cries. Something must have happened to Jayce.

But Demon Lord Sugaar had been reduced to ash and was no more. I could see all this happen from where I was sheltering behind a roof. That meant the sky was ours. I didn't know how Jayce had done it, but he'd succeeded.

That means it's my turn.

I couldn't mess up now. I didn't even want to think about what Jayce would say if I failed. Just imagining his smug face was already pissing me off, and I didn't want Neely consoling me with her gentle roars, either. Right now, I needed to pick up Teoritta and dive straight into the waiting hellfire.

I hopped into the air and landed on a rooftop. The battle in the sky was already over, and the other dragon knights had begun dropping explosive sacred seals onto the castle. That would slow down the enemy's attacks.

Before me was a path straight to the castle, albeit blocked by massive faeries.

"It appears Jayce won," muttered Teoritta in my arms. "The others are holding up as well. That means we cannot afford to lose,

my knight.”

A cold breeze blew from the north. Were Patausche and Frenci all right?

“What is taking you so long, penal hero?!”

An obnoxiously loud voice came through the seal on my neck. It was Dasmitur. He had been nagging me for a while already. He must have been extremely eager to get us inside that castle so he could claim victory. I suspected Marcolas Esgein was thinking along the same lines.

“The enemies in the sky are scattering in confusion. Now is your opportunity to lead your men inside! Go!”

“That goes without saying. Right?” muttered Teoritta, clearly displeased.

“Right.” I nodded.

I got a running start and leaped off the rooftop. The castle was right before our eyes, but faeries were beginning to form a crowd in front of it. This was a crucial point for both offense and defense, and everything depended on what happened once we made it past these faeries and set foot inside the castle.

“Teoritta.”

“As you wish!”

Sparks raced through the air as swords rained down upon our enemies. This was enough to take care of the smaller ones.

Unfazed, a colossal troll swung his massive club and launched it directly at us. I couldn’t believe he’d thrown his only weapon.

What an idiot.

Kicking off a streetlamp, I swiftly changed directions. There were countless objects in the capital that I could use as footing, allowing me to easily throw one of my knives at the troll, blowing off its head with Zatte Finde. I landed and ran past its corpse.

“Th-the goddess is here! And she’s with the Thunder Falcon!”

“Don’t be scared! The goddess can’t kill us!”

I could hear the voices of human soldiers working with the enemy. They held out their lightning staffs and fired shots in unison from atop a roof, their faces twisted in desperation. I stuck close to

the buildings and dodged their attacks as bolts rained down, boring holes into the pavement.

Seems like every idiot is calling me that weird nickname now…

It was embarrassing. I actually preferred "Goddess Killer."

"Xylo…! There are human soldiers." I knew what Teoritta was trying to say. The enemy was probably holding their loved ones hostage to force their loyalty, and that pissed me off. I couldn't even explain why it made me so angry. "I am not going to be able to—!"

"It's fine. We're going to break through. Teoritta, hold your breath!"

"Ah! Mmph!"

I covered Teoritta's mouth and placed my other hand on the ground. *We should be in the clear now*, I thought. With my probe seal, Loradd, restored, I could manage this maneuver with ease. Speaking of Loradd, I should mention that this seal was merely a defective prototype. The problem? Its output was way too high.

I punched the ground three times with my left fist. Dust and debris from the battle rose into the air, creating a smoke screen to conceal us.

"What is this…?!" shouted one of the human soldiers. I couldn't blame him. What was he supposed to think?

Using the debris as our cloak, I rushed toward the castle with my hand still covering Teoritta's mouth. Reinforcements would take care of the soldiers on the rooftops for us, but that didn't mean we could just waltz right into the castle. A large faerie pushed forward to stand in our way, as if it had been waiting for us.

It was a barghest, and an especially large one—bigger than a building. With a roar, the beast charged us so quickly, I barely managed to dodge. I landed in a narrow alley, Teoritta still in my arms, and listened to the continuing sounds of destruction. There was no way I was going to finish off a creature this massive with Zatte Finde alone, and I didn't have that kind of time to waste. Besides, there was someone else far more suited for this kind of job.

"N-not so fast, my knight!" Teoritta coughed, tears welling in her eyes as she slapped me on the shoulder. "You could have been a little gentler, you know! Respect! Where is your respect?"

"My bad. But I suggest you save your breath for now." I put a hand to the seal on my neck and shouted to our sniper, "Tsav! Back us up!"

I figured if anyone could blow off this ridiculously large barghest's head, it was him.

"Oh, sorry, Bro. I want to help, but…" Tsav was being unusually hesitant, and his breathing sounded almost erratic. Was he moving? Why? *"Things have gotten super busy over here all of a sudden, so I can't help! You're on your own!"*

"The hell are you talking about? I don't have time for this!"

I narrowly dodged the barghest's next charge. In return, Teoritta summoned numerous swords, but no blade could get past its thick skin. It probably felt like we were poking it with needles. The creature looked up and howled at the moon.

"I'm seriously sorry, Bro. I'll make it up to you later, but there's this guy, and he's being kind of a pain." Tsav sounded excited. What was he so happy about? *"It's an assassin. I'll meet up with you once I kill this knucklehead, okay? Good luck!"*

"Hey!"

I didn't hear a peep out of Tsav after that.

This wasn't good. The barghest had set its sights on Teoritta and me, and we weren't getting in the castle unless we did something about it. Other faeries noticed we'd stopped moving and began to approach us as well. I had to do something, and quick. But what?

I had to take a risk. I needed to dodge its attacks, get up close to it, and finish it in one strike.

That's my only option.

I needed to end this with my next move. I took a deep breath, and then—

"Attack! For the goddess!"

"Fire, fire, fire! Back up the Thunder Falcon!"

Before I could even complain about the nickname, countless lightning bolts and arrows shot out from behind me. The barghest was immediately staggered and the surrounding faeries skewered. The Federated Kingdom's army had arrived. Dasmitur's soldiers, along with various other groups, were pushing ahead.

These were the soldiers who had volunteered to fight alongside the Saint, and it seemed they were an excitable, motivated bunch.

"Hey now…"

I appreciated the help, but they were being too aggressive and moving too far ahead. The barghest howled, then charged. If I didn't do something, it was going to crush the soldiers in front in one fell swoop.

I had to do it. We had a chance now with this many reinforcements.

"My knight! Now!" yelled Teoritta, voicing my decision before I even opened my mouth.

She'd saved me. If she hadn't, it might look like I was intentionally risking my life to rescue the others.

"On it."

I leaped forward, unsheathed a knife, and dodged as I infused it with the power of Zatte Finde. As the soldiers' attacks knocked the beast off-balance, Teoritta summoned a giant sword. I kicked off it, changing direction midair.

This was our usual strategy. I swiftly launched my knife into the faerie's head, and it released a flash of light and exploded. It was over… Or at least, it should have been, but the barghest had the vitality to match its massive body.

It's not dead yet…?! What the hell is *this thing?!*

It continued to charge, missing half its head, but it was no longer after us. It probably couldn't see anymore, and it was now heading straight for our reinforcements. They'd advanced far too close to the enemy.

"Xylo, the soldiers…!" screamed Teoritta.

She started to summon another sword, but I doubted she'd be able to manage one big enough to pin the creature in time. I clicked my tongue. There had to be some way to stop it…

Then, all of a sudden, the barghest came to a halt. An empty space in the air had begun to spark as a castle wall sprouted up from the street. The barghest crashed into it, made a gurgling sound deep in its throat, then fell against the wall and toppled over.

"Is that…the Saint's…?" mumbled Teoritta, glancing back and forth between me and the wall with concern.

Normally, I would have been utterly confused by what had just happened, but I was very familiar with this phenomenon. It was a divine summons—a power belonging to the Goddess of Fortresses Senerva.

"Everyone, please—ahem! Men, get back!"

I assumed the person speaking must be Saint Yurisa Kidafreny. Her vivid scarlet hair reminded me of fire, and while she seemed very serious, she was still just a little girl. She extended her bandaged right hand and shouted:

"Fear not, men, for I shall protect you!"

Then she stepped over the castle wall as it faded into a golden light and made her way forward. The soldiers erupted into cheers as a wild fervor engulfed them like a wave.

This is insane. What is she rambling about?

What was the Saint doing on the front line? She should have stayed put in the rear, like the figurehead she was meant to be.

"Saint Yurisa! Please! You must stand back…!" shouted a female guard, rushing over with a shield and lightning staff. "This is reckless. What are you going to do if you get hurt?!"

There seemed to be some sort of commotion at the rear. Although I enjoyed seeing that asshole Marcolas Esgein all flustered, I couldn't just let this go.

"What are you doing?!" I shouted at the Saint the moment I was back on the ground.

She turned around, startled, but soon regained her determined expression.

"As… As long as they call me the Saint, it is my duty to try—no, it is my duty to fulfill my role, no matter what!"

"By fighting on the front line? Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?"

"Exactly!" chimed in my companion, puffing out her chest. "My knight and I, the great Goddess Teoritta, will put an end to this battle ourselves!" Perhaps it was a sense of rivalry, but she seemed

even more assertive and confident than usual. “It is *my* duty to face danger by Xylo’s side! …Right, my knight?”

“That’s not what I meant. Don’t you understand? Your ability to summon… It’s pointless if you stand out in the middle of the battlefield. You’re a sitting duck.”

“Shh…” The Saint raised her right hand and opened her right eye. She appeared to be looking at something—something not of our world, I suspected. “Sh-shut up! Even so, I still have to fight.”

Sparks flew into the air as a massive bridge formed—a staircase-like bridge large enough to cross the moat surrounding the castle and then some. Immediately, battle cries and cheers rose up from the soldiers. They were loud enough to be heard throughout the Second Capital.

I clicked my tongue once more.

“Follow my lead!” shouted the Saint. “It is time for us to reclaim the castle!”

This was nuts. How much longer was this girl going to continue this pathetic charade? Until it got her killed?

◆

He called himself Soola Od—“venomous beetle” in the language of the old kingdom. And he lived up to the moniker. After all, he was an assassin who would do anything for money.

It was a simple life, and that was how he liked it.

Born in the slums of the Industrial City of Rocca, Soola didn’t have a single good memory of his time growing up. The city had a complicated legal system, a strict hierarchy, and lots of obligations and limitations. Those sort of things had always disagreed with him, and he found relationships formed from such frameworks unpleasant, to say the least.

In the end, he couldn’t make it living an honest life, and so he chose a profession somewhere between a mercenary and an adventurer. He believed that he would have an easier time living life as an outcast. But here, too, there was hierarchy and other people

he had to work with. He found all this aggravating, and it wasn't long before he fell even deeper into the abyss.

But that was what he wanted. He couldn't stand working with others and having to maintain those relationships. And so he decided to think of everything in terms of money. He would live his life while forming the bare minimum of connections with others, and with those few, it would be all about money. This seemed like the simplest, most straightforward way to survive, and other people appeared to understand where he was coming from. If he said he was only after money, they never questioned him further.

Soola Od put his life on the line for every job he took, all for the sake of his simple, primitive, selfish way of life. And he'd never failed, regardless of how skilled his target was. Up until now, at least. But this man was…

Again?

Another flash of lightning pierced the empty night above his head.

He has considerable skill and incredible precision.

Crouching low, Soola Od peered into the darkness, never stopping. He leaped, still on all fours, from one rooftop to the next, his eyes locked on his opponent. The moment he landed, he fired the lightning staff in his left hand. The weapon, called Buckleya, was specialized for sniping, so while it didn't have enormous power or range, it was extremely precise.

His enemy, however, wasn't making things easy for him, and kept taking him by surprise. Soola Od had made a mistake earlier by letting his opponent get too close to him. If he hadn't used his secret weapon, he could have been badly wounded.

"Hey, what's your name?" asked his opponent. To make matters worse, the man was extremely annoying. "Like, it's really hard for me to talk to you when I don't know your name. Don't you think so? You're making it look like I'm talking to myself. Like I'm some sort of weirdo. Oh, right! I'm Tsav! I'm actually a genius assassin… Well, I'm more of a genius in general, but I've personally slaughtered countless targets. Oh! Well, I actually have a zero percent success

rate, 'cause, like, these 'targets' weren't technically my real targets, but I had a reason for…"

He had been chattering nonstop like this since the beginning of their battle. It was impressive that he could spout so much nonsense while moving so rapidly and so quietly. He'd just effortlessly backflipped to dodge Soola's last strike.

This guy is really something.

Tovitz Hughker, who had hired Soola, told him this elite unit was the enemy's secret weapon, and his words finally made sense.

Soola Od was a proud man. No matter how dangerous the mission, he was always successful. He had been through hell and back, and it didn't matter who he was up against—no one could match the skill and experience he'd racked up over the years. What's more, he'd disposed of countless assassins who boasted about their skills and turned out to be weaklings.

But now, his confidence was wavering.

Soola thought back to what Tovitz had told him.

"If my assumptions are correct, you should probably run away if you encounter this elite unit. You might not lose, but you probably won't win."

"Just tell me what you want me to do if I run into them during my mission."

"I mean, I don't know how skilled you truly are, so it's hard to say. But…" Tovitz smirked coldly. *"Try to keep them busy for as long as you can. In the meantime, I'll finish up what I have to do."*

Tovitz had been right.

An opponent I can't defeat, huh? Does such a person really exist? Everyone's the same. If you stab them where it hurts, they die.

Soola Od stared hard at his opponent in the dark.

The man held his lightning staff at the ready. It was also specialized for sniping, with a longer than average shaft. Would he fire again? Soola decided to take a chance before that could happen. He hated to admit it, but his opponent was good. He was a better sniper and seemed to be able to predict where Soola would dodge.

"Could you hold still for a second, please?" his enemy said. Soola crouched. Was this guy crazy? "I can't hit you if you keep hopping around like a grasshopper. Why don't you relax for a second. By the way, did you know that grasshoppers are typically really calm? It's when they're in groups that you gotta watch out…"

The tip of the other man's staff flashed right in the middle of his rant.

Now! thought Soola, dropping down and placing his right palm on the ground. This activated Sakara, the flight seal engraved on his arm. He launched into the air.

The technology to engrave sacred seals directly onto the human body was still not widespread, and the success rate of the procedure wasn't very high, either. Soola, however, had lucked out. His seals were engraved by an underground doctor who was one of the very best.

His sacred seal functioned perfectly, carrying his body to a nearby rooftop and allowing him to narrowly dodge his opponent's attack. But the instant he landed, the structure beneath him collapsed. He stumbled but caught himself. A whole portion of the roof was completely destroyed.

"Oh, wow. You fell for it," said his opponent with a snicker. "Surprised? It's a really simple trap, but dumb people always fall for it."

Was I lured here? wondered Soola. He knew he couldn't use the same trick twice with this man. He shouldn't have used Sakara. By the time his legs were free from the rubble, the enemy had already closed the distance.

He lunged toward Soola with great agility, forcing him to engage in close combat. Soola saw the blade in his opponent's hand and grabbed a knife with his right. The man's weapon was the type of knife used for thrusting, and he came at Soola like an arrow. Their blades crossed once, then twice, as the scraping of metal rang out across the rooftop.





Impossible…!

A chill ran down Soola's spine. His upper arm stung with pain. So did his stomach and knee. The man kicked him, and he used the momentum to put distance between them.

His reflexes are superhuman.

In their brief exchange, Soola had focused solely on defense, and still, he was the only one injured.

"Wow, you're tough," said his opponent. "You deserve a medal for lasting this long against me. I mean it. Feel free to brag to everyone tomorrow! …Oh, wait! You won't be able to, 'cause you'll be dead. Hmm. Maybe I can tell everyone about it for you."

Although he spoke like a buffoon, he was just as strong as he claimed. It was the first time Soola had fought anyone so skilled.

I can't beat him in a fair fight.

But Soola was never planning on fighting fair. He was an assassin, and assassins won by exploiting their opponents' weaknesses. There was no reason for him to fight with honor.

And this man's weakness is…

Soola Od moved his lightning staff away from the man, pointing it instead at the ground. Beyond it were two people: Xylo Forbartz and Goddess Teoritta. They had just dodged a giant barghest's charge and were about to take cover. Soola's eyes were used to the dark, and he could clearly see his two targets.

"What do you think of this?" he taunted, purposely provoking his enemy as he activated the sacred seal. There was a flash, then a burst of sparks.

"Hey, yo. Wait up. That's…"

The enemy immediately realized what this meant. He leaped forward, still smiling. With unsurprisingly precise movements, he rammed his shoulder into the already activated sacred seal. The staff's shaft was pushed out of the way, to the sound of rending flesh. The shot missed, but his opponent's right shoulder was charred, his collarbone shattered. His right arm hung limply by his side.

Checkmate, you idiot.

Tsav staggered before falling to his knees. There were countless ways to kill someone stronger than yourself, and for Soola Od, exploiting an opponent's weakness was the best way of all.

He's the same as the others. One must eliminate all weaknesses. Having relationships with others only gets in the way.

Soola moved to deliver a follow-up attack, swinging his knife toward his opponent's neck. But why was he smiling? And why was his left hand touching his neck? Just what was he up to?

"He fell for it, Dotta."

Soola halted his attack. He sensed something in the enemy's careless, flippant smile—something beyond mere malice. It was the simple, primitive urge to kill.

"Exploiting your opponent's weakness isn't a bad idea. I agree with you there," he said. "Unfortunately for you, though, I'm a genius."

That wasn't something someone who'd just lost half his right shoulder should have been saying. Soola leaped back as far as he could.

"You should save tricks like that for normal people. Heh-heh. Did you really think you could win? Sorry, man. This is just how it is!"

With a series of dry pops, four shots came flying toward Soola, and he felt as if his left leg were on fire. He wouldn't be able to stick his landing. He was going to fall off the roof. Before that could happen, he slammed his left hand against whatever he could, and, using every scrap of luminescence in his body, he launched himself into the air. All he could do now was run.

Tsav was staring down at him, cackling. "I had fun with you. What's your name?"

"Soola Od…!" shouted the assassin, unsure if his opponent could hear him.

I won't be able to beat him now. Was I so weak that I couldn't even take on a buffoon like this?

The second he rolled to the ground, Soola Od began to run. Adrenaline had numbed his aching left leg. What he felt now was humiliation. He'd given up something important, though he wasn't sure what. His well-honed techniques and deep-seated pride—the

things that made him who he was—had been kicked to the side with a chuckle as though they were nothing.

He couldn't believe it. Why was he so upset? Did he have that much self-respect? Up until now, he had always looked down on people who prided themselves on their dignity and conscience. He thought those things were mere weaknesses. In the end, was he the same as all of them?

Relax. This is mere delusion. "Self-respect"? Hogwash. I fulfilled my duty. All I had to do was buy time.

That was the only thing he needed to worry about. Yet after a few moments, he realized he'd been gritting his teeth so hard, his gums were bleeding.

✦

"I hit him!"

Dotta crawled out onto the rooftop. His carefree smile looked a little strained. Tsav responded with a wry smirk, unsure of how to react. Not only would he need repairs on his right arm, he didn't have the strength left to help Xylo, either. This opponent had been tough.

"I hit him, Tsav! Did you see that?"

"Yeah, you hit him once. And you only hit his leg! For crying out loud, I needed you to hit him in the head or the chest. You know, somewhere lethal."

"What? I thought that was pretty good, for me."

"You were practically at point-blank range, and you only hit one out of four shots! Come on, Dotta! If you put in a little effort, the two of us could be an unstoppable killing machine!"

"I don't think I want to be a killing machine…"

"Indeed. What's the point of that?" said a woman with smoky-red hair from behind Dotta. "More importantly, you're going to start target practice after this. At this rate, you won't even be able to protect yourself."

This was Trishil, a former mercenary and probably human—if you ignored the bizarre aura coming from her bandaged right arm, that is. Tsav assumed this was Dotta's girlfriend. At any rate, she was tough as hell.

"How do you plan on becoming a hero like that, Hanged Fox?" she asked.

"I don't want to be a hero, either…," he replied.

"Too bad. You have no choice. That's your punishment."

"I've already been punished enough! Why am only I getting extra punishment?!"

"I mean, isn't it obvious, Dotta?" said Tsav. He could feel himself smiling. "You've done so many bad things that you need to be punished even more. No complaining!"

What would these guys do without me? wondered Tsav. *This bunch of goofballs and weirdos would be lost without a prodigy like me to protect them. I'm just too nice a guy. Why am I always helping people out like this? I'm really missing out on life. I mean…*

He didn't even like the penal heroes, really. Venetim and Norgalle were funny, but other than that… He really was too nice. Most people cared only about themselves and the people they liked. That was the normal way of things.

I'm a real philanthropist. Probably the nicest guy in the whole world. He stared at the blood dripping down his aching arm with a sense of detachment. *You better win after everything I just did, Bro. I'm counting on you.*

That said, this was the first time he'd let an opponent get away in a long time.

"Soola Od," he muttered, and felt a prick of discomfort.

PUNISHMENT: RECLAIM ZEYLLENT, THE SECOND CAPITAL, PART 6

The castle was already in a state of chaos by the time we stepped inside. Soldiers from the Noble Alliance led by the Dasmiturs were the first to rush in.

What happened to sending us penal heroes in first, huh?

They courageously ran across the bridge the Saint had summoned, then rushed into the castle without a second's hesitation. Inside, they received an extremely warm welcome—from a horde of faeries, that is. The battle began right away, forcing Teoritta and me to clean up the mess.

"Xylo! More are on the way!" she shouted.

"I know."

I slammed my first against the wall. Seven enemies incoming.

Only smaller faeries could fight indoors, and most of the ones here were humanoid faeries like brownies. They were agile and favored sneak attacks, but they were no match for Teoritta and me. Especially now that I had my probe seal back.

The creatures slid down the railing leading to the second floor in the large entrance hall, once again targeting the Dasmitur soldiers. These were the men who'd been left behind on the front lines and forced to fight a tough battle during the retreat in the Tujin Tuga Hills. It looked like this unit always got the short end of the stick, and it almost made me feel for them. Almost.

I grabbed one of my knives. "Get back!" I shouted, throwing it.

Zatte Finde's explosion blew away most of the faeries. The rest were skewered by Teoritta's summoned swords.

"Heh! We have arrived! You have nothing more to fear!" announced Teoritta, hands on her hips. "Tend to your wounds and relax, for I promise you victory!"

"It's the Goddess of Swords and the Thunder Falcon," someone muttered.

Stop calling me that weird nickname, dammit. That was what I wanted to say, but just as Teoritta had implied, a lot of these men were wounded. And their injuries weren't just scratches, either. Our first priority was to have them withdraw.

"What are you doing?" I roared. "Hurry up and get out of here. Who rushes into danger without a plan?"

"I-I'm sorry!" said a young man, bowing. He looked familiar. "But Lord Dasmitur went on ahead and ordered us to secure this hall."

"That idiot."

I clicked my tongue, not bothering to hide my irritation. The head of the Dasmitur family was a real dumbass. If he wanted to go die on his own, I would have let him. But he was trying to take his soldiers with him, and that pissed me off.

"I'll go after him," I said. "Where was he headed?"

"Up the staircase…"

"That's where the real fight is happening."

I hit the floor and activated my seal. A fierce battle was unfolding at the top of those stairs, and I could tell from all the movement that things were getting intense.

"I've had enough already. Teoritta, I'm exhausted from dealing with all these idiots, so I'm going to take a little break."

“Come now, my knight.” Teoritta grinned and chuckled. “If you talk like that, people will keep misunderstanding you.”

Shut up, I thought.

“Everyone,” she continued, “please focus on treating your injuries. My knight has declared that he will protect you until every last one of you is taken care of.”

“U-understood! Thank you so much! Oh, but… Uh…”

“What? You got even more demands?” I asked.

“Well, uh…”

The young soldier visibly recoiled under my piercing gaze, his face contorting as though he found it hard to breathe. The expression looked somehow familiar. I’d spent some time with Dasmitur’s soldiers, and I thought I remembered this guy from Kerpresh…

Before I could get any further, though, a series of loud noises rang out above our heads. It had come from the second floor, where several figures flew through the railing as if someone had thrown them back. There was no time to catch them. And besides, their heads and torsos were all thoroughly crushed.

I didn’t realize what was going on at first, and it took a few moments to process.

They’re already dead. What happened?

Teoritta started to run over to the bodies, but I stopped her.

“Wait. You can’t help them.”

“But…”

I didn’t want to look her in the eye right now. What could I say to her at a time like this? But ultimately, there was neither the need nor the time to say anything.

“What are you doing?!” someone shouted, rushing out from the upstairs hallway. It was Dasmitur, covered in blood and utterly confused. *Is that his blood?* I wondered “Hurry! I need backup this instant! They’re gone… My elite warriors were defeated by that monster…!”

“Please wait, Lord Dasmitur. Are you hurt?” asked a soldier. He stood upright, almost businesslike. But Dasmitur had no time even for that.

"Gather as many reinforcements as you can!" he shouted. "Contact Lord Esgein and tell him to bring the entire army this way! No, wait… Have him bring weapons to destroy the whole castle!"

"What in the world is—?"

"Th-th-that ridiculous monster— Wait. Hold on. You," he shouted, clinging to the broken railing, his enormous pupils focused on me. "Penal hero Xylo Forbartz! Yes, I shall give you the honor. You lead the way!"

I could tell he was completely disoriented. What was waiting at the other end of that hallway?

I struck the ground with my fist. I had no idea what had happened, but the battle above us had already subsided. There was no movement at all. I didn't sense anyone, human or faerie. *Wait. What's that?* After a moment, I picked up something humanoid, walking extremely slowly.

"It's Demon Lord Abaddon! It's Abaddon!" shouted Dasmitur. "Kill him! And if you can't do that, buy us time! Got it? This is an order!"

"Xylo." Teoritta grabbed my arm, looking displeased. The fact that she wasn't angry was so like her. "Don't worry about it. It is what it is."

There were still injured soldiers here…but there were likely more elsewhere. Plus, the quickest way to make sure that everyone in the castle was safe was to kill the source of the Demon Blight.

Looks like I'm almost at my limit, too.

I looked down at my chest and saw that the blue emblem used to fasten my cloak was faintly shimmering. This emblem, which had been finished with luminous paint, could measure sustained combat capability, and it was set to lose its glimmer as I used up the luminescence stored in my body.

In other words, my luminescence, which was several times higher than that of an ordinary person's, was finally about to run out. And once that happened, I wouldn't just lose my ability to activate sacred seals. It was going to hinder my physical capabilities as well.

But…I'm not about to have anyone saying I chickened out of fighting Abaddon. Especially that dumbass Dasmitur. Though nothing would be worse than what Jayce would say if he caught wind of it.

"Let's go." I patted Teoritta on the shoulder, giving her the signal to move forward. "It's an order, and it's the fastest way to end this. Plus, it's what we always end up doing. And we're not going to lose, right?"

"…Right." Teoritta nodded and squeezed my arm. Her grip was extremely tight. "You have my blessing, so we cannot fail!"

"That's right," I said. "Lord Dasmitur, where's Demon Lord Abaddon right now?"

"Down the hallway, you fool!"

Dasmitur pointed back toward the second floor, confirming what my probe seal had picked up. Apparently, the space was even bigger than this hall, and the ceiling must have been really high, too. Only one room in the castle could be that big.

"He's in the throne room!" shouted Dasmitur. "That arrogant monster…!"

"All right." I snorted.

Way too many people were trying to be king these days.

◆

In the end, he wasn't able to understand it.

Demon Lord Abaddon paced slowly around the room and thought.

"It does not make sense to me. Why would our king treat Boojum as if he were special?"

The king's orders were utterly baffling to Abaddon. In fact, this war of theirs was far too irrational. If they wanted to, couldn't they annihilate the humans and take over at any time?

"My king has a goal, and it is not simply to rule over the humans," he muttered, stepping over the bodies piled up on the floor.

The soldiers who had reached him here seemed to have been rather strong warriors, but none of them were a match for him. One man, however, was still breathing. He grabbed Abaddon's leg and grunted, his grip weak.

"Isn't it ironic?"

Abaddon stomped on the soldier's skull, crushing it as he looked up at the ceiling.

The room was very spacious. The humans called this the "throne room," and it could easily fit a hundred armed soldiers. The moonlight cast its brilliant white light through a large window high up on the wall. Abaddon thought the size and style of the room resembled a chapel. But rather than the goddesses, it was meant for worshipping the nation's king.

"I can read and understand minds, and yet the mind of our king is something I still cannot comprehend." Abaddon spoke to the humans' corpses as he installed himself on the throne. "It's like a bad joke."

He was exhausted. He was managing to hold up for the time being, but eventually, he would run out of energy. Right now, what mattered was the goddess—Goddess Teoritta. As long as he killed her, he would fulfill his primary objective.

He'd lured them all here. It wouldn't be long until that penal hero arrived.

"This is proof of my loyalty."

Abaddon clapped his hands and let out a great laugh from his belly. It sounded almost like crying.

✦

Soldiers were screaming.

"*Monster!*" they said.

It must have been a demon lord. Nearly every soldier in the area —in that hallway—was dead. Those who had survived were frozen, overcome with fear. All they could do was tremble.

"It appears Abaddon walked down this corridor," observed Tevi, her face pale.

Saint Yurisa was surprisingly calm as she listened to the name of the demon lord behind this massacre. Or perhaps she was merely numb.

This was the first time she had ever been on a battlefield. Perhaps, rather than running or panicking in fear, she was the type who simply stopped, unable to do anything at all.

"Abaddon is currently in the throne room. After all of Dasmitur's soldiers were killed, Lord Dasmitur…" Tevi seemed unusually hesitant. "He supposedly sent penal hero Xylo Forbartz and Goddess Teoritta to fight the demon lord."

"…All right." Yurisa forced herself to be firm. "I'll go."

"I don't advise it. It might have been the right call to send those two alone. Using Goddess Teoritta's Holy Sword, they can eliminate the threat with minimal casualties."

"I—I am the Saint!" exclaimed Yurisa unexpectedly. She clenched her throbbing right fist. "I can't lose to the penal heroes. This whole battle, everyone has been talking about them. Tell me, where are they fighting?"

"It's too dangerous."

"It's the Saint's duty to fight, even when there's danger. Being just a figurehead…is pointless…"

"But…" Tevi looked troubled. She grimaced, then glanced quickly to either side. Several armed military priests and soldiers began to move. "…Saint Yurisa, you are an extremely valuable person, so even if we have to use force—"

"'Force'?" Yurisa narrowed her right eye. She could feel her power—much more than she'd known she had. These soldiers could never stop her. It didn't matter if there were tens, even hundreds more. "You cannot. I—I…"

The Saint caressed the air, and sparks began to fly. She summoned a wall that formed a barrier between her and the others.

Yeah, I can do this. I can do this even if I'm alone. I'll do it.

Though she hadn't planned to work alone, she instantly made up her mind. Xylo and Teoritta were fighting without anyone's help

to spare the other soldiers. Why couldn't she do the same?

"I am Saint Yurisa Kidafreny. I will go where I wish. S-so please…let me fight…just this once…!"

✦

There was nothing to block our advance.

I couldn't see a single faerie, just mountains of corpses and unconscious bodies.

Teoritta and I eventually made it to the throne room, where we found Demon Lord Abaddon lounging on the throne, much to our surprise. He exuded a calm confidence; it seemed he had no plans to flee. He was utterly relaxed.

What's up with this guy?

He appeared to be a man just past his prime. He seemed mild mannered, and if he wore a white tunic, he could easily pass for a priest. There was something even friendly about him. But a demon lord's expression was fundamentally different from a human's. You couldn't trust it.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, penal hero and goddess."

He called out to us casually from his place on the throne. I could sense Teoritta's body tense as she took a half step toward me.

"I must say I'm rather surprised. I thought Tatsuya Ninagawa would be the one to make it here."

"Ninagawa"? Does he know Tatsuya? Abaddon's eyes wandered for a few moments before he nodded.

"My ability doesn't work on him at all…so I'm relieved."

"And what ability is that?"

"The ability to read minds. Though I suppose it is also somewhat difficult to read the minds of Holy Knights who have forged a pact with a goddess."

He spoke as if none of this was important. I was confused, to put it lightly. Why would he reveal something like that so easily? Was he bluffing? Or did he have some reason?

"Yes, I understand why you are confused," agreed Abaddon, as if to prove his claims. "Could you not consider this a token of our friendship? I only wish to create a peaceful relationship with humans. If we are to negotiate, I believe it's only natural for me to reveal my ability."

"A 'token of our friendship'? Is that some sort of joke?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Ah, yes. Wonderful. It makes me so happy that you realized that was a joke. I have absolutely no interest in a friendly relationship with you all." He laughed, but his words were full of malice. He was the first demon lord I'd met since Boojum who could effortlessly speak our language, and now he was trying to have a conversation with us. "However, there is one thing that I want you to trust me on. I have no intention of hurting you humans any more than I need to. If anything, I'm trying to manage you all more efficiently for your own sake. It may not be what you're used to, but I can promise you peace and happiness."

"'Happiness'? When any one of us could end up dead and in your stomach tomorrow?"

"Yes. I am considering a management style that will satisfy your individualist nature." Abaddon spread out his arms like a priest delivering a sermon. "Only the useless ones have to die, and you humans will be able to vote on it and decide who yourselves. It's not a bad idea, yes? Those who can contribute and those who are loved, such as babies, will be given the right to live."

"What is wrong with you? Voting to see who deserves to die? Like hell I'm gonna let that happen."

"Hmm. I am having trouble understanding the issue."

Abaddon looked at me as if he were trying to peer straight into my heart. He was talking and making expressions like a human, but you could tell if you looked straight at him: There was no emotion in his eyes. They were just black, empty holes.

"Why are you so angry?" he asked.

"Eat shit."

I wasn't interested in answering his ridiculous questions. Only the loved and the valued got to live? Maybe that would make for a better world, but the goddesses would never allow it. They didn't

judge people based on "value." They wanted to save everyone. That was how Senerva was and how Teoritta was, too. I knew they would never suggest abandoning someone simply because they had no social worth.

That was why I wanted someone—anyone—to tell them that they were doing the right thing. I wanted to acknowledge that their efforts were important and noble.

And besides, I hated when people tried to force their rules on me. Using power to make someone do what you wanted meant you didn't respect them.

"Interesting…" Abaddon appeared to have read my mind. This had been a test to see if he could really do it. "Allow me to correct you. You seem to misunderstand the true nature of the goddesses. They—"

"That's enough. You're just trying to draw this out. Teoritta, let's do this."

I interrupted the demon lord and unsheathed a knife.

He wasn't bluffing; he'd actually revealed his ability to me. And that meant he was only interested in one thing: buying time. I didn't know why, but he kept trying to drag out the conversation, and I couldn't let him do that.

"Ready when you are!" Teoritta exclaimed. Then she pointed at the priestlike man, her finger sparking. "Demon Lord Abaddon! No matter what reasons you give, I cannot forgive the suffering you caused all those people. As a goddess, I condemn you to death!"

"Very well." Abaddon leisurely stood up from the throne, completely ignoring the sword Teoritta had summoned above him. In an instant, his body blurred, and he glided over the thick carpet. "It appears I cannot stall any longer. I have no choice but to deal with you myself."

This surprised me. He didn't look like the type who would willingly engage in close combat. But that was probably why he'd chosen the guise of a relaxed, elderly man—to catch his opponents off guard.

Abaddon closed the distance even more quickly than I expected. His arms swelled with a dull pop. All of a sudden, he was huge. He'd

become a monster.

I pushed Teoritta out of the way. "Get back!"

Then I activated Sakara, my flight seal, and lunged forward to counter his attack.

The sword that Teoritta had summoned had completely missed the demon lord, thanks to his speed. He raised his enlarged right arm and brought down his fist. This, too, was unexpected.

I swung the knife in my left hand to parry, changing his blow's trajectory.

This asshole's just full of surprises.

The force was greater than I'd imagined, and I felt my knife creak under the pressure. It sliced through Abaddon's clothes, revealing his dark, tough hide.

He followed up with his left fist, swinging it horizontally from the side in a sweeping motion.

"Farther back, Teoritta!"

I yanked her out of the way. One hit from this guy could shatter bone, so I had to keep Teoritta clear.

But if this is the best he can do…

Abaddon's skills in hand-to-hand combat were amateurish. It was like watching a human with incredible strength just flailing his arms around. It was easy to dodge and counter.

But if I used Zatte Finde this close, I'd hurt myself as well, so I couldn't rely on it just yet. But I still had other ways to fight back. And Teoritta was here, too.

Don't you dare underestimate me.

I leaped back, using the opening to throw a knife. Abaddon sensed it coming and deflected it with one hand. But when fighting close-up, we had the overwhelming advantage. All I needed to do now was use our secret weapon.

"Let's finish this! Teoritta, the Holy Sword…!"

I hardly needed words when asking Teoritta to summon something, since we shared a portion of our thoughts. But right as I was about to end this battle, Abaddon grabbed my right wrist, as if he knew exactly what I was planning. *Interesting*, I thought. *So that's why he wanted to fight this close-up.*

"I do not really enjoy fighting, and I am not much good at it, either," he said, his tone gentle. Immediately, I curled forward with my elbows in front of me to block his incoming attack. "Nevertheless, I believe my speed at this range gives me an advantage. Wouldn't you agree?"

Intense pain shot through my elbows. He must have cracked one of my bones. I threw a desperate kick to counter, but my leg cut through air.

Dammit. He's reading my mind before every attack.

"But of course."

Abaddon dodged, easily letting go of my arm.

Cut the crap!

I was going to need a trap—one where it wouldn't matter if he read my mind. Or I would need to pull off an attack so quickly that he couldn't react in time. The Holy Sword wasn't going to work against him. Risking everything on a single shot would make it easy for him to dodge, and if he did that, Teoritta would be out of juice, and we'd lose.

Regardless of skill, Abaddon had a lot of power when he fought at close range. And that made him particularly difficult to deal with.

"I—I will not let you escape!"

Teoritta summoned more swords: Some grew from the ground, while others fell from the sky. But Abaddon effortlessly dodged each one, as if he were taking a leisurely walk.

"While reading the goddess's mind is difficult, her animosity is clear. You might have an all-powerful Holy Sword, but it means nothing if you can't hit me." Two swords simultaneously swung at Abaddon from either side, and he deflected them with a single swing of his arm. "Hardly a threat."

Before I realized it, Abaddon was once again right before my eyes. What should I do? If I could hit him with Teoritta's Holy Sword, that would be it. But I couldn't. At this rate, I was just losing energy.

His body is too hard to cut, his mind-reading ability lets him dodge every attack, and his punches are absurdly powerful.

It was like fighting a wild animal wearing a suit of heavy armor.

I can see why Dasmitur's elite soldiers went down so easily…

But I didn’t have time to be impressed. I had to come up with something.

Then, just as I was working hard to think of a strategy, I heard a voice that totally ruined all my plans.

“T-t-t-take this!” came a strained shriek. Someone was behind me—even farther back than Teoritta. They were standing in the entrance to the throne room, and along with their voice, sparks appeared below Abaddon’s feet. All of a sudden, what looked like a miniature steeple shot up as if to skewer the demon lord, twisting the air around it and creating a gust of wind.

“Hmm.”

Abaddon evaded this easily. For a summons, it was crude. Hardly even an attack. But for the first time, the smile vanished from the demon lord’s face.

I looked back, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

“You again?”

The Saint, Yurisa Kidafreny, was standing in the doorway with her right arm extended, growling as tears welled up in her right eye. Had she come here alone? Those around her probably tried to stop her. She must have escaped them somehow.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted.

“I came to…” Yurisa briefly paused before restating herself clearly, “I—I—I came to save you. I came to fulfill my duty as the Saint!”

“Have you lost your mind? Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?! You didn’t even hit him!”

“Yes! You are putting yourself in danger!” Teoritta roared emphatically. She even raised her fist. “Stand back. My knight and I can easily handle this ourselves.”

“I—I can still… I can still do this… I’m going to hit it!”

Yurisa completely ignored Teoritta’s warning and frantically began swinging her arm. Sparks appeared behind Abaddon, then a castle wall sprouted up in their wake.

“Connect! …Hit it!”

Another steeple shot out of the wall, but despite it being directly behind the demon lord, he easily dodged yet again.

However, these rough, random attacks seemed to be limiting Abaddon's movement, forcing him to make large leaps to get out of the way. This made it increasingly easy for me to read his moves. It was my turn to strike, and yet, all of a sudden, the Saint's relentless attacks elicited a new response from Abaddon.

"Hmm. You are the Saint, I presume? I am already growing tired of you."

Abaddon jumped down toward the stone steeple rising at his feet and kicked it away with tremendous force, shattering the structure and sending rubble through the air.

"It appears I have no choice!" shouted Teoritta.

At the last moment, she brought swords down from above, deflecting the debris. Abaddon had clearly been aiming at Yurisa. What happened to her bodyguard? Did she really come all the way here alone? What was everyone doing?

Give me a break!

Cursing, I lunged straight toward Abaddon. The Saint had been summoning steeples and walls like crazy, and he didn't have anywhere else left to run.

"…Just this once, okay?" muttered Teoritta peevishly as she brought a sword out from the void. It wasn't the usual Holy Sword, but it was still a fine blade. "Saint Yurisa, I shall grant you *special* permission just this once to join our battle." She made sure to emphasize the word "special."

I grinned wryly as I brought the sword down on Abaddon's shoulder. It didn't matter if he blocked it. The instant the blade made contact, I released it. My left hand was already grasping another sword as it emerged from a void. I thrust it forward, Abaddon deflected it, then I activated Zatte Finde, causing the tip to explode. This staggered him, and his face twisted.

"Interesting. That was quite impressive… I wasn't expecting you to come up with a solution so quickly!"

Abaddon was now on the defensive. Each strike forced him farther away until his back was nearly against one of the Saint's walls. I continued to push. I was almost there.

He's within reach. It's time to end this. He can't escape now, even if he can read my mind!

There was no reason not to use the Holy Sword. There was nowhere he could run now— *Wait. No.*

"Ha-ha-ha! Precisely! This is wonderful, Xylo Forbartz," said Abaddon with a laugh. His right arm was swelling up, just about to pop. "I thank you for coming in so close."

All of a sudden, something burst out from inside his right arm: a horde of insects—massive ones around the size of my palm. Their bodies were white and faintly shimmering. It was as though they ate through his arm before breaking free and scattering.

Faeries… Wisps!

The faeries known as wisps were disgusting caterpillar-like creatures with fangs and the ability to fly.

We were in trouble now. How could I have been so stupid? Abaddon had made me believe his forte was close combat. And he'd fought in such a way as to convince me he didn't have the means for long-range attacks.

Looks like he was keeping a few pets he didn't tell me about.

Maybe the way his body swelled made it the perfect nest for creatures like this. And it had all been for this moment. His goal was to pull me away from Teoritta so I would leave her unguarded.

"Bringer of the end, Goddess Teoritta!" Abaddon shouted as insects buzzed through the air. I managed to take out a few with one of my knives, but I didn't have time to infuse it with much explosive power. "You alone stand in my king's way. It is time for you to make your exit—permanently."

The wisps closed in on Teoritta. Even her impeccably accurate summons wouldn't be able to take them all out. These faeries were both small and extremely quick. One—no, two—had survived her rain of swords and rapidly approached.

This is bad. I'm such an idiot.

"That you are," agreed Abaddon, adding insult to injury.

He threw his left fist at me. There was no time to guard. The impact hurt so much, it almost knocked the wind out of me. It

probably broke a few ribs, too. But that was a small price to pay. I kicked off Abaddon, activated Sakara, and sent him flying.

He crashed straight into one of Yurisa's walls, cracking it.

Please let me make it in time…!

Knowing the move would leave me open to a lethal attack, I turned around to save Teoritta. Then I stopped cold.

"I am…fine…" Two faeries had gone after Teoritta. "I am your partner and the goddess you serve, correct?" she asked smugly. She was obviously putting on a brave face.

One of the faeries had been pierced by a sword she'd summoned just in the nick of time, but she was using the blade she kept sheathed at her waist to handle the second one. We had bought it at the marketplace in Ioff. Though little more than a toy, it was a beautifully crafted knife with a blade polished to a mirrorlike finish.

I'm impressed she was able to cut anything with that…

I almost wanted to laugh. She was still taking such good care of it. She even remembered what little I had taught her.

Teoritta fearlessly let the wisp bite down on her left arm to keep it from dodging. Then, holding the sword with a reverse grip, she thrust it into the creature's head, making a clean cut all the way down its body. When the faerie dropped lifelessly to the ground, she gave it a disrespectful kick for good measure.

Before I knew it, Teoritta had become able to handle this much on her own.

"I—I think…I did quite well." Her voice trembled, and her left sleeve was drenched in blood. Those guys from the Temple would probably faint if they saw her now. But she'd done well. "Right, my knight? I believe I deserve some praise."

"Hmph." Abaddon grunted. My kick had left him some distance from us, and he hadn't closed it yet. But now his whole body was writhing. Did he have more wisps in there?

"That wasn't nice, Teoritta. You…" I could hear the air begin to shake eerily. Insect-like wings had grown from Abaddon's back and had begun to whir. "You and you alone must die…"

The demon lord lifted off the ground.

He can fly, too? And here I thought this guy couldn't get any more aggravating.

I had to do something. Anything. I just needed to make one more move to end this. A demon lord that could fly and read minds? Would I even be able to hit him? What did I use to do during times like this?

I knew. I would have started moving before I even had time to think. That was what felt natural. Back then, I had Senerva, so I could kick off the walls and towers she summoned with my flight seal to catch my prey.

I'm losing it.

Senerva was gone. She was gone, and yet there was a tower beneath my feet—a small structure growing from the floor, facing diagonally forward toward where Abaddon was heading. As I kicked off it and launched myself forward, I caught a glimpse of Yurisa, holding her right arm, as if even she were surprised, a tear running down her right cheek.

…I'm really losing it.

Senerva never cried in the middle of a battle, so this had to be a coincidence. There was no way Senerva's right arm and eye had superseded Yurisa's will and were trying to save me. That was impossible.

"Hmph…" Abaddon's smile vanished. He was clearly taken aback. What could have been so unexpected that it startled a being who could read minds?

"Go, my knight." Teoritta's voice was sharp. She was clearly pushing herself. "Finish this!"

A sword emerged from a sparking void—numerous swords—too many for even Abaddon to dodge them all. Eventually, one pierced his leg, stopping him in his tracks. A bizarre screech escaped his throat, perhaps some sort of battle cry.

I was almost there. Only a few more steps until he was in range.

"You're gonna pay for scaring my goddess like that."

After infusing a knife with enough power from Zatte Finde, I threw it right into his chest, blowing it apart. It was over.

Abaddon collapsed onto the ground faceup, with his mouth half-open, like an idiot. I tumbled to the ground as well. My left arm and ribs ached. They had to be cracked, and this unbearable sense of exhaustion was proof that I had used up every last bit of luminescence in my body. I was completely drained.

Get up and fight, you idiot.

I cursed myself. I didn't deserve to be a goddess's knight if it only took a few scratches to take me down.

Pull yourself together, dammit. Stand. You have to finish him off…!

I glared at the collapsed demon lord. He was only about three steps away. This wasn't over. I had to move. I just needed to fill my lungs with air one more time and deliver the final blow. I had the Holy Sword.

"Heh… Ha-ha-ha," laughed Abaddon. Was he trying to feign confidence?

He's bluffing. There are no more faeries up his sleeve…

I slammed my fist against the ground, and the echoes from my probe seal assured me there were no more living creatures inside Abaddon. He was fresh out.

"Do you think we could talk a little, Xylo Forbartz? I always wanted to sit down and chat with you all."

"Enough lies."

"What? I am not lying. This is called a joke. But don't worry about it… I am not interested in talking to humans. My role here at the castle is finished, and my king's objective is being fulfilled as we speak." His gaze shifted to something behind me.

…What?

There was an eerie silence, and I thought I felt my senses grow sharper.

I heard a commotion at the entrance to the throne room as countless people rushed inside: soldiers and nobles alike. Had Abaddon's command crumbled already? Or had our soldiers eliminated all the others?

"Ha-ha…," Abaddon laughed.

Lord Dasmitur and even Marcolas Esgein were among the soldiers rushing inside, and they ran straight to the Saint to congratulate her. Either that, or they were scolding her and making it look like congratulations. Yurisa turned back this way as soldiers surrounded Teoritta and—

Abaddon was holding out his left hand, pointing at them. Only then did I realize what he was holding: a lightning staff.

"Xylo Forbartz, you truly are heroic," he said. "Perhaps you really are the one my king seeks. But how will you handle this?"



The moment seemed to stretch on forever as I remembered an exchange I'd once had with Teoritta.

"*You treat your life far too carelessly*," she'd snapped. She was so angry, I could see fire in her eyes. This was after we'd defeated Charon at Tujin Tuga. *"You should take a good look at yourself before you start getting mad at others."*

"*I'm allowed to do this because I'm special*," I smugly replied. *"I'm a penal hero. They can bring me back to life, so if we rank lives by priority, it would be goddesses, then ordinary soldiers, then us penal heroes."*

"But you will lose your memories, and after a while, you will lose your sense of self built on those memories, right?" She sounded like she was scolding me. *"You undervalue yourself. Merely existing is not the only thing that matters. Have you never even considered the memories you could lose?"*

"Losing memories is a small price to pay. Even if that happened…" I thought about this for a moment, trying to come up with some sort of witty remark, only to settle on the same old, tired argument. *"Then I'd just make new, better memories. Should be easy as long as the world hasn't ended."*

Even I thought it was chop logic. There was something important that I had failed to touch on that day. Lost memories… For example, memories of Senerva. Who would remember her if not

me? If I lost my memories of her, then it would be almost like she'd never existed.

But…I could still remember Senerva. I could clearly recall the last thing she said to me.

"Thank you. Take care of this world for me, okay?"

Those words were like a curse. In fact, I probably would have been better off forgetting them.



I had no idea who Abaddon was aiming at.

He was on death's door, so his aim probably wasn't even that accurate. Was it Teoritta? The Saint? Maybe Dasmitur, or Esgein? He could have been aiming at a soldier I didn't even know. *Ridiculous.* I didn't want to admit it, but I had no idea who I was trying to save.

If only I could say it was the goddess or the Saint, it would make me sound a lot cooler.

But in that brief moment, there was only one thing I could do. I had to block the attack with my body.

A bolt of lightning pierced my chest. The impact was intense, but before I could even think about the heat or the pain, I—we—had something we had to do.

"Teoritta."

I wasn't confident I'd managed to say her name, but I knew she could sense what I wanted to say. Sparks appeared in midair as the Holy Sword emerged in my hand.

I should have done this a few seconds earlier, instead of trying to catch my breath. Someone like me had no time for such luxuries. *Dammit.* As I swung the Holy Sword with the last dregs of my strength, a light sharp enough to tear the world apart traced a line through the air. And even Abaddon, with his ability to read minds, couldn't dodge or block it.

"Ha-ha! You truly are heroic!" The demon lord grinned once more before he was engulfed in the light. "But surely you know what this means, right? Awaiting you at the end of this path—"

I wasn’t able to hear what he said after that. I dropped to my knees and immediately lost consciousness. Teoritta’s screaming voice drowned out my heartbeat. I wondered what she was saying. She was probably trying to scold me again.

If you want to scold me, you’ve gotta be more…





PUNISHMENT: RECLAIM ZEYLLENT, THE SECOND CAPITAL—FINAL REPORT

The battle against Demon Lord Anise ended with a slash from Frenci's curved blades.

That said, it was more or less over by the time Patausche seared off her third tentacle. The sniper unit had been backing them up from the main road and distracting the enemy, allowing them to close in on her. Anise was already cornered and desperately trying to catch her breath.

Her fatal mistake, however, happened just after that. Right as Frenci was getting ready to attack, Anise suddenly tensed up and looked back toward the castle. At that point, all Frenci had to do was lunge forward and swing her blades one last time.

"No…"

As Frenci sliced off her arm, Anise was frozen, almost in a daze. Taking her eyes off Frenci had sealed her fate. She shoved Frenci away on reflex, but she couldn't recover. That much was obvious.

"This can't be happening…" Anise, whose face was like an impassive mask even when hit, had now formed a clear expression—something very close to despair. "Your Excellency," she said, gazing toward the castle.

This doesn't appear to be a trap, thought Patausche.

It didn't seem logical that Anise would deliberately expose herself like this after losing all four of her tentacles, especially since her legs were severely injured as well. And it almost looked like tears were welling up in her pitch-black eyes. Her despair, or perhaps sadness, was likely genuine.

What had happened inside the castle? Had Xylo and the others won? If so, that was all the more reason to end this once and for all.

"Nistagis!"

Flames roared from the tip of Patausche's spear as she swung it, creating a vortex of fire. She moved to bring it down—then she stopped. Once again, her battle instincts kicked in. She'd sensed something like bloodlust, or perhaps deep hatred.

Promptly switching to defense, she swung her spear not at Anise but to the side. Her gut instinct was instantly proved correct as a bolt of lightning shot out from nowhere and was swallowed by her wall of flames. Someone had sniped at her with a lightning staff, but she'd already created a sacred seal barrier before this even had time to register. Bolt after bolt clashed into her shield, eventually followed by an arrow.

Her mistake, however, was reflexively knocking down the arrow with her spear.

"Incredible. That's not usually something you can defend against on instinct. I'm impressed," a voice gushed as the arrow hit the ground and burst.

Patausche had only caught a glimpse of the small cylindrical object attached to the final shot—an explosive sacred seal. With a flash of light, it emitted a powerful blast. It didn't knock her down, but it did disrupt her balance.

An unbearable pain shot through her right leg. It had been gouged almost straight through, and the bone crushed.

"Patausche Kivia!" yelled Frenci. "What are you doing?! What a disgraceful injury!"

Despite her blurred vision, Patausche could guess that Frenci, too, had tried to land a follow-up attack but had stopped when she heard the dry pops of the lightning bolts. Frenci clicked her tongue, only confirming Patausche's suspicions.

"Anise, we're retreating," said the voice from before. "We've done enough here."

"But His Excellency…! His wave has disappeared… Without him, my existence is meaningless."

Anise seemed to be arguing with someone, but their conversation made absolutely no sense.

"This is an order from His Excellency. Retreat."

A second explosion. Had someone thrown another explosive seal? There was no way to dodge with a shredded right leg, so Patausche activated her sacred seal barrier and allowed the blow to knock her down onto the street below.

"Anise, you still have a mission to fulfill," said the voice. "I was given a message for you, so if you are truly loyal to Lord Abaddon, then please come. This will give your existence meaning."

"Giii." Anise groaned, and Patausche felt a chill wind that nearly froze her lungs.

"Anise! Wait…!" shouted Patausche.

Her voice was strained as she tried to stand up. She quickly realized this was futile; all she felt was more excruciating pain. By the time she managed to twist her body enough to look up, Anise was gone. The one throwing the explosive seals had disappeared, too.

I can't move, thought Patausche. *I'll probably get sent to the repair shop for this leg. I have to stop the bleeding.*

"…What a mess. I had her cornered, and she still got away. How humiliating," muttered Frenci. "How will I get him back like this…? What a fool I am!" She was clearly speaking to herself.

Patausche hated to admit it, but Frenci's skills were impressive. She could truly believe the woman hailed from the same place as Xylo.

"Penal Hero Unit 9004, can you hear me?"

Patausche suddenly heard a voice coming from the seal on her neck. It was Captain Adhiff Twevel of the Ninth Order, and she could almost see his smug, callous expression.

She had sensed even back when she was a captain herself that they would never see eye to eye. Then again, there weren't many people she got along with. In most cases, it was a difference in age and rank that kept things formal, and the others around her tended to be people who kept to themselves and didn't let others in. Or else, like Twevel, they were simply incompatible. The only exception was the captain of the Fourth Order, Savette Fisballah, who had graduated the same year she did. She had teased Patausche all throughout their time at school together.

"Penal Hero Unit 9004, can you hear me? Are all of you dead?"

"Oh… I apologize. I'm afraid we aren't, and I can hear you clearly. Please tell me what you need."

This second voice was Venetim, speaking from somewhere in the Second Capital. Adhiff Twevel's tone got on her nerves as usual, so Patausche merely listened in silence.

"*The situation has changed drastically*," said Twevel. *"We're initiating a sweep operation. In the meantime, I need you to lead the civilians and meet us at Gencotz Park in front of the castle."*

"S-sweep operation? The park…? Uh… What is going on?"

"As I said, the situation has changed. Apparently, we have won. For now, at least."

"What? Excuse me, but—"

"Supreme Commander Marcolas Esgein's soldiers led by Saint Yurisa have reclaimed the royal castle. It appears Xylo Forbartz killed Abaddon. We won."

It all seemed far too anticlimactic.

Xylo and Goddess Teoritta won…? thought Patausche.

It was unusual for them not to contact everyone and brag a little once they'd finished the mission. Patausche remained silent, and Venetim and the other penal heroes didn't touch on the matter, either. No one had declared the battle was over, leaving Patausche

with a bad feeling in her gut. The man who would usually interrupt right about now with a few rude remarks was eerily silent. Why?

"Demon Lord Sugaar was confirmed dead as well. However…" Twevel's words sounded cold and distant. *"I have been informed that both Jayce Partiract and Xylo Forbartz perished in battle. Kelflora will send her shadow soldiers to retrieve their bodies, so I would like for you to confirm and collect their remains."*

Xylo Forbartz…

Patausche pictured the man's angry expression and felt a cold gust blow past. She looked up at the night sky, and beneath the bright white moon, the wind whispered of winter's imminent arrival.

Idiot. You utter fool.

For all Patausche knew, she said those words out loud. She'd finally realized why Frenci was always calling Xylo a mess.

"Goddess Teoritta has been a good friend to Kelflora. I promise we will transport their remains as carefully as we possibly can."

Even as he said this, Adhiff Twevel's tone and the way he spoke rubbed Patausche the wrong way.

Is it over?

She turned toward the castle in the distance. The walls and steeple were wrapped in a radiant light as they rapidly regenerated. It must have been the Saint's power—the power to summon buildings. They were using it to rapidly reconstruct the castle.

…Is it really over? she wondered.

For some reason, to her, it felt as though mankind had suffered an irreparable defeat.

✦

I think things have gone really well so far.

Once Tovitz Hughker escaped the clutches of his pursuers and made it through the capital's north gate, the colossal faeries he'd kept on standby outside the city began demonstrating their true value. The barghests ravaged the lines of battle, while the trolls further exacerbated the damage. He'd made the right choice

concentrating such a powerful force here. It was working just as he'd hoped.

The faeries had all come from Abaddon, and Tovitz figured he was probably dead by now. He was willing to risk even his life to achieve his goal, and it looked like he'd finally paid the price. Like an insect, Abaddon was woefully unattached to his own survival.

At any rate, it seemed Tovitz would be able to get far enough from the capital by daybreak. After carefully making his way around the Eleventh Order in the north, he urged his steed onward, pressing ever deeper into the northern expanse.

Not bad, he thought.

Tovitz reflected on all the measures he'd taken so far.

He avoided a bad matchup with the Holy Knights, helped destabilize the city, and sent Soola Od to deal with mankind's trump card—that elite unit. It appeared Soola Od had even managed to escape the city alive. But most important of all, Anise had survived.

I'm so glad I didn't lose her.

This was what he was most proud of. Demon Lord Anise sat behind him on his horse. He could feel her chilly body against his. She was severely wounded, but her injuries were far from fatal. Her mental state, however, couldn't have been worse. Abaddon's death was taking its toll on her.

"Ridiculous." Anise was dumbfounded when Tovitz gave her the news. "There is no way that His Excellency would lose in battle and perish."

"It's the truth." The way his words were shaking her up gave him a kind of dark excitement. "Lord Abaddon predicted this would happen. That's why he ordered me to save you."

"Who killed him?"

"I'm not sure. I wasn't there."

"…It was probably one of our own—Puck Puca," insisted a dry, mechanical voice from Tovitz's side. "He goes by the name 'Rhyno,'"

As it happened, another demon lord had escaped the Second Capital along with them: Boojum. He, too, had fled a losing battle and was badly injured.

Although Tovitz would have preferred to be alone with Anise, it wasn't all that bad if he pretended Boojum was their loyal, reliable bodyguard. In fact, Boojum had already proved his usefulness by eliminating every Federated Kingdom soldier who stood in their way. He did so easily while riding a coiste bodhar—a faerie born from a mutated horse.

"That man is sinister and powerful," he continued. "I believe he merely let me escape."

"A kinslayer, you say?"

Tovitz couldn't believe this at first, though he quickly warmed to the idea after giving it more thought. Countless humans had defected to the enemy, after all. Tovitz was one of them. Therefore, if there were demon lords with a certain degree of intelligence, then it made sense that there were a few eccentrics.

"Puck Puca is a threat," continued Boojum. It seemed this individual was really bothering him. His tone had a raspy, creaky note to it every time he uttered the name. "I believe that was the first time…I ever experienced fear. I lost the mental battle to him. I must overcome that man and defeat him at all costs. He poses a serious threat to our king."

"All right." *A demon lord who sided with mankind, huh?* But no matter how powerful or sinister he was, there were always ways to deal with such threats. "Let me take care of him."

"Are you sure you can do it? He's cunning. There's no telling what he'll do."

"Yeah, I think I can take care of him… After all, I'm a firm believer that humans are capable of greater evil than any demon lord. More importantly, Boojum, make sure you don't accidentally drop that. That was Abaddon's final wish."

"…The box?" Anise reacted to Abaddon's name and shifted her gaze to the coffin-like box Boojum was carrying over his shoulders.

"We succeeded in our mission," said Tovitz. "We instilled fear into mankind while retrieving what we needed from the city. Apparently, His Excellency's goal was always to sneak that thing out of the capital."

Tovitz stared at the rectangular box. Despite its appearance, it was a bit too small to be a coffin. If that's what it was, it must have been made specially for a small child.

What lay inside, however, were the remains of two goddesses, formerly enshrined in the castle in Zeyllent.

"Apparently, it contains the remains of the Goddess of Terra and the Goddess of Sorrow…"

Abaddon had seized the Second Capital and lured mankind into attacking specifically to sneak out these remains. He'd known they were hidden somewhere in the city, but he hadn't known where. If he'd managed to capture a member of the royal family, he could have used his ability to find out right away. But because they managed to escape, he had to resort to other means. Searching blindly would take too long, so he'd lured the Federated Kingdom's army into attacking. By observing where they focused their attacks and where they didn't, the location of the remains would be revealed. The favor he'd requested of Tovitz was to find and retrieve them.

In other words, from the very beginning, Abaddon had seen even himself as nothing more than a tool for buying time. The other demon lords were merely distractions. Everything they did was for the goal of retrieving these goddesses' remains for the Demon Blight.

"According to His Excellency, mankind developed the living weapon known as the Saint during the Third War of Subjugation. They managed to create a special human by attaching the arms and eyes of two goddesses."

The story went like this: During the Third War of Subjugation, a Saint was born from the sacrifices of the Goddess of Terra and the Goddess of Sorrow. With her leadership, mankind became a powerful threat to the Demon Blight, leading to reconciliation and peace between the two sides. The key to mankind's success was these remains, and they'd been hidden in the Second Capital of Zeyllent.

"We must deliver them to our king. We've already been granted an audience with him. Anise, that is your new mission."

Tovitz made a point of saying "*our* king." After all, he'd already left humanity behind and joined the Demon Blight.

Anything for Anise.

He would have taken on the world for her. But as he thought those words, he couldn't help but smirk.

Even I can see how ridiculous that sounds, but it's the truth… If I lived a normal life, I could never do any of this.

Tovitz Hughker could sense the door to a future free of boredom opening before him.

"Keep it together, Anise," he said. "Lord Abaddon has entrusted you with continuing the fight on his behalf."

"His Excellency left the future…in my hands…"

Tovitz was lying. Abaddon had left him no such messages. All he told Tovitz to do was deliver the remains to their king. Even so, it was one of the only guidelines Anise had to direct her actions and give her hope.

"Mankind has already created a new Saint, but they still don't seem to realize how dangerous she is," continued Tovitz. He spoke matter-of-factly, purposely choosing not to console Anise. "These remains would only push them further toward a path of self-destruction."

"…Did His Excellency say anything else?"

Anise's words were cold and emotionless, but she seemed to be regaining her strength.

"That's all he said, unfortunately."

Once again, Tovitz was lying. The truth didn't seem necessary to him. If he said more, it would sound overblown and risk her starting to doubt him. Telling her Abaddon was expecting great things from her seemed like too much in this situation. And thankfully, he no longer had to worry about anyone reading his mind.

He could feel Anise's freezing breath caress his back. Perhaps she was sighing.

"Very well. From now on…I will assume His Excellency's duties," she said.

"It will be an honor to serve you."

"I must speak with the king," she said, completely ignoring Tovitz. "Boojum, do you know where His Majesty is now?"

"No."

"You were originally one of his guards, weren't you? How can you not know?"

"Because I don't. There is no way to track him down once he decides that he doesn't wish to be found. It seems a very simple concept to me."

Anise didn't say a word for a moment. A chill ran down Tovitz's spine. The air had gotten even colder. But before Anise could put what she was feeling into words, Boojum added, "I could speculate, however."

"…You should have said so sooner."

"Really? I felt it would be rude to answer a question I wasn't asked."

"I don't care about manners. Just tell me where you think he might be."

"The king is most likely living alongside humans. He's either in the First Capital or the Holy City."

Tovitz was taken aback. The king of the Demon Blight himself was hidden in plain sight in a human city? Anise, however, simply nodded, as if this were nothing unusual.

"Okay. Then, Boojum, you and Tovitz go see the king for further instruction. I'll head north."

"We won't be working together?" said Tovitz. "I'll be so lonely."

"I must prepare to fight back against the humans and carry out His Excellency's vision."

The biting north wind started to pick up, forming snow. It wouldn't be much longer before the world was enfolded in winter's embrace. The farther north they headed, the more bitter the cold became. Roads would soon be blocked off and straits frozen over.

"I suspect that once winter is finished and spring arrives, mankind will seek a final battle. And then, when all is done…" Her voice was tinged with restrained fury. "Lord Abaddon said that he would make sure mankind was under our control by the end of this war, and I plan on fulfilling his wish, no matter what."

Her voice was like a low groan. Had she always had emotions? Or was she slowly learning them at this very moment?

"And…" She seemed to gaze into the sky. "I will never forgive the humans who killed Lord Abaddon. I will find them no matter what, and I will rob someone from them just as they did to me."

Anise's icy grip on Tovitz's shoulder was almost painful, yet he found a strange pleasure in it. It grounded him and reminded him that he was alive.

✦

In general, it could be said that the Saint conducted herself quite admirably.

She had led mankind to victory in the most recent battle, proving herself a truly worthy symbol. Now, as she stood on the balcony with her arms stretched wide, the ruined castle began to regenerate.

But, to be frank, I think she went a little overboard.

These were the thoughts of the current head of House Dasmitur, Hawin Dasmitur.

At this rate, the Noble Alliance will lose all standing…

Maintaining a noble family's reputation and social standing depended heavily on honor, and Dasmitur was willing to do whatever it took to keep his. He had to protect his family for the sake of his unreliable sons, his young daughter, and his sickly wife. This was also a matter of concern for their territory and its people, since a weakened lord meant a vulnerable domain.

For that reason, the Saint's existence posed a problem for every noble. She had demonstrated far too much power on the battlefield, and her triumph had tipped the scales in the Temple's favor, elevating their authority. The demands for donations in her name would only increase, and any refusal to pay would be political suicide. Therefore, Dasmitur and the Noble Alliance were left with no choice but to weaken her influence, and the quickest way to do that was…

An assassination.

Among the members of the Noble Alliance, this was deemed the most reliable course of action. However, there was no need to rush. The opportune moment would come after Yurisa Kidafreny's triumphs solidified her position and victory was within mankind's grasp. Only when all the pieces were in place would they have her meet a fitting end and die heroically on the battlefield.

But they needed to start laying the groundwork now, to make sure they wouldn't fail.

I can't let those fools at the Temple get too cocky.

Dasmitur despised organized religion with a passion. It was his belief that a goddess only needed to be worshipped when she was being useful.

I will have her killed one day. That much is certain.

He discreetly left the hall while pondering that thought. He had a meeting to attend. There were people skilled in such matters—individuals far worse than any adventurer. These people, known as the Emerald Finger, made a living in the western territories by murdering and cursing. They were experts in unique poisons as well.

He would make his plan with them. It would be best to have someone infiltrate Yurisa's circle of guards, since they would have the best chance to get close to her. They'd gain her trust and remain ready to take her out at just the right moment.

Dasmitur intended to have it done, no matter how vile the means. He believed that was his duty as a noble lord—to protect those who relied on him.

Looks like that's the place.

Before long, Dasmitur made his way around the castle to where he had promised to meet these would-be assassins. And indeed, he found a woman there.

Just one?

As he was about to say something, he stopped. There were supposed to be four seasoned killers of the Emerald Finger waiting for him. A sense of dread crept over him, and he clutched the lightning staff at his waist—a futile gesture.

"…Please cease your attack on Saint Yurisa."

Dasmitur realized all at once that a peculiar gasp had escaped his lips. A burning sensation crept up his throat. At some point, the woman had turned around, ever so casually. She was gripping a short sword in her hand, its tip dripping with blood.

How did she…?

They'd been around ten steps apart—the range of attack for a lightning staff. But this woman had already closed the distance. With a troubled smile, she grabbed Dasmitur's shoulder. Her gesture was surprisingly gentle, like she was merely steadying him before he could fall.

"I can't have you doing things like this. This wasn't the plan, and now I have to go around killing people."

Dasmitur suddenly remembered who the woman was.

Tevi… The Saint's…bodyguard…

He had already realized that he was going to die. Behind the woman with her wry smile were the four bodies of the Emerald Finger assassins he'd come here to meet.

"All I desire is a peaceful resolution. War is abhorrent to me, but everyone else seems to love it, don't they?" Tevi spoke in a whisper. "The Saint will bring about mankind's downfall. That demon lord, Abaddon, said so."

Dasmitur struggled to remain conscious through the pain as Tevi laid him down.

"Please do not worry about a thing," she told him. "I promise to protect Lady Yurisa until the very end."



A thick, slushy snow was falling in the Holy City of Kivogue.

At its center, the towering ebony structure of the grand temple would surely be adorned with a pristine cap of snow by dawn.

The situation has changed. I must return to the Crypt of Gray Lights.

Kafzen Dachrome was in a rush. He had to get through before the roads were blocked with snow. It felt as if winter got colder and the snow heavier with each passing year. Even the Goddess of Storms, Bafroque, could not conquer this bitter cold. Thick, brooding clouds had become a common sight over the past few years, even in Kivogue.

But in spite of all this, there was a brightness in the people walking the streets. Their expressions had subtly shifted since last autumn, when mankind had lived under the shadow of the Demon Blight. The market, too, was now buzzing with life, and the reason for this change was…

"Extra, extra! Read all about it! Those guys have done it again!" shouted a man hawking freshly printed newspapers. People were already surrounding him. "It's the penal hero unit! Together with the Saint, they've reclaimed the Second Capital!"

The news of the Federated Kingdom's army reclaiming the lost capital had been the talk of the town since yesterday. The defeat of several demon lords and the emergence of the Saint had brought with it a long-awaited glimmer of hope. It was the first piece of good news in what felt like an eternity. However, the ones who had truly captured the people's hearts were none other than…

"Word has it that the Goddess of Swords Teoritta and the Thunder Falcon killed the demon lord Abaddon with a single strike! It's all in here! Read all about their heroic deeds and every detail of the battle!"

This brought in the customers like nothing else.

Even here, in a city full of devout believers loyal to the goddesses, Teoritta was a star. People were purchasing small daggers as good luck charms in her honor. Xylo Forbartz, despite his tarnished reputation as the goddess killer, was seen by many as a stalwart soldier fighting under the goddess's command, as if she'd tamed him. Even the penal hero unit was gaining notoriety, though the rumors were laughably embellished.

Kafzen glanced at the newspaper as he passed the vendor and noticed how their portraits were all cast in a glorified, heroic light. It hardly resembled reality. Tatsuya was almost unrecognizable.

The narrative positioned them as a linchpin in the capital's recapture, a claim that would surely astonish Marcolas Esgein and Lord Dasmitur, who had both rushed to the capital in a race to claim glory.

We, the Crypt of Gray Lights, should probably use their reputation to our advantage. Maybe it would help with funding.

Kafzen walked along, entertaining such idle thoughts, until he came to a stop at a corner of the main road. A shoeshine boy lay sprawled there, seemingly disinterested in his trade. Kafzen caught the boy's attention with two sharp whistles, and the kid crossed his arms and turned to gaze at him. This gesture was a kind of code.

“No good?” Kafzen squatted, then put a few bills of paper currency into the boy’s hand.

“It won’t be so easy. We were successful in baiting the Noble Alliance to pursue the Emerald Finger, but that’s all,” muttered the boy.

He reluctantly sat up. He spoke in a unique style, hardly moving his lips. The Twelfth Order instilled this training in all its members, Kafzen included.

“I thought Lord Dasmitur would pull through,” said Kafzen, “but I suppose we can’t simply remove the Saint from the board this early in the game.”

“We should probably back off and reconsider our approach before things get dangerous.”

“I’m already handling it. Our lord appears to be orchestrating events within the Temple, so be ready to get to work.”

The boy said nothing. That was how they were meant to indicate agreement or confirmation. The Twelfth Order’s work had to be carried out in silence, after all.

“Now, what’s the word from our lord?” asked Kafzen, prompting the boy to take out a cloth and begin polishing the knight’s boots.

“As planned, we will focus on defense during the winter and launch an offensive as soon as the ice melts in the Valligarhi Channel. Incidentally, the plan is currently being called by the code name Ragi Enseglef.” The boy muttered his answers and kept his head down.

“A little dramatic, no? The men back at Galtuile must have come up with it.”

“The Eleventh Order will be occupied with their mission in the north throughout winter, so there is no time for rest.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s how life is when you’re in the Eleventh Order.”

“I have a message from the vice-captain as well. The hunt for the humanoid demon lord that has infiltrated the Federated Kingdom is proving difficult. The coexisters have organized an intelligence unit similar to ours, and our fight continues in the dark.”

"Tell the vice-captain to be careful. I can't have my second-in-command dying on me."

"Incidentally, there is another matter I want to bring to your attention concerning the penal hero unit."

"Go on."

Seeing as this was a mere sidenote, its contents would have little bearing on future operations. Such things were usually of little interest to Kafzen, but there was something about the penal hero unit that ignited his curiosity.

"What happened to them?" he asked.

"They will be placed under the command of the Consecrated Brigade led by the Saint."

The Consecrated Brigade? Interesting.

This was an old name pulled from history. It was a title bestowed upon the unit lead by the Saint during the Third War of Subjugation—a simple name derived from the notion that they were using the bodies of goddesses in their fight. It was a clear enough label, and it would allow those in charge to promote Yurisa Kidafreny as the resurrected Saint as well. That much was fine, but…

"The penal hero unit is going to be placed under her command?" asked Kafzen. "That will be problematic. They're criminals."

"The third prince and princess apparently pulled a few strings."

"A saint leading a group of criminals… It almost sounds like a joke."

Kafzen was always smiling, but it was an expression he purposely maintained. This time, however, his smile was almost genuine.

"When winter is over, around the time summer arrives…"

That was when humanity would venture north.

It would be the first and last such expedition. The national treasury and public morale couldn't sustain this fight for much longer. They'd even dragged out the Saint for this. If they couldn't turn the tide in this final confrontation, humanity would quickly spiral into defeat.

"We'll need them in the counterattack, so I hope the penal hero unit lives up to its reputation." A frigid wind howled down the street,

hinting at a harsh winter followed by an even harsher spring.

Xylo Forbartz.

The report mentioned that he had died in battle and was sent out for repairs.

You probably have no idea, but you are slowly becoming a ray of hope for the people. Everyone is looking to you for inspiration. You have allowed them to dream—a dream of victory for mankind.

Had Xylo already been resurrected? If so, what was he dreaming about? Kafzen secretly hoped that whatever was happening in his dream, it was at least a little better than reality.

✦

A school of celestial fish swam across the heavens, guided by an even larger figure that bore a striking resemblance to a whale. I knew exactly what this was.

The Goddess of Beasts, Fymlynde.

It was the high-speed transport fleet under the command of Siguria Partiract, the captain of the Seventh Order.

This was a clear signal that war was imminent. Our Fifth Order, along with two others, was to be deployed in a massive operation to recapture the northern bridgehead. We needed to circumnavigate the Valligarhi Channel and restore communications with the City of Artillery, Norphan. This was part of a large-scale plan to pave a path forward to the north, and the Sixth Order and our Fifth Order were going to be doing the bulk of the fighting.

That's right, I would be working with the Sixth Order's captain, Lufen Cauron. Of everyone I knew, he was the least suited to being a soldier, yet he possessed one of the sharpest military minds. Lufen never worried about how he would fight the enemy. Instead, he focused on equipping his soldiers and allies for victory. Rations, quarters, transport, supplies, weapons, consumables—he saw to it all.

Lufen made me realize that while tactics were honed through practice and experience, logistics was an art that you had to be born

with. He had secured the Seventh Order's transport, bought information on the roads' conditions from Verkle Development Corp, and negotiated with the nobles for garrison sites.

This thorough preparation made it clear: Lufen had a natural gift for the logistical side of war. By the time idiots like us had figured something out, Lufen had already done it. If he continued as usual, we would never have to worry about the forces in the rear. Even with nothing else to back me up, I felt sure our mission would succeed.

"Everything is going well here. Supplies arrived on schedule, and Siguria has finished as well." Lufen's voice came over the communicator. *"We're ready to go whenever you are."*

His words were mixed with static. A small shield-like piece of equipment powered by a sacred seal vibrated faintly as it carried his voice to me.

"What do you think, Xylo? Are you confident you can finish things up before sundown?"

"What? You think I'm gonna sit around all day twiddling my thumbs?" I replied, facing the communicator. "I'll be done in no time. We're going to Norphan's hot spring district tonight for a drink."

"What a great idea! That's what I wanted to hear. Know a good place?"

"Already found one."

"Impressive. All right, all we need to do now is win. How do you want to do that?"

"Go through the forest to the west and assume a flanking position. I'll handle the rest."

"Roger. Talk to you later."

The call with Lufen cut off. We had no intention of discussing the details of the battle, so I simply gave him the general plan. Lufen's unit was to maneuver around the enemy for a flank attack, while we, the Fifth Order, held the front line—or at least we were going to make it look that way before charging straight into the enemy. After that, we would summon a fortress right in the center of the legion of faeries, driving a wedge into the middle of their forces. The

scattered enemies would then have no choice but to retreat or flee right into our arms.

We had fought like this countless times before. Lufen would have the west side under his control, while the east side was blocked off by a river. If the faeries retreated without putting up a fight, then so much the better. Our only objective was to restore communications with the City of Artillery, Norphan. If we could do it without any losses, that would be ideal.

All of a sudden, I found myself wondering what the faeries'—what the Demon Blight's—goal was. I wasn't thinking about their next target of attack but about their ultimate objective. What were they trying to get out of all this? I'd heard some demon lords even possessed the intelligence to speak our language. What could they possibly want that would drive them to wage this kind of war? The priests at the Temple claimed they were after our extinction, but if they were keeping humans as slaves and livestock, that couldn't be right.

To me, it looked like they were attempting to bring about a fundamental decline of human civilization. But why? Demon lords could supposedly live off cows or pigs, so why aggressively attack our cities, despite the risks? Maybe understanding their reasons would be the key to mankind's victory.

"Xylo."

My mind was wandering, when all of a sudden, someone called out to me from behind. It was Senerva, her voice as bright and bouncy as if she were on a walk under a sunny sky.

"I can't believe you're still here playing all by yourself," she said. "Dekstar was looking for you. The battle's about to begin, right? He wanted you to say a few words before we left."

Dekstar was my adjutant. He could be a bit aggravating at times, but he was so talented that I couldn't complain. I wished he wasn't so high-strung, though.

"What does he want me to do? I've got nothing interesting to say," I replied, without even looking back at her.

"I don't know, but some people think your speeches are good for morale."

"Well, tell Dekstar that battles aren't just about morale and that I was busy discussing supplies, which are way more important."

I adjusted the belt at my waist, making sure the knives, their handles, and their sheaths were all ready for battle. I wanted them to be easy to unsheathe, and not too worn. It was always important to double-check, since you needed to feel fully prepared to really focus.

"But there *are* people who want to hear you talk, so maybe you should go encourage them. They could be dead by this time tomorrow, for all we know."

"And I'm going to make sure that doesn't happen. Besides, if they need a speech, then Dekstar is more than capable of handling it. He's better at speaking than I am."

"No, they want to hear from you, Xylo. What you say is important to them. You're the captain, right? I mean, technically. Like, on paper."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

But Senerva had a point. The leader had to show the soldiers that he was confident in their victory. That way, they could fight free from doubt. It wasn't good to go overboard, but it wasn't a bad idea to give everyone a pep talk and assure them that everything was going to work out. It wasn't something I was good at or particularly enjoyed doing, though.

"All right, I'll go say a few words. I suppose I'm already asking a lot of Dekstar."

"I'm glad to hear it. That's my knight. We're going to win, right?"

"We always win. We've already reclaimed so much ground for mankind that in another year, the Demon Blight'll be completely wiped out. We're unstoppable."

"Yeah, you're right. I can't wait to live in a world without war."

I was sure Senerva had on a carefree smile. I imagined the cheerful look on her face as I slowly turned around.

"Don't get reckless, though, okay?" I said. "I don't want you using your abilities too much and—"

But I couldn't finish my sentence. Senerva's face—it wasn't there. There was only darkness, a hollow void.

“Xylo.” I could hear her voice coming from the fathomless abyss. “I believe in you. You’re unbeatable, and you will keep winning… even without me. I’m sure of it.”

Only then did I realize that I was trapped in a dream. Senerva never said that. Or at least, I didn’t think she did.

She couldn’t have.



I opened my eyes to find myself in the repair shop.

I was sure, because the first thing I saw was a humanoid figure stitched together from what looked like white sheets, looking down at me.

“Ah,” said the creature. “You’re already awake? Just as resilient as always, I see.”

It spoke quickly, all in one breath. The cloth, or bandages, covered it completely, even to the tips of its fingers.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” it asked. “How’s your vision? Can you speak?”

“Mmm.”

I knew this walking basket of rags. It was Andavila, the Goddess of Blood, from the Second Order. She had the ability to summon sprites that could heal wounds and regenerate flesh. Although she had the guise of a young girl, she was always swaddled in a bundle of cloth, and I had never seen what she looked like underneath. Then again, maybe this was her true form, and there wasn’t anything underneath.

“I can see, and I can talk, too,” I replied, my voice hoarse.

I shut my eyes tightly, then opened them again. After a moment, they started to process more of my surroundings. The room was bare: a bleak ceiling, a simple bed. It was a bit drearier than a hospital room, and while it was clean and sturdily built, that was about all you could say.

“Oh?” said Andavila, lowering her hand. “Then it’s about time you thanked me. My knights and I healed you.” She couldn’t have

been any smugger. “You don’t feel bad at all, right? You know why? Because my knights are perfect!”

This goddess’s “knights”—the knights of the Second Order—were a bit unique. There were several squads of them, each with around twenty members who were all medical technicians, and they worked at numerous repair shops all throughout the Federated Kingdom.

I wasn’t really a fan of any of these Holy Knights. Their temperament was very similar to an ordinary doctor’s, and they always made ridiculous demands like “Don’t engage in reckless hand-to-hand combat,” “Don’t drink too much,” and “Get enough sleep.” That meant we could never get along. Who had the audacity to tell a soldier not to be reckless? Although my situation was a bit unique, an ordinary soldier might die tomorrow, for all they knew.

“Come on. What are you doing? Hurry up and thank me!” demanded Andavila.

From experience, I knew she wasn’t going to give this up. Compliance was the best strategy, unless I wanted to get myself caught in an infinite loop of demands for gratitude.

Truth be told, she was probably the most overworked goddess of the bunch, since she was constantly moving from one repair shop to another, following the fiercest battles. In a sense, she had the most grueling job out of everyone.

“…Thanks. You saved me, Andavila.”

“I believe the phrase is, ‘Thank you very much, Goddess Andavila.’ You’re always so cold. And you forgot to thank my knights.”

“…Thank you very much, Goddess Andavila. Please tell your knights thank you for me as well.”

“Good boy. You’re a lot more well-behaved than that dragon knight.”

Dragon knight… Was she talking about Jayce? He was sent to the repair shop, too? I was curious about the aftermath of the battle. What happened to the Second Capital?

But Andavila turned on her heel to leave before I could ask.

"Okay, my work here is done… Hey, Teoritta! Your Holy Knight is awake!" she yelled out the door.

"Okay! Thank you so much, Andavila!"

I could hear light footsteps approaching. It was Teoritta, carrying a load of items.

"Finally, you are awake, Xylo!" She looked both delighted and relieved. "I have been waiting for this moment! They told me that you would not be able to leave for three whole days, so I figured you would be bored and brought you this!"

With a thud, she dropped a few books on the table next to my bed. They were probably collections of poems. There was also a board to play zigg and a deck of cards for gambling. Did Tsav teach her how to use those?

"But do not fear! I will keep you entertained and play with you until you get better! You must be thrilled, yes?"

"I am." I shot her a wry grin. If anyone was bored, it was obviously her.

"We head to the First Capital once you are better, and are you ready for this? Xylo, we are getting time off as thanks for our hard work and success! A real vacation! And you have me to thank for it."

"Definitely."

"They even let me borrow these poetry books and zigg board. We are going to have so much fun over the next three days!"

"Please don't work me too hard…"

"Oh, and— Oh, yes! I have been practicing my fighting skills, too! Check this out, Xylo!" She pulled a knife still in its sheath from her coat and showed it to me. The finely polished blade didn't make it look any less like a toy. "I was able to protect myself, thanks to the techniques you showed me. This knife saved me!"

"…Yeah."

"I remember you had a lot to say about this knife, but it is actually quite a fine weapon and definitely not a toy!"

"Yeah."

"If I practice even harder and learn how to protect myself better, then maybe you will not have to do anything reckless to save me anymore. Right?"

“Yeah.” I couldn’t say much in reply. After all, I had never seen that knife before in my life. But I felt as if telling Teoritta that would crush her with disappointment. “I bet.”

I thought it would be nice if that were true.

Even knowing my prayer would probably go unanswered, I wished from the bottom of my heart that things would be just as Teoritta said.

THE SAINT'S LOG: RAGI ENSEGLEF, PREPARATION FOR AN OFFENSIVE STRATEGY

By the time Adhiff Twevel arrived, it was already too late. Behind a small temple in the northwestern outskirts of the Second Capital was a cemetery that had already been ransacked and dug up. A spot in one corner beneath a fig tree was particularly messy.

And Adhiff Twevel knew exactly what had been buried there.

The sacred remains of two goddesses…

The enemy has stolen them. That was the only explanation for this. But even then, neither panic nor despair clouded his expression, for he had been trained to handle things like this. *A noble's battle begins with their expression.*

"Are you okay, Adhiff?" Kelflora looked up at him from the side. Her dark, cold eyes might have looked blank, but he could detect a flicker of unease. "Do you want to eat something sweet?" she asked, opening her hand to reveal a few pieces of candy.

Adhiff gently wrapped his hands around hers, making sure to not show any change in his expression. "It's fine. This isn't going to be

an issue. This isn't the end."

It wasn't over yet. Hopefully. Adhiff tried desperately to convince himself.

"Adhiff Twevel!" someone called from behind.

It was Hord Clivios. By the time Adhiff turned around, Hord was already off his horse and rushing over. His expression and the exhaustion on his goddess's face told him what they'd been through. Once again, he was reminded that one must cover their face with an invisible mask.

"It seems you had quite a battle, Captain Clivios." Adhiff gave him a slow, elegant bow. "As you can probably surmise, we were not afforded such pleasures."

"…I see. So what happened?"

"I would love to go into detail, but…"

"Pelmerry, go spend some time with Kelflora," Hord said to his goddess.

This way, the two knights could delve deeper into more complex topics. This was his way of telling her to rest. As Adhiff knew well, Pelmerry was the kind of goddess who wouldn't rest at all unless ordered.

"You're fine with that, right?" Hord asked Adhiff.

"But of course. Kelflora, go play with Pelmerry. Don't wander off too far, though."

Kelflora nodded back in silence. Being told to play at a cemetery sounded like some kind of sick joke. Nevertheless, her eyes lit up ever so faintly with joy.

"Very well. Come on, Pel," she said simply, taking Pelmerry by the hand. "I brought candy… Adhiff said he didn't want any."

Despite her mature features, there was a childlike quality to Kelflora's gestures. Pelmerry cast a concerned glance at Hord, who merely nodded in response. Perhaps she'd noticed her knight's pallor.

But Hord's expression was only natural, given the heavy subject they were about to discuss.

"Captain Clivios, I believe I know exactly what you wish to say," began Adhiff as he watched the goddesses out of the corner of his eye. "The remains have already been stolen."

"There were two goddesses buried here, right?"

"Correct. According to High Priest Hatem, the remains of the Goddess of Terra and the Goddess of Sorrow, which were used to create a saint during the Third War of Subjugation, were most likely located here."

"…That was the court priest's assessment? Are we sure they were stolen?"

"Either way, we should probably assume they were. The situation is dire."

That was putting it lightly. It was easy to imagine how the enemy would use the remains. If mankind could use them to create a saint, surely the demon lords could do the same.

Those who supported Project Saint had failed to grasp its full implications. You could argue that the goddesses' powers remained under control because goddesses were the ones using them. Goddesses had a kind of safety mechanism—instincts that kicked in and wouldn't allow them to attack humans. Although Adhiff had his reservations about this, he recognized how dangerous it would be to have such powers with no limits.

"Although Abaddon was slain, the enemy gained something more than worth his sacrifice. What do you think, Captain Clivios? Wouldn't you agree that the situation is looking bleak?"

"What about Galtuile?" Hord seemed to be looking for a glimmer of hope. "What was their analysis of the situation? What are they planning on doing?"

"Their policy hasn't changed. They plan to initiate an all-out offensive using the Saint in the spring. They're apparently calling the mission Ragi Enseglef."

"…Named after the sacred robe of Meht during the Third War of Subjugation? Do they really plan on making the Saint wear that?"

"Yes, they intend to use anything they can to their advantage, including legends."

"And the Meht royal family will give them permission? That's a national treasure."

"They seem to think so. Winter is almost here, and once that happens, the channels in the north are going to freeze over. At the

very least, that will mean two months of natural cease-fire. We need to prepare as much as we can during that period."

Hord didn't need Adhiff to tell him that. The Demon Blight came from the north, and Galtuile believed they had some sort of nest up there. The bitter cold and heavy snow of winter slowed them down, and with a few exceptions, they were unlikely to attempt crossing the mountains to attack human cities during this period.

Of course, mankind was more or less in the same situation. The Fourth Order's goddess, Bafroque, could mitigate the weather somewhat, but the effects were limited in range and only temporary. At best, it would be enough to deal with one of the aforementioned "exceptions."

"…Who will helm the mission this spring?" muttered Hord as he thought this over. "I hope it's someone decent and respectable."

"I don't know. I believe the opposite would be better. Do you really think a decent, honest person can win?" said Adhiff with a smirk. "For example, what if it were penal hero Xylo Forbartz?"

"Absurd," sputtered Hord. Adhiff had expected this response. "There is absolutely no chance of that happening. An army wouldn't even be able to function under a reckless man like that. I still cannot comprehend how they allowed him to lead the Fifth Order for the short time they did."

"Really? Because the penal heroes were the ones who truly protected the citizens of the capital, and Xylo personally eliminated Abaddon."

No one could deny their contributions, not even Hord Clivios. While Adhiff wasn't eager to commend Xylo, he had to admit that the man consistently delivered results.

"I have been thinking," he began. "I wonder… What if we were able to provide Xylo Forbartz and his friends with sufficient supplies, troops, and the authority to operate independently? What feats might they accomplish then?"

"Ridiculous." Hord visibly scowled. "Should any military or nation lend their support to such individuals, it would signal the apocalypse."

But the world is already ending, Adhiff thought. He managed to stop himself from saying it aloud, however. Even he thought it sounded too nihilistic for a joke.

✦

It took a few days after the battle to settle all the operations concerning the retaking of the Second Capital.

Xylo had eliminated Abaddon, and Jayce had disposed of Sugaar. Four days had gone by since then. After receiving orders to restore the town's essential public services, Venetim was so busy, he could barely catch his breath. Especially since Xylo, Jayce, Tsav, and even Patausche had been sent to the repair shop.

Rhyno cheerfully did the physical labor asked of him, but Venetim couldn't find it in him to do the same.

Neither Rhyno nor Tatsuya seem to understand the concept of exhaustion, Venetim thought, crouching in the shadows of a back alley and facing the main road. *Even the king is working hard… I can't take any more of this…*

His entire body hurt. He was at his limit. He'd joined hands with Dotta to keep an eye out so they could relax while no one was looking, but he was still utterly exhausted. Dotta didn't even have the strength left to stand.

"Hey, Venetim?" grunted Dotta. He was clinging to an abandoned barrel at an odd angle and moved only his head to face the other man. "Are you still alive? I'm dead…"

"What a coincidence. I'm dead, too."

"Figured. If I knew we'd have to do this, I would've cut off my leg or something so they'd send me to the repair shop, too."

"I hate pain, but maybe I could feign some illness? I think I'll give it a try next time…"

"Don't. Xylo would give you a real reason to be there if he found out."

"…Yes, good point." Venetim smiled listlessly as the conversation petered out.

I don't want to do anything for a while after this.

Even talking was taxing.

"I heard they were going to give us some time off once this is over…" Dotta sounded as if he were slowly dozing off. "They weren't pulling my chain, right?"

"No, they weren't. We're getting a vacation."

"It sounds like a lie when you say it, Venetim!"

"What? Okay, then they were yanking your chain…"

"It was my fault for asking you. Anyway, I'm gonna die if I don't get time off after this, and I'm gonna take it all out on you."

"Please don't… But, well, I think we'll probably…maybe…get some time off if we're lucky. A little, at least."

"Ah! Now, you're starting to scare me!"

The rumors about the vacation were probably true. Soon, the northern straits would be bound by ice and the roads and mountains cloaked in snow, temporarily halting the Demon Blight's advances. It was always like this during winter.

There was one problem, though. Venetim had been given some troublesome tasks to take care of, and he didn't even want to think about what was going to happen after their vacation was over.

"Hey, uh… Venetim? Think you could say something? If we're getting a vacation, then that means something big is coming, right?!"

"Yes, I suppose there's a little something coming down the line."

"I highly doubt it's gonna be 'little.'"

"…When our vacation is over and spring comes, it seems those in charge plan to launch a large-scale offensive against the enemy…" Venetim dreaded even the thought of mentioning this to anyone, especially to Xylo. "Of course, we will be participating in this attack. We have received the honor of fighting on the front line directly under the Saint's command. I hear it has already been voted on and decided."

"What the…?! I don't want any stupid honor!" screamed Dotta with a surprising amount of energy. "I can't think of anything I'd like less. It's gonna be brutal. I heard the Saint somehow managed to run off, even though everyone was trying to stop her."

"Yes, I heard that, too…"

"This is gonna be awful."

"I agree."

Venetim envisioned the situation. Come spring, they would most likely embark on a perilous journey across either the frozen northern straits or over the snow-capped northwestern mountains to reach the enemy's main encampment. They would undoubtedly be right on the front line, too. He couldn't help but wonder if they could fight their way through while protecting this selfish so-called Saint.

Once spring is here…

Mankind would gather all their forces and march to eliminate the Demon Blight once and for all. But was that even possible? And if they did, when the hellish fight was over, would the penal heroes finally win their amnesty?

"…Whatever. I'm tired of thinking about it," muttered Dotta. Venetim heard him collapse onto the ground. "Good night."

That's probably a good idea, thought Venetim.

It was best not to think about it. After all, the idea of amnesty was nothing more than a pipe dream.

AFTERWORD

Hello, Rocket Shokai here.

I like villains who scream *Keh-hyaaa!* before attacking. I call them *kehyarists*, and today, I would like to talk about a specific subset I like to call the "artists."

Artists, right? They can be all over the map when it comes to what they specialize in. I've been considering a few archetypes of this sort of *kehyarist*. While this might not be much, I hope it'll give you some ideas for when you create your own third-rate villains, or maybe even for when you become one yourself.

The Painter Type:

These *kehyarists* get off on seeing their opponents' beautiful demise and are always plotting to capture that emotion on canvas. Alternatively, they might seek inspiration from the gruesome end of their target.

Their goal is to make death into something beautiful, so they avoid using mundane weapons. They might even consider using poison to add a little more color to their work. Their ultimate goal is to become a part of the beautiful painting themselves.

The Musician Type:

These *kehyarists* make it their life's work to create beautiful music with the screams of their victims. Their attacks typically involve some sort of sound waves or dancing. They might even have speakers mounted on their shoulders. But those who misuse music must face the music one day themselves, and they often end up tragically perishing from their own sound wave attacks.

The Theatrical Type:

These *kehyarists* take pleasure in writing their own scripts and directing tragic finales, and they often refer to their targets as actors, puppets, or marionettes, as if they are on a stage. They also delight in manipulating their victims, forcing them to put on a magnificent show for an audience.

Of course, it is only fitting for them to meet their end onstage, betrayed by their actors and forced to witness the destruction of their perfect script before being beautifully blown into pieces.

Anyway, I'm really thrilled to have been able to write this fourth volume and talk about my favorite type of third-rate villains. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your wonderful support. And on that note, I conclude this afterword.

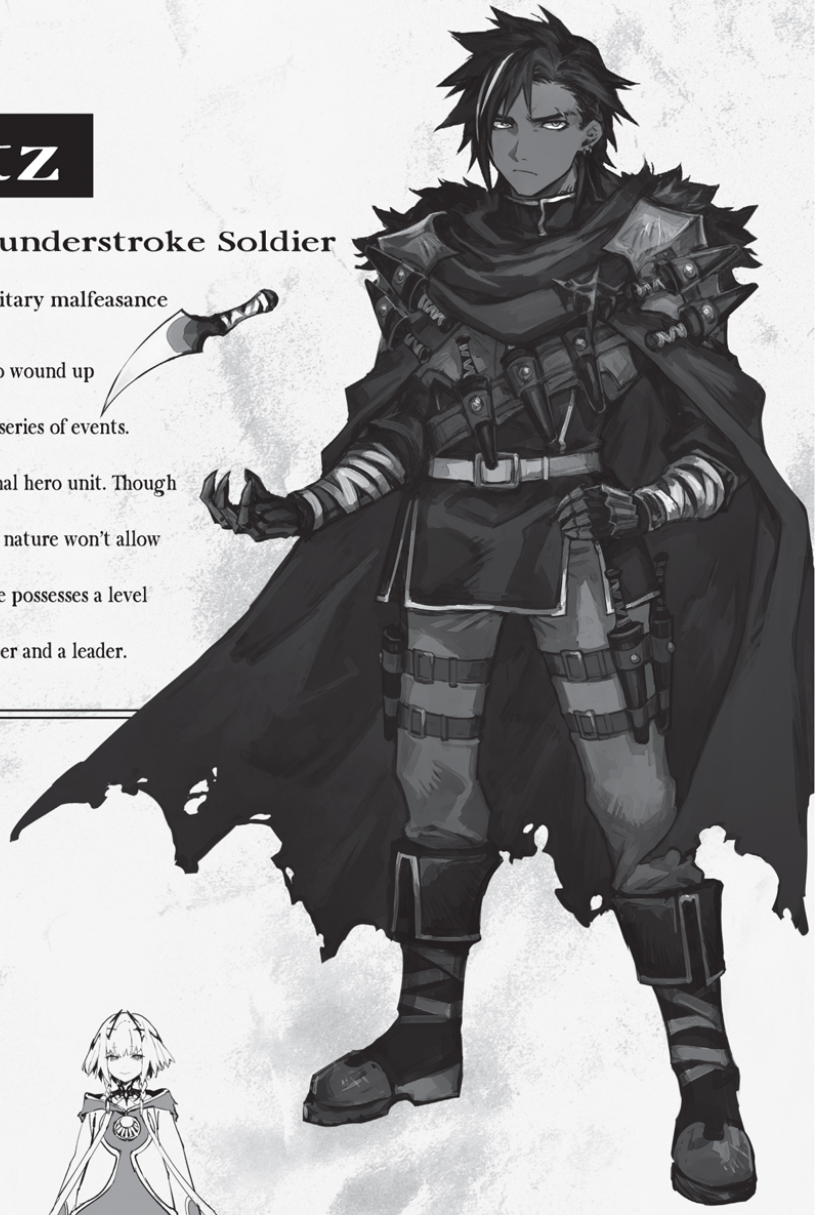
CHARACTERS

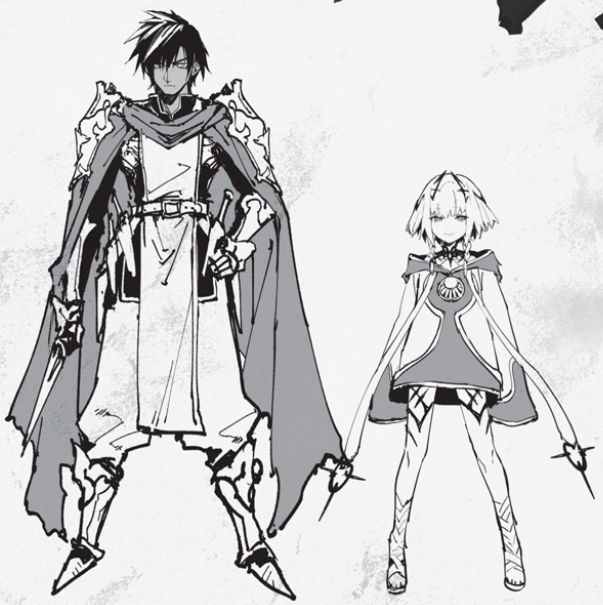
Xylo Forbartz

Military Role: Thunderstroke Soldier

Crime: Slaying a goddess, military malfeasance

A former Holy Knight captain who wound up killing his goddess due to a tragic series of events. He is the de facto leader of the penal hero unit. Though he has a rough, brutal manner, his nature won't allow him to leave anyone behind, and he possesses a level head and great skill as both a fighter and a leader.





Captain Xylo of the Fifth Order of the Holy Knights

Goddess Senerva





Goddess Pelmerry



Goddess Kelflora



Teoritta

Goddess of Swords

The thirteenth goddess, whose existence was previously kept secret. She has the power to summon any kind of sword–from Holy Swords to cursed swords–from other worlds. Though she usually has the proud demeanor of a goddess, she has a cute side to her, too, which comes out when she's done good work and wishes to be praised.



CHARACTERS



Patausche Kivia

Military Role: Cavalry

Crime: Murder, plotting an insurrection

Former captain of the Thirteenth Order of the Holy Knights. She was originally supposed to form a pact with Teoritta and is a serious woman with a strong sense of justice. After killing her uncle, High Priest Marlen Kivia, she was sentenced to join the penal hero unit.



Frenci Mastibolt

Daughter of the leader of the Southern Night–Gaunts and Xylo's fiancée before he became a penal hero. She has a sharp tongue despite her blank, masklike expression, and she refuses to break off her engagement with Xylo.



Dotta Luzulas



Military Role: Scout

Crime: Theft

The most diabolical sneak thief in history, with over one thousand reported thefts. A troublemaker with a timid personality. Constantly tries to steal things on impulse for no reason and has the skill to pull it off, no matter what the target.



Tsav

Military Role: Sniþer

Crime: Murder, desecration and abandonment of corpses

An ex–assassin raised by an order of assassins. Cheerful and talkative. When he was part of the order, he would often grow fond of his targets and become unable to kill them. To solve this problem, he would find someone else, grind up their corpse, and pretend they were his target. Good at pretty much everything, particularly sniþing.



CHARACTERS



Venetim Leopool

Military Role: Commander

Crime: Fraud, embezzlement, usurping sacred power, plotting an insurrection

A con man and political criminal who nearly sold off the royal palace. Pretends to be capable but is a total good–for–nothing. Somehow manages to fool people by simply saying whatever comes to mind. For this reason, he handles external negotiations as the penal hero unit's commander.

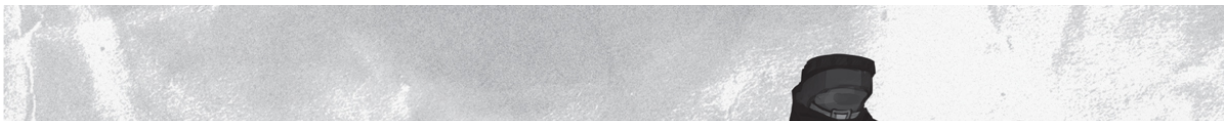


Rhyno

Military Role: Artilleryman

Crime: None

An eccentric individual who committed no crimes but instead volunteered to become a penal hero. Although he speaks like a man of virtue, there is something fishy about him. He is an extraordinarily skilled artilleryman and wears a suit of armor engraved with sacred seals into battle.



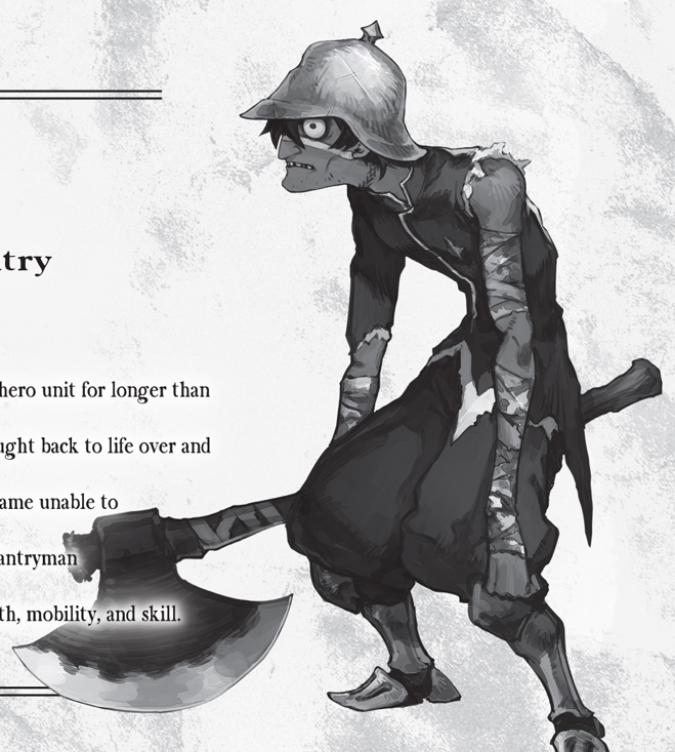


Norgalle Senridge

Military Role: Combat Engineer

Crime: Arson, murder, property damage, lèse–majesté

A terrorist who claims to be king. Those around him call him “His Majesty.” He possesses the arrogant demeanor of one who rules over others, but his warm regard for his people is equally king–like. He has a remarkable ability to tune seals, allowing his creations to unleash incredible power.



Tatsuya

Military Role: Infantry

Crime: No record

A berserker who has been in the penal hero unit for longer than anyone can remember. After being brought back to life over and over, he eventually lost his ego and became unable to communicate. He is a monster of an infantryman and possesses unrivaled physical strength, mobility, and skill.



CHARACTERS



Jayce Partiract

Military Role: Dragon Knight

Crime: Drug trafficking, mutiny

A dragon knight specializing in air combat. He is particularly beloved by dragons and is himself interested in nothing else but the winged creatures. He is able to communicate with them and is skilled with a lance, making him exceptionally talented at his role.



Neely

A female dragon who takes to the battlefield alongside Jayce. According to him, she has an appealingly strong will and is definitely his type.





Yurisa Kidafreny

Saint

A very ordinary girl who was born and raised in a farming village in the south. Because of her special stigma, she was chosen to have the power of a goddess implanted inside her as part of Project Saint. She possesses the right arm and right eye of the deceased goddess Senerva.



CHARACTERS

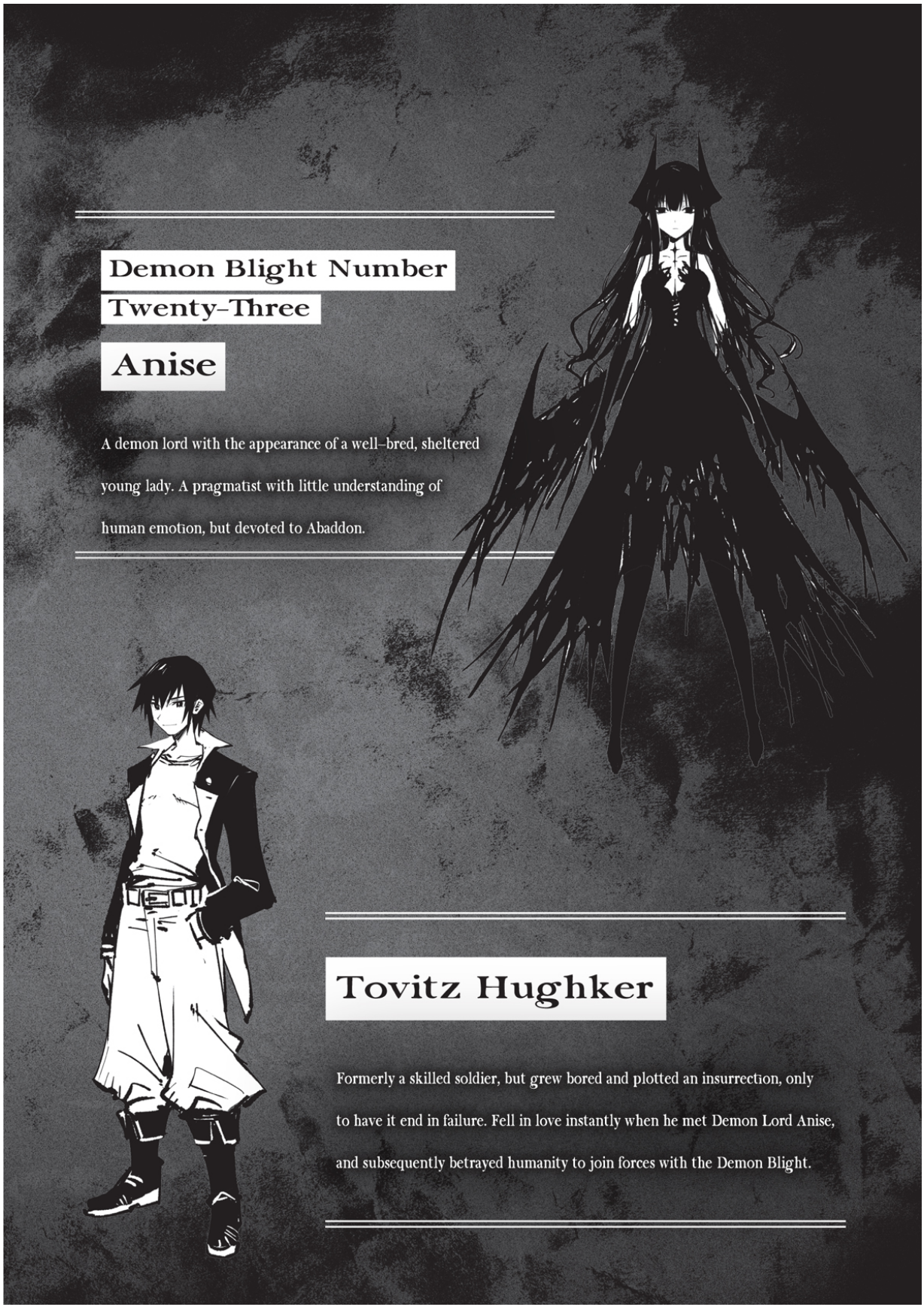
Demon Blight Number Twenty-One

Abaddon

A demon lord with the appearance of a pleasant man just past the prime of life. His cold, insect-like eyes can read the thoughts of humans. He's currently studying human culture and has a fondness for jokes.

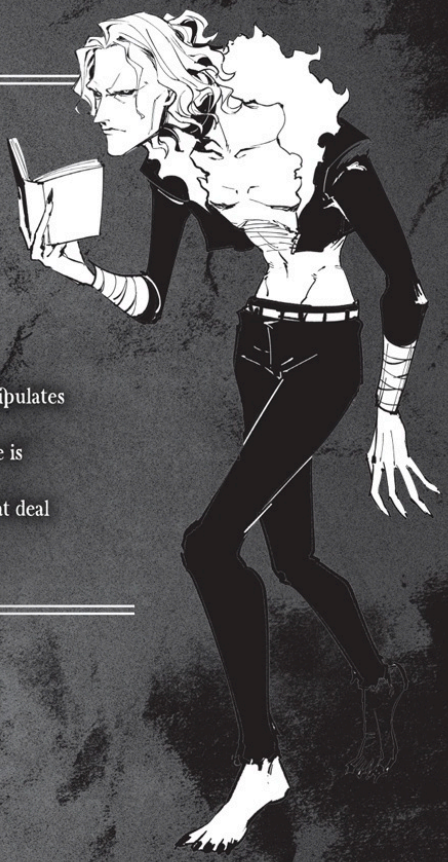





Demon Blight Number
Twenty-Three
Anise
A demon lord with the appearance of a well-bred, sheltered young lady. A pragmatist with little understanding of human emotion, but devoted to Abaddon.
Tovitz Hughker
Formerly a skilled soldier, but grew bored and plotted an insurrection, only to have it end in failure. Fell in love instantly when he met Demon Lord Anise, and subsequently betrayed humanity to join forces with the Demon Blight.



CHARACTERS



Demon Blight Number Thirty

Boojum

A demon lord who takes the guise of a human and manipulates blood. Fought Xylo and the others in the city of Ioff. He is extremely curious about human culture and pays a great deal of attention to manners. Has a special love of poetry.

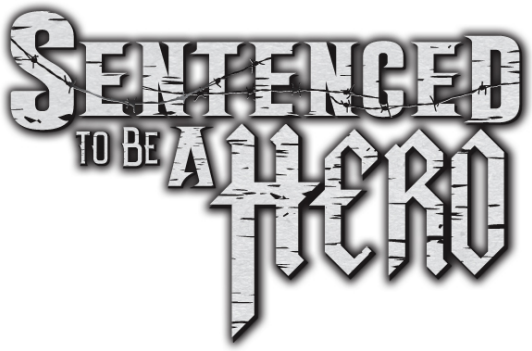


Soola Od

A human held captive in the Second Capital. He possesses a high degree of skill as an assassin, with an equally lofty ego and a dislike for other humans. Tovitz hires him to assist his mission while helping the Demon Blight.



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IV

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